



EXPLORING CHALLENGES IN ACADEMIC WRITING: A CASE STUDY OF FINAL-YEAR ENGLISH EDUCATION STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Academic writing is a critical skill in higher education, particularly in English Education programs where students are expected to produce undergraduate theses. Despite its importance, many students struggle to meet academic standards in writing. This study aims to explore the challenges faced by final-year students in writing their thesis introductions. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six final-year English Education students and document analysis of their thesis drafts. Thematic analysis revealed four major challenges: difficulty initiating the writing process, limited academic vocabulary, insufficient supervisory support, and psychological pressure. These findings highlight the interplay between cognitive, linguistic, and affective factors in shaping writing performance. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of writing struggles in EFL contexts and offers pedagogical implications for academic writing instruction. It recommends enhanced scaffolding, targeted vocabulary instruction, and improved supervision practices to better support students' writing development.

Keywords: *academic writing; English Education students; writing challenge*

INTRODUCTION

In the landscape of higher education, academic writing stands as a cornerstone skill for student success, especially in English Education programs where the completion of research-based theses is a graduation requirement. The ability to produce clear, coherent, and structured academic texts reflects not only students' linguistic competence but also their capacity for critical thinking and scholarly engagement. Academic writing is therefore more than a functional skill—it is an essential indicator of a student's readiness to contribute meaningfully to academic and professional communities.

Despite its importance, concerns about the quality of undergraduate theses continue to surface, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts such as Indonesia. Final-year students often encounter substantial difficulties in articulating their ideas in formal academic prose. One critical section that frequently reveals these struggles is the introduction chapter, which serves as the conceptual gateway to the entire thesis. Observations from supervisors and institutional reports commonly indicate that these sections are often underdeveloped, lacking clarity, coherence, and argumentative depth.

Scholars have long documented the challenges faced by EFL learners in academic writing. Hyland (2004), Nation (2009), and Paltridge (2004) identified persistent difficulties including limited genre awareness, insufficient academic vocabulary, and weak organizational skills. More recent studies (e.g., Pasaribu et al., 2024; Alzubi & Nazim, 2024) confirm that these linguistic and cognitive issues are further compounded

by affective factors such as anxiety and low self-confidence, as well as institutional constraints like limited instructional support.

Within the broader literature, challenges in academic writing have been categorized into at least four interrelated domains. The first is linguistic, involving grammatical inaccuracies and a lack of academic vocabulary necessary to express complex ideas (Nation, 2009; Alzubi & Nazim, 2024). The second is cognitive, covering difficulties in developing ideas, organizing arguments logically, and synthesizing existing literature (Paltridge, 2004; Siddiqui et al., 2023). The third domain is affective, including issues of motivation, self-efficacy, and writing-related anxiety (Ivanič, 1998; Hamdani & Abid, 2025). Lastly, institutional challenges such as insufficient writing instruction, inadequate supervisory feedback, and lack of access to academic resources further exacerbate students' difficulties (Wahid, 2024; Ananda et al., 2024).

To better understand these multifaceted challenges, this study draws upon three complementary theoretical lenses. Genre Theory (Swales, 1990) provides a structural approach to analyzing how students compose introductions, especially through the CARS (Create a Research Space) model. Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) emphasizes the role of social interaction and scaffolding in writing development, underlining the need for guided academic support. Meanwhile, the notion of writer identity (Ivanič, 1998) frames the internal struggle students face in constructing an authoritative academic voice while negotiating their roles as novice scholars.

Despite the wealth of theoretical insights and international studies on EFL writing, there is still a noticeable gap in localized, in-depth qualitative research that investigates the lived experiences of students at the final stage of their academic writing journey in Indonesia. Particularly lacking are case studies that explore the specific challenges of composing thesis introductions—a section that sets the intellectual tone and determines the clarity of the entire research project.

To address this gap, the present study aims to explore the challenges experienced by final-year English Education students in writing the introduction section of their undergraduate theses. By examining both students' perceptions and their actual writing practices, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the obstacles they face, as well as the pedagogical implications that can be drawn to improve academic writing instruction in EFL teacher education programs.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design aimed at gaining in-depth and contextualized insights into the academic writing experiences of final-year students. A case study approach was deemed appropriate as it allows a detailed exploration of participants' perspectives and practices within a bounded system—namely, students engaged in writing the introduction section of their undergraduate theses in an English Education program.

The participants of this study consisted of six final-year students enrolled in an English Education program at a private university located in West Java, Indonesia. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on two criteria: (1) they were currently working on their undergraduate theses, and (2) they had completed at least the first draft of their introduction chapter. This selection aimed to ensure that participants had sufficient experience with academic writing to reflect meaningfully on the challenges they encountered.



To gather data, two qualitative methods were employed: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The interviews, each lasting between 30 and 45 minutes, were conducted individually with all participants. These interviews aimed to explore students' lived experiences, perceptions, and specific difficulties encountered during the process of writing their thesis introductions. The use of open-ended questions allowed for flexibility and depth, enabling participants to elaborate on their thoughts while still addressing key areas relevant to the study.

In addition to interviews, document analysis was conducted on the participants' draft introduction chapters. This analysis focused on identifying patterns in linguistic features, rhetorical structure, and common writing deficiencies. The combination of interview and document data allowed for triangulation and a more comprehensive understanding of the academic writing challenges faced by students.

Data from both sources were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the researcher familiarized herself with the data by reading and rereading transcripts and documents. Second, initial codes were generated inductively based on repeated patterns and relevant content. Third, these codes were collated into potential themes that represented significant aspects of the students' challenges. The fourth and fifth steps involved reviewing and refining themes to ensure internal coherence and relevance to the research question. Finally, themes were clearly defined and named to reflect the essence of the participants' experiences.

Through this systematic and iterative process, the study identified key thematic findings that shed light on the multidimensional challenges encountered by EFL students in academic writing at the thesis level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of interviews and students' draft introductions revealed four major themes that encapsulate the core challenges faced by final-year English Education students in writing academic texts, particularly the introduction chapter of their theses. These themes reflect the linguistic, cognitive, affective, and institutional dimensions of academic writing challenges, each intertwined in ways that impact students' overall writing performance. Major Themes Identified in Student Writing Challenges can be seen from chart below:



One of the most common challenges expressed by participants was the difficulty in initiating the writing process. Many students shared a sense of confusion and paralysis when faced with a blank page. One participant remarked, *"I didn't know how to begin. I kept rewriting the first paragraph again and again."* (P3). This struggle highlights a lack of understanding about the rhetorical structure and purpose of the introduction section. The finding resonates with Paltridge (2004), who argues that inadequate genre awareness can hinder students from articulating a focused research background and rationale. In the context of EFL learners, this initial barrier can delay progress significantly, creating a domino effect on students' confidence and momentum throughout the writing process.

Another prominent theme was students' frustration with their limited academic vocabulary. Participants often expressed that while they had ideas in mind, they found it difficult to express those ideas using appropriate academic language. As one participant noted, *"I understand the idea, but I cannot write it in academic English."* (P1). This issue is a well-documented challenge in EFL contexts where students have limited exposure to academic discourse (Nation, 2009). In line with the findings of Alzubi and Nazim (2024), the lack of lexical resources not only affects clarity and precision but also undermines students' sense of authority and ownership over their writing. The inability to choose "the right words" often leads to vague generalizations or awkward phrasing that fail to meet academic standards.

A recurring concern among participants was the lack of clear and constructive feedback from thesis supervisors. Several students described their supervision sessions as unhelpful or vague. One student recalled, *"My supervisor only said 'fix this part' but didn't explain how."* (P5). This points to an institutional issue where the scaffolding needed for academic writing development is insufficient or inconsistently provided. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, effective feedback and guided interaction are critical forms of scaffolding that help learners bridge the gap between their current ability and their potential competence. The absence of this support structure contributes to confusion, self-doubt, and disengagement from the writing process.

The affective dimension of writing also emerged as a significant challenge. Participants reported experiencing anxiety, stress, and demotivation, particularly when comparing their progress to that of their peers. One participant confessed, *"I feel stuck and under pressure because others are progressing faster."* (P6). This kind of psychological burden can inhibit creativity, lower writing productivity, and ultimately erode self-efficacy. The role of affective factors in academic writing is well-documented (Hyland, 2004; Hamdani & Abid, 2025), and this study further confirms that writing difficulties cannot be solely attributed to linguistic deficits or cognitive load. Emotional factors—such as fear of failure, lack of confidence, and academic pressure—must also be addressed in instructional practices.

Taken together, these four themes provide a nuanced understanding of the interrelated nature of the writing challenges experienced by EFL students. The findings support existing literature while offering a localized perspective on how Indonesian undergraduate students navigate the complex process of academic writing in a foreign language. Unlike studies that treat these issues in isolation, this research demonstrates how cognitive difficulties, limited linguistic resources, lack of institutional support, and psychological stress converge to form a multidimensional challenge.

From a pedagogical standpoint, these findings underscore the need for comprehensive support systems that address not only language and structure but also emotional resilience and supervisory engagement. Implementing genre-based instruction,



providing vocabulary scaffolding, enhancing supervisor training, and incorporating affective support mechanisms may collectively empower students to develop their academic writing competencies more effectively.

CONCLUSION

This research investigated the diverse challenges that final-year students of English Education face in writing the introduction of their undergraduate theses. The analysis of interviews and drafts revealed that four interconnected issues emerged: struggle to begin writing, poor academic language skills, lack of feedback from supervisors, and mental stress. These findings demonstrate that the problems of academic writing among EFL learners cannot be purely linguistic or cognitive in nature, but they also need to consider emotions and the institution's context.

This also adds to the scholarship on how the dimensions of academic writing conversely incorporate and impacts students in different ways. This also highlights the need for effective teaching that combines systematic planning focusing on teaching the genre and vocabulary, balanced supervision, and training targeted on coping skills for negative feelings. Addressing these interconnected challenges would promote better and more self-assured academic writers within the context of EFL teacher education.

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