

Investigating EFL Students' Challenges in Writing Academic Papers

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Abstract: This study examined the challenges faced by EFL students in Indonesia in writing academic papers, focusing on their strategies for dealing with these challenges. The study involved 100 students in the English education department, who were working on their thesis in their 7th semester. A mixed-method approach was used, with quantitative data collected through a close-ended questionnaire and open-ended questions about strategies used. The results showed that students faced difficulties in controlling emotions, deciding the thesis topic, and understanding current issues. They also struggled with correct English grammar, planning long written texts, creating coherent sentences, and expressing ideas logically. The qualitative responses suggested strategies for students to become self-aware and autonomous in academic writing, such as reading articles and seeking support from peers. Teachers should develop effective learning strategies, motivate students, and stay updated on current issues. Future research should use interviews, self-inquiry, and classroom observations to provide more comprehensive results.

Key words: EFL students, academic paper, writing challenges, strategies

INTRODUCTION

Hyland (2013) mentioned that when it comes to admission and achievements in university life, academic writing in English becomes an important aspect and is used as a gateway to success for students all around the world. This statement is backed by further research by Toba (2019). In the field of writing, the most recent findings of difficulties faced by students in Indonesia, as well as Toba (2019) reported that students' struggles in writing academic papers are dominated by several reasons, such as limited knowledge about aspects of writing as well as personal reasons, including lack of writing practice, writing

antipathy, the stress in writing, insufficient time allotted for writing tests, and insufficient teaching of the writing process. Hence, investigations into the challenges faced by EFL students must continue to be carried out. Meanwhile, the study of the strategies used is also expected to help the students in overcoming the difficulties they may face.

Writing involves discovering and developing ideas, writing them down, and revising them (Moore & Murray, 2006). Academic writing, also known as structured writing, is an activity in university or higher education, involving research projects. There are three types: essays, thesis, and reports (Puspita, 2019). In Indonesia, a thesis is a common type of academic writing, required for university graduation. Jani & Mellinger (2015) & Hyland (2013) assume that mastering writing skills benefits students in meaningful expression and is crucial for global goals like understanding disciplines, career development, and efficient learning. Nevertheless, Challob et al. (2016), have identified academic writing as a challenging skill to learn. Proficient writing demands mastery of various elements, such as appropriate structures, content, mechanics, and organization, which can be complex for many EFL writers. Researchers must optimize initiatives to improve students' writing skills. Another statement by Oshima & Hogue (1999) mentioned that developing students' academic writing skills requires a lot of study and practice.

Students' research and thesis writing performance is influenced by internal and external factors, including motivation, dedication, pleasure, and comprehension. These factors interact with personality and linguistic factors, affecting their overall performance (Brown, 2007). Researchers studied internal factors in English learning, focusing on strategies used by students to overcome challenges and achieve goals. External factors, like privileges, can impact success, but internal motivation is crucial. Individual differences among second language learners determine their success.

Previous studies have found that motivation is the most significant factor affecting students' writing performances. The recent study by Kurniasih (2022) found motivation crucial for Indonesian university students' writing performance.

Harahap and Syarif (2022), Khairah and Fatimah (2022) & Wahyuni (2019) examined the level and types of anxiety towards writing performances conclude that anxiety still becomes the prior problem in the writing and teaching process. Lin & Morrison (2021) reported linguistic difficulties in writing academic papers, and students developed strategies to cope with these difficulties. Sabti (2019) found that students experiencing higher anxiety levels had poor writing results, while those with lower anxiety levels had better results. Puspita (2019) found that personality factors, sociolinguistic factors, and academic writing skill factors affected students' writing performances. Altınmakas & Bayyurt (2019) found that interconnected educational and contextual factors influence undergraduate writing, including students' nature, perceptions, and expectations. Toba (2019) reported that EFL students in Indonesia encountered difficulties in writing, with limited knowledge about aspects of writing and personal reasons like lack of writing practice, writing antipathy, stress, insufficient time for writing tests, and insufficient teaching of the writing process. Previous studies about challenges in writing by Kurniasih (2018) confirmed that anxious students tend to produce poor compositions in writing. Furthermore, as mentioned in the previous study by Singh et al. (2017) proved that facing difficulties in writing, especially in grammar context, resulted poor writing outcome. In connection with the findings in the previous studies which found that students encountered difficulties in academic writing, future studies should focus on larger scales, covering various populations and education levels to gain deeper knowledge on academic writing difficulties (Fadda, 2012). Investigating the challenges and strategies developed by undergraduates in writing academic papers can provide more information for undergraduate students to understand and deal with these challenges, as it is essential for mastering this skill in their undergraduate programs. Finally, the following questions were raised up in this study:

1. What challenges do EFL students face in writing academic paper?
2. How do EFL students deal with those challenges?

METHOD

This study examines EFL students' academic paper challenges, focusing on internal factors and strategies. A mixed-method research design, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, collects quantitative data through a questionnaire and open-ended questions via Google form.

The quantitative phase of the study involved closed-ended questionnaire focusing on internal factors and students' challenges. The questionnaire was adapted from Lin & Morrison (2021) and Puspita (2019). Containing 30 questions grouped in personality factor and academic skill factor, this questionnaire aims to identify students' challenges due to internal factors. The researcher modified questions to focus on internal factors and excluded external factors. This questionnaire provides a predefined answer to choose from in the form of the option of "Yes" or "No", ratings from 1-5, opinions from 1 (very easy); 2 (easy); 3 (neutral/uncertain); 4 (difficult); 5 (very difficult). The qualitative phase involved an open-ended questionnaire to understand students' strategies for addressing challenges and their thought processes. The questionnaires were translated into Bahasa Indonesia to reduce misunderstandings and ensure data validity. The closed-ended questionnaire was chosen for ease of use, increased response rate, and measurable quantitative data.

This subject of this study focused on English Education students in the 7th semester of 2022 at University of Islam Malang. The participants were male and female, with prior experience in research paper writing and currently working on their thesis. They are taking a "thesis writing seminar" course in their 7th semester, which teaches them how to write a thesis proposal. The study is conducted without dividing participants by proficiency level and they were not a native English speaker.

This study focused in finding internal factors that affects students writing performances based on several reason. First, internal factors are more closely linked to student learning outcomes (Nofrianti, 2018). Second, Internal factors have a greater impact on thesis writing challenges compared to external elements

like culture, as suggested by previous studies, including (Rizwan, 2022) & (Dwihandini, 2013).

The quantitative data was analyzed through calculating the percentage of each question item and sorted them from the highest to the lowest. Whichever is the highest, it indicates most challenges encountered by students in each personality and academic writing skills factor.

FINDINGS

Personality factors affected students' thesis writing

Table 1. Challenges in Personality Factors Question Items Number 1-5

NO	QUESTION ITEMS	FREQUENCY					TOTAL SCORE %
		VE	E	N	D	VD	
1	In settling for a topic on my thesis	0 (0%)	16 (6.4%)	27 (16.2%)	38 (30.4%)	19 (19%)	72%
2	In settling on a thesis title	0 (0%)	8 (3.2%)	26 (15.6%)	45 (36%)	21 (21%)	75.8%
3	Owing to the thesis topic's background knowledge	2 (0.4%)	15 (6%)	33 (19.8%)	33 (26.4%)	17 (17%)	69.6%
4	Determining and formulating the thesis problem	1 (0.2%)	17 (6.8%)	34 (20.4%)	29 (23.2%)	19 (19%)	69.6%
5	In determining the thesis objectives	1 (0.2%)	15 (6%)	37 (22.2%)	39 (31.2%)	8 (8%)	67.6%

In question items number 1-5, students mostly struggled in settling on thesis title (75.8%) followed by settling on topic (72%), determining the objectives (67.6%), having good background knowledge and formulating thesis problem (69.6%).

Table 2. Challenges in Personality factors Question Items Number 6-10

NO	QUESTION ITEMS	FREQUENCY					TOTAL SCORE %
		VE	E	N	D	VD	
6	In writing an appropriate review of the literature	1 (0.2%)	17 (6.8%)	30 (18%)	38 (30.4%)	14 (14%)	69, 4%

7	In settling on the method I want to employ for my thesis	1 (0.2%)	22 (8.8%)	35 (21%)	33 (26.4%)	9 (9%)	65.4%
8	In collecting data for my thesis	2 (0.4%)	19 (7.6%)	39 (23.4%)	30 (24%)	10 (10%)	65.4%
9	In writing my thesis findings	2 (0.4%)	8 (3.2%)	45 (27%)	35 (28%)	10 (10%)	68.6%
10	In creating a good thesis	2 (0.4%)	9 (3.6%)	34 (20.4%)	35 (28%)	20 (20%)	72.4%

In question items number 6-10, students mostly struggled in settling on creating good thesis (72.4%), followed by writing a proper literature review (69.4%), writing findings (68.6%), in settling method and collecting the data (65.4%).

Table 3. Challenges in Personality Factors Question Items Number 11-15

NO	QUESTION ITEMS	FREQUENCY					TOTAL SCORE %
		VE	E	N	D	VD	
11	Since I had several ideas while writing my thesis, I was confused	1 (0.2%)	10 (4%)	39 (23.4%)	36 (28.8%)	14 (14%)	70.4%
12	in financial condition while writing the thesis	5 (1%)	21 (8.4%)	43 (25.8%)	21 (16.8%)	10 (10%)	62%
13	when attempting or presenting a thesis	4 (0.8%)	10 (4%)	38 (22.8%)	32 (25.6%)	16 (16%)	69.2%
14	Becoming worried about writing a thesis	2 (0.4%)	8 (3.2%)	19 (11.4%)	48 (38.4%)	23 (23%)	76.4%
15	Aware of updated issues regarding my thesis topic	1 (0.2%)	11 (4.4%)	32 (19.2%)	37 (29.6%)	19 (19%)	72.4%

In question items number 11-15, students mostly struggled in dealing with anxiety (76.4%), followed by unaware of updated issue (76.4%) deal with confusion (70.4%), to present a thesis (69. 2%), and deal with financial issue (65.4%).

Table 4. Challenges in Personality Factors Question Items Number 16- 20

NO	QUESTION ITEMS	FREQUENCY					TOTAL SCORE %
		VE	E	N	D	VD	
16	In identifying some thesis-writing-related issues	0 (0%)	14 (5.6%)	33 (19.8%)	36 (28.8%)	17 (17%)	71.2%
17	to be critical of certain issues of my thesis writing	1 (0.2%)	8 (3.2%)	32 (19.2%)	41 (32.8%)	18 (18%)	73.4%
18	Possessing intrinsic motivation for thesis writing	0 (0%)	14 (5.6%)	31 (18.6%)	36 (28.8%)	19 (19%)	72%
19	writing a thesis with extrinsic motivational factors	1 (0.2%)	15 (6%)	35 (21%)	32 (25.6%)	17 (17%)	69.8%
20	For integrating either every sentence and formulating an insightful thesis	1 (0.2%)	13 (5.2%)	27 (16.2%)	40 (32%)	19 (19%)	72.6%

In question items number 16-20, students mostly struggled in dealing with critical thinking (h.4%), followed by integrating sentences (72.6%) getting intrinsic motivation (72%), identifying related issues (71%), and getting extrinsic motivation (69.8%).

Academic skill factors affected students' thesis writing

Table 5. Challenges in Academic Skill Factors Question Items Number 1-5

NO	QUESTION ITEMS	FREQUENCY					TOTAL SCORE %
		VE	E	N	D	VD	
1	In minimalizing the error of grammar on my thesis writing	1 (0.2%)	11 (4.4%)	28 (16.8%)	43 (34.4%)	17 (17%)	72.8%
2	In paraphrasing and summarizing sentences from the sources to my thesis writing	3 (0.6%)	15 (6%)	46 (27.6%)	30 (24%)	6 (6%)	64.2%
3	In knowing which grammar use that supposed to be deleted, replaced, supplied and reordered on my thesis writing	1 (0.2%)	14 (5.6%)	32 (19.2%)	46 (36.8%)	7 (7%)	68.8%

4	In Planning long-written texts	2 (0.4%)	9 (3.6%)	33 (19.8%)	44 (35.2%)	12 (12%)	71%
5	Elaborating and supporting ideas	2 (0.4%)	13 (5.2%)	51 (30.6%)	28 (22.4%)	6 (6%)	64.6%

In question items number 1- 5, students mostly struggled with minimizing grammatical errors (72.8%), followed planning long written text (71%), using correct grammar (68.8%), to present a thesis (69. 2%), and elaborating the supporting ideas (64.6%).

Table 6. Challenges in Academic Skill Factors Question Items Number 1-5

NO	QUESTION ITEMS	FREQUENCY					TOTAL SCORE %
		VE	E	N	D	VD	
6	Clearly and logically organizing ideas	0 (0%)	15 (6%)	39 (23, 4%)	33 (26, 4%)	13 (13%)	68, 8%
7	Linking sentences smoothly	2 (0, 4%)	18 (7, 2%)	28 (16, 8%)	38 (30, 4%)	14 (14%)	68, 8%
8	Citing academic sources	2 (0, 4%)	17 (6, 8%)	39 (23, 4%)	37 (29, 6%)	5 (5%)	65, 2%
9	In finding references/sources that match the thesis topic	6 (1, 2%)	17 (6, 8%)	38 (22, 8%)	29 (23, 2%)	10 (10%)	64%
10	Using appropriate academic style	7 (1, 4%)	7 (2, 8%)	57 (34, 2%)	20 (16%)	9 (9%)	63, 4%

In question items number 6- 10, students mostly struggled in orgazing ideas clearly and logically and smoothly linking the sentences (68.8%), followed by citing academic sources properly (65.2%), finding related sources (64%), and using appropriate academic style in writing (63.4%).

Strategies that the students used to deal with the challenges

The data showed various answer that came from the students but these answers can be submitted to the four strategies that are widely used by them.

1. By reading and browsing for more articles

40 of the 100 students admitted that they needed to read more and find more references in order to complete their thesis with fewer difficulties.

"I've read a lot of references related to my thesis title" (S17)

2. By sharing with peers and lecturer

Some of the students revealed that they overcome the challenges by coming to discuss their difficulties with their friends who had experience in writing thesis.

"I planned to read a lot of previous theses and share them with friends in order to gain motivation and new ideas for my thesis" (S12)

"I sought advice from advisors often" (S52)

3. By utilizing AI

The next response showed that students were using some online tools as much as possible.

"Grammarly and Quillbot can help with paraphrasing and grammar correction" (S47)

4. By doing relaxations

Students also did some healing activities or took some rest, and made their time management.

"I would take a break or pause for about 5 minutes when I got stuck and then committed to continuing on my work after that" (S74).

DISCUSSION

The study found that students face challenges in personality factors, such as anxiety in writing a thesis (76%), deciding the thesis title (75.8%), and being aware of current issues (73.4%). Financial situation, data collection, and thesis method selection had the lowest percentages. Controlling emotions which was the most common difficulty is in line with the previous findings by Harahap & Syarif (2022) was the most difficult factors followed by deciding on a thesis topic and title and lack of awareness of current issues. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that personality factors still have the highest percentage compared to academic writing skills factors (Puspita, 2019).

The questionnaire about the students' challenges in academic writing skills revealed that the majority of the students faced challenges in minimizing grammar

errors in their thesis writing (72, 8%), Planning long written texts (71%), Organizing ideas clearly and logically also linking sentences smoothly (68, 8%). The results revealed that only a few students struggle with some challenges including using the appropriate academic style for writing their thesis, finding references that match their thesis topic, in paraphrasing and summarizing sentences from the sources to their thesis writing. In line with the several previous findings, it was also stated that students encountered linguistic challenges during working on their thesis (Lin and Morrison, 2021) & (Ma, 2021), difficulties in paraphrasing and summarizing sentences (Lestari, 2020), difficulties in organizing ideas clearly and logically due to poor critical thinking methods (Shahsavari, 2020).

The last report was the result of the open ended question. Based on the findings, the strategies used by students can be classified into four categories. First, most of the students which are 40 from 100 admitted that they read more references to overcome their challenges is in line with some previous study. Students conduct extensive research planning activities during a thesis proposal, such as reading related sources to strengthen their references and learning how to structure a thesis (Rahayu, 2023). Second, Students frequently use sharing with peers and lecturers to overcome thesis writing challenges. This strategy have some positive impacts such as boosting intention to finish their thesis (Mbato, 2019), reduce thesis stress and boost self-efficacy (Rahayu, 2023), improve their writing skills by getting feedback (Jiang, 2020). Third, utilizing AI also have been proven effective to assist students in writing (Umamah, 2022). Fadlilah (2023) also suggested teaching reference tool management to students to reduce writing errors. Fourth, stress reducing strategy and managing time was also employed by the students. Mistar, Zuhairi, and Parlindungan (2014) stated that self-monitoring and planning is one of eleven strategies used by students in writing. Research shows that this strategy help students to concentrate (Mbato, 2019), and improve the progress on their writing (Pravita, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

In brief, the study finds that EFL students at Universitas Islam Malang face challenges in writing academic papers, particularly in personality and linguistic challenges. The majority of students use strategies like reading, discussing experiences, using educational materials, online tools, seeking healing, and managing time. These challenges were classified as high which means there were majority of the student encountered challenges in both personal and academic skill factors. Students can become self-aware and autonomous in academic writing by practicing and learning, seeking clarification on unclear material for instance; thesis titles, grammar, organization, and sentence linking, and sharing challenges with others. Teachers can develop effective learning strategies, motivate students, and stay updated on current issues. Future researchers should use multiple instruments, such as interviews, self-inquiry, and classroom observations, to understand students' challenges and provide more comprehensive results.

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