THE ACADEMIC WRITING CHALLENGES FACED BY INDONESIAN UNDERGRADUATE EFL LEARNERS AT UNIVERSITY OF ISLAM MALANG

Sania Alinda Mouli Asnas

(*Jurusan Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris FKIP Unisma*)

Abstract: This study aimed to describe the academic writing challenges faced by students and how students can overcome their challenges. This study used a descriptive qualitative research design. This research was conducted on 55 English Education students in the 6th semester at University of Islam Malang. There were 5 out of 55 students who were interviewed. The purposive sampling was used in this study. In collecting data, the instrument used was the questionnaire and interview. The results showed that the students agreed that they had challenges in all the items of the questionnaire except for the part of writing conclusion which stated that it was neutral. Based on the results of interview, the students' strategies to overcome their challenges using seven strategies such as brainstorming, reading many articles, using online applications, receiving feedback, writing practice, using the dictionary, editing their work by themselves. In conclusion, they faced challenges in terms of structure, developing ideas, vocabulary, and grammar.

Keywords: academic writing, challenges, EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the important skills that English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners should strive for their success in writing assignments, exams, graduation projects, and their careers because English is the dominant international language in communicating scientific information today (Alkhuzaee et al., 2019). In writing, EFL learners must comply with several writing guidelines to write correctly because the type of writing they are working on is a type of formal writing that is different from other types of writing, so it is called academic writing. Academic writing is the result of a person's critical thinking ability which acts as a bridge to communicate his ideas to others that can express his intellectual abilities. EFL learners must become proficient in academic writing. They are expected to be able to present arguments and develop ideas appropriately in academic writing (Fareed et al., 2016). The academic accomplishment of EFL learners is determined by the text they produce in English; hence they must be proficient in academic writing.

The importance of academic writing at the university level is to show students' intellectual abilities to others, to provide evidence in providing sound arguments in students' problem-solving abilities, to demonstrate students' competence as effective communicators, to denote students' ability to explain their ideas to others, and to prove whether the student is a person who can think critically or not, such as expressing opinions based on thorough analysis, synthesis, and evaluation from various sources (McMillan & Weyers, 2014).

Due to the importance of academic writing in English, there has been a growing number of studies examining the nature and development of students' academic writing practices in various settings, as well as the emergence of different approaches to writing in higher education. In contexts where English is taught and studied as a foreign language, several factors influence students' writing such as first language (L1) and second language (L2), academic writing experience or practice, knowledge of a particular discipline, individual factors, and social context that affect each of them. It is a double difficulty for those who do not speak English as their language as they adapt to an academic writing style (Hyland, 2013). They have to improve their second language (L2) competence and learn to write in second language (L2), so this does require time and patience for those in the EFL environment as improving skills in academic writing is a challenging process.

The challenges in academic writing are that students cannot express their ideas through their writing, so they also cannot handle the words, ideas, opinions of others that can help them in developing their ideas, and they also make mistakes in spelling, sentence structure, and vocabulary (Mousa, 2017). According to Singh (2019), there are eight challenges faced by students in academic writing, namely lack of English language proficiency, challenges in expressing ideas, disorganized academic writing structure, intentional plagiarism, editing, translation, inappropriateness in academic writing culture, and cheating in their academic writing.

In Indonesia, especially in the English Education Department, academic writing is one of the most challenging courses for students because it is a preparatory class for students before writing a thesis proposal. For English Education students, academic writing is often recognized as the highest level of writing course. According to

Budjalemba et al., (2020), many students in the academic writing class are afraid and worried about their writing because they face various challenges in the world of writing, such as lack of skills, motivation, knowledge, unable to organize ideas, express arguments, paraphrase, synthesize, summarize, grammar, and other problems. Due to these problems and considering the challenges faced by EFL learners in academic writing, this study aims to analyze more deeply what challenges are faced by Indonesian undergraduate EFL learners, especially English Education students at University of Islam Malang. This study also aims to find out how they can overcome the challenges they face.

METHOD

To gather the data for this study, the researcher used a qualitative approach. Qualitative approach was approach of the study that aimed to understand phenomena to increase in-depth understanding of perceptions, behaviors, actions, and motivations experienced by research subjects described in words obtained from interviews, field notes, and documentation studies (Moleong, 2019). The researcher used qualitative approach to know the description of the challenges of academic writing in English faced by Indonesian undergraduate EFL learners at University of Islam Malang and how they overcome their challenges.

The research subjects were sixth-semester students majoring in English Education at University of Islam Malang. The researcher determined the sixth semester as the appropriate level to observe because the sixth-semester students already had the experience of learning to write academically which was taken in the Writing III and Writing IV course in the third and fourth semester. Moreover, they were assigned to write a research article in the course of Seminar on ELT. The number of classes in the sixth semester of the academic year 2021/2022 was four consisting of A, B, C, and D classes, and the researcher selected the students in each class randomly to fill out the questionnaire.

In this research, there were 55 students English Education Department as the participants who filled out the questionnaire. However, there were only five out of 55 students to be interviewed as the representatives of 55 responses, and the researcher selected participants to be interviewed based on the results of the questionnaire of

students who had difficulties in academic writing. This research used purposive sampling to get certain students according to the characteristics needed in this research. Purposive sampling was a sampling technique of data sources that was tailored to the research objectives and certain considerations. This sampling technique was used because the researcher considered that the subjects of the research that had been selected were those who knew best about the challenges they faced in academic writing and how to overcome them.

The instruments used in this research were questionnaire and interview. The questionnaire was developed and adapted from Fitriyah (2021). The questionnaire was validated first by the lecturer of Writing IV course before being distributed to the subjects of the research. The participants were asked to fill out the online questionnaire via Google Form.

Table 1 Distribution of Items

No	Classification	Items
1	Structure	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
2	Developing Ideas	8, 9, 10, 11
3	Vocabulary	12, 13, 14
4	Grammar	15, 16, 17

The interview was conducted in the form of a semi-structured interview. The five students were selected for interview. The researcher only took five students to be interviewed, especially students who had difficulties in academic writing because the data from the five students was able to provide complete and satisfactory data.

The researcher did some techniques to analyze the data based on the information from the questionnaire and the interview. The first data analyzed was the questionnaire. After the researcher got the data from the participants, the first step was that the researcher analyzed the data of the questionnaire by calculating responses from the students who were given the questionnaire. The second step was that the researcher wrote the result of the calculation and the total of participants that chose each item of Likert scale. The last step was that the researcher summarized the topic's result in order to obtain the data's interpretation.

The second data analyzed was the interview. The data obtained through interviews were analyzed according to the topic in the form of a description. The

researcher analyzed the data of the interview using the theory from Creswell (2009) who said that there were some steps in analyzing data in qualitative research, and they were organizing and analyzing data, coding data, and working with the coded data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

To find out the challenges in academic writing, the researcher has distributed the questionnaire to 55 participants and conducted an online interview with 5 participants. They are English Education students in the 6th semester at University of Islam Malang who have been writing academic writing. The findings about the academic writing challenges for structure were presented in Table 1. There were seven statements described, namely the challenges in writing introduction, literature review, method, result and discussion, conclusion, abstract, and using the appropriate academic style in writing academic writing.

Table 1 Academic Writing Challenges for Structure

No	Statement	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
1	I have challenges in writing the introduction.	10.9	49.1	34.5	5.5	0
2	I have challenges in writing the literature review.	14.5	54.5	29.1	1.8	0
3	I have challenges in writing the method.	16.4	50.9	25.5	7.3	0
4	I have challenges in writing the result and discussion.	12.7	50.9	32.7	3.6	0
5	I have challenges in writing the conclusion.	5.5	38.2	47.3	9.1	0
6	I have challenges in writing the abstract.	10.9	49.1	34.5	5.5	0
7	I have challenges in using the appropriate academic style in writing academic writing	20	50.9	29.1	0	0

Based on Table 1, it was concluded that the students agreed that they had difficulties in writing the introduction, literature review, method, result and discussion, abstract, and using the appropriate academic style in their writing, but in writing conclusion, they were neutral. The first difficulty was writing introduction. This finding is in line with the statement from Qasem & Zayid (2019) which stated that one of the challenges faced by students is writing the introduction section. An unfocused introduction was one of the most common mistakes students make in academic writing. The second difficulty was writing the literature review. This finding is in consistent with the statement from Singh (2019) which stated that one of the challenges faced by students is writing a literature review. The students' literature review was inadequate.

The third difficulty was writing the method. This finding agrees with the statement from Qasem & Zayid (2019) which stated that one of the challenges faced by students is the writing method section. Their research methodology was not very well thought out. The fourth difficulty was writing the result and discussion. This finding is in accordance with the statement from Azizah & Budiman (2017) which stated that one of the challenges faced by students is writing the result section. In academic writing, they did not communicate the results section well. In writing conclusion, they were neutral. This result is following the research conducted by Fitriyah (2021) that students are relatively evenly divided about their difficulties in writing conclusions in academic writing where there are 42% of students are neutral, 30.8% of students who agree, and 27.2% of students who disagree that they have difficulty in writing conclusions in English academic writing.

The fifth difficulty was writing the abstract. This finding is in conformity with the statement from Susanti & Mahaputri (2022) which stated that students have difficulty in the process of writing abstracts. Because students did not have sufficient information about the contents of the abstract, they had difficulty compiling it. The sixth difficulty was using the appropriate academic style in writing academic writing. This finding is in concordance with the statement from Lin & Morrison (2021) which stated that the students face difficulty in using appropriate academic style because adhering to academic writing conventions is one of the most challenging factors for students.

The findings about the academic writing challenges for developing were presented in Table 2. There were four statements described, namely the challenges in expressing ideas clearly and logically, coherence and cohesion, critical thinking, and translation.

Table 2 Academic Writing Challenges for Developing Ideas

No	Statement	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
1	I have challenges in expressing my ideas clearly and logically.	16.4	40	38.2	5.5	0
2	I have challenges in coherence and cohesion.	9.1	50.9	38.2	1.8	0
3	I have challenges to think critically when writing academic writing.	18.2	43.6	38.2	0	0
4	I have challenges in translating, so I use the help of Google Translate.	18.2	43.6	30.9	5.5	1.8

Table 2 explicitly describes that the students agreed that they had difficulties in expressing ideas clearly and logically, coherence and cohesion, critical thinking, and translation. The first difficulty was in expressing ideas clearly and logically. This finding is supported by the statement from Singh (2019) which stated that another important problem with academic writing difficulties is expressing one's ideas in English. The second difficulty was in coherence and cohesion. This finding is in conformity with the statement from Rahman & Hasan (2019) which stated that the most common issues with academic writing for non-native learners are coherence and cohesion.

The third difficulty was critical thinking. This finding is in line with the statement from Altınmakas & Bayyurt (2020) which stated that the students have the inability to think critically in academic writing. The fourth difficulty was translation. This finding is in accordance with the statement from Singh (2019) which stated that students have challenges in translating because EFL learners have difficulty in writing English to express their ideas, so they use Google Translate to translate their mother tongue into English.

The findings about the academic writing challenges for vocabulary were presented in Table 3. There were three statements described, namely challenges in summarizing, paraphrasing, and using the vocabulary needed in academic writing.

Table 3 Academic Writing Challenges for Vocabulary

No	Statement	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
1	I have challenges to summarizing statements or the sentences from the expert and the previous study.	16.4	49.1	25.5	7.3	1.8
2	I have challenges to paraphrasing statements or the sentences from the expert and the previous study.	16.4	50.9	29.1	1.8	1.8
3	I have challenges in using the vocabulary needed in my writing especially academic writing vocabulary.	14.5	47.3	30.9	7.3	0

Table 3 clearly presents that the students agreed that they had difficulties in summarizing, paraphrasing, and using the vocabulary needed in their writing. The first difficulty was summarizing. This finding is in accordance with the statement from Ankawi (2020) which stated that the students face difficulty in summarizing in their

academic writing because students do not understand writing skills in their first language, so they have difficulty in transferring writing skills such as summarizing into their second language easily.

The second difficulty was paraphrasing. This finding is in line with the statement from Sajjad et al., (2021) which stated that the students have low paraphrasing skills in their academic writing. The third difficulty was using the vocabulary needed in academic writing. This finding is in supported by the statement from Joshua (2020) which stated that one of the causes of poor student academic writing is the lack of vocabulary, especially academic writing vocabulary that uses a more formal vocabulary because the students have a limited English vocabulary.

The findings about the academic writing challenges for grammar were presented in Table 4. There were three statements described, namely the challenges in linking between one sentence and other sentences smoothly, writing with the correct grammatical aspects, and spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.

Table 4 Academic Writing Challenges for Grammar

No	Statement	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)
1	I have challenges in linking between one sentence and other sentences smoothly.	16.4	43.6	29.1	10.9	0
2	I have challenges to write academic writing with the correct grammatical aspects (tenses, logical connectors, word order).	29.1	47.3	21.8	1.8	0
3	I have challenges in spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.	10.9	41.8	34.5	10.9	1.8

Table 4 obviously shows that the students agreed that they had difficulties in linking between one sentence and other sentences smoothly, grammatical aspects, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. The first difficulty was linking between one sentence and other sentences smoothly. This finding is in consistent with the statement from Lin & Morrison (2021) which stated that the students face difficulty in linking sentences because they do not know how to connect sentences properly.

The second difficulty was grammatical aspects. This finding is in accordance with the statement from Al - Tamimi (2018) which stated that the students face difficulty in the use of grammar in their academic writing such as tenses, modals,

logical connectors, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, and articles. The third difficulty was spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. This finding is in line with the statement from Altheneyan & Boayrid (2019) which stated that the students make mistakes related to mechanics such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization because they have difficulty accurately using them in their writing.

To find out the students' strategies to face their challenges in academic writing, the researcher conducted an online interview with 5 participants. The students' strategies to face their challenges in academic writing were brainstorming and reading many research articles. The followings are the views from the students.

Participant 1:

The strategy I used, outline first like using spider web, so I have to circle from the basic idea to the specific one.

Participant 4:

The strategy that I use to overcome it is by looking for many articles that relate to the topic that is being discussed by me.

Before the students began to write, they made an outline based on their topic first to make it easier in the process of writing, so the first strategy used was brainstorming. This finding is in line with the statement from Sajjad et.al., (2021) which stated that brainstorming is one of the aspects of the writing process to have good writing skills. To improve the students' ability in critical thinking, reading article should be encouraged to them, so the second strategy was reading many research articles. Ankawi (2020) stated that reading many research articles makes it easier for students to express their ideas critically in their academic writing.

All students also had the other strategies to overcome their challenges in academic writing namely, using applications such as Quillbot, Grammarly, Mendeley, and Zotero. The followings are the students' responses.

Participant 1:

I do not know the structure of how to write the order of the sources, so I only use online tools such as Mendeley, and Zotero.

Participant 2:

My strategy is that I also use an online tool to paraphrase namely Quillbot.

Participant 5:

> *I use Grammarly because I am just human and sometimes I get an error to checking my grammar.*

The first tool was Mendeley and Zotero which helped them in managing the references and citation. The second tool was QuillBot which assisted them in paraphrasing and summarizing. The last tool was Grammarly which aided them in the part of grammar. The third strategy was using online applications. This finding is in line with the statement from AlMarwani (2020) which stated that following technological advances, one of the supports in academic writing is that students use online applications that are easily accessible, for example, to assist in checking grammar, spelling, and others.

The other students had the other strategies to overcome their challenges in academic writing namely, receiving feedback from their friends, seniors, or lecturers and writing practice. The students' perceptions are shown below.

Participant 1:

> *The strategy I use, is still the same, practice more, and I usually ask for asking help from my senior.*

Participant 4:

> *I practice writing many times.*

To help students in the writing process, they could get feedback from their friends, seniors, and also lecturers, so the fourth strategy was receiving feedback. This finding is in line with the statement from Noori (2020) which stated that an important strategy that can assist students in improving their academic writing is to receive feedback on both the writing process and the writing product. One of the influencing factors in academic writing challenges was the lack of writing practice. Therefore, if the students practice writing more, it will be easier for them to write in their writing process, so the fifth strategy was writing practice. This finding is in line with the statement from Azizah & Budiman (2017) which stated that practicing writing more can overcome the students' difficulty in writing academic writing because when they are writing, they can find the pattern.

Other students' strategy to face their challenges in academic writing were by using the dictionary and editing their work. The opinion from the student is provided below.

Participant 5:

> *My strategy is that look for some dictions in the online dictionary or a dictionary book. I try to find a suitable word to express my ideas. Another strategy that I use I read again my sentence whether it is, clear enough or not.*

The students used a dictionary book and online dictionaries such as U-dictionary and Google Translate to help them in translating their writing or using appropriate vocabulary for their writing in academic writing, so the sixth strategy was using the dictionary. This finding is in line with the statement from Lin & Morrison (2021) which stated that using the dictionary is one of the top five strategies for managing students' academic writing challenges. The students edited their work by reading their writing whether their writing was clear and understandable or not, whether their writing had the appropriate meaning or not, so the seventh strategy was editing their work. This finding is in line with the statement from McMillan & Weyers (2014) which states that one of the strategies that students need to master is the editing strategy in academic writing, and that strategy can be done by reading their work aloud. Reading their work aloud can help them to identify errors that may not reach their eyes.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study has been conducted by investigating EFL learners at University of Islam Malang to answer two research problems. For the first research problem was about the academic writing challenges faced by Indonesian undergraduate EFL learners at University of Islam Malang. The researcher concluded that the students faced the challenges in writing academic writing related to structure, developing ideas, vocabulary, and grammar. For the second research problem was about how Indonesian undergraduate EFL learners at University of Islam Malang overcome the academic writing challenges. The researcher concluded that there were seven strategies used by the students to overcome their challenges in academic writing such as brainstorming, reading many research articles, using online applications, receiving feedback, writing practice, using the dictionary, and editing their work by themselves.

Considering the results of the study, the researcher provides some suggestions. For EFL students, this research is expected to help them to be more responsive to investigate their challenges and can use possible strategies to overcome their challenges after they learn the academic writing challenges and strategies from the result of this research. For English academic writing lecturers, it is suggested that they develop innovative ways for dealing with challenges in academic writing in order to ensure that the learning process in academic writing works effectively. For future researchers, the result of this research can help them explore deeper challenges in academic writing by using other types of academic writing such as essays to investigate the English Education students in one university or various universities in Indonesia. In addition, they can investigate the factors contributing to students' challenges and steps in writing academic writing, especially in research article or essay.

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