

EXPLORING EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' CHALLENGES IN LEARNING ENGLISH ACADEMIC WRITING

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to explore the multifaceted challenges encountered by undergraduate students in an Indonesian EFL context. This study employed an explanatory sequenced mixed-methods design involving 80 undergraduate students from the English Education Study Program at Universitas PGRI Silampari. Data were collected through close-ended and open-ended questionnaires as well as semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that students encountered four major categories of challenges. Linguistic difficulties, particularly limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, and first language interference, were the most frequently reported barriers. Cognitive challenges included difficulties in generating ideas, organizing arguments, and maintaining coherence and cohesion in academic writing. Affective factors, such as writing anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, and perfectionism, further hindered students' writing performance. In addition, institutional factors, including inconsistent feedback, limited writing practice, inadequate learning resources, and time constraints, contributed to students' writing difficulties. These findings suggest that English academic writing instruction should move beyond a sole emphasis on language accuracy by integrating strategy-based writing instruction, process-oriented pedagogy, emotional support, and sustained opportunities for authentic writing practice. The study contributes to the growing body of EFL writing research by providing a holistic understanding of students'

writing challenges and offering pedagogical insights for developing more responsive and learner-centered writing instruction in Indonesian higher education.

Keywords: English academic writing, EFL university students, writing challenges

INTRODUCTION

Writing is widely recognized as one of the most essential competencies for university students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Unlike receptive language skills, writing requires learners to generate ideas, organize information logically, apply appropriate grammatical structures, and communicate meaning effectively to a target audience. In higher education, academic writing plays a pivotal role in enabling students to complete course assignments, conduct research, publish scholarly work, and participate in academic discourse. Consequently, the ability to write effectively in English has become a fundamental academic competency for students in EFL contexts.

Despite its importance, English academic writing remains one of the most challenging language skills for EFL learners. Writing is a multidimensional process that involves not only linguistic knowledge but also cognitive, metacognitive, rhetorical, and affective abilities. Students are expected to plan their ideas, organize arguments coherently, employ appropriate academic vocabulary, maintain grammatical accuracy, and revise their work critically. These complex demands often make writing considerably more difficult than other language skills, particularly for learners whose exposure to English is largely limited to classroom settings (Hyland & Jiang, 2020; Manchón & Matsuda, 2020).

Previous studies have consistently reported that EFL university students encounter numerous difficulties in English writing. Linguistic challenges such as limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, and first-language interference remain persistent obstacles to effective written communication (Maulana et al., 2023; Yavuz-Erkan & Yilmaz, 2022). Beyond language-related problems, many learners experience cognitive difficulties, including generating ideas, organizing paragraphs, maintaining coherence and cohesion, and developing logical arguments. Such challenges frequently prevent students from expressing their thoughts clearly and constructing academically acceptable texts.

Recent research has also demonstrated that students' writing performance is influenced by affective and contextual factors. Writing anxiety, fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence, and fear of negative evaluation often discourage students from actively engaging in writing activities (Pekrun et al., 2017; Rahimi & Fathi, 2021). Furthermore, contextual factors—including limited opportunities for writing practice, inconsistent feedback, insufficient instructional support, and

inadequate learning resources—may further hinder students' writing development. These findings indicate that writing difficulties should be viewed as a complex interaction among linguistic, cognitive, emotional, and environmental factors rather than as isolated language problems.

Although the literature on EFL writing has expanded considerably over the past decade, several limitations remain. Most previous studies have focused on a single dimension of writing difficulties, such as grammar, vocabulary, writing anxiety, or writing strategies. Other studies have predominantly employed quantitative survey designs that provide limited explanations of students' actual experiences. Consequently, relatively little is known about how various linguistic, cognitive, affective, and institutional challenges interact to shape university students' experiences of learning English academic writing, particularly within Indonesian higher education. A more comprehensive understanding of these interconnected challenges is essential for developing effective and learner-centered writing instruction.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to explore university students' challenges in learning English academic writing at Universitas PGRI Silampari. By integrating questionnaire data with semi-structured interviews, the study provides a richer and more comprehensive understanding of students' lived experiences than could be achieved through a single data source. Rather than examining only one aspect of writing difficulty, this study investigates the interrelationship among linguistic, cognitive, affective, and institutional factors that influence students' writing development.

The novelty of this study lies in its holistic exploration of English writing challenges through multiple qualitative data sources. The study not only identifies the dominant difficulties experienced by Indonesian EFL university students but also explains how these challenges interact throughout the writing process. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of EFL writing research by offering empirical evidence from an Indonesian higher education context and by providing practical implications for designing more responsive, process-oriented, and learner-centered writing instruction.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore the linguistic, cognitive, affective, and institutional challenges encountered by undergraduate students in learning English academic writing at Universitas PGRI Silampari. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the major challenges experienced by students and to provide pedagogical insights that may support the improvement of English writing instruction in Indonesian higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English Academic Writing in EFL Contexts

English academic writing is recognized as one of the most demanding language skills for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Unlike everyday writing, academic writing requires students to communicate ideas logically, construct coherent arguments, employ appropriate academic vocabulary, and adhere to disciplinary conventions. Effective academic writing therefore involves the integration of linguistic knowledge, critical thinking, rhetorical competence, and audience awareness (Hyland & Jiang, 2020). For university students, writing proficiency is essential not only for completing academic assignments but also for conducting research, producing scholarly publications, and participating in academic communication.

Writing is widely regarded as a recursive process consisting of planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. During this process, writers continuously evaluate and refine their ideas to improve clarity and coherence. Consequently, successful academic writing requires both lower-order skills, such as grammar and vocabulary, and higher-order skills, including idea development, organization, coherence, cohesion, and critical reasoning (Manchón & Matsuda, 2020).

Challenges in English Academic Writing

Numerous studies have reported that EFL learners experience a wide range of challenges when learning English academic writing. These challenges extend beyond grammatical accuracy and involve multiple interconnected dimensions. The first dimension is linguistic challenges, including limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, inappropriate lexical choices, and first-language (L1) interference. Students with insufficient linguistic resources often struggle to express ideas accurately and produce grammatically acceptable academic texts (Maulana et al., 2023; Yavuz-Erkan & Yilmaz, 2022).

The second dimension concerns cognitive and rhetorical challenges. Many students experience difficulties in generating ideas, organizing paragraphs, maintaining coherence and cohesion, constructing logical arguments, and integrating supporting evidence into their writing. These higher-order writing skills require students to organize information systematically while simultaneously managing language accuracy (Teng & Zhang, 2020).

The third dimension involves affective challenges. Emotional factors such as writing anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, perfectionism, and low writing self-efficacy frequently reduce students' confidence and willingness to engage in writing activities. Previous studies have shown that writing anxiety is negatively associated with writing performance because anxious learners often avoid writing tasks, hesitate to express ideas, and spend excessive time revising their work (Rahimi & Fathi, 2021; Pekrun et al., 2017).

Finally, institutional and contextual factors also influence students' writing development. Large class sizes, limited opportunities for writing practice, insufficient feedback, inadequate learning resources, and inconsistent instructional expectations may reduce students' opportunities to improve their writing competence. Therefore, writing difficulties should be understood as the result of interactions among individual, pedagogical, and environmental factors rather than merely linguistic deficiencies.

This study adopts a socio-cognitive perspective of writing, viewing writing as a complex activity involving linguistic competence, cognitive processing, emotional regulation, and contextual influences. The framework integrates three complementary perspectives.

First, the Process Writing Theory emphasizes that writing develops through recursive stages of planning, drafting, revising, and editing rather than through a single act of text production. This perspective highlights the importance of continuous reflection and revision throughout the writing process.

Second, Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) theory explains how learners actively regulate their cognition, motivation, and behavior while completing writing tasks. According to Zimmerman (2008), successful writers plan their writing, monitor their progress, evaluate their performance, and revise strategies when necessary. Students with stronger self-regulation generally demonstrate greater writing independence and persistence.

Third, the Social Cognitive Theory proposed by Bandura (1997) highlights the importance of self-efficacy in writing. Students with high writing self-efficacy are more likely to persist when facing difficulties, whereas learners with low confidence often experience higher levels of writing anxiety and avoid challenging writing tasks. These theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding students' writing challenges across linguistic, cognitive, affective, and contextual dimensions.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to investigate EFL university students' challenges in learning English academic writing. The explanatory sequential design was selected because the study involved two interconnected phases: an initial quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase. The quantitative phase was intended to identify the frequency and distribution of students' perceived writing challenges, while the subsequent qualitative phase was designed to explain and elaborate the patterns identified in the quantitative findings. Recent methodological literature emphasizes that sequential mixed-methods designs are particularly useful when quantitative results

require further contextual explanation through qualitative evidence (Khabibullah et al., 2024).

The design followed a QUAN → QUAL → Integration sequence. In the quantitative phase, data were collected using a close-ended questionnaire. The results were analyzed descriptively to identify the most frequently reported challenges. In the qualitative phase, open-ended questionnaire responses and semi-structured interviews were used to explore students' experiences in greater depth. Finally, the quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated to develop a comprehensive interpretation of students' academic writing challenges.

The use of mixed methods is also supported by recent research in EFL academic writing. For example, Batubara and Fithriani (2023) investigated Indonesian EFL students' academic-writing difficulties using questionnaire data supported by interviews. Similarly, recent research by Ihsan and Musdizal (2025) employed a mixed-method approach to investigate Indonesian university students' perceptions and challenges in academic writing. These studies demonstrate the value of combining numerical evidence with students' accounts when investigating complex writing difficulties.

Participants

The participants consisted of 80 undergraduate students enrolled in the English Education Study Program at Universitas PGRI Silampari. The participants came from the first, third, fifth, and seventh semesters and had previously taken or were currently taking English writing courses. The inclusion of students from different semesters was intended to capture writing experiences across different levels of academic experience.

Purposive sampling was used because the researchers required participants who had direct experience with English writing courses and could provide relevant information about academic writing challenges. Recent EFL writing studies have similarly selected university students with previous academic-writing experience as participants because they are able to report difficulties encountered during the writing process (Bram & Angelina, 2022; Harmawan et al., 2023).

The inclusion criteria were: (1) students were enrolled in the English Education Study Program; (2) students had learned or were learning English writing; (3) students were willing to participate; and (4) students were available during data collection.

For the qualitative phase, participants were purposively selected from the questionnaire respondents. Selection was based on the relevance and richness of their responses and their ability to provide further explanations of the quantitative findings. This procedure allowed the qualitative phase to remain directly connected to the results of the initial quantitative phase.

Research Instruments

Three instruments were employed in the study: (1) a close-ended questionnaire, (2) an open-ended questionnaire, and (3) a semi-structured interview protocol. The combination of these instruments was intended to provide complementary forms of evidence concerning students' academic writing experiences. The close-ended questionnaire was used during the quantitative phase to identify the frequency of students' perceived academic writing difficulties. It consisted of 33 statements addressing linguistic, cognitive, structural, affective, writing-process, and contextual dimensions of writing.

The use of questionnaire data is appropriate because recent Indonesian studies have demonstrated that questionnaires can provide useful descriptive evidence concerning students' academic-writing difficulties. Bram and Angelina (2022), for example, identified academic-writing setbacks among Indonesian tertiary students through questionnaire data, while Batubara and Fithriani (2023) used questionnaire responses to identify language, structure, and content-related difficulties.

The second, the open-ended questionnaire consisted of five questions that allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words. The questions focused on students' perceptions of English writing, difficulties encountered during writing, strategies used to address those difficulties, and factors affecting their writing development. The open-ended responses were analyzed qualitatively and used to complement the numerical patterns identified through the close-ended questionnaire.

The last, semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide deeper explanations of the quantitative findings. The interview questions focused on students' experiences with vocabulary, grammar, idea generation, organization, coherence and cohesion, planning, drafting, revising, editing, academic style, writing anxiety, feedback, learning resources, and writing practice.

The use of interviews as a follow-up to questionnaire data is consistent with recent EFL academic-writing research. Batubara and Fithriani (2023), for instance, used interviews to provide additional explanations of questionnaire findings concerning Indonesian students' academic-writing difficulties. Ihsan and Musdizal (2025) likewise combined quantitative and qualitative evidence to investigate students' academic-writing perceptions and challenges.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, particularly frequencies and percentages. The frequency of each response category was calculated and converted into percentages to identify the distribution of students' perceived writing challenges.

The purpose of this analysis was descriptive rather than inferential. The researchers did not attempt to establish causal relationships among variables. Instead, the quantitative findings were used to identify prominent writing challenges that required further qualitative explanation. This approach is consistent with recent studies investigating EFL academic-writing challenges through descriptive questionnaire data (Bram & Angelina, 2022; Pasaribu et al., 2024). Pasaribu et al. (2024), for example, found that Indonesian EFL university students experienced substantial problems in academic writing, particularly in syntactic, morphological, punctuation, and capitalization aspects. Such findings support the importance of examining writing difficulties systematically across multiple dimensions.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data from the open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis involved several iterative stages: familiarizing the researchers with the data, identifying meaningful segments, generating initial codes, grouping related codes, developing themes, reviewing the themes, and interpreting relationships among the themes.

The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns concerning students' linguistic, cognitive, structural, affective, writing-process, and contextual experiences. The qualitative findings in the present study generated themes including vocabulary limitations, grammar problems, idea organization, writing-process challenges, anxiety and fear of mistakes, stress and overthinking, feedback problems, lack of learning resources, limited writing practice, and institutional barriers. Recent Indonesian EFL research has similarly identified academic-writing challenges involving grammar, vocabulary, organization, academic conventions, psychological factors, and learning conditions (Harmawan et al., 2023; Pasaribu et al., 2024; Sari, 2024).

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The final stage involved integrating the quantitative and qualitative findings. Integration is the defining feature of the explanatory sequential design because qualitative findings are used to explain and elaborate quantitative patterns.

The integration therefore demonstrated that students' writing difficulties were interconnected rather than isolated. Linguistic weaknesses interacted with cognitive difficulties, affective barriers, writing-process problems, and contextual conditions. This interpretation is consistent with recent Indonesian research showing that academic-writing difficulties extend beyond grammar and vocabulary to include organization, coherence, confidence, writing strategies, and

academic conventions (Bram & Angelina, 2022; Batubara & Fithriani, 2023; Ihsan & Musdizal, 2025).

Overall, the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design enabled the researchers to identify the prevalence of students' academic writing difficulties while also explaining the experiences and contextual factors underlying those difficulties. The design was therefore appropriate for examining academic writing as a multidimensional phenomenon involving linguistic, cognitive, affective, procedural, and institutional factors.

FINDING

The following part will describe the research data of students' writing challenges found in learning. The data were elicited from questionnaire and interview tools.

Questionnaire Data

Table 1. Students' Challenges in Writing

No.	Statements	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
1	Lack of vocabulary to express my ideas	2.4%	8.8%	42.5%	35%	11.3%
2	Difficulty using correct grammar.	1.2%	11.3%	52.5%	25%	10%
3	Trouble organizing ideas logically	1.2%	11.3%	48.8%	31.2%	7.5%
4	Difficulty maintaining coherence and cohesion.	2.4%	5%	47.5%	36.3%	8.8%
5	Problems with spelling and punctuation.	10%	25%	52.5%	10%	2.5%
6	Limited time to plan and revise.	1.3%	12.5%	55%	26.2%	5%
7	Writing anxiety or fear of negative evaluation.	12.4%	8.8%	27.5%	33.8%	17.5%
8	Lack of examples/model texts.	10%	15%	50%	22.5%	2.5%
9	Insufficient teacher feedback.	22.5%	26.7%	41.3%	7%	2.5%
10	L1 interference (transfer from native language).	2.5%	16.2%	68.8%	10%	2.5%
11	Limited opportunities to practice writing in English.	13.7%	17.5%	45%	21.3%	2.5%

The data in the table reveal that students face a wide range of linguistic, structural, cognitive, and affective challenges when writing in English, with varying degrees of frequency and intensity. Overall, the majority of respondents report experiencing most difficulties *sometimes* or *often*, indicating that writing challenges are a persistent issue rather than isolated occurrences.

One of the most prominent problems is lack of vocabulary, with 42.5% of

students experiencing it *sometimes* and an additional 46.3% experiencing it *often* or *always*. This suggests that insufficient lexical resources significantly hinder students' ability to express ideas clearly and accurately. Similarly, grammar difficulties are widespread: more than half of the students (52.5%) report encountering them *sometimes*, and 35% experience them *often* or *always*, indicating that grammatical accuracy remains a major barrier to effective writing.

Challenges with organizing ideas logically are also common. Nearly half of the respondents (48.8%) report this difficulty *sometimes*, while 31.2% experience it *often*. A related challenge—maintaining coherence and cohesion—shows a similar pattern, with 47.5% indicating they experience this *sometimes* and 36.3% *often*. These findings underscore that higher-order writing skills, such as structuring arguments and linking ideas smoothly, pose substantial difficulties for many students.

Surface-level issues—particularly spelling and punctuation—are also noteworthy. Over half of the respondents (52.5%) face these problems *sometimes*, while a substantial 35% experience them *rarely* or *never*, suggesting more variability in students' proficiency in mechanical aspects of writing.

Time-related constraints also affect students' writing performance. A majority (55%) report having limited time to plan and revise *sometimes*, with an additional 31.2% experiencing this challenge *often* or *always*. This indicates that time pressure may prevent students from engaging in essential writing processes such as idea generation, drafting, and revision.

Affective factors emerge strongly in the data. Writing anxiety or fear of negative evaluation affects a significant portion of students: 27.5% report experiencing it *sometimes*, while an additional 51.3% face it *often* or *always*. This highlights the emotional burden associated with writing tasks and its potential impact on students' performance and willingness to write.

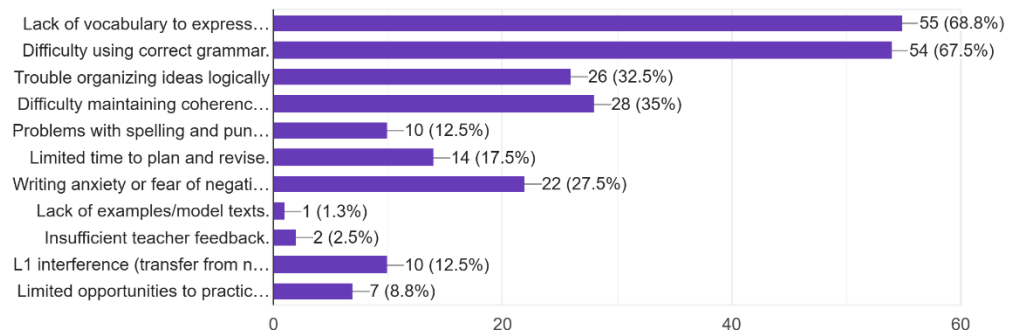
External or environmental challenges appear less severe but remain relevant. For example, half of the students (50%) report experiencing a lack of examples or model texts *sometimes*, while 22.5% experience this *often*. Meanwhile, insufficient teacher feedback is reported much less frequently, with 49.2% indicating it happens *rarely* or *never*, suggesting that most students feel adequately supported through feedback.

L1 interference, or the influence of students' native language on their English writing, is particularly common: 68.8% experience it *sometimes*, though only 12.5% report it *often* or *always*. This indicates that while L1 transfer is a recurring issue, it may not be perceived as severe as other linguistic challenges. Finally, many students report limited opportunities to practice writing. Almost half (45%) experience this issue *sometimes*, and an additional 23.8% report it *often* or *always*, indicating that practice opportunities outside formal instruction

may be insufficient for sustained writing development.

12. From the list above, which THREE problems bother you the most? (Dari daftar di atas, TIGA masalah apa yang paling mengganggu Anda?)

80 responses



The chart illustrates the responses of 80 participants who were asked to identify the three writing problems that trouble them the most. The data reveal that the most prominent challenges are related to linguistic proficiency. A large majority of respondents—55 people (68.8%)—reported that a lack of vocabulary to express ideas is their biggest difficulty. This is closely followed by difficulty using correct grammar, selected by 54 respondents (67.5%), indicating that concerns about accuracy in language use are widespread. These two issues stand out far above the others, suggesting that many learners feel their writing struggles stem primarily from limited language knowledge.

In addition to language-related problems, many participants also experience challenges with structuring and organizing their writing. Difficulty maintaining coherence and flow was chosen by 28 respondents (35%), while 26 respondents (32.5%) reported trouble organizing ideas logically. These results demonstrate that around one-third of participants struggle not only with language mechanics but also with the broader organization of ideas, which is essential for producing clear and cohesive writing. Another significant factor is writing anxiety or fear of negative evaluation, which affects 22 respondents (27.5%). This indicates that emotional and psychological barriers also play a meaningful role in shaping students' writing experiences.

Less common but still notable issues include limited time to plan and revise, selected by 14 respondents (17.5%), as well as problems with spelling and punctuation and L1 interference, each chosen by 10 respondents (12.5%). These lower percentages suggest that, although such issues do impact some learners, they are not as dominant as vocabulary, grammar, or organizational concerns. Even fewer participants identified limited opportunities to practice writing (7 respondents, 8.8%) as a major obstacle.

Finally, the least frequently reported problems relate to instructional support. Only 2 respondents (2.5%) felt they received insufficient teacher feedback, and just 1 respondent (1.3%) mentioned a lack of examples or model texts. These low figures imply that most respondents are generally satisfied with the resources and feedback available to them. Overall, the chart highlights that the most significant writing difficulties involve language proficiency and the ability to develop coherent, well-organized writing, while external and instructional factors appear to be less problematic for the majority of learners.

Overall, those data revealed that the most significant writing challenges faced by the 80 surveyed students stem primarily from linguistic limitations and difficulties in organizing ideas. Issues such as lack of vocabulary, problems with grammar, L1 interference, and struggles with spelling and punctuation consistently affect the majority of respondents, with most students reporting these difficulties at least “Sometimes,” and many experiencing them “Often” or “Always.” Equally prominent are challenges related to higher-order writing skills—logical organization, coherence, and cohesion—with more than four out of five students regularly finding these areas difficult. Psychological factors, particularly writing anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, are also widespread, affecting nearly 80% of participants to varying degrees. Time constraints and limited writing practice further contribute to students’ struggles, although to a slightly lesser extent. In contrast, external or instructional factors—such as insufficient teacher feedback or lack of model texts—appear to be relatively minor concerns for most learners. Taken together, the data clearly indicate that students’ writing difficulties are largely rooted in their language proficiency and their ability to structure ideas effectively, underscoring the need for targeted instructional support in vocabulary development, grammar accuracy, discourse organization, and confidence-building to help them overcome these pervasive challenges.

Interview Data

Table 2. Summary of All Categories of Students’ English Writing Difficulties

Category	Themes	Description of Difficulty
A. Linguistic Difficulties	Vocabulary Limitations	Difficulty finding correct English words, reliance on translation, limited academic vocabulary
	Grammar Problems	Confusion with grammar rules, tenses, verb forms, accuracy, and complex structures
B. Cognitive & Structural Difficulties	Idea Organization & Structure	Difficulty organizing ideas, maintaining coherence, connecting arguments, avoiding over-explanation
	Writing Process Challenges	Slow writing, mental translation, time pressure, perfectionism, difficulty generating ideas

C. Writing Process Stages	Planning	Struggle to generate ideas, create outlines, decide order of arguments, overthink structure
	Drafting	Hardest stage: difficulty starting sentences, expressing ideas, forming clear sentences, getting stuck
	Revising	Difficulty identifying weaknesses, fixing coherence, restructuring arguments
	Editing	Difficulties with grammar correction, spotting errors, polishing sentences, formatting, citations
D. Stylistic & Academic Writing Challenges	Tone and Style Issues	Difficulty maintaining academic tone, choosing precise vocabulary, balancing creativity vs. academic standards
E. Affective (Emotional) Difficulties	Anxiety & Fear of Mistakes	Anxiety about grammar, spelling, low scores; fear of being wrong
	Stress, Pressure & Overthinking	Stress from deadlines, unclear ideas, expectations; overthinking sentence structure
	Fear of Judgment & Low Confidence	Fear of negative evaluation; worry about appearing weak or unintelligent
	Perfectionism-Related Anxiety	Excessive self-editing, fear of not meeting standards, fear of losing personal voice
	Cultural & Pragmatic Concerns	Worry about tone, politeness, cultural appropriateness
F. Contextual & Institutional Barriers	Large Class Size & Limited Support	Crowded classes reducing individual feedback opportunities
	Insufficient or Inconsistent Feedback	Feedback is brief, delayed, unclear, grammar-focused, or inconsistent across lecturers
	Lack of Learning Resources	Outdated books, limited dictionaries, insufficient examples, weak library resources
	Weak Internet / Digital Limitations	Slow internet affecting access to dictionaries, examples, tools
	Limited Writing Practice Opportunities	Too few writing tasks, workshops, or practice sessions
	Time	Tight deadlines, short class time, too many

	Constraints & Heavy Workload	assignments
	Lack of Writing Specialists / Support	Limited writing centers, consultation, or expert assistance
	Inconsistent Expectations Across Lecturers	Conflicting standards (grammar vs. content vs. critical thinking)

the findings show that students' English writing difficulties are multifaceted, deeply rooted in both linguistic weaknesses and challenges with structuring ideas. The pie charts reveal that problems with vocabulary, grammar, spelling, punctuation, and L1 interference are the most pervasive issues, with a large majority of students experiencing these barriers regularly. Equally significant are higher-order challenges—such as organizing ideas logically, maintaining coherence and cohesion, and adopting an appropriate academic tone—which indicate that writing difficulties extend well beyond surface-level language accuracy. Emotional factors, including writing anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, overthinking, and low confidence, further compound these struggles and often hinder students' drafting, planning, and revising processes. Although external instructional issues such as insufficient feedback or lack of resources exist, they appear less influential than internal linguistic, cognitive, and affective obstacles. Taken together, the data suggest that students' writing challenges are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, highlighting the need for comprehensive, targeted pedagogical support that strengthens language proficiency, improves discourse organization, reduces writing-related anxiety, and provides supportive learning conditions to help students become more confident and effective English writers.

Overall, the findings show that students' English writing difficulties arise from an interconnected set of linguistic, cognitive, emotional, and institutional factors. Vocabulary limitations and grammar problems remain the most dominant challenges, often preventing students from expressing precise ideas and constructing accurate sentences. Many learners also struggle with organizing their thoughts, developing coherent arguments, and applying an appropriate academic tone—indicating that writing difficulties extend beyond language forms to higher-level cognitive skills. These challenges become especially visible during the writing process, where drafting emerges as the hardest stage for most students, followed by persistent struggles in planning, revising, and editing due to overthinking, uncertainty, and difficulty evaluating their own work. Emotionally, students frequently experience anxiety, fear of mistakes, stress, perfectionism, and

fear of judgment, which not only undermine their confidence but also intensify their linguistic and procedural difficulties. In addition to these internal challenges, external institutional factors—such as large class sizes, limited instructional time, inconsistent feedback, outdated resources, and inadequate access to learning materials—further restrict students’ opportunities to practice and improve. Taken together, these findings reveal that students’ writing challenges are multifaceted and mutually reinforcing, highlighting the need for comprehensive pedagogical support that addresses language accuracy, idea development, emotional well-being, and institutional learning conditions to help students become more confident and effective writers in English.

DISCUSSION

The findings shows that students generally hold positive attitudes toward English writing, that they value teacher feedback and meaningful writing tasks, but also struggle with linguistic, organizational, and affective challenges — are well-supported by recent empirical studies on EFL writing.

Writing Challenges: Linguistic, Structural, and Affective Hurdles

The findings of the key writing difficulties, such as vocabulary limitations, grammar problems, L1 interference, spelling and punctuation errors, plus difficulties with logical organization, coherence, and academic tone, echoes findings from multiple recent studies. For instance, in a 2020 investigation among EFL learners, linguistic difficulties (vocabulary, grammar) remained among the primary barriers to writing, and students often struggled to produce accurate and meaningful English sentences. Similarly, a study focusing on coherence and cohesion challenges in EFL narrative writing reported that many students felt anxious and uncertain, frequently made grammar mistakes, and often relied on digital tools like Google Translate to compensate for their vocabulary gaps.

Moreover, the finding that structural aspects — idea organization, coherence, academic tone — are as significant as linguistic issues is also supported by recent research. In Ihsan & Musdizal’s (2022) study, while content generation was less problematic for students, coherence (logical flow) and paragraph organization were consistently weak. Beyond linguistic and structural difficulties, this study highlighted the significant role of emotional and cognitive factors, such as writing anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, overthinking, and low confidence, in impeding writing performance. This resonates with a growing body of research showing that writing anxiety remains a major obstacle among EFL students. For example, a study with Indonesian EFL learners reported that about 70.5% experienced high levels of scientific writing anxiety, with major causes including language difficulties, time constraints, lack of writing practice, and fear of negative evaluation from peers or teachers (Ihsan and Musdizal, 2022).

Another recent study found that metacognitive awareness (e.g., planning, self-monitoring) is widely used by anxious writers, but these strategies alone do not reliably reduce anxiety; cognitive anxiety remains high even among those with strong metacognitive habits (Hidayati, 2020). Thus, the conclusion that writing difficulties are interconnected and mutually reinforcing with linguistic, structural, and affective challenges interacting mirrors and is validated by contemporary scholarly findings.

Affective and Metacognitive Dimensions: Anxiety, Confidence, and the Limits of Strategy Use

The findings emphasized that emotional factors, such as writing anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, low confidence, significantly affect students' writing performance. Recent studies confirm this pattern: in one study of EFL learners, the dominant type of writing anxiety was cognitive anxiety (worry about language accuracy, scores, judgment), while avoidance behaviors (postponing writing, avoiding tasks) were also common (Fitriani et al, 2022). Interestingly, while many of the students reportedly use metacognitive strategies (planning, drafting, revising), other research suggests that such strategies do not always significantly reduce anxiety. In a 2020–2021 study, metacognitive awareness strategies were widely used — but the statistical analysis found no significant correlation between metacognitive strategy use and lower writing anxiety (Roslaini et al, 2023). This suggests that while strategic competence and metacognitive awareness are valuable, they may not be sufficient by themselves to overcome deeply rooted affective barriers such as fear, perfectionism, or negative self-evaluation. In other words, improving writing performance may require not only skills and strategies, but also emotional support, confidence-building, and safe writing environments.

Given the complexity and interconnectedness of the difficulties the students face, such as linguistic, structural, cognitive, and affective, the findings align with calls in recent literature for holistic, learner-centered, and multifaceted writing pedagogy. Rather than focusing only on grammar drills or corrective feedback, instruction should integrate language accuracy, discourse competence, strategy training, feedback literacy, and emotional support (Erlangga et al, 2025).

In conclusion, the research findings make clear that EFL writing is not a simple matter of learning grammar rules or memorizing vocabulary. It is a complex, dynamic process shaped by learners' language proficiency, prior experience, emotional state, writing strategies, feedback ecology, and the learning environment. Writing difficulties are rarely due to a single factor; instead, they emerge from an entanglement of linguistic, cognitive, affective, and contextual constraints. Addressing these challenges, then, requires a holistic, flexible, learner-centered pedagogical approach — one that nurtures not only students' linguistic competence, but also their strategic awareness, emotional confidence,

and autonomous writing habits. This study adds to a growing consensus in recent EFL research that improving writing competence demands more than error correction: it must involve strategic instruction, affective support, exposure to authentic texts, meaningful feedback, sustained practice, and scaffolding over time.

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that students' experiences with English writing are shaped by a complex interaction of attitudes, challenges, and strategic behaviors. While most students hold positive perceptions of writing and recognize its academic value, their confidence and understanding of what constitutes effective writing vary widely depending on their proficiency and prior experience. Despite this generally positive orientation, students continue to face substantial linguistic and structural difficulties—particularly in vocabulary, grammar, coherence, and academic tone—which are further intensified by affective barriers such as anxiety, fear of evaluation, and low self-assurance. These challenges are compounded by inconsistent use of writing strategies, as learners employ a diverse but uneven set of tools, from pre-writing planning to digital aids and teacher feedback. Importantly, differences in strategy use and writing habits highlight a developmental continuum in which more experienced writers demonstrate greater rhetorical awareness and autonomy, while less proficient learners rely heavily on translation and surface-level correction. Taken together, the findings underscore that writing development is neither linear nor uniform; rather, it is driven by the dynamic interplay of linguistic ability, emotional readiness, strategic awareness, and instructional support. This suggests that effective writing pedagogy must be comprehensive, flexible, and responsive—strengthening foundational language skills, supporting higher-order writing abilities, reducing writing anxiety, and fostering sustained, independent writing practices to help students become more confident and capable English writers.

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