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EXPLORING STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN WRITING ENGLISH ESSAYS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the challenges faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in writing academic essays, focusing on linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, involving 20 undergraduate students enrolled in an Academic Writing course at an EFL university. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, essay document analysis, and classroom observations, then analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. The findings identified six major challenges: grammatical errors, limited vocabulary, difficulties in generating and developing ideas, inadequate essay organization, problems with coherence and cohesion, and affective barriers, particularly writing anxiety and low self-confidence. Grammar and vocabulary were the most frequently reported difficulties. The results further suggest that students' writing challenges are interconnected, reflecting the influence of linguistic competence, cognitive processes, and psychological conditions on their academic writing performance. The study highlights the importance of comprehensive writing instruction that integrates language development, critical thinking, and emotional support. Teachers should provide explicit guidance, constructive feedback, and a supportive classroom environment. Further studies could examine these challenges across diverse educational settings and explore how digital technologies can enhance students' academic writing development.

Keywords: Essay writing, writing difficulties, EFL students, academic writing, qualitative study.

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is considered one of the most essential skills in English language learning because it enables students to communicate ideas, opinions, and information in written form. In academic contexts, writing is not only used as a means of communication but also as a tool for developing critical thinking, creativity, and analytical abilities. Among various writing activities, essay writing is regarded as one of the most challenging tasks for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners because it requires the integration of linguistic, cognitive, and organizational skills. Students are expected to generate ideas, organize arguments logically, use appropriate vocabulary, apply grammatical rules accurately, and maintain coherence throughout the text (Hairul, 2023).

Despite its importance, many EFL learners continue to experience difficulties in writing English essays. Several studies have reported that students often struggle with grammar, vocabulary, organization, mechanics, and idea development. Alfaruqy et al. (2022) found that first-year university students encountered difficulties in organizing ideas, using appropriate vocabulary, and applying grammatical rules in essay writing. Similarly, Widya and Teopilus (2023) revealed that students experienced problems in content development, language use, mechanics, and essay organization. These findings suggest that writing remains a complex skill that requires continuous practice and guidance.

Research conducted by Bulqiyah et al. (2021) further showed that students' writing difficulties can be categorized into cognitive, linguistic, and affective problems. The study indicated that students frequently struggle to generate ideas and express them effectively in written form. Likewise, Riadil (2021) reported that EFL learners experienced

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challenges in developing arguments, organizing paragraphs, and selecting appropriate writing strategies. Such difficulties often prevent students from producing coherent and well-structured essays.

In addition to organizational problems, linguistic difficulties remain one of the most dominant issues in essay writing. Nurlatifah and Yusuf (2022) found that students commonly made errors related to grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, and sentence structure when writing analytical exposition texts. Similar findings were reported by Derakhshan and Karimian Shirejini (2020), who revealed that grammar and vocabulary limitations significantly affected students' writing quality. Furthermore, Laoli et al. (2026) discovered that English major students still faced considerable difficulties in constructing grammatically correct sentences and using appropriate vocabulary despite having studied English for several years.

Previous studies have also highlighted the importance of idea development in academic writing. Hairul (2023) found that many university students struggled to develop supporting details and provide relevant evidence in their essays. Likewise, Purba and Teopilus (2022) reported that students often had difficulties maintaining coherence and cohesion between paragraphs. These problems resulted in essays that lacked logical flow and clear organization.

Argumentative and academic writing have also become major concerns in EFL research. Juhana et al. (2023) found that students experienced difficulties constructing argumentative claims, integrating evidence, and presenting logical reasoning. Similarly, Busthomi et al. (2026) reported that students faced challenges in organizing arguments and maintaining consistency throughout argumentative essays. These findings indicate that academic writing requires not only language competence but also higher-order thinking skills.

Furthermore, writing difficulties are often influenced by psychological factors. Research published in *Acta Psychologica* (2026) revealed that low self-confidence, writing anxiety, and lack of motivation significantly affected students' academic writing performance. The study emphasized that students who experience writing anxiety tend to avoid writing activities and have difficulty expressing ideas effectively. Similar findings were reported by Bulqiyah et al. (2021), who identified affective barriers as one of the major causes of writing difficulties among EFL learners.

A number of studies have also investigated writing difficulties in different educational contexts. Hamdani and Abid (2025), through a qualitative meta-analysis of Indonesian EFL students, concluded that grammar, vocabulary, organization, idea development, and writing mechanics remained the most common challenges across various educational levels. Likewise, Fareed et al. (2016) found that inadequate language proficiency, limited vocabulary knowledge, and ineffective teaching methods contributed significantly to students' writing difficulties. Supporting this finding, Raoofi et al. (2017) emphasized that linguistic competence plays a crucial role in determining students' writing achievement.

Recent developments in educational technology have encouraged researchers to explore the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing instruction. Jelson et al. (2025) found that students increasingly used ChatGPT to generate ideas, improve grammar, and organize essays. Similarly, Woo et al. (2023) reported that students generally perceived AI-assisted writing positively because it helped them overcome vocabulary and grammar problems. However, the studies also warned that excessive dependence on AI tools might reduce students' critical thinking and independent writing abilities.

Although numerous studies have investigated students' writing difficulties, several gaps remain evident. First, many previous studies focused on specific writing genres such as descriptive, expository, analytical exposition, or argumentative texts. Second, most studies primarily examined linguistic aspects of writing difficulties, including grammar and vocabulary problems, while cognitive and affective factors received less comprehensive attention. Third, although recent studies have discussed AI-assisted writing, limited research has explored students' essay writing difficulties by integrating linguistic, cognitive, and psychological perspectives within the contemporary digital learning environment.

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Therefore, this study aims to explore students' difficulties in writing English essays by examining the linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors that influence their writing performance. By identifying the major challenges experienced by students, this study is expected to contribute to the development of more effective writing instruction and provide insights for English teachers in supporting students' academic writing development.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This research utilized a qualitative descriptive design to investigate the challenges students face in writing English essays. Qualitative research is suitable for examining the experiences, perceptions, and difficulties of participants in a real-world context. As noted by Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research allows scholars to gather a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon from the viewpoint of the participants. Given that the aim of this study was to recognize and comprehend the challenges encountered by students when composing English essays, a qualitative method was deemed the most appropriate approach.

The study adopted a descriptive qualitative design because it focused on describing and interpreting students' writing difficulties rather than measuring variables statistically. The research aimed to examine the linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors that influence students' essay writing performance.

2.2 Setting and Participants

The research took place at a university where English is taught as a foreign language. The participants were undergraduate students enrolled in an Academic Writing course. A purposive sampling method was employed to choose participants who had prior experience in writing English essays and were open to sharing their experiences.

A total of 20 students took part in the study. They were chosen because they had completed multiple essay-writing assignments and were knowledgeable about the academic writing process. Their insights were instrumental in highlighting the difficulties faced during essay writing tasks.

2.3 Research Instruments

To collect comprehensive data, the researcher employed three research instruments:

1) Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students' perceptions and experiences regarding essay writing difficulties. This type of interview allowed the researcher to prepare guiding questions while also providing opportunities for participants to elaborate on their responses.

The interview questions focused on:

a. Difficulties encountered during essay writing.
b. Challenges related to grammar and vocabulary.
c. Problems in organizing ideas.
d. Difficulties in developing arguments.
e. Feelings and attitudes toward writing.
f. Strategies used to overcome writing challenges.

Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and was conducted in a language comfortable for the participants to ensure accurate responses.

2) Essay Document Analysis

Students' essay assignments were collected and analyzed to identify common writing difficulties. Document analysis enabled the researcher to examine actual writing performance and compare it with participants' interview responses.

The essays were analyzed based on five writing components adapted from Jacobs et al. (1981):

a. Content
b. Organization
c. Vocabulary

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d. Language Use (Grammar)
e. Mechanics

3) Observation Notes

Classroom observations were conducted during writing activities to gain additional information regarding students' behavior, participation, and responses during essay-writing tasks. Observation notes helped strengthen the findings obtained from interviews and document analysis.

2.4 Data Collection Technique

The data collection process was conducted in several stages.

First, the researcher obtained permission from the institution and informed participants about the purpose of the study. Participants were also informed that their identities would remain confidential.

Second, the researcher collected students' essay assignments from the Academic Writing course. These essays served as the primary documents for analysis.

Third, individual semi-structured interviews were carried out with chosen participants. With the participants' approval, the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for further analysis.

Finally, classroom observations were carried out during writing sessions to record students' engagement, participation, and visible difficulties while completing essay-writing tasks.

2.5 Data Analysis and Criteria of Success

The gathered data were examined through the thematic analysis method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved the following steps:

1) Data Familiarization

The researcher repeatedly read interview transcripts, observation notes, and students' essays to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data.

2) Generating Initial Codes

Important statements and recurring issues related to writing difficulties were identified and coded systematically.

3) Searching for Themes

The codes were grouped into broader categories representing major writing difficulties experienced by students.

4) Reviewing Themes

The researcher reviewed and refined the themes to ensure consistency and relevance to the research objectives.

5) Defining and Naming Themes

The final themes were identified and categorized into three major dimensions:

a. Linguistic difficulties
b. Cognitive difficulties
c. Affective difficulties

6) Reporting Findings

The results were presented descriptively and supported by excerpts from interviews, observations, and document analysis findings.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher employed several strategies.

Credibility

Data triangulation involved the comparison of insights gathered from interviews, written essays, and observations conducted in the classroom.

Transferability

Detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and procedures were provided to allow readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar contexts.

Dependability

The researcher maintained a clear record of all research procedures, including data collection and analysis processes.

Confirmability

Research findings were supported by direct evidence from participants' responses and document analysis to minimize researcher bias.

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Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were carefully observed throughout the study. Participants voluntarily agreed to participate and provided informed consent before data collection. Their identities were kept confidential by using pseudonyms in all reports and publications. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that students encountered various difficulties in writing English essays. Based on the analysis of interview transcripts, students' essays, and classroom observations, six major themes emerged: (1) grammatical difficulties, (2) limited vocabulary knowledge, (3) difficulties in generating and developing ideas, (4) problems in essay organization, (5) difficulties in maintaining coherence and cohesion, and (6) affective factors affecting writing performance.

1) Grammatical Difficulties

The analysis indicated that grammar was the most frequently reported difficulty among participants. Most students stated that they were uncertain about the correct use of tenses, subject-verb agreement, articles, prepositions, and sentence structures when writing essays.

For example, several students produced sentences such as:

"Students is difficult to writing essay."
"Many student have problem in grammar."

These errors demonstrated students' limited mastery of grammatical rules. Interview data also revealed that students often translated sentences directly from Indonesian into English, resulting in grammatical inaccuracies.

One participant stated:

"I usually know what I want to write, but I do not know how to make the sentence grammatically correct."

Another participant explained:

"I often confuse between past tense and present tense when writing essays."

These findings are consistent with Alfaruqy et al. (2022), who reported that grammar remains one of the most significant challenges faced by EFL students in essay writing. Similarly, Nurlatifah and Yusuf (2022) found that grammatical errors frequently occur due to insufficient understanding of English sentence structures.

The findings suggest that grammatical competence remains a crucial factor influencing students' writing quality. Students may possess ideas to express but struggle to communicate them effectively due to grammatical limitations.

2) Limited Vocabulary Knowledge

Vocabulary limitation emerged as another major challenge. Students frequently reported difficulties selecting appropriate words to express their ideas. As a result, they often repeated the same vocabulary throughout their essays or relied on simple expressions.

Essay analysis showed that students tended to use common words repeatedly, such as *"good," "bad," "important," and "interesting,"* while avoiding more specific academic vocabulary.

One participant commented:

"Sometimes I have ideas, but I do not know the English words."

Another participant stated:

"I always open a dictionary because my vocabulary is very limited."

Classroom observations also showed that students spent considerable time searching for vocabulary while writing essays.

This finding supports the studies conducted by Derakhshan and Karimian Shirejini (2020) and Hamdani and Abid (2025), which identified vocabulary deficiency as one of the primary obstacles in EFL writing. Limited vocabulary restricts

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students' ability to express ideas clearly and affects the sophistication of their essays.

3) Difficulties in Generating and Developing Ideas

The findings revealed that many students struggled to generate ideas at the beginning of the writing process. Some students reported that they often stared at a blank page for several minutes because they did not know what to write.

Even when students were able to generate initial ideas, they frequently encountered difficulties developing those ideas into complete paragraphs.

One participant explained:

"I know the topic, but I do not know how to make it longer."

Another student reported:

"My essay is usually short because I cannot think of supporting ideas."

Document analysis showed that many essays contained underdeveloped paragraphs with insufficient explanations, examples, or supporting details.

These findings are in line with Hairul (2023), who found that idea generation and content development were among the most common challenges in academic essay writing. The results indicate that students need greater support in brainstorming, outlining, and elaborating ideas before drafting essays.

4) Problems in Essay Organization

Many students experienced difficulties organizing their essays into a logical structure. Several essays lacked clear introductions, topic sentences, supporting paragraphs, and conclusions.

The analysis showed that students often presented ideas randomly without following the conventional structure of an academic essay.

One participant stated:

"I know the essay has introduction, body, and conclusion, but sometimes I do not know what should be written in each part."

Observation data revealed that students rarely prepared outlines before writing. Instead, they tended to write immediately after receiving the topic.

These findings support the work of Widya and Teopilus (2023), who found that organization is one of the most problematic components of essay writing. Poor organization makes essays difficult to follow and reduces overall writing quality.

5) Difficulties in Maintaining Coherence and Cohesion

The findings also indicated that students experienced difficulties connecting ideas logically across sentences and paragraphs.

Many essays lacked transition signals such as *"however," "therefore," "moreover," and "for example."* Consequently, ideas appeared disconnected and fragmented.

One participant commented:

"I do not know how to connect one paragraph with another."

Another student admitted:

"Sometimes my essay jumps from one idea to another."

Essay analysis confirmed that many students struggled to maintain logical progression throughout their writing.

These findings are consistent with previous studies conducted by Purba and Teopilus (2022), which highlighted coherence and cohesion as essential but challenging aspects of academic writing. Effective essay writing requires students to establish clear relationships between ideas and maintain logical flow.

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6) Affective Factors Affecting Writing Performance

Beyond linguistic and cognitive difficulties, affective factors significantly influenced students' writing performance.

Many participants reported feeling anxious when writing essays in English. They were afraid of making grammatical mistakes, receiving negative feedback, or obtaining low grades.

One participant stated:

"I feel nervous every time I have to write an essay."

Another explained:

"I am afraid my lecturer will find too many mistakes in my writing."

Classroom observations showed that some students frequently erased sentences, hesitated before writing, and appeared reluctant to share their work with peers.

These findings support the study published in Acta Psychologica (2026), which identified writing anxiety and low self-confidence as significant predictors of academic writing difficulties among EFL learners. Psychological barriers may reduce students' willingness to take risks and express ideas freely.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that students' difficulties in writing English essays are multidimensional and interconnected. Grammar and vocabulary problems represent linguistic barriers that directly affect students' ability to communicate ideas effectively. At the same time, difficulties in generating ideas, organizing content, and maintaining coherence reflect cognitive challenges associated with academic writing.

Furthermore, affective factors such as anxiety and lack of confidence intensify these difficulties. Students who doubt their language abilities may avoid writing activities or become overly concerned about making mistakes. Consequently, their writing development may be hindered.

The results support previous research indicating that successful essay writing requires the integration of linguistic competence, cognitive skills, and positive psychological conditions. Therefore, writing instruction should address not only grammar and vocabulary but also idea development, essay organization, and students' emotional well-being.

To help students overcome these difficulties, teachers should provide explicit instruction on essay structure, encourage brainstorming and outlining activities, offer constructive feedback, and create a supportive classroom environment that promotes confidence in writing. Additionally, the responsible use of digital tools and AI-assisted writing platforms may help students improve vocabulary, grammar, and idea generation while maintaining critical thinking and academic integrity.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored students' difficulties in writing English essays among EFL learners. The findings revealed that students encountered a variety of challenges during the essay-writing process, which can be categorized into linguistic, cognitive, and affective difficulties. Linguistically, students struggled with grammar and vocabulary, making it difficult for them to express ideas accurately and effectively. Frequent grammatical errors, limited vocabulary knowledge, and inappropriate word choices negatively affected the quality of their essays.

From a cognitive perspective, students experienced difficulties in generating ideas, developing supporting details, organizing essay structures, and maintaining coherence and cohesion throughout their writing. Many participants were able to identify essay topics but found it challenging to elaborate their ideas into well-developed paragraphs and logically connected arguments. These difficulties often resulted in essays that lacked clarity, organization, and depth of discussion.

Furthermore, affective factors such as writing anxiety, fear of making mistakes,

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lack of confidence, and low motivation also contributed significantly to students' writing difficulties. These psychological barriers influenced students' willingness to engage in writing activities and limited their ability to express ideas freely. The findings suggest that writing difficulties are not solely caused by insufficient language proficiency but also by cognitive and emotional factors that interact throughout the writing process.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that writing English essays is a complex task requiring the integration of linguistic competence, critical thinking skills, organizational abilities, and positive psychological conditions. Therefore, English writing instruction should not focus exclusively on grammar and vocabulary but should also provide opportunities for students to develop ideas, practice essay organization, improve coherence and cohesion, and build confidence in writing.

The study also highlights the importance of creating supportive learning environments in which students receive constructive feedback, engage in collaborative writing activities, and utilize appropriate technological resources. Teachers are encouraged to implement process-based writing instruction that guides students through planning, drafting, revising, and editing stages. Such approaches may help students overcome their writing difficulties and improve their overall writing performance.

Although this study provides valuable insights into students' difficulties in writing English essays, it is limited to a specific educational context and a relatively small number of participants. Future research is recommended to involve larger participant groups, different educational levels, and diverse learning contexts. Further studies may also investigate the impact of digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence (AI)-assisted writing tools on students' essay-writing development and writing challenges in contemporary EFL classrooms.

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