

ENHANCING ACADEMIC WRITING PROFICIENCY: A DATA-DRIVEN STUDY ON EFL STUDENTS' CHALLENGES AND NEEDS

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Abstract. Academic writing is an important skill but remains a challenge for students of English as a Foreign Language in higher education. This study aims to analyse the academic writing abilities of sixth-semester EFL students in terms of their language proficiency, the language problems they face, and their perceived learning needs regarding academic writing. This study employed a quantitative descriptive method involving 34 students as respondents. Data were collected via a structured questionnaire comprising multiple-choice questions, checklists, and a Likert scale. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics to illustrate trends in students' abilities, problems, and needs. The results indicate that the majority of students are at an intermediate proficiency level, with the main challenges lying in the ability to produce analytical, coherent, and cohesive writing, as well as weaknesses in paragraph organisation and grammar. Furthermore, students demonstrated a high need for more effective academic writing learning models, particularly those emphasising the pre-writing stage and idea development. These findings highlight the importance of developing an academic writing curriculum that is student-centred and capable of integrating linguistic aspects and cognitive demands in academic writing.

Keywords: Academic Writing, EFL Students, Needs Analysis, Writing Problems

Abstrak. Penulisan akademik merupakan keterampilan penting namun masih menjadi tantangan bagi mahasiswa Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing di pendidikan tinggi. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kemampuan penulisan akademik mahasiswa EFL semester enam yang ditinjau dari tingkat kemampuan bahasa, permasalahan bahasa yang dihadapi, serta kebutuhan pembelajaran penulisan akademik yang dirasakan mahasiswa. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kuantitatif dengan melibatkan 34 mahasiswa sebagai responden. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner terstruktur yang mencakup pertanyaan pilihan ganda, daftar periksa, dan skala Likert. Data dianalisis menggunakan statistik deskriptif untuk menggambarkan kecenderungan kemampuan, masalah, dan kebutuhan mahasiswa. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sebagian besar mahasiswa berada pada tingkat kemampuan menengah, dengan permasalahan utama pada kemampuan menghasilkan tulisan yang analitis, koheren, dan kohesif, serta kelemahan dalam organisasi paragraf dan tata bahasa. Selain itu, mahasiswa menunjukkan kebutuhan yang tinggi terhadap model pembelajaran penulisan akademik yang lebih efektif, terutama yang menekankan tahap pra-penulisan dan pengembangan ide. Temuan ini menunjukkan pentingnya pengembangan kurikulum penulisan akademik yang berorientasi pada kebutuhan mahasiswa dan mampu mengintegrasikan aspek linguistik serta tuntutan kognitif dalam penulisan akademik.

Kata Kunci: Penulisan Akademik, Mahasiswa EFL, Analisis Kebutuhan, Masalah Penulisan

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the most essential yet demanding language skills for academic success, particularly for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). As a productive skill, writing requires not only grammatical accuracy and vocabulary mastery, but also higher-order cognitive processes such as organizing ideas, maintaining coherence, and developing logical arguments (Kent & Wanzek, 2016; Uzun, 2024). Compared to other language skills, writing is often considered the most difficult because learners must actively construct meaning rather than merely process input (Helaluddin et al., 2020). Difficulties in writing have direct implications for students' academic achievement, as limited writing ability can hinder performance in coursework, assessment tasks, and the completion of academic assignments that require critical thinking and argumentation (Zafarovna & Qizi, 2024). For this reason, improving academic writing instruction is a crucial concern in higher education and curriculum development.

In higher education, writing demands become more complex due to the requirements of academic writing. Students are expected to express ideas clearly, systematically, and in accordance with scholarly conventions, including critical analysis, evidence-based argumentation, and logical coherence (Starfield, 2019). However, many EFL students continue to experience persistent difficulties in generating ideas, organizing arguments, and maintaining coherence and cohesion in academic texts, even after completing formal writing courses (Xu, 2022). These difficulties often result in lower academic performance, reduced confidence in academic communication, and challenges in meeting disciplinary expectations. This condition indicates that academic writing problems extend beyond linguistic accuracy and are closely related to cognitive and instructional factors within the learning process (Oshima, 2012).

Recent studies in EFL contexts emphasize the importance of needs analysis as a foundation for improving academic writing instruction and curriculum relevance. Needs analysis allows educators to identify students' proficiency levels, learning difficulties, and instructional expectations, providing a basis for designing learning materials and teaching approaches that align with students' actual conditions (Richards, 2001). Nevertheless, previous studies tend to examine writing problems, instructional strategies, or learners' perceptions separately. Few studies integrate students' actual academic writing proficiency, experienced language problems, and perceived learning needs within a single analytical framework, particularly at the tertiary level.

Addressing this gap constitutes the novelty of the present study: it simultaneously examines academic writing proficiency, writing difficulties, and perceived learning needs of sixth-semester EFL students within one coherent needs-based analysis. This study aims to explore students' current level of academic writing ability, the language problems they encounter, and their expectations toward academic writing instruction. The findings are expected to contribute practical insights for the development of academic writing curricula, the alignment of instructional practices with students' needs, and the improvement of assessment priorities in EFL academic writing courses.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative descriptive method to provide a systematic overview of students' academic writing conditions without manipulating variables. This approach was chosen because the study aimed to describe students' language level, language problems, and learning needs based on measurable data obtained from a relatively homogeneous group of participants. The descriptive design allowed the researcher to capture patterns and tendencies in students' academic writing experiences as they naturally occurred within the instructional context. Data were collected using a questionnaire, as this instrument is effective for gathering students' perceptions, experiences, and learning needs in a structured and efficient manner. The participants consisted of 34 sixth-semester students from the English Education Department who had completed academic writing courses. Their academic background enabled them to evaluate their own writing proficiency, identify challenges encountered during academic writing tasks, and express their instructional needs based on prior learning experiences.

The questionnaire was adapted from Helaluddin et al. (2020) and modified to ensure alignment with the objectives and context of this study. The modifications included adjusting the wording of items to suit the academic writing context in higher education, simplifying language to ensure clarity for respondents, and refining indicators so that each item directly reflected one of the three research dimensions: language level, language problems, and learning needs. Several items were also contextualized to academic writing tasks commonly encountered by the participants, such as writing essays, research papers, and argumentative texts, to enhance the relevance of the instrument.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies and percentages. Data related to students' language level were used to describe their perceived academic writing proficiency, while responses concerning language problems identified dominant difficulties experienced by students. Data on learning needs were analyzed

to reveal students' expectations and priorities for academic writing instruction. Together, these data sets were used to answer the research questions by providing an integrated description of students' writing proficiency, challenges, and instructional needs as a basis for curriculum and instructional improvement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Language Level

In this section, students are asked questions about their skill level in writing, especially their academic writing skills, and they answered based on their abilities. The goal is to determine the current language skills of students.

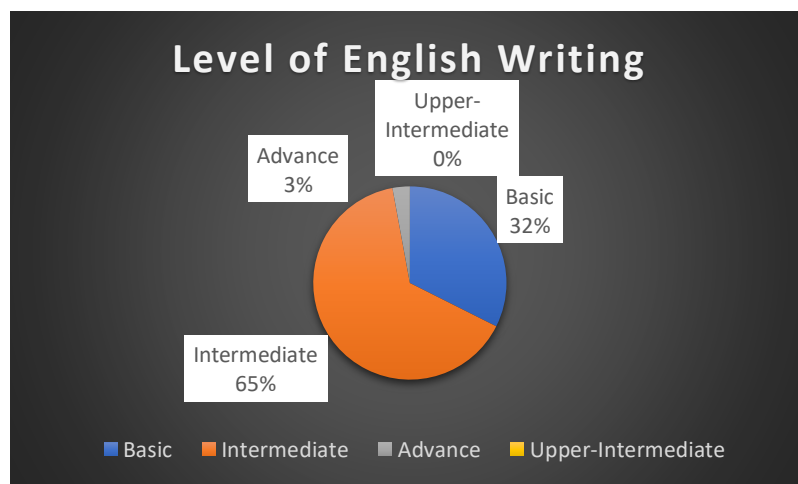


Figure 1. The percentage of students' level in writing

Based on Figure 1, 11 students (32%) are at the basic level of English writing, while the majority of students, 22 students (65%), are at the intermediate level. No students (0%) are categorized at the upper-intermediate level, and only 1 student (3%) has reached the advanced level. These findings indicate that most respondents possess an intermediate level of English writing proficiency. This distribution suggests that although students have developed fundamental writing skills, they have not yet achieved higher-level academic writing competence, indicating a need for instructional support that focuses on advancing students from intermediate to upper-intermediate and advanced writing levels.

Students' Language Problem

There are five areas that were studied in terms of students' language problems: problems in writing grammatically, in writing correct sentences, in free hand writing, in creating well-organized paragraphs, and problems in analytical, coherent, and cohesive writing. Furthermore,

the problems include student’s weakness, students challenging, and students’ strengths in writing. The findings of the questionnaire on the students’ weakness and challenging found that majority of the students’ problems were that they could not write analytical, coherent, and cohesive writing.

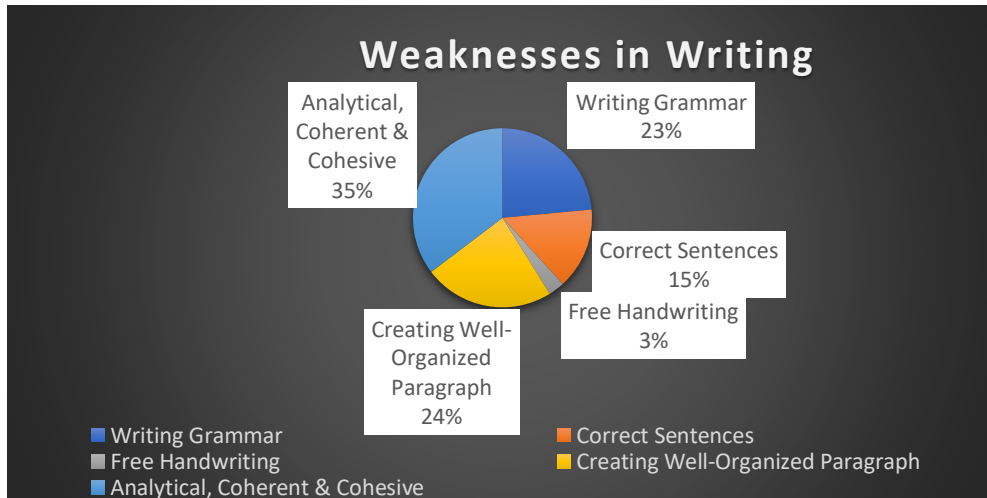


Figure 2. The Percentage of students’ weakness in writing

Based on Figure 2, the most common students’ weakness were 12 students (35%) were weak in analytical, coherent, and cohesive writing, and least was 1 student (3%) was free handwriting. Moreover, around 8 students (24%) were weak in creating well-organized paragraph, 8 students (23%) were weak in writing grammar, and there were 5 students (15%) were weak in writing correct sentences.

Students’ Language Need

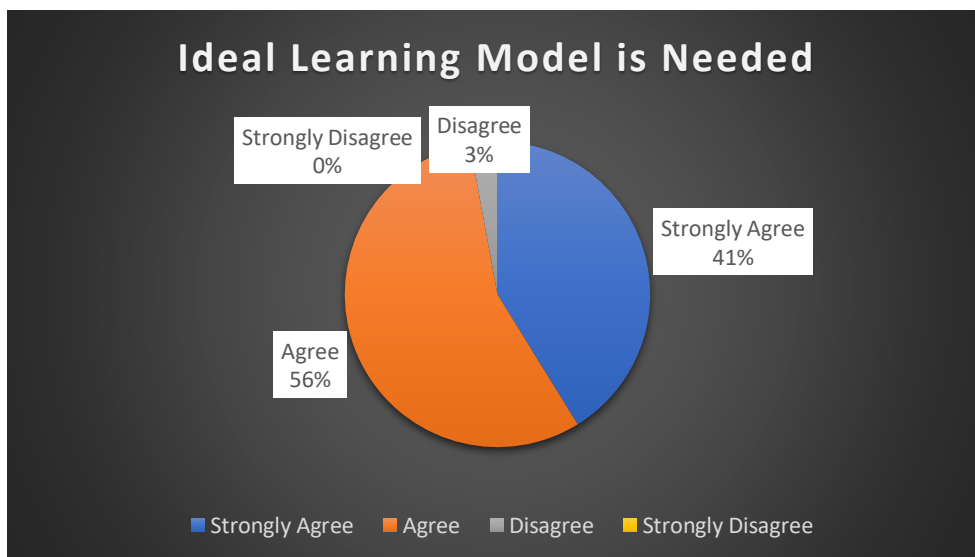


Figure 3. The percentage of ideal learning needs

Based on Figure 3, the findings indicate a strong consensus among students regarding the need for an ideal learning model in academic writing courses. A total of 14 students (41%) strongly agreed and 19 students (56%) agreed that an ideal learning model is necessary, while only one student (3%) disagreed and none strongly disagreed. This dominant agreement suggests that existing instructional practices may not have fully addressed students' learning needs in academic writing. From a theoretical perspective, this finding aligns with learner-centered and needs-based instruction, which emphasizes that effective learning models should be responsive to students' abilities, difficulties, and expectations (Richards, 2001). The strong demand for an ideal learning model also reflects the complexity of academic writing, which requires not only linguistic accuracy but also cognitive processes such as idea development, organization, and critical argumentation (Oshima, 2012; Starfield, 2019). When instructional models fail to adequately support these processes, students are more likely to perceive a gap between instructional input and learning outcomes.

Furthermore, the results support Helaluddin et al. (2020), who argue that inappropriate or generic teaching models in writing instruction may hinder students' engagement and progress. The high level of agreement in this study indicates that students are aware of their learning challenges and expect a more structured, supportive, and relevant learning model to help them improve their academic writing performance. This reinforces the importance of aligning instructional design with students' actual needs to enhance learning effectiveness.

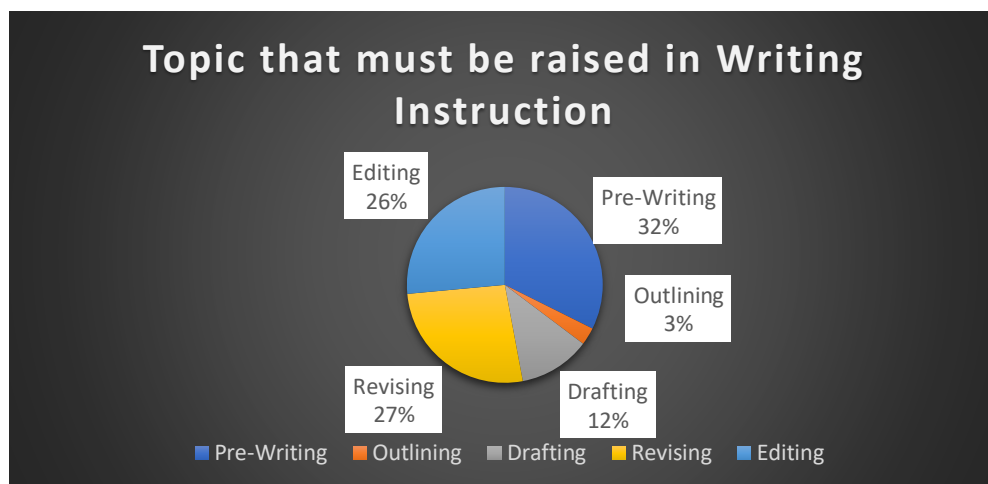


Figure 4. Topic that must be raised in writing instruction

Based on Figure 4 above, the questionnaire results show that 32% of students stated that pre-writing materials in academic writing instruction need to be improved. This finding indicates that a considerable proportion of students experience difficulties at the initial stage of

the writing process, particularly in generating, selecting, and organizing ideas before writing. Weaknesses at the pre-writing stage often lead to problems in coherence, paragraph development, and argument clarity in the final text. Strengthening pre-writing activities such as brainstorming, mind mapping, outlining, and guided idea exploration is therefore essential to support students in developing more structured and meaningful academic texts. This finding is consistent with results from national studies which emphasize that inadequate pre-writing instruction contributes significantly to students' writing difficulties. For example, Sari and Sukardi (2021) found that structured pre-writing activities improved students' ability to organize ideas in academic essays, while Nurhayati (2020) reported that explicit guidance in pre-writing stages helped EFL students reduce writing anxiety and improve content quality. These studies reinforce the importance of enhancing pre-writing instruction as a foundation for effective academic writing.

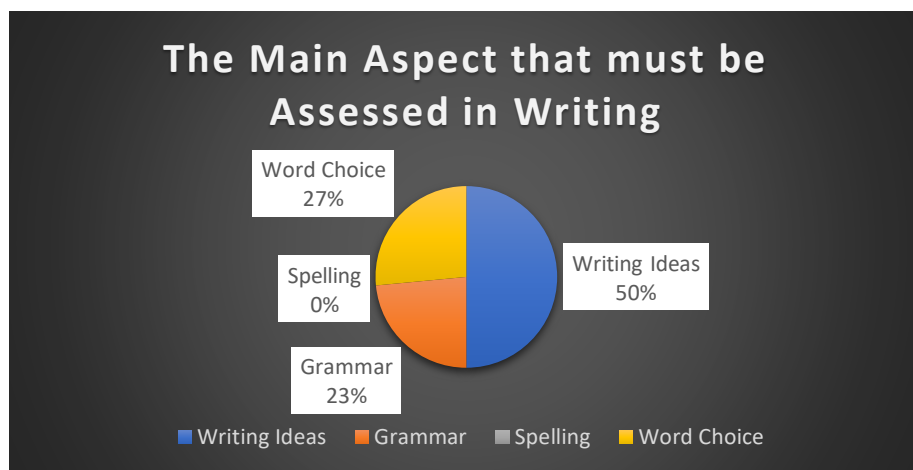


Figure 5. The percentage of assessment aspect

Based on Figure 5, the questionnaire results indicate that 17 students (50%) considered writing ideas as the most important aspect in writing assessment, followed by word choice with 9 students (27%) and grammar with 8 students (23%). This finding suggests that most students place greater value on the development and clarity of ideas rather than on surface-level language features. It reflects students' awareness that strong ideas form the foundation of effective academic writing and support the communication of meaning. This result is in line with previous studies which argue that idea development and content organization are central to writing quality, especially in academic contexts, while grammatical accuracy functions as a supporting component rather than the main focus. Research by Hyland (2003) emphasizes that academic writing assessment should prioritize meaning-making and argument development, whereas grammar should be treated as a tool to enhance clarity. Similarly, Brown (2004) notes

that overemphasis on grammar may hinder students' ability to express ideas freely, particularly during the drafting stage. Therefore, the findings reinforce the importance of assessment practices that focus on ideas and content while integrating language accuracy in a balanced manner.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, this study concludes that sixth-semester EFL students' academic writing ability is generally at a moderate level, with most students identifying themselves as intermediate writers and very few reaching an advanced level. The main difficulties lie in producing analytical, coherent, and well-organized academic texts, indicating that students struggle more with idea development and structure than with spontaneous writing. These challenges highlight the need for targeted support in higher-order writing skills. In terms of learning needs, students strongly expressed the importance of improving the academic writing learning model, particularly at the pre-writing stage. They emphasized that idea generation and development should receive greater attention, both in instruction and assessment. Overall, the findings underline the importance of implementing a more structured, student-centered, and needs-based academic writing curriculum to better support students in developing effective academic writing skills.

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