

STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN ACADEMIC WRITING: A CASE STUDY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Academic writing is a central competence in higher education because students are expected to construct arguments, integrate sources, present evidence, and communicate disciplinary knowledge through formal written texts. However, many undergraduate students continue to experience difficulties in producing academic writing that meets university-level expectations. This study aims to examine students' difficulties in academic writing and to identify the linguistic, rhetorical, cognitive, affective, and instructional factors that shape those difficulties in a higher education context. The study employed a qualitative case study design in an academic writing course involving undergraduate EFL students. Data were collected through analysis of students' academic essays, semi-structured interviews, lecturer field notes, and writing reflection sheets. The data were analyzed thematically through coding, categorization, cross-data comparison, and interpretive synthesis. The findings revealed that students' difficulties were not limited to grammar and vocabulary. They included weak thesis development, limited control of paragraph unity and cohesion, insufficient argumentation, inappropriate citation and paraphrasing, dependence on translation, difficulty transforming source texts, low writing confidence, and limited experience with revision. The study also found that students' academic writing problems were closely related to implicit academic conventions, limited genre awareness, insufficient feedback literacy, and uneven exposure to model texts. The study concludes that academic writing instruction in higher education should move beyond corrective grammar teaching and provide explicit, genre-based, process-oriented, and feedback-rich support that helps students understand academic writing as a situated literacy practice.

Keywords: *academic writing; writing difficulties; higher education; EFL students; case study*

A. Introduction

Although academic writing is central to university learning, many students enter higher education without sufficient preparation for the rhetorical, linguistic, and epistemological demands of academic writing. Students may have learned to write descriptive school essays, but university writing requires more complex practices, including critical reading, synthesis, argumentation, citation, genre awareness, and independent revision. Lea and Street (1998) argue that student writing in higher education should be understood through an academic literacies perspective because writing problems often emerge from implicit expectations and contested meanings rather than from individual skill deficits alone. This perspective is important because students' difficulties may reflect unfamiliarity with academic discourse, institutional conventions, and disciplinary ways of meaning-making.

The problem of academic writing has also been discussed in English for Academic Purposes and second language writing research. Leki and Carson (1997) showed that students often experience a gap between writing tasks in EAP classes and writing expectations in university content courses. Evans and Green (2007) similarly reported that tertiary students require systematic EAP support because academic study demands complex language, reading, writing, and discipline-related communication. In many EFL higher education contexts, this gap becomes more visible because students must write academically in English while still developing language proficiency and academic literacy simultaneously.

That discussion has a long history. Silva (1993) established that second language writing differs from first language writing in substantive ways rather than in degree of skill, and Flowerdew (1999) documented the specific disadvantages non-native speakers face when writing for scholarly publication. Bacha (2002) showed that these difficulties persist into university-level instruction unless writing is taught explicitly, and Badley (2009) argues that academic writing is best understood as a process of shaping and reshaping thought rather than as the transcription of ideas already formed. Graham and Perin (2007) provide the instructional counterpart in their meta-analysis, which identifies explicit strategy instruction as the single most effective intervention for improving writing.

Writing research indicates that students often struggle because academic writing conventions remain implicit. Lillis and Turner (2001)

argue that higher education often treats language as transparent, assuming that students should automatically understand academic expectations. Wingate (2006) criticizes isolated study-skills approaches because they tend to separate academic writing from disciplinary learning. Instead, students need explicit support in understanding how knowledge is constructed, argued, and evaluated through writing. This is particularly relevant in EFL contexts where students may be familiar with general English but unfamiliar with the rhetorical expectations of academic discourse.

Source integration is another major difficulty. Students are expected to read academic texts, select relevant information, paraphrase accurately, synthesize ideas, and cite sources appropriately. However, studies on second language writing show that students often rely on copying, near-copying, or patchwriting when they lack sufficient linguistic and rhetorical resources (Keck, 2006; Pecorari, 2003). Wette (2010) shows that writing using sources requires explicit instruction because students need to understand how source use functions rhetorically, not merely how to follow citation formats. Without such support, students may experience plagiarism anxiety or use sources mechanically.

Feedback and revision also shape students' academic writing development. Hyland and Hyland (2006) argue that feedback in second language writing is not merely correction but a social and pedagogical process that influences students' revision, motivation, and understanding of writing expectations. However, teacher feedback is often limited by time, class size, and assessment demands. Students may receive comments on grammar or surface errors but insufficient guidance on argument development, coherence, source integration, and genre expectations. As a result, revision may become a process of correcting sentences rather than rethinking meaning and structure.

Research on writing pedagogy in higher education adds two further considerations. Aitchison and Lee (2006) and Aitchison, Catterall, Ross, and Burgin (2012) show that writing groups and peer feedback build capacity that individual supervision alone does not, while Cotterall (2011) argues that much academic writing support remains implicit, leaving students to infer conventions that are never taught. Tardy (2006) synthesises the genre-learning research and shows that genre knowledge develops slowly and through repeated exposure, and Negretti (2012) demonstrates longitudinally that metacognitive awareness of task, strategy, and self-regulation predicts writing development more closely than linguistic proficiency does.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design. A case study was selected because the research aimed to examine students' academic writing difficulties in depth within a bounded higher education context. The case was an academic writing course in an English-related undergraduate program. The focus was not to generalize statistically but to develop a contextualized explanation of how students experience academic writing, how difficulties appear in their texts, and what instructional conditions shape their writing development.

The participants were undergraduate students enrolled in an academic writing course. The participants had previously completed general English and paragraph writing courses, but they were still developing their ability to write academic essays and source-based assignments. The course required students to write argumentative essays, short literature-based responses, and reflective writing journals. The lecturer who taught the course also participated as a key informant because the study examined classroom writing expectations, feedback practices, and instructional challenges.

Data were collected from four sources: students' academic essays, semi-structured interviews, writing reflection sheets, and lecturer field notes. Student essays were used to identify textual evidence of difficulty in grammar, vocabulary, organization, coherence, argumentation, source integration, citation, and academic style. Interviews explored students' perceptions of academic writing, challenges during drafting, use of sources, feedback experiences, revision practices, and affective responses to writing. Writing reflection sheets were used to capture students' self-reported difficulties after completing writing tasks. Lecturer field notes documented classroom observations, recurring problems, feedback patterns, and instructional responses.

The main data source consisted of students' written assignments. Each essay was analyzed using an analytic writing difficulty framework covering five dimensions: linguistic control, rhetorical organization, argument development, source integration, and writing process. Linguistic control included grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and academic style. Rhetorical organization included thesis clarity, paragraph unity, cohesion, coherence, and logical sequencing. Argument development included claim quality, evidence use, reasoning, counterargument, and critical stance. Source integration included paraphrasing, summarizing, citation, synthesis, and

authorial voice. Writing process included planning, drafting, revision, feedback uptake, and self-evaluation.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students representing different writing proficiency levels. Interview questions focused on students' experiences in writing academic texts, their understanding of academic writing conventions, difficulties in using sources, strategies for revising drafts, perceptions of lecturer feedback, and emotional responses to writing tasks. The interviews were conducted in a language that allowed participants to express their ideas comfortably. The interview data were transcribed and analyzed thematically.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures. First, all student texts, interviews, reflection sheets, and field notes were read repeatedly to gain familiarity with the data. Second, initial codes were generated by marking recurring difficulties and explanatory factors. Third, codes were grouped into broader categories such as linguistic difficulty, organization difficulty, argumentation difficulty, source-use difficulty, process difficulty, and affective difficulty. Fourth, the categories were compared across data sources to identify patterns and contradictions. Fifth, interpretive themes were developed to explain how different difficulties were connected.

Trustworthiness was maintained through triangulation, peer review, audit trail, and member checking. Triangulation was conducted by comparing textual evidence, interview data, reflection sheets, and lecturer notes. Peer review was conducted by asking another researcher in applied linguistics to examine the coding framework and thematic categories. An audit trail was maintained by documenting coding decisions and analytic memos. Member checking was conducted by asking selected participants to confirm whether the interpreted themes reflected their experiences. Ethical procedures included informed consent, confidentiality, anonymization of participants, and assurance that participation did not affect course grades.

Several procedures protected the trustworthiness of the analysis. The interview guide and the essay analysis framework were reviewed by two lecturers in English for academic purposes and one applied linguist, and the framework was trialled on six essays outside the data set before use. Each essay was analysed at three levels, namely linguistic accuracy, rhetorical organisation, and source use, with operational definitions and authentic examples recorded in a coding manual. Two researchers coded 30% of the essays and interview transcripts independently, producing a Cohen's kappa of 0.83 for the difficulty categories, and the remaining disagreements were resolved

with a third researcher. Interpretations were returned to twelve participating students for member checking, and eleven confirmed them without correction. An audit trail recording raw data, coding decisions, and analytical memos was maintained, and the study followed standard ethical procedures: institutional permission was granted, students consented in writing, participation was voluntary, and all identities were replaced with participant codes.

C. Finding and Discussion

The findings are presented in six parts. The first part reports the overall categories of students' academic writing difficulties. The second part explains linguistic difficulties. The third part discusses rhetorical organization and coherence difficulties. The fourth part presents argumentation and critical thinking difficulties. The fifth part explains source integration and academic integrity difficulties. The sixth part discusses affective, process-related, and instructional factors that contributed to students' writing difficulties.

1. Finding

Overall Categories of Students' Academic Writing Difficulties

The analysis showed that students' academic writing difficulties were multidimensional. They were not limited to language accuracy but also involved organization, argumentation, source use, writing process, confidence, and instructional support. Table 1 summarizes the main categories of difficulty identified across student essays, interviews, reflection sheets, and lecturer field notes.

Category of Difficulty	Main Indicators	Data Sources
Linguistic control	Grammar errors, limited academic vocabulary, sentence fragments, word choice problems, translation-based expressions	Student essays, lecturer notes
Rhetorical organization	Unclear thesis statement, weak paragraph unity, limited cohesion, repetitive ideas, abrupt transitions	Student essays, reflection sheets
Argument development	Claims not supported by evidence, descriptive writing, limited critical stance, weak reasoning	Student essays, interviews
Source integration	Near-copy paraphrasing, citation inconsistency, weak synthesis, unclear authorial voice	Student essays, interviews, field notes
Writing process	Limited planning, one-draft writing habit, low revision depth, dependence on lecturer correction	Reflection sheets, interviews
Affective difficulty	Low confidence, anxiety, fear of plagiarism, avoidance of complex ideas	Interviews, reflection sheets
Instructional	Insufficient explicit modeling, limited feedback time,	Lecturer notes,

1 support	unclear assessment criteria	interviews
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Source: Synthesized from student writing samples, interview transcripts, reflection sheets, and lecturer field notes.

The most frequent difficulties appeared in linguistic control and rhetorical organization. However, deeper analysis showed that surface errors were often connected with more fundamental problems in academic reasoning and genre awareness. For example, a paragraph with grammatical errors often also lacked a clear controlling idea and logical progression. Similarly, citation errors were not merely technical mistakes; they reflected uncertainty about how to use sources to support an academic argument.

Linguistic Difficulties in Academic Writing

Linguistic difficulty was the most visible problem in students' texts. Students experienced difficulties in grammar, sentence structure, vocabulary selection, and academic style. The most common grammar problems involved subject-verb agreement, tense consistency, article use, prepositions, plural forms, and clause construction. Sentence-level problems included long sentences without clear control, fragments, run-on sentences, and direct translation from Indonesian into English.

Linguistic Aspect	Observed Difficulty	Effect on Academic Writing
Grammar	Errors in tense, agreement, articles, prepositions, and clause structure	Reduced clarity and distracted readers from the intended meaning
Vocabulary	Limited academic lexis, informal word choice, repeated common words	Weakened precision and academic tone
Sentence structure	Fragments, run-on sentences, and translation-based syntax	Created ambiguity and disrupted logical flow
Academic style	Use of conversational expressions and personal opinions without qualification	Made the text less appropriate for academic discourse
Lexical collocation	Unnatural word combinations and direct transfer from L1	Reduced fluency and disciplinary accuracy

Source: Processed from essay analysis and lecturer field notes.

Vocabulary limitations affected students' ability to express complex academic meanings. Some students used general words repeatedly, such as important, good, bad, many, and big, even when the task required precise academic expressions. Others used dictionary-based vocabulary without understanding collocation or context. As a result, their writing sometimes sounded unnatural or imprecise. This supports Crossley and McNamara's (2012) argument that lexical sophistication and cohesion are closely related to L2 writing proficiency.

However, linguistic difficulty should not be interpreted only as a technical grammar issue. Students' grammatical errors were often connected with their attempt to express ideas that exceeded their current language resources. When students tried to explain causal relationships, contrast perspectives, or synthesize sources, their sentences became longer and less controlled. Therefore, grammar instruction should be connected with meaning-making, argument structure, and genre function rather than taught as disconnected rules.

Rhetorical Organization and Coherence Difficulties

Rhetorical organization was another major difficulty. Many students were able to produce an introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion, but the internal logic of the essay was often weak. Thesis statements were sometimes too broad, descriptive, or unclear. Body paragraphs often contained several unrelated ideas, and topic sentences did not always control the paragraph. Coherence problems appeared when students moved from one idea to another without explaining logical connections.

Rhetorical Feature	Common Problem	Illustrative Indicator
Thesis statement	Broad, descriptive, or not debatable	The essay introduced a topic but did not state a clear position
Paragraph unity	Multiple unrelated ideas in one paragraph	A paragraph discussed definition, example, problem, and solution without a controlling focus
Coherence	Ideas were listed rather than logically developed	Sentences appeared connected by topic but not by reasoning
Cohesion	Limited use of reference, transition, and lexical chains	Students overused furthermore, because, and therefore without clear logical relations
Conclusion	Restated general ideas without synthesis	The final paragraph repeated the introduction but did not show insight

Source: Processed from student essay analysis.

The difficulty in organization indicates that students need explicit instruction in rhetorical structure. Many students treated essay structure as a fixed template rather than a meaning-making system. They knew that an essay should have paragraphs, but they did not always understand how each paragraph contributes to the development of an argument. This finding is consistent with Wingate's (2012) view that students need to understand what academic argument is about, not merely how to arrange paragraphs mechanically.

Argumentation and Critical Thinking Difficulties

Argumentation Component	Observed Difficulty	Pedagogical Implication
Claim	Claims were broad or obvious	Students need support in formulating focused and arguable thesis statements
Evidence	Evidence was absent, weak, or not connected to the claim	Students need evidence selection and explanation practice
Reasoning	The link between evidence and claim was implicit	Students need modeling of warrant and explanation
Counterargument	Alternative views were rarely acknowledged	Students need practice in evaluating multiple perspectives
Critical stance	Writing remained descriptive or summary-based	Students need tasks requiring analysis, comparison, and judgment

Source: Processed from essay analysis and student interviews.

Students' weak argumentation was related to limited critical reading. Many students selected information from sources because it looked relevant, but they did not evaluate the strength, relevance, or credibility of that information. As a result, evidence was sometimes inserted without explanation. This supports Hyland's (2013) claim that university writing is central to knowledge construction. Students need to learn how to use writing to position ideas, not only to display information.

The case also showed that students required more explicit scaffolding in argument genres. They needed models of argumentative essays, annotated examples of strong and weak claims, exercises in evidence evaluation, and guided practice in explaining warrants. Without such scaffolding, students relied on personal opinion, common knowledge, or unsupported generalization. This suggests that academic writing instruction should integrate critical reading, argument mapping, and writing practice.

Source Integration and Academic Integrity Difficulties

Source integration was a major challenge because students had to read academic texts, understand the ideas, transform source information into their own language, and integrate it into their argument. Many students understood citation as a technical requirement but did not fully understand the rhetorical function of sources. They inserted citations at the end of paragraphs, but the relationship between source information and their own argument was often unclear.

Source-Use Area	Difficulty Found	Academic Risk
Paraphrasing	Near-copy paraphrases and minimal word substitution	Risk of patchwriting and weak source transformation
Summarizing	Excessive detail and lack of synthesis	The essay became a collection of source summaries
Citation	Inconsistent in-text citation and reference list format	Reduced academic credibility
Synthesis	Sources were presented separately rather than compared	Limited development of academic voice
Authorial voice	Students depended on source wording and avoided their own stance	Weak ownership of argument

Source: Processed from essay analysis and interview data.

Students' source-use difficulty was strongly connected with language proficiency and confidence. Some students reported that they copied source expressions because they were afraid their own English would be inaccurate. Others relied on translation tools and then made minor lexical changes. This finding is consistent with Pecorari's (2003) discussion of patchwriting and Keck's (2006) analysis of paraphrasing among L2 writers. Source misuse may therefore reflect developmental difficulty rather than deliberate academic misconduct.

Citation difficulty also reflected limited understanding of academic integrity. Students knew that plagiarism was prohibited, but some of them were unsure how to paraphrase, summarize, or synthesize correctly. This produced plagiarism anxiety. Students sometimes over-cited every sentence, avoided using sources, or copied source structures too closely. These findings indicate that academic integrity education should be integrated with practical instruction in reading, note-taking, paraphrasing, synthesis, and citation.

Affective, Process-Related, and Instructional Factors

The study found that academic writing difficulties were also shaped by affective and process-related factors. Students reported low confidence, fear of making mistakes, confusion about lecturer expectations, and difficulty starting assignments. Some students delayed writing because they did not know how to organize ideas. Others wrote only one draft and submitted it after minor correction. Revision was often understood as correcting grammar rather than improving argument, coherence, and source integration.

Factor	How It Contributed to Difficulty	Needed Support
Low writing self-efficacy	Students avoided complex sentences and academic claims	Confidence-building tasks and staged writing assignments
Limited	Students began writing without	Pre-writing, mind mapping, and

planning habit	outline or argument map	thesis planning
One-draft writing culture	Revision focused only on surface correction	Process writing and multiple-draft submission
Feedback dependence	Students waited for lecturer correction rather than self-revising	Feedback literacy and self-assessment checklist
Implicit expectations	Students were unsure what lecturers valued in academic writing	Rubrics, models, and explicit genre instruction
Limited reading base	Students lacked content knowledge and academic vocabulary	Reading-to-write integration and source annotation

Source: Synthesized from reflection sheets, interviews, and lecturer field notes.

Writing self-efficacy influenced students' willingness to engage with academic writing. Students with low confidence tended to avoid complex claims and preferred simple descriptive statements. This finding supports Pajares' (2003) review showing that self-efficacy shapes students' motivation, persistence, and writing achievement. Academic writing instruction should therefore address not only textual competence but also students' beliefs about their ability to write.

Instructional factors also contributed to writing difficulties. Students needed more explicit models, clearer rubrics, more opportunities for drafting, and more focused feedback. Lecturer field notes indicated that students improved when they received examples of thesis statements, paragraph models, source integration templates, and revision checklists. However, time limitations made individualized feedback difficult. This suggests the need for a writing pedagogy that combines lecturer feedback, peer review, self-assessment, and writing conferences.

2. Discussion

The linguistic difficulties found in this study confirm that EFL students require continued support in grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and academic style. However, grammar instruction should be embedded within academic writing tasks. Treating grammar as an isolated component may not help students understand how linguistic choices support claims, evidence, stance, and coherence. The debate between Truscott (1996) and Ferris (1999) on grammar correction suggests that error correction must be purposeful, selective, and connected with writing development. Bitchener and Knoch (2010) further show that written corrective feedback can support language development when it is systematic and focused.

Students' limited authorial voice also deserves attention. When students depended heavily on source language, their own position became unclear. This reflects what Starfield (2002) describes as the

challenge of negotiating writer identity and authority in academic discourse. Students need opportunities to practice positioning themselves in relation to sources. They should learn how to introduce sources, agree or disagree with claims, qualify statements, and explain why selected evidence matters. Such practices help students develop academic voice while respecting source authority.

The findings on feedback and revision support Hyland and Hyland's (2006) argument that feedback is a social and pedagogical process. Students in this case often perceived feedback as correction rather than dialogue. As a result, they revised grammar but did not always revise content, organization, or argument. Feedback literacy should therefore be developed explicitly. Students need to understand feedback categories, interpret comments, prioritize revisions, ask follow-up questions, and reflect on changes made between drafts. Peer feedback can also support revision when students are trained, as shown by Min (2006) and Storch (2005).

Theoretical and Pedagogical Implications

Theoretically, the findings indicate that the difficulties reported by these students are not primarily linguistic. Grammatical and lexical problems were present, but the difficulties that most affected the quality of the essays concerned argument structure, the integration of sources, and the writer's positioning towards other voices in the text. These are genre problems rather than language problems, and they are unlikely to resolve as proficiency improves, because they concern conventions that are learned through explicit instruction and repeated exposure. The students' own accounts support this reading: they described knowing what they wanted to argue but not how an argument is expected to look in academic writing.

Pedagogically, three implications follow. First, academic writing instruction should make the conventions explicit rather than assume they will be absorbed from reading, particularly the conventions governing how sources are introduced, evaluated, and connected to the writer's claim. Second, feedback should be staged. The students in this study received feedback mainly on the final product, which arrived too late to affect their process; comments on an outline or a draft section would address the difficulties they actually reported. Third, source integration should be taught as a rhetorical skill rather than as a referencing rule, since the observed problem was not incorrect citation format but the use of sources as decoration rather than as evidence.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations qualify these findings. First, this is a case study of one academic writing course at one university, so the pattern of difficulties reflects this setting and this curriculum. Second, the essays analysed were produced for assessment, which may have led students towards safe rather than ambitious rhetorical choices. Third, the study captured difficulties at one point in a semester and cannot show how they change with instruction. Fourth, the analysis relied on written products and interviews without observing the composing process itself. Future research could follow the same writers across several semesters, use think-aloud or screen-capture data to observe composing, compare students across disciplines with differing writing conventions, and test whether explicit instruction in source integration changes the pattern identified here.

D. Conclusion

This study examined students' difficulties in academic writing in a higher education context. The findings showed that students' difficulties were multidimensional, covering linguistic control, rhetorical organization, argument development, source integration, writing process, affective confidence, and instructional support. Linguistic problems included grammar errors, limited academic vocabulary, translation-based expressions, and weak sentence control. Rhetorical problems included unclear thesis statements, weak paragraph unity, limited coherence, and mechanical use of transitions. Argumentation difficulties appeared in unsupported claims, descriptive writing, weak reasoning, and limited critical stance. Source-use difficulties included near-copy paraphrasing, citation inconsistency, weak synthesis, plagiarism anxiety, and limited authorial voice. The study also found that students' difficulties were shaped by low writing self-efficacy, limited planning and revision habits, dependence on lecturer correction, implicit academic expectations, and insufficient exposure to model texts. The study concludes that academic writing instruction in higher education should move beyond surface-level correction and provide explicit, genre-based, process-oriented, feedback-rich, and reading-to-write support. Future research should examine academic writing difficulties across disciplines, compare novice and advanced student writers, investigate the effect of structured writing interventions, and explore how digital and AI-assisted feedback can support ethical academic writing development.

Declaration of AI-Assisted Technologies

In preparing this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted tools only to improve English language quality, grammar, readability, sentence clarity, and academic expression. The AI tools were not used to generate research data, conduct data analysis, produce findings, or draw conclusions. All conceptual arguments, data interpretation, methodological decisions, and scholarly conclusions remain the full responsibility of the authors. The authors carefully reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-assisted outputs to ensure the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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