



Exploring EFL Graduate Students' Difficulties in Completing Academic Writing: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

Academic writing is an essential academic component in higher education. Although EFL graduates have undergraduate writing experience, this does not always imply that the academic writing process will be simpler at the graduate level. At this level, writing requirements grow more complex, including precise language, logical organization, and in-depth analysis, as they are expected to meet the high standards of academic writing inherent in advanced study. As a result, the purpose of this study is (1) to explore the difficulties faced by students in academic writing through students' stories and (2) to investigate the strategies that students apply to cope with difficulties. This study applies a qualitative research method called narrative inquiry research. This research relied on three graduate students in English education as sources, with data acquired through in-depth interviews. The findings revealed that EFL students in higher education struggle with the complexity of academic writing rules, organizing ideas, linguistic barriers, and emotional stress. To overcome this, they employed a variety of strategies, including free writing, seeking feedback from peers or lecturers or utilizing AI tools, regulating emotions, and referring to writing models. In a sense, these findings demonstrate that academic writing is more than just communicating ideas in writing, it is an intellectual and emotional process that may develop the way students think, feel, and express knowledge. Empathetic and supportive learning encourages them to acquire writing strategies while also developing independence, self-confidence, and reflective awareness, all of which serve as the basis for strong and empowered academic writers.

Keywords: *Academic writing difficulty 1; coping strategies 2; EFL graduate students 3; Narrative Inquiry 4*

Introduction

Writing is a high-level mental activity that is unique to each individual, and each piece of writing created might have distinct qualities. Academic writing is done for a variety of purposes and takes on various shapes and characteristics, and students are expected to encounter a variety of writing styles. (Noori, 2020). Therefore, with the diverse purposes of academic writing with various types of writing, writing is generally recognized as one of the most difficult problems for ESL or EFL students (Nam Chi, Thi Thuy, & Nhan Ai, 2024). This issue is especially significant at the university level, when academic writing expectations are high. The difficulties that develop might differ substantially based on the individual's background, experience, and ability. However, it is occasionally viewed as difficult for students to comprehend. Even native English speakers may struggle to write at a higher academic level (Fadda. 2012).

The difficulties in academic writing are frequently linked to a variety of issues, particularly students' comprehension of writing skills and ability to assemble research, reports, or essays (Sitompul & Anditasari, 2022). Therefore, Academic writing abilities are an essential component of students' professional identity as future instructors or researchers. In this study, all participants had the same undergraduate education: English Language Education programs. Although they had academic writing experience as undergraduates, this did not ensure high writing quality at the graduate level. This shows that earlier expertise does not necessarily lead to mastery of more difficult academic writing. As a result, a better knowledge of how postgraduate students build experiences and awareness, overcome obstacles, and devise strategies for boosting their academic writing abilities is required.

Numerous difficulties experienced by students in academic writing include English proficiency (Nam Chi, Thi Thuy, & Nhan Ai, 2024). Many learners encounter major difficulties associated with their limited fluency in English. Non-native English speakers may struggle with vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and idiomatic phrases, impacting their writing's clarity and consistency (Ramos & Souza, 2022). Another difficulty is recognizing academic standards, learners must follow specific standards in citation styles, formal language, and academic norms. In addition, academic writing encourages students to think critically, they must be able to objectively assess and integrate information from multiple sources to construct a compelling and logical argument.

This activity necessitates intellectual rigor and advanced cognitive capacities, resulting in writing that is not just descriptive but also demonstrates a thorough comprehension of the issue under consideration (Hyland, 2004). Students frequently struggle with organization and structure while creating a well-structured and logically cohesive writing, they must effectively arrange their thoughts and convey their arguments clearly and cohesively (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). In investigation skills, students must be able to discover appropriate literature, evaluate their reliability, and successfully incorporate it into their writing (Ferris, 2003).

Several previous studies have been conducted to investigate EFL students' difficulties in academic writing. The study "Investigating EFL Learners' Difficulties And Strategies In Academic Writing Skill: A Qualitative Study" reveal that Indonesian EFL university students confront a variety of academic writing obstacles, including grammar, cohesion, coherence, paragraph structure, diction, spelling errors in writing, and psychology (Riadil, Rahman, & Chonpracha, 2023). Another study, "The Current Issues of Indonesian EFL Students' Writing Skills: Ability, Problem, and Reason in Writing Comparison and Contrast Essay", Indonesian EFL university students continue to struggle with academic writing aspects such as content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics.

They face these difficulties not only because of a lack of knowledge about, but also because of personal factors such as a lack of writing practice, a negative perception of writing, a lack of motivation, time management, and an ineffective writing teaching process taught by lectures (Toba, Noor, & Sanu, 2019). Last study entitled "Investigating Academic Writing: Exploring English Department Students' Perceptions of Challenges" found that English Department students have confidence in creating ideas and using fundamental grammar, but struggle with word use, textual coherence, and writing mechanics (Ihsan & Musdizal, 2025).

This study differs from previously published work that it focuses on Indonesian EFL graduate students who confront more complicated difficulties in advanced academic writing rather than EFL undergraduate students, who have dominated most previous studies. Unlike previous studies that focused on surface-level concerns like grammar or syntax, Fundamental barriers to organization, argumentation, research integration, alternatively, it might be a personal difficulty such as affective and cognitive development are investigated in this study. Furthermore, this study not only identifies students' difficulties, but also investigates the strategies to address those difficulties. This study provides a deeper and more nuanced view of the development of academic writing ability in higher education by delving into EFL graduate students' personal experiences.

Although some studies have looked into EFL students' issues with academic writing, the majority have focused on undergraduate contexts and surface characteristics such as grammar, vocabulary, and coherence. However, there are few studies that have looked at how EFL graduate students, particularly those in the Indonesian context, comprehend, confront, and overcome the more complicated difficulties of advanced academic writing. Furthermore, this study focuses not only on identifying difficulties, but also on exploring how EFL students comprehend, confront, and navigate these difficulties, particularly in Indonesian context, providing a deeper understanding of the development of academic writing competency in advanced higher education. Therefore, this study aims (1) to explore the difficulties that university students encounter in academic writing through students' stories. Additionally, this research seeks (2) to investigate the strategies that students apply to cope with difficulties. Based on the statement explained above,

the researcher formulated two research questions. They are (1) What difficulties do EFL graduate students encounter in the academic writing process? and (2) How do EFL graduate students apply strategies to cope with difficulties in academic writing? The rest of the paper is arranged as follows: Section 2 covers the methodology, Section 3 includes the findings and discussion, Section 4 provides conclusions and recommendations, and the last section contains the references.

Method

Research Design

In this study, the researcher employed a qualitative research design called narrative inquiry, which allows for a more in-depth exploration of the participant's narrative, allowing the researcher to become intimately involved with the personal story and the complexities of the experience. Narrative research is especially well-suited for capturing and analyzing detailed stories or life experiences of an individual or a group of individuals. Gathering information about a person's/ people's life and asking the participants to share life experiences are the foundation of narrative research. The stages have been determined clearly and systematically to facilitate research (Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, 2000).

The stage begins with determining if the chosen topic is best suited for a narrative research technique. Next, the researcher selects one or more individuals who are relevant to the research topic. The data is then collected, including multiple sources of participant accounts. Background information from these stories is then used in the data collecting, analysis, and writing processes. The researcher then evaluates and retells the individuals' stories. Collaboration with participants is encouraged throughout the data gathering process to ensure the validity of the shared experiences. Finally, the researcher creates a narrative that summarises the participants' experiences. The collected material is subsequently evaluated using thematic analysis.

Participants

This research was conducted at the English Education Department of the master program of Yogyakarta State University, it involved three students selected using purposive sampling techniques, with the following criteria: 1) graduate students of English education who had taken or were taking research methodology/scientific writing or currently writing English academic papers, 2) struggled with English academic writing, and 3) were willing to be interviewed and share their experiences openly. The relatively small number of participants served a specific purpose. In narrative research, the limited number of participants allows researchers to explore each individual's personal experiences in greater depth. Therefore, three participants were deemed sufficient to obtain a rich and comprehensive understanding of the experiences being studied. This research is part of a academic project and was carried out in compliance with ethical research norms.

All participants were informed of the study's goal and methods, and they voluntarily and freely, uncoerced consent via an informed consent letter.

. The fundamental information about the participants in this study as follows:

Table 1. Basic participant information

No	Participant	Age	Gender	Year of study
1	P1	24	Female	1st Year
2	P2	25	Female	2nd Year
3	P3	23	Female	1st Year

Data Collection

Data was collected through in-depth interviews, guided by an interview guide instrument. The interview was conducted for approximately 90 minutes, with each person taking no more than 60 minutes and was conducted in Indonesian, then a recording device was provided.

Data Analysis

This study utilized thematic analysis to analyze the data, as this method helps to identify, organize, and interpret the main themes that emerged from the participants in a logistically and meaningful way, the thematic analysis technique is as follows, step 1 is to become familiar with your data, step 2 is to generate initial codes, step 3 is to search for themes, step 4 is to examine themes, step 5 is to define and name themes, and the last step is to produce the report.

The reliability/validity of the research results was maintained through various strategies. Researchers asked participants to clarify or review interview results that required further explanation (member checking) to ensure the accuracy of the information conveyed. Peer debriefings were conducted to obtain alternative perspectives and minimize researcher bias. Furthermore, researchers provided in-depth descriptions (thick descriptions) to ensure the reader fully understands the context of the participants' experiences.

As a researcher, I am conscious that my background as an English Language Education student could affect how I comprehend and interpret participant experiences. My personal experience negotiating the hurdles of academic writing increased my empathy for the participants' situations and allowed me to better comprehend the context of their experiences. However, this common experience prompted me to be wary about bringing bias into the data analysis process. As a result, throughout this research, I sought to preserve neutrality by critically reflecting on my own position, ensuring that any findings accurately represent the participants' narratives and viewpoints.

Result

The interview data was analyzed and divided into two major theme categories, difficulties encountered by EFL students in academic writing, and strategies employed to overcome those difficulties. The first section includes four themes: the complicated norms and regulations of academic writing, difficulty organizing ideas, language and structural hurdles, and the emotional cost of the writing process. The second section includes four adaptive techniques established by participants, such as starting free writing, seeking external help, controlling emotions, and utilizing model texts for assistance. When taken together, these topics give a thorough picture of how EFL students confront and respond to academic writing difficulties.

Difficulties In the Academic Writing Process

1. Linguistic And Structural Barriers in Writing (Grammar, Structure, and Spelling)

As EFL students with language restrictions, all participants acknowledged that language barriers were a major difficulty they faced. As told by P2, a second-year master's student even basic grammatical errors frequently occur, demonstrating that authors who are exhausted may encounter minor issues, instead of substantial difficulties with grammar, coherence, and cohesiveness (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017).

My difficulty when editing/revising the writing is the grammar, spelling, and flow of each paragraph, especially finding the appropriate conjunction for the sentence, such as "moreover", "on the other hand", etc... P1.

...Grammar or structure is quite difficult for me. When we are too tired, sometimes even simple grammar might be left behind or not noticed, so it can become an error in writing. P2

When writing it must also think about how the structure, how an event has occurred, so you have to think if this has happened, you have to use "past tense" or not, you have to use "gerund" or like for example there are two clauses, there are three verbs, etc., so writing structure and grammar are in my opinion the most difficult during the academic writing process. P3

Based on these participants' experiences, many EFL students believe that the fundamental goal of academic writing is to create extremely cohesive, logical, and critically analytical writing. As a result, they frequently overlook linguistic details such as sentence structure or syntactic patterns (Wang & Parr, 2021). This occurs since they are already burdened with the effort to create perfect work, hence, grammatical faults are frequently disregarded, or worse, totally ignored. In additions, Riadil, Rahman, and Chonpracha's (2023) study found that grammar was the most difficult aspect of academic writing for nine out of ten participants. This outcome is consistent with the findings of this study, which revealed that difficulties learning

grammatical structures is a key barrier to EFL students' ability to write effectively and logically. This demonstrates that grammatical abilities are more than just structural characteristics, but rather a necessary basis for establishing clarity and credibility in academic writing.

2. Complex Rules and Structure of Academic Writing

The primary distinction is in the goal of the writing, which is more formal and scientific. As a result, both writers and readers frequently struggle to grasp the substance of academic works. This issue is typically created by the usage of complicated writing patterns. As told by several participants.

...I realize that academic writing is not easy, in writing a thesis, journal articles, even assignments are also difficult to do because there are many rules that must be followed, P1

...academic writing is not arbitrary, so it must follow the criteria or steps that have been set, so I think it is quite difficult and must follow the existing procedures, P2

...I think the most difficult thing is finding or organizing formal sentences and vocabulary....., sometimes I have to adapt or look for vocabulary that I haven't or am not used to using, which is more formal in academic writing. P3

As EFL graduate students, this difficulty is a frequent and significant one that emerges when they begin writing academic papers. According to P1, a first-year master's student and P2, a second-year master's student academic writing is difficult as it must adhere to stringent academic guidelines. This demonstrates that students frequently feel constrained by the expectations of formal and inflexible frameworks, impeding the process of writing organically and flexibly. In addition, P3, a first-year master's student underlined the difficulties in forming academic tones. Transitioning to an academic language style necessitates greater work in altering vocabulary, syntax, and writing style. Getting used to this academic manner is particularly tough, especially for EFL students. Although all of them have substantial writing expertise from their undergraduate degrees, this does not mean that the writing process at the graduate level will be easier. In this setting, all participants frequently believe that the structure and rules of graduate academic writing necessitate a higher standard of proficiency.

This becomes considerably more difficult for students when academic writing standards must be tailored to the context or kind of writing. For example, while producing research articles, many journal editors require a framework that is both concise structure and obvious. This might be difficult for them since they must express their ideas clearly and concisely without using a lot of words. As a result, they devote more work to creating paragraphs that satisfy the template's requirements than to the actual writing. This highlights the complicated interaction between the preceding instances. As a result, students must have a thorough

awareness of academic writing skills from diverse context in order to assess their own writing abilities and employ strategies to address distinct difficulties in writing (Li, 2024). One key takeaway from this analysis is that many students are not completely prepared for these obligations. This is partly due to the disparity between the norms and habits of writing in their first language (L1) and the expectations that exist in English-language academic environments (Ma, 2021).

3. Struggles In Structuring And Articulating Ideas (Organizing, Developing, Or Connecting The Ideas)

Academic writing's difficulties are not only throughout the writing process, but also in the preparation and formulation of the ideas, even graduate students struggle to keep a logical flow in their writing, which is necessary for coherence. They frequently struggle to link ideas coherently, resulting in disconnected and difficult to comprehend ideas (Saleh & Alharbi, 2017), as experienced by the participants.

...every time there is an idea and I imagine how to write, but when it comes to expressing the idea in writing, it is difficult. P1

...organizing ideas is also very difficult, the flow is different between paragraphs, as if it is not connected, so it is also difficult. P1

...understanding the topic is quite difficult because I try to determine the topic that suits what I want to write,...P2

... I have to organize the topic after the first paragraph is finished, then what should I explain again after the topic in paragraph one is finished? Then I have to connect again so that the topic in paragraph one and paragraph two are connected, so I have to make bridging or relationships. P3

My difficulty when editing/revising the writing is the grammar, spelling, and flow of each paragraph, especially finding the appropriate conjunction for the sentence, such as "moreover", "on the other hand", etc..." P1.

Having a good idea does not guarantee good writing. An idea is an interpretation, and writing is an expression (Wilson, 2000). An excellent idea demonstrates the capacity to think critically and creatively, yet an idea is merely a type of interpretation that remains abstract. A written work, on the other hand, is the expression of an idea, the act of organizing words, phrases, and structures in a clear and directed manner so that the reader may understand them. Thus, in academic writing, not just critical thinking abilities are required, but also the ability to transmit ideas effectively and logically. This indicates that simply having an idea isn't enough.

The main issue in this experience is to explain the notion or idea in a logical, clear, and academically accurate manner. A powerful notion without appropriate articulation is difficult to grasp, yet it may be compelling if expressed with the proper structure. Thus, the cognitive and linguistic abilities to integrate information, formulate arguments, and communicate ideas effectively and logistically have a substantial impact on academic writing quality (Hamp-Lyons & Jin, 2022; Hyland, 2004). These abilities need a greater amount of effort than others. This is particularly pertinent for EFL students with limited English ability, who frequently struggle to absorb and interpret information effectively.

4. Emotional Burden Of Academic Writing (Overwhelm, Confusion, Frustration)

Overwhelmed in writing very often, For example, I get feedback from a lecturer, I understand what I am going to do, but in the writing process, I am confused about how to write it. Then finding references is also difficult, therefore I have postponed writing for about 2 weeks. Maybe what I feel is actually confused, confused about what I should do, so that's what makes me overwhelmed and stuck in writing. P1

...I feel frustrated in writing. I understand what I want to write, but don't know how to process it, like how to find the first word to start writing,... So, all that frustration is caused by my confusion in writing, confused about where to start, confused about finding references that support my statement, so that's what makes me stuck in writing, so I can't write anything. P1

I feel overwhelmed or stuck while writing, yes, often, then what happens is that I don't know what to write and I feel quite sad, ... But if I feel tired, then I don't know what to write, ... P2

The disappointment is that sometimes we have tried or put a lot of effort into searching for a lot of journals, or sometimes we have written or had fun getting literature, but when we want to download or find the full file of them, it is not available, it has to be paid, so that is also sometimes frustrating, ... P3

The high emotional stress felt by all participants indicates that emotional burden can cause students to have difficulty continuing writing and even lead them to postpone or even stop the process. Students are occasionally let down when their efforts are in vain and neglected whenever they feel hopeless, which produces confusion and leads them to stop writing. Consequently, writing anxiety can generate stress and concern, leading to avoid or stop writing (Blasco, 2016). This indicates that emotions play a significant role in the academic writing process, emotional burden is not generated solely by a lack of aptitude or effort, but rather by the combination of the individual's cognitive limitations with external academic expectations. This is also increasingly supported by the findings of Toba, Noor, and Sanu (2019), who discovered that the causes of academic writing difficulties were confusion, a lack of understanding, and a lack of motivation, all of which led to their participants indicating that writing made them feel stuck.

This study reveals that difficulties encountered by the participants frequently resulted in psychological variables that hampered their writing process. These psychological difficulties influence the quality and professionalism of students' writing. A propensity to postpone or be hesitant to begin the writing process, owing to concerns about making mistakes that may lower the quality of their work (Rehman, Sama, Rehman, Majeed, & Mehmood, 2025). This instance exemplifies the twofold issue that EFL students confront, in which psychological variables not only impede their general writing abilities but also worsen pre-existing linguistic difficulties. As a result, their academic writing abilities suffer, limiting their capacity to generate well-structured writing works.

Strategies To Overcome Writing Difficulties

1. Initiating Writing as A Coping Strategy

My strategy is usually to just start writing, because when I start writing, my brain usually starts working and heating up, so it starts to help me know what to write, how to do it, understand what I want,...start writing anything, even if the idea is not connected, we can know the weaknesses and strengths so we can develop it,...P1

Writing is not only the product of great thought, but also a strategy for clearing the mind and determining a path for thinking. Writing is more than just pouring out complete ideas into writing, it is also a process of discovering and shaping the concepts themselves (Elbow Peter, 1973). This may also be recognized from Peter Elbow's famous quotes, "Writing is a way to end not-knowing.". P1's strategy not only aids in the technical parts of writing, but it also has a soothing and inspiring psychological impact. As a result, it may be promoted as part of academic writing instruction, so that students are not too focused on perfection from the outset, but rather on making incremental enhancements during the process.

P1, a first-year master's student, employs Starting Writing as a Problem-Solving Strategy. This strategy can be used to all of the difficulties discussed above. The difficulty in adapting complex academic writing, if overcome with this strategy, convinces the self that, while we have limitations, perfection is not something to strive for; simply being able to write as much as possible has boosted our confidence that writing is a form of learning something. Beginning to write anything will make it simpler for us to analyze what is required and developed, even if it is not as flawless as complicated writing.

This is also consistent with P1's belief that by beginning to write, we may later assess the quality of the thoughts we expressed in writing. This strategy can be used to address a variety of previously identified difficulties. Difficulties in adjusting to complex academic writing can be solved by adopting the habit of simply writing, which allows authors to understand that perfection is not the final objective. By starting to write as often as possible, authors may gain confidence and recognize that writing is an experimental process for discovering and developing ideas. Even if the

outcomes aren't flawless, the writing process allows anyone to identify areas for progress and development. This is consistent with P1's statement that starting to write first allows her to more readily sort and analyze the quality of the thoughts presented in her writing, as well as enhance motivation.

2. Relying On External Support: Peers, Lecturers, And Digital Tools

Peer feedback helps me. They provide improvements with suggestions, or with AI tools such as grammar check or ChatGPT, it helps me decide what to add or remove from my writing,... from getting feedback for my writing so that I can reflect on it,...P1

If the tool is probably AI, I use AI to give me ideas related to the academic writing paper that I write, because if my ideas sometimes get stuck, but with AI, there are ideas that I can explore further. P2

A lot of AI tools help me when I'm stuck for new ideas, then I use them to search for the literature, which can get me more ideas....Then, feedback also from lecturers who are more expert, and have faced dozens of articles, so I prefer to follow lecturers' feedback... P3

This is also in line with the findings of Riadil, Rahman, & Chonpracha (2023) who stated that For Indonesian students studying English as a second language, the most demanding aspect of academic writing is not just grasping linguistic structures, but also adapting to academic writing styles that differ culturally and rhetorically from their native language. This difficulty demonstrates a disparity between linguistic skill and the intellectual competence necessary in English-language higher education. According to participants' experiences, the most effective strategy for bridging this gap is to seek external assistance, whether from lecturers, peers, or via the use of artificial intelligence powered technologies. This action not only provides a practical solution, but it also demonstrates students' metacognitive awareness of the need for feedback during the writing process. Thus, engaging with multiple sources of support may be viewed as a sort of active adaptation that promotes the development of learning autonomy while also improving critical thinking abilities in taking input, modifications, and guidance in academic writing.

Students utilize feedback to identify their writing's strengths and flaws, as well as reflect on areas that need to be improved. This strategy helps students avoid feeling stressed individually by providing assistance and viewpoints from others who can support growth. In addition, AI tools gained the appropriate feedback and output for their writing activities (Su, Lin, & Lai, 2023). This also aligns with research by Ihsan & Musdizal (2015), which demonstrates how the presence of other parties, both human and machine, may broaden the students' viewpoint while analyzing and assembling their writing. Consequently, this finding show that a combination of constant individual effort, targeted instruction, and the use of various collaborative learning technology may considerably enhance students' academic writing skills. Integrating these aspects into the academic writing process can benefit students

with diverse needs and promote better writing outputs.

3. Regulating Emotions to Maintain Writing Motivation

The significance of emotions in education is now widely acknowledged as a critical factor, since various studies reveal that emotions and feelings have a direct impact on students' learning competencies (Pekrun, R., & Perry, 2014). In this study, the participants realize the need to sustain emotional circumstances to stay motivated while writing and ensure that the academic writing process proceeds smoothly.

The strategy is to go for a walk, buy food or snacks, or listen to music. Because if you leave it alone, it will get more stuck, so you have to go out to relieve stress. P1

To manage my emotions, I usually sleep, or I usually scroll TikTok or watch movies. After doing these activities, it seems that my mood may have returned to writing or working on assignments because I think the task is on deadline so I have to do it. P2

If we are stressed, we can't force ourselves, if we do it, maybe the result of our academic writing will be bad. Then my strategy is I will seek help from AI or other tools, or other studies that will support my article. P3

All these activities not only provide a distraction but also allow for the release of emotions, which has been demonstrated to assist in restoring focus, quieting the mind, and reducing writing pressure. This shows that deliberate stress management is an essential component of the productive writing process, particularly in the face of high academic writing pressure. All things considered, these strategies strengthen the view that writing is not a linear process, but a dynamic process that requires flexibility in managing time, energy, and emotional conditions.

Academic writing not only requires good academic writing and professional writing skills, but it is a factor that is driven by good emotional factors, so that excellent motivation in carrying out the writing process is enhanced by positive emotions, resulting in high quality writing. Thus, the capacity to perceive and control emotions adaptively can have a direct impact on academic writing achievement. In addition, motivational and emotional control affect not only academic achievement but also affective outcomes like enjoyment and emotional balance in writing (Zhang & Dong, 2022), they support the notion that emotional management strategies are critical for maintaining students' motivation and writing output.

4. Seeking Models and Following Patterns for Guidance

By following or looking for literature or references related to their writing, they could use them as a guide in writing. Participants' limited reading habits and exposure to academic literature left them with a lack of awareness of academic language patterns such as argumentation structure, formal style, and critical source utilization (Ihsan & Musdizal, 2025). As a result, academic writing skills are determined not just by language competency but also by the frequency with which

students are exposed to academic literatures. The more frequently students read and analyze relevant academic literatures, the more they will learn scientific thinking and writing patterns, which serve as the foundation for critical and coherent writing abilities.

....when I'm struggling, I search for and understand articles that are similar to what I'm going to write, then I follow a pattern or flow to guide my writing process. P1

The strategy is that we have to look for a lot of literature, studies, or other research that supports the topic we want to write about... I have to read more similar research. P2

By finding writing models and patterns, students can comprehend writing more concretely. This strategy also demonstrates that the academic writing process is more than just creating text and conveying ideas, it is also about exploring, adjusting, and maturing ideas with the help of external sources. The experiences of P1, a first-year master's student and P2, a second-year master's student serve as an essential reminder that for EFL graduate students, academic writing is a lengthy and dynamic process. Academic writing requires the writer to actively participate in comprehending, analyzing, and critically reflecting on numerous sources.

This strategy focuses on continual attempts to improve comprehension, ideas, and scientific thinking abilities. The experiences of P1 and P2 show that excellent writing processes are consistent and reflective, with students actively analyzing, comparing, and incorporating ideas from numerous sources to enhance their arguments. As a result, this strategy has shown beneficial in assisting students in overcoming difficulties that emerge when they encounter deadlocks or confusion in developing their writing.

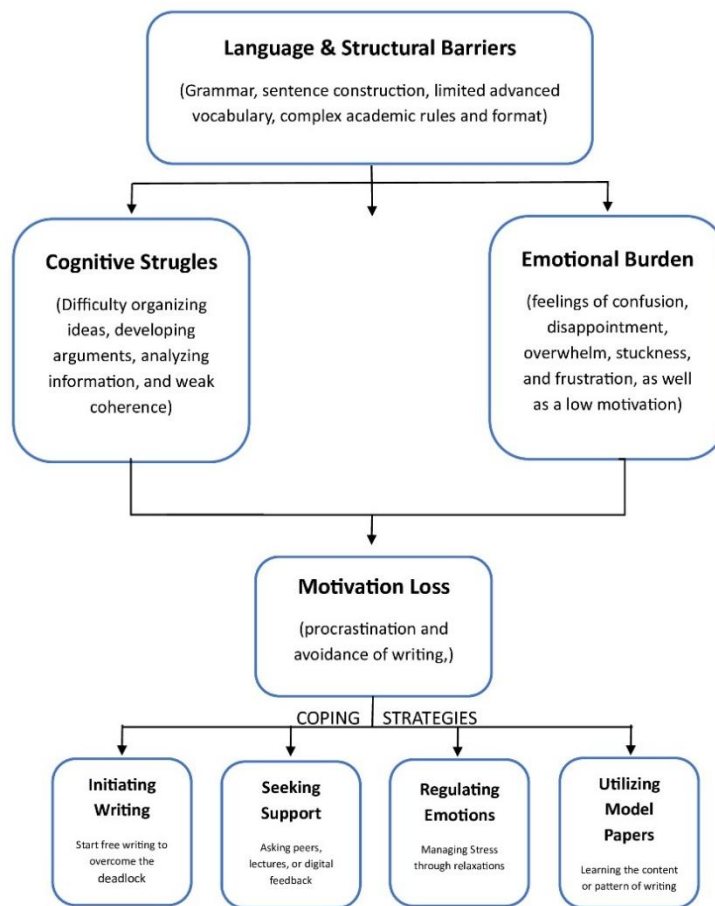
This is also in line with the findings of (Wu, Qie, & Wang, 2023), who emphasize the necessity of employing model texts as inspiration during the academic writing process. The study found that EFL learners who were given model texts improved significantly in several elements of writing, including vocabulary, grammar, topic development, and overall writing structure. Model texts assisted students who originally struggled with concept organization by offering clear examples of how to successfully convey arguments and supporting evidence. Furthermore, the act of comparing and analyzing model texts helped students become more aware of linguistic and rhetorical aspects, which they could subsequently apply to their own writing. The usage of model writings not only offered patterns for self-expression, but also facilitated a thoughtful and analytical writing process, encouraging students to gain confidence and independence in generating coherent and high-quality academic writing.

To aid comprehension of the research findings, the table below summarizes the findings. In addition to the summary table, this study offers graphics that depict the cause-and-effect linkages that arise from the overall findings, allowing for a more complete comprehension of the research results.

Table 2. Summary table of findings

Main Theme	Subtheme	Key Findings
Difficulties in Academic Writing	Complex Rules and Structure	Students struggle with the strict style and professional tone necessary for academic writing. EFL students struggle to adjust to academic styles.
	Structuring and Articulating Ideas	Difficulty organizing concepts or idea clearly; struggling to link paragraphs and maintain logical flow.
	Linguistic and structural Barriers	Grammar, spelling, and structural flaws obstruct clarity; restricted vocabulary and sentence construction errors are frequent.
	Emotional Burden	Feelings of frustration, perplexity, and writing anxiety led to procrastination and writer's block.
Strategies to Overcome Writing Difficulties	Initiating Writing as a Coping Strategy	Starting to write freely helps to develop ideas and reduces perfectionism; writing becomes a journey of discovery.
	Relying on External Support	Students seek assistance from classmates, lecturers, and AI technologies for feedback, evaluation, and idea development.
	Regulating Emotions	Managing emotions through relaxation or breaks (listening music, rest, leisure, eating snack) help they stay motivated.
	Seeking Models and Patterns	Comprehending model papers helps students structure, vocabulary, and flow while also improving analytical awareness.

Figure 1. Illustration of the link between difficulties and strategies in academic writing.



Discussion

The figure above illustrates the link between the numerous difficulties that EFL students confront in academic writing and the strategies they employ to solve them. Language and structural barriers account for the majority of primary components. These difficulties then result in two types of additional difficulties, cognitive struggle and emotional burden. When language and structural difficulties are not addressed, they frequently lead to additional difficulties that impede the writing process, eventually leading to a loss of motivation, such as procrastination or avoidance of writing. To overcome these difficulties, students use a variety of strategies that are suited to the individual difficulties they encounter. Overall, this picture demonstrates that language and emotional difficulties are inextricably linked and may be solved by implementing adaptive, reflective, and writer-focused strategies.

Conclusion

This study reveals that academic writing still offers various difficulties, even when students have prior expertise in academic writing in undergraduate programs, this does not rule out the chance that these difficulties will grow significantly over time. Graduate EFL students encountered a variety of difficulties, including

structural and linguistic complexity, difficulties in organizing ideas, and emotional distress such as confusion, disappointment, and stress. This well-being is affected by both internal (such as academic language and writing capabilities, as well as emotional condition) and external (such as academic demands or pressures and restricted resources) factors.

In this sort of follow-up, EFL students respond to these difficulties by developing a variety of strategies, solutions, or adaptations, such as strategies for starting the writing process as a trigger for ideas and awakening brain activity, seeking feedback from various parties such as friends, lecturers, and AI-based tools, regulating emotions to maintain motivation and interest in writing, and utilizing writing samples as a guide. These strategies aid students in navigating the cognitive and emotional difficulties of the academic writing process.

In addition, the study's findings contribute to the notion of self-directed learning by demonstrating how students actively participate in the academic writing process and how linguistic, cognitive, and emotional elements interact to determine their difficulties and strategies.

Recommendation

This study has a few limitations. First, the number of participants was minimal, with only three graduate students. As a result, the findings cannot be applied to all EFL graduate students, as individual experiences and issues with academic writing might differ greatly. Second, data were gathered primarily through interviews, therefore the results are strongly reliant on participants' stories. Third, because this study was performed inside a single institutional environment, contextual and institutional variables impacting academic writing may differ at different universities. And last, the narratives were based on participants' memories, which might not fully capture their experiences.

These findings highlight the significance of grasping the multidimensional trait of academic writing, which is complicated and encompasses numerous difficulties at the same time, demanding a more holistic and student centered instructional strategy. This implies that academic writing is not only about language and writing, it is also about emotion and motivation. Thus, the following recommendations are offered.

First, instructional strategies must be modified to be more comprehensive and to take into account students' demands and real experiences in the academic writing process. Lecturers are supposed to give technical and affective assistance to establish a learning environment that is not only academically demanding and stressful, but also empathetic to students' real experiences. Second, students should create regular and thoughtful writing habits, set achievable objectives, and actively seek feedback from lecturers, peers, and digital platforms. Students must also regulate their emotions, which may be accomplished through self-reflection or simple relaxation techniques. Furthermore, students should take advantage of

accessible resources, such as writing workshops or academic assistance centres, to boost their writing abilities and confidence. Finally, institutional assistance, providing workshops that target psychological concerns in academic writing, leveraging digital tools, and expanding free access to paid journals.

Likewise, future research suggests to include a larger and more diverse group of participants from various classes to gain broader and more representative insights, and use a variety of data collection techniques to improve the understanding of students' experiences. Interviews, for example, might be combined with journal or diaries, document analysis, or classroom observations to create a more comprehensive and triangulated picture of experiences, furthermore, future research could focus on specific dynamics of students' academic writing difficulties, such as the affective factors that influence the writing process, the impact of various types of feedback, etc.

Finally, this study indicates that academic writing is more than just a linguistic ability; it is a complex endeavour that includes cognitive, emotional, and self-control components. By recognizing these three elements, professors, institutions, and students may collaborate to create a more helpful and empowered writing environment. Ultimately, academic competence and emotional resilience will result in more self-sufficient, confident, and thoughtful EFL writers.

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