

Exploring the Writing Challenges Faced by First-Year EFL Students: A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the major writing difficulties faced by first-year students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts at Universitas Negeri Makassar. A qualitative research approach was employed, involving the analysis of students' written assignments and in-depth interviews with 15 purposively selected participants. The findings reveal four key areas of difficulty: grammatical and sentence structure errors, limited vocabulary and inappropriate word choice, poor paragraph organization, and a lack of coherence and cohesion. In addition to these surface-level issues, the study uncovered several underlying contributing factors, including limited exposure to English outside the classroom, inadequate writing instruction, first language interference, emotional barriers, and excessive reliance on translation technology. These results indicate that students' writing challenges are not solely rooted in linguistic deficiencies but are shaped by a broader ecosystem of influences that impact their development as academic writers. A deeper understanding of these factors is essential for designing more effective pedagogical interventions—ones that address both technical errors and the developmental needs of EFL learners.

Keywords: Critical Writing Challenges, EFL Students, Academic Writing.

INTRODUCTION

Writing skills are a fundamental component of effective communication and critical thinking, serving as a cornerstone for success in academic and professional settings. These skills enable individuals to convey their ideas, knowledge, and arguments in a clear, concise, and

organized manner, which is essential for academic achievement, career advancement, and effective collaboration. (Fleckenstein et al., 2023) (Roxas, 2020)

Undeniably, writing is an indispensable skill in different contexts of life, particularly in the realm of education. (Roxas, 2020) Throughout the educational journey, students are tasked with a diverse array of academic writing assignments, ranging from essays and research papers to more comprehensive works. The ability to navigate these writing tasks is crucial for students to demonstrate their understanding of course material, engage in critical analysis, and effectively communicate their ideas.

Moreover, the importance of writing skills extends beyond the academic realm and into the professional world. Workplace settings often require employees to produce a wide range of written communication, from detailed reports and impactful proposals to concise emails and persuasive presentations. Proficient writing skills enable professionals to effectively convey information, articulate their ideas, and make a compelling case for their recommendations (Roxas, 2020) (Septiwan & Hafizh, 2021) (Belcher, 1995)

However, despite the recognized importance of writing skills, many students and professionals continue to face challenges in this area. Factors such as language proficiency, lack of experience, and difficulty in organizing thoughts can contribute to these writing challenges. Consequently, there is a pressing need to address these challenges and support individuals in developing their writing skills.

The prevalence of digital media and technology in the modern educational landscape has given rise to concerns about the writing habits of first-year undergraduate students. Many students are reportedly engaging in the practice of cutting and pasting content from various sources without proper attribution, a behavior that can hinder their ability to develop their own unique writing style and skills (Roxas, 2020).

Studies conducted at Addis Ababa, Jimma, and Bahir Dar universities have revealed that the primary writing tasks assigned to high school students often involve expressing and supporting opinions, with less emphasis on summarizing and synthesizing information. As a result, students may not have had sufficient practice to cultivate a set of sophisticated writing skills, leading to unsatisfactory writing in various aspects, including poor grammar, weak organization, and flawed reasoning.

The complex nature of academic writing, which involves attention to details such as spacing and punctuation, can pose significant challenges for students who lack the necessary experience and skills. Recognizing students' prior writing experiences and the multifaceted nature of writing can guide educators in designing more effective assignments and providing appropriate support to help students refine their skills.

According to the literature, academic writing is an indispensable skill that is crucial in various contexts, including education. The ability to "read like a writer" and apply those strategies to one's own work can be a powerful tool in developing strong writing skills (Gravel, 2018). However, the emphasis on disciplinary thinking in academic settings has not translated effectively to classroom practices, as many students have limited opportunities to engage in discipline-specific writing tasks.

Additionally, the current emphasis on high-stakes assessments in many educational systems has led to a focus on memorizing facts rather than strengthening students' "disciplinary muscles" (Gravel, 2018). Opportunities for students with disabilities to develop discipline-specific writing

skills are also often limited. To address these challenges, educators should strive to design assignments and provide support that recognizes the complex nature of academic writing and the diverse experiences and needs of their students.

University students often struggle to meet the expected level of academic writing in their coursework. This issue is particularly prevalent in Ethiopia, where instructors frequently complain about students' inability to express themselves clearly and produce coherent academic papers. (Taye & Mengesha, 2024) The researchers' teaching experiences have revealed that university students tend to rely on copying and pasting content instead of developing their own texts when asked to write paragraphs or essays. (Taye & Mengesha, 2024) Furthermore, students in higher education often find it challenging to write in a systematic and logical manner. (Taye & Mengesha, 2024)

Recognizing the significance of this problem, the present study aims to investigate the common writing challenges faced by first-year university students in Ethiopia. The study seeks to address the following research questions:

- a. What are the most frequent English writing difficulties encountered by regular undergraduate students?
- b. What are the underlying factors contributing to these writing challenges?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing in a second or foreign language is widely recognized as one of the most demanding language skills for learners to acquire. For first-year EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students, the transition from secondary-level writing to the academic demands of higher education often brings a host of challenges. This chapter provides a narrative overview of the existing literature related to the writing difficulties faced by first-year EFL students, including the nature of writing in an academic context, the specific challenges encountered by learners, and the contextual factors that influence their writing development. The review also highlights relevant studies that have explored similar themes in different EFL contexts.

The act of writing is far more than merely putting words on a page. It involves a complex integration of cognitive processes, language knowledge, and sociocultural awareness. Harmer (2004) emphasizes that writing requires learners to organize ideas coherently, apply appropriate grammar and vocabulary, and consider the needs of their audience. This complexity becomes even more pronounced for EFL students, who must express ideas in a language that is not their mother tongue. Ferris and Hedgcock (2014) argue that second language writers often struggle with both surface-level linguistic issues and deeper rhetorical conventions.

First-year EFL students, in particular, face a unique set of challenges. Linguistic limitations are among the most commonly reported problems. Many students grapple with grammar accuracy, word choice, and sentence structure. Silva (1993) notes that ESL/EFL writing tends to be more constrained, less fluent, and less organized than that of native speakers. In addition, unfamiliarity with academic writing genres can hinder students' ability to produce texts that meet university-level expectations. Hyland (2003) suggests that EFL learners often lack awareness of genre conventions and the rhetorical structures required in academic essays.

Apart from linguistic and structural challenges, psychological factors also come into play. Writing anxiety is a prevalent issue among first-year students. Cheng (2004) found that EFL learners often experience fear of making mistakes, which may lead to procrastination or avoidance of writing tasks altogether. Furthermore, many students enter university without a clear understanding of effective writing strategies. As Raimes (1985) pointed out, the writing process involves multiple stages — planning, drafting, revising, and editing — yet EFL students frequently focus only on the final product, ignoring the value of process-oriented writing.

Contextual factors such as classroom environment, teacher feedback, and previous educational background also significantly influence students' writing experiences. Leki (2001) observed that when writing instruction is overly focused on grammar and mechanics, it may neglect the development of critical thinking and idea organization. Additionally, the availability of constructive feedback and the nature of teacher-student interaction can either support or hinder writing growth. In many EFL settings, limited instructional time and large class sizes further complicate the teaching and learning of writing.

Several studies have explored the writing difficulties of EFL students in various national contexts. For instance, Alamri (2019) investigated Saudi EFL students and found persistent challenges in organizing ideas and selecting appropriate vocabulary. Similarly, Nguyen and Gu (2013), in their study of Vietnamese learners, reported difficulties stemming from cross-cultural rhetorical differences and a lack of academic writing exposure. In the Indonesian context, Utami (2020) revealed that inadequate writing practice and limited feedback were among the main obstacles for first-year students in developing their writing skills.

Taken together, these studies highlight the multifaceted nature of writing difficulties in EFL contexts, especially among first-year students. These challenges are not only linguistic but also cognitive, emotional, and contextual. Understanding these dimensions is essential for developing more effective pedagogical strategies that address the real needs of EFL learners and support them in their academic writing journey.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the writing challenges faced by first-year EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate for gaining in-depth understanding of the students' experiences, perceptions, and struggles in writing academic texts in English. This design allowed the researchers to gather rich, descriptive data through open-ended responses and naturalistic observation.

Participants

The participants of this study were 15 first-year EFL students enrolled in a Paragraph Writing course at Universitas Negeri Makassar especially for students in the second-semester of academic year 2024/2025. All participants had similar educational backgrounds and were learning English as a foreign language in an academic setting. Their consent was obtained prior to data collection, and their identities were kept confidential using pseudonyms.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and students' writing samples.

- a. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students' perceptions of their writing difficulties. The interviews were conducted in a mix of English and Bahasa Indonesia, depending on the comfort of the participants.
- b. Writing samples (e.g., short paragraphs or essays written as class assignments) were analyzed to identify recurring patterns of challenges, such as grammatical errors, coherence issues, and vocabulary limitations.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The steps involved were:

- a. Transcribing the interview recordings.
- b. Reading the transcripts and writing samples repeatedly to gain familiarity.
- c. Coding the data manually to identify key themes and categories.
- d. Grouping codes into broader themes such as *language-related challenges*, *organizational problems*, *psychological factors*, and *lack of writing strategies*.
- e. Interpreting the findings in relation to existing theories and literature.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter presents the findings derived from the analysis of students' writing samples and semi-structured interviews, followed by a discussion that relates these findings to the existing literature. The discussion is organized based on the two guiding research questions: (1) What are the most frequent English writing difficulties encountered by regular undergraduate students? and (2) What are the underlying factors contributing to these writing challenges?

Frequent English Writing Difficulties Encountered by Students

a. Grammar and Sentence Structure Errors

Many students faced persistent difficulties with fundamental grammatical structures, which significantly affected the clarity and accuracy of their writing. It was common to find sentences with incorrect subject-verb agreement, such as "*My mother go to supermarket every weekend*" or "*My brother have a motorcycle.*" These errors suggested that students had not yet internalized even the most basic syntactic rules in English. Tense usage also appeared inconsistent. A student might begin a sentence in the past tense—"Yesterday I went to the library"—and then suddenly shift to the present—"and study for test."

Beyond verb forms, the misuse or absence of articles was a frequent issue. Sentences like "*He is clever student*" or "*They went to cinema last weekend*" appeared regularly, indicating uncertainty about when to use *a*, *an*, or *the*. In addition, many students struggled to form complete and well-punctuated sentences. Several combined multiple ideas into one long, run-on sentence without using conjunctions or proper punctuation. One student wrote, "*I live in a dorm it is small but comfortable I share with my friend she is from Java.*" This lack of sentence boundaries made their ideas difficult to follow and often obscured the intended meaning.

The recurrence of these grammatical and structural errors points to deeper issues in learners' interlanguage development, where L1 patterns—especially from Bahasa Indonesia—may interfere with the acquisition of English syntax. These patterns also reflect a limited exposure to

model texts and insufficient feedback on sentence-level accuracy in previous learning experiences.

b. Limited Vocabulary and Incorrect Word Choice

Alongside structural issues, lexical limitations emerged as a prominent challenge in students' writing. A noticeable tendency was the overuse of basic and repetitive vocabulary. Many students relied heavily on familiar adjectives like *good*, *bad*, or *nice*, even when trying to describe more complex ideas or experiences. For example, one paragraph about a favorite restaurant simply stated, "*The food is good. The place is good. The service is good,*" with no attempt to vary or expand upon the description.

More concerning were the inappropriate word choices, which often resulted from literal translations or uncritical use of online tools like Google Translate. In one case, a student wrote, "*My friend is very emotion,*" likely intending to say "*emotional.*" Another wrote, "*I follow English course,*" instead of "*I take*" or "*join.*" These lexical errors sometimes distorted the intended meaning or made the writing sound awkward and unnatural.

In addition, students occasionally selected words that were either too informal or mismatched in tone for academic writing. Descriptions like "*the teacher is cool and nice*" might be acceptable in casual conversation, but they detracted from the formality expected in an academic context. These word choice problems suggest that students are not only limited in the range of vocabulary they can actively use but also lack awareness of register and context-appropriate language.

c. Poor Paragraph Organization

Another recurring difficulty was the inability to construct well-organized paragraphs. Many students struggled to structure their ideas logically within a paragraph. In several cases, paragraphs began without a clear topic sentence and continued with a list of unrelated or loosely connected statements. For example, a student wrote: "*I want to be a doctor. I like playing football. My father is a teacher. Being a doctor is my dream.*" While these sentences may reflect aspects of the student's life, they lack a coherent focus or logical progression.

Even when students attempted to support a main idea, the supporting details were often vague, overly general, or disconnected. This lack of development made it difficult for readers to understand the writer's main message. Additionally, transitions between ideas were often missing or misused. Some paragraphs employed repetitive transitions such as "*then, then, then...*" without clarity or variation, while others jumped between ideas without any signals, creating a jarring reading experience.

These patterns suggest that students may not be familiar with the conventional structure of academic paragraphs—beginning with a topic sentence, followed by supporting details, and ending with a concluding or linking sentence. Rather than forming a unified idea, many of their paragraphs resembled lists or personal reflections loosely strung together. This points to the need for explicit instruction in rhetorical organization and practice in writing well-developed paragraphs.

d. Lack of Coherence and Cohesion

Closely tied to poor paragraph structure was a widespread lack of coherence and cohesion across students' texts. In many essays, ideas were presented in a fragmented way, with little to no use of cohesive devices such as transition signals, reference words, or conjunctions. As a result, the flow of ideas felt disjointed and difficult to follow. For instance, a student wrote, *"I like English. I don't like grammar. It is difficult."* The relationship between these statements is unclear and would benefit from cohesive links like *"Although"* or *"However."*

Another common problem was the use of unclear referents. Pronouns like *"this," "it,"* or *"they"* were used ambiguously, leaving the reader unsure of what or whom they referred to. In one case, a student wrote: *"This is very interesting. They said it is good."* Without context, it was impossible to determine what *"this"* referred to or who *"they"* were.

Transitions between paragraphs also posed challenges. Many students moved from one paragraph to the next without any bridging statements, resulting in abrupt shifts in topic. This lack of cohesion made it difficult for readers to stay engaged with the argument or narrative being developed.

Such coherence issues are typical of early-stage EFL writing development. They suggest that students have not yet acquired the skills to guide their readers effectively through a text. The absence of cohesive devices and logical flow underscores the need for more focused instruction on discourse-level writing skills and the use of model texts that demonstrate coherent paragraphing and idea development.

Underlying Factors Contributing to Writing Difficulties

The recurring writing problems observed among first-year EFL students at Universitas Negeri Makassar did not occur in isolation. Rather, they reflected a complex interplay of linguistic, instructional, cognitive, and affective factors that shaped how students approached writing in English. Through close analysis of student texts and interview narratives, several contributing elements emerged as underlying causes of their writing difficulties.

a. Limited Exposure to English Outside the Classroom

One of the most prominent factors was students' limited interaction with English beyond the academic setting. For many, the classroom was the only place where they read, heard, or used English. This minimal exposure severely restricted their opportunities to absorb natural sentence structures, vocabulary, and the rhythm of English writing. Several students mentioned during interviews that they rarely watched English-language media, read English books, or interacted with English content online.

For example, one student remarked, *"I only use English in class, outside I speak Bahasa or my local language. I don't really read English books unless for assignments."* This lack of consistent linguistic input contributed to fossilized grammatical errors and limited lexical development, as students were not regularly seeing or hearing correct English used in authentic contexts.

b. Insufficient Writing Instruction and Feedback

Another major contributing factor was the nature of writing instruction students had previously received. Many had experienced writing classes in high school that emphasized

grammar drills, sentence-level translation, and memorization rather than genuine composition. When asked about prior writing tasks, one student explained, “*In school, we usually write sentences or translate from Bahasa. We rarely write paragraphs or essays.*” As a result, students entered university without having built foundational skills in organizing and developing ideas into coherent texts.

Moreover, feedback on writing tended to focus heavily on surface-level errors—such as spelling or verb forms—rather than higher-order concerns like organization, coherence, or argument development. In one writing assignment, for instance, a student had clearly struggled to structure a paragraph logically, but the only feedback given was: “*Check verb tenses.*” This approach discouraged students from seeing writing as a process of developing ideas and refining structure, and instead reinforced the belief that accuracy in grammar alone was the marker of good writing.

c. Influence of First Language (L1) Writing Habits

The influence of students’ first language also played a significant role in shaping their English writing. Several sentence constructions and organizational patterns observed in the writing samples mirrored the syntax and rhetorical style of Bahasa Indonesia or local languages. For example, many students wrote long, loosely connected sentences without punctuation—structures that are more acceptable in spoken or informal Bahasa Indonesia. One student wrote: “*I go to market buy fish come back cook with my mother,*” reflecting a narrative sequencing more typical of spoken Indonesian than standard English.

Similarly, students tended to present ideas indirectly or circularly, a common rhetorical strategy in Indonesian academic culture, where writers may delay their thesis or main point until the end. While culturally appropriate in some contexts, this approach clashed with English academic writing norms that value clarity, directness, and early thesis placement.

d. Low Confidence and Writing Anxiety

A less visible but equally influential factor was students’ emotional relationship with writing in English. Many students expressed low self-confidence and anxiety when asked to produce written texts, especially when assignments were graded or presented publicly. Several admitted to avoiding writing unless absolutely necessary, citing fear of making mistakes or being judged. One student said, “*When I write in English, I feel nervous. I don’t know if it’s right or wrong, so I just write short and simple.*”

This emotional hesitation often resulted in overly simplistic writing, as students opted for safe vocabulary and avoided complex sentence structures. In some cases, students even limited their ideas, afraid that expressing them in English would lead to errors. The emotional barrier became a cognitive one, reducing their willingness to revise or take risks in their writing.

e. Overreliance on Translation Tools

While digital tools such as Google Translate were meant to assist learning, many students became overly dependent on them—often without understanding the translations provided. Instead of trying to recall vocabulary or sentence structures they had learned, some students simply wrote in Bahasa Indonesia and translated entire paragraphs into English using online tools.

This practice often led to grammatically awkward or semantically inaccurate sentences. For instance, one student originally wrote in Bahasa: “*Dia adalah orang yang pemalu tetapi pekerja keras.*” The translated version submitted was: “*He is someone who shy but hard work,*” revealing not only translation errors but also a lack of post-editing or comprehension. This dependency also hindered students’ development of autonomous language processing skills, reinforcing passive habits instead of active language construction.

In summary, the writing difficulties experienced by students stemmed not merely from gaps in linguistic knowledge but from a wider ecosystem of factors, including limited exposure to English, inadequate writing pedagogy, first language interference, emotional barriers, and uncritical reliance on technology. Understanding these underlying causes is essential for designing more effective instructional approaches—ones that address both the surface errors and the deeper developmental needs of EFL learners.

CONCLUSION

This study has revealed a comprehensive portrait of the English writing challenges faced by first-year EFL students at Universitas Negeri Makassar. Through the analysis of students’ written work and interview responses, four major areas of difficulty emerged: grammar and sentence structure errors, limited vocabulary and inappropriate word choice, poor paragraph organization, and a lack of coherence and cohesion. These issues often manifested in frequent grammatical mistakes, repetitive or inaccurate word usage, disorganized paragraph development, and writing that was difficult to follow due to the absence of logical connections.

Beyond these surface-level problems, the study also uncovered several underlying factors contributing to students’ writing difficulties. These included limited exposure to English outside the classroom, insufficient instruction and feedback in previous educational settings, the strong influence of the first language (L1) on sentence structure and rhetorical style, low writing confidence, and heavy reliance on translation tools. Together, these factors explain why students struggle not only with the technical aspects of writing but also with developing clarity, coherence, and academic tone in their written expression.

These findings suggest that improving EFL students’ writing ability requires more than grammar drills or vocabulary lists. It calls for a more holistic and process-oriented approach to writing instruction—one that emphasizes idea development, exposure to authentic texts, constructive feedback, and emotional support. In short, helping students become better writers means guiding them not only to write correctly but to think, plan, and express ideas meaningfully in English.

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