



Silent Struggles after Sundown: Investigating the Academic Literacy Challenges of Night Class Students in English Language Education

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ABSTRACT

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Article history:

Received: 23-10-2025

Revised: 02-11-2025

Accepted: 17-12-2025

Published: 23-01-2026

*Applied Linguistics and
English Education*, Vol. 03
Issue 02, 2026, pg. 39-49.

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E-ISSN 2987-7741

This study explores the academic literacy challenges faced by night class students in English Language Education who also work full-time. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, five students from Universitas PGRI Adi Buana Surabaya shared their experiences navigating English academic reading and writing under the pressure of limited time, cognitive fatigue, and minimal institutional support. The findings reveal that these learners often struggle to comprehend complex texts and structure academic writing, not due to a lack of motivation, but because of structural and emotional constraints. Many rely on coping strategies such as digital tools or peer support, though these are often insufficient for deep learning. The study highlights that current academic systems are not fully responsive to the realities of non-traditional learners. It recommends inclusive literacy support such as flexible feedback mechanisms, evening-based writing clinics, and integrated instruction. This research calls for a shift toward more equitable and empathetic approaches in English language education.

Keywords: *Academic Literacy, Academic Reading, Academic Writing, Cognitive Fatigue*

INTRODUCTION

In the context of higher education, academic literacy has become a fundamental pillar for student success, especially for those enrolled in English Language Education programs. Academic literacy is no longer understood merely as the ability to read and write; instead, it encompasses a broad and complex set of competencies, including

critical thinking, the ability to analyze texts, the understanding of argumentative structures, and familiarity with specific academic genres. For students in English language programs, the demands of academic literacy are further intensified. These learners are expected to master the conventions of scholarly communication in a language that is not their native tongue, thus adding a substantial layer of difficulty to the learning process (Hyland & Jiang, 2019; Tardy, 2009).

In today's competitive academic landscape, where academic performance is increasingly emphasized, students are required to demonstrate competence in various academic practices. These include writing argumentative essays, interpreting scholarly articles, producing structured research reports, and actively participating in academic discourse. Academic literacy has, therefore, become a core skill, one that significantly shapes students' learning outcomes, academic identity, and readiness for future professional or academic paths. Ideally, the development of such literacy should begin early in the academic journey and be supported by a learning environment that is adaptive, inclusive, and attuned to students' diverse circumstances.

However, this ideal scenario is often out of reach for students who take night classes. Unlike their day-class counterparts, night students typically juggle multiple responsibilities, such as full-time employment, family care, and other social obligations. As a result, they often attend classes after long hours of work, facing lectures and assignments while physically and mentally exhausted. This condition restricts their available time for studying, reduces their focus, and limits their access to academic resources. The challenges they face in developing academic literacy, particularly in English, are not only practical but also deeply structural. Reading scholarly texts in English and producing writing that aligns with academic conventions becomes even more difficult under these circumstances (Mukhammedova & Muhammedali, 2025).

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, the challenges of academic literacy development become even more complex. Students are not only expected to understand the content of academic texts, but also to navigate the structural and syntactic patterns of a foreign language, which often differ significantly from the grammatical conventions of their native language. This linguistic distance can pose cognitive difficulties, particularly in reading comprehension, where unfamiliar sentence structures, academic vocabulary, and discourse conventions may hinder meaning-making processes (Alduweebi & Al-rubshi, 2024). Over time, these challenges affect not just academic performance but also students' learning motivation, self-efficacy, and their overall English language development (Clarke, 2024).

The learning conditions faced by night students also expose a broader structural inequality within the higher education system. Many academic institutions do not yet provide policies or learning structures that are responsive to the specific needs of night students. For example, learning materials, academic consultations, and literacy-supporting programs are still largely conducted during the day, making them inaccessible to those who study at night. As a result, night students often become an underserved population within their own academic communities. Even simple academic interactions, such as peer group discussions or collaborative projects, often become difficult to coordinate due to scheduling conflicts with daytime students.

This limited access to institutional support forces night students to rely on independent learning strategies, many of which are not sufficient to meet the rigorous demands of academic literacy. These students often turn to online resources, informal learning communities, or draw from their professional experiences to support their academic work. However, such strategies may not adequately address the complexities of English academic literacy, which demands precision in language use, familiarity with academic conventions, and an understanding of structured reasoning.

In light of these conditions, this study, *Silent Struggles After Sundown: Investigating the Academic Literacy Challenges of Night Class Students in English Language Education*, is both timely and necessary. The study seeks to explore the lived experiences of night students as they navigate the challenges of academic literacy. More specifically, it aims to understand what barriers they face, the underlying causes of those barriers, and how such obstacles affect their motivation, English language competence, and academic performance. This research also seeks to provide space for students' voices, voices that are often overlooked in dominant academic narratives. Their stories reveal how they persist and adapt in academic systems that are not always built with their realities in mind.

Previous studies have emphasized the critical role of academic literacy in higher education (Hyland & Jiang, 2019; Wingate, 2015), and several researchers have also explored how genre awareness and language proficiency contribute to students' academic success (Tardy, 2009). However, most of this research has focused on full-time or international students in conventional learning environments. For instance, Chell et al. (2021) investigated academic literacy challenges in countries such as the UAE and Finland. However, these studies did not address the specific experiences of night students, particularly in developing contexts like Indonesia.

Studies by Im Bok (2021) and Mukhammedova & Muhammedali (2025) have highlighted the learning fatigue and time limitations experienced by adult learners or evening students. However, little has been done to explore the relationship between these constraints and the development of academic literacy in English. This represents a significant research gap that the present study aims to fill. Internal challenges, such as exhaustion, low confidence, and psychological pressure, interact with external factors like rigid work schedules, transportation issues, and lack of support from family or peers. Together, these create a compounded burden. Many night students report feelings of academic isolation and disconnection from their university community, making it even harder to access the support they need to succeed.

What sets this study apart is its intention not only to document these challenges but also to deeply explore the subjective realities of the students experiencing them. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, this research will delve into how students interpret their challenges, what self-devised strategies they implement, and how they continue to pursue academic goals despite limited institutional accommodation (Chell et al., 2021).

The significance of this research lies in its relevance to the growing population of non-traditional students in Indonesian higher education. As education becomes more flexible and diverse, institutions can no longer operate under the assumption that all students share similar life circumstances. Night students are not outliers; they are an integral part of the academic landscape. Without proper attention to their needs, higher education risks perpetuating deeper educational inequities (Manjet Kaur

Mehar, 2019).

Furthermore, the insights gathered from this research can inform the design of more inclusive academic support programs, such as online academic writing services, flexible consultation hours, evening literacy workshops, or peer mentoring systems specifically tailored for non-traditional learners. By grounding these recommendations in the authentic experiences of students, this study hopes to produce actionable and contextually relevant solutions rather than abstract theoretical suggestions.

In summary, this research seeks to address an important yet often neglected issue in English language education. Night class students continue to fight “silent struggles” in their academic lives, struggles that are invisible to many but deeply impactful. Their challenges in developing academic literacy not only shape their academic performance but also influence their identity, motivation, and prospects as future educators. Through this study, their stories will be heard and translated into practical insights that advocate for a more inclusive and empathetic academic system.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using a narrative inquiry method, designed to explore the personal experiences of evening university students in overcoming academic literacy challenges in English. The choice of narrative methodology is grounded in its ability to capture the lived realities of individuals and how they make sense of their struggles and identities through storytelling (Wei, 2023). In contrast to other qualitative strategies that focus primarily on thematic saturation or descriptive categorization, narrative inquiry provides a deeper lens through which the formation of meaning, identity, and agency can be examined over time (Loo & Sairattanain, 2022). In this research context, it allows for a rich understanding of how evening students interpret their difficulties in reading and writing academic texts in English, and how they construct strategies and narratives around their dual roles as students and working professionals.

The research was conducted at Universitas PGRI Adi Buana Surabaya, specifically targeting students enrolled in the English Education Department who attend evening classes. The rationale behind choosing this setting stems from its relevance as an educational institution that accommodates working students, an increasingly common demographic in higher education. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability technique often used in qualitative studies where specific characteristics are essential for the depth of analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In this case, the inclusion criteria were: (1) active enrollment in the English Education program, (2) consistent attendance in evening courses, and (3) possession of a stable job outside academic hours. These criteria were established to ensure that participants had substantial, lived experiences in negotiating academic literacy under the dual demands of study and employment. The study targeted 5 participants considered to meet the research needs.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews guided by a narrative approach. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing flexibility while still addressing the core themes of academic literacy, study time limitations, fatigue, and coping strategies. This design aimed to encourage participants to share their life

stories in ways that revealed both the emotional and practical dimensions of their struggles. The questions invited them to reflect on experiences such as understanding complex academic English texts, writing papers under time constraints, attending lectures while physically and mentally exhausted, and juggling professional responsibilities alongside academic deadlines. The interviews were conducted in a conversational tone to foster a sense of comfort and openness, thereby ensuring authenticity in participants' responses. When available, supplementary documents such as written assignments, study notes, or personal journals were also collected to triangulate the data and provide additional layers of insight (Norman & Eslami, 2024).

Narrative data were analyzed using a structured narrative analysis framework, which prioritized the sequence and structure of events as told by the participants. This approach goes beyond thematic coding by examining how individuals construct their stories, locate meaning in specific events, and interpret turning points within their educational journeys. The stages of analysis included: (1) carefully listening to and transcribing the narratives, (2) identifying critical incidents or pivotal moments that shaped their academic experiences, (3) reorganizing their stories thematically to uncover shared patterns, and (4) comparing the narrative structures and emerging themes across participants (Loo & Sairattanain, 2022). While similarities and common threads were explored, attention was also given to the uniqueness of each participant's experience, in keeping with the ethos of narrative inquiry, which values individuality and context-specific meaning-making.

To ensure research trustworthiness and uphold ethical standards, several procedures were implemented. First, member checking was conducted, whereby participants were invited to review the researchers' interpretations of their stories to confirm accuracy and authenticity. This step not only reinforces the credibility of the findings but also empowers participants as co-constructors of knowledge. In addition, all participants signed informed consent forms after receiving detailed explanations of the study's objectives, methodology, and confidentiality protocols. Ethical research practice was emphasized throughout, particularly because the subject matter involved personal struggles, emotional experiences, and potential vulnerabilities (Norman & Eslami, 2024; Wei, 2023).

Overall, this methodological design aims to generate a rich, reflective, and authentic portrait of the lived experiences of evening students as they navigate the complex intersections between academic literacy and working life. Narrative inquiry was chosen not merely as a method of data collection, but as a philosophical stance that respects the agency of participants and positions their voices as central to the production of knowledge. As such, the study seeks to move beyond surface-level reporting to reveal the deeper emotional, cognitive, and social dynamics that shape how academic literacy is experienced in real-life contexts. Here are the interview questions:

1. Can you tell me the story of how you decided to enroll in a night class while working during the day? [This question sets the narrative tone and builds context around their dual roles]
2. What does a typical weekday look like for you as both a working individual and a university student? [Aims to reveal time management, energy levels, and competing responsibilities]

3. Can you describe your experiences when engaging with academic reading materials in English after your work hours? [Focuses on comprehension challenges and reading fatigue]
4. Have you ever struggled with writing academic texts in English because of your schedule or condition at night? Can you share an example? [Explores barriers to academic writing related to time, focus, and language]
5. In your view, how has being a night class student affected your ability to develop academic literacy in English? [Directly links learning mode with academic literacy development]
6. How do you feel about your ability to express ideas academically in English, either in writing or class discussions? [Investigates self-perception and language confidence]
7. Can you recall a moment when you felt motivated or discouraged while doing academic tasks at night? What happened? [Captures emotional and motivational dynamics tied to literacy tasks]
8. What kind of strategies do you use to cope with reading or writing assignments in English, especially when you're tired? [Uncovers personal coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies]
9. Have you ever felt that the university or your lecturers supported (or did not support) your literacy development as a night student? How so? [Looks into institutional or instructional responsiveness]
10. What kind of changes or support do you think would help you improve your academic literacy skills while managing work and study? [Invites reflection and recommendations based on lived experience]

RESULTS

1. Time Constraints & Cognitive Fatigue

Participants in this study commonly described arriving in class already physically exhausted, with diminished capacity to focus or process new academic materials. These time-related constraints often led to last-minute reading, rushed writing, or complete avoidance of certain academic tasks. Several students expressed that they could not fully engage with readings or writing tasks until late at night, when the body and mind were no longer functioning at their best.

More than just a matter of time, the mental load carried by night students created a cumulative effect that hampers cognitive clarity. This cyclical burden deepens over the semester, leading to academic burnout. Even when students were motivated, physical exhaustion often prevented them from performing at their full potential. Such exhaustion contributed to delays in assignment submission and lower academic confidence. The tension between professional obligations and academic demands creates a space where academic literacy is often deprioritized, even though students recognize its importance.

2. Academic Reading & Writing Difficulties

Participants described specific challenges in comprehending dense academic papers and drafting well-structured English texts. In this study, students highlighted a recurring difficulty in understanding theoretical and abstract content, particularly when written in academic English with complex grammar and discipline-specific vocabulary. The lack of time to read materials thoroughly exacerbated these issues, often resulting in surface-level understanding.

In writing, students reported difficulties organizing their ideas according to academic conventions. This included challenges in developing clear arguments, citing properly, and maintaining coherence across paragraphs. Most of them relied on templates or previously submitted examples, indicating a lack of formal training in writing processes. The absence of targeted academic writing instruction tailored for working students often left them feeling unsupported. Moreover, night students had fewer opportunities to consult with lecturers during office hours, meaning they missed valuable feedback that could guide their literacy development. These conditions potentially hinder their graduation or further academic pursuits.

3. Motivation & Emotional States

In this study, students reported that their desire to pursue higher education was rooted in self-betterment and future career advancement. However, many shared emotional accounts of discouragement, especially when they could not complete academic tasks on time or when they received low grades due to rushed assignments. Many were unaware of academic resources offered by their universities, or found them inaccessible due to their working schedules. The learning environment for night students was also characterized by lower levels of peer interaction and limited engagement opportunities. Students emphasized that courses were often rushed, and lecturers sometimes skipped deeper engagement due to time constraints. There was a clear desire for evening-based academic writing clinics, online office hours, and asynchronous resources tailored to night learners. These suggestions reflect a growing need for universities to adapt to diverse learner profiles.

4. Coping Strategies & Self-Regulation

In response to fatigue, students reported using self-directed strategies such as scheduling study sessions early, leveraging workplace flexibility, or accessing online tutorials. Participants often developed independent routines that included studying during lunch breaks or listening to academic content during commutes. Some created WhatsApp groups with classmates to share notes and motivate one another, especially before assignment deadlines. Despite limited time and institutional support, students demonstrated resourcefulness in managing their academic load. A few adopted minimalist study strategies, focusing only on key sections of readings or using AI-based tools to summarize texts. Others relied on peer proofreading or recycled older materials to meet requirements. However, many expressed concerns that these strategies, while useful for survival, did not always contribute to real learning. The over-reliance on shortcuts revealed a tension between passing and

mastering.

5. Institutional Support & Learning Environment

Many students felt underserved by institutional structures. In this research, students reported a lack of nighttime academic consultations, insufficient feedback from lecturers, and minimal integration of writing support within content subjects. Many were unaware of academic resources offered by their universities, or found them inaccessible due to their working schedules. The learning environment for night students was also characterized by lower levels of peer interaction and limited engagement opportunities. Students emphasized that courses were often rushed, and lecturers sometimes skipped deeper engagement due to time constraints. There was a clear desire for evening-based academic writing clinics, online office hours, and asynchronous resources tailored to night learners. These suggestions reflect a growing need for universities to adapt to diverse learner profiles.

DISCUSSION

The findings regarding time constraints and cognitive fatigue align with Mukhammedova (2025), who found that working students' conditions severely hinder deep engagement with academic texts. Bok (2021) similarly observed that fatigue among adult learners directly compromises literacy efforts (inlibrary.uz). The cumulative mental load described by participants reflects how sustained exhaustion over a semester can lead to academic burnout and declining academic confidence, even when motivation remains high. This supports the idea that motivation alone is insufficient when cognitive and physical resources are depleted.

The academic reading and writing difficulties reported by participants are consistent with Baker et al. (2021), who emphasized that adult learners often struggle more with reading due to insufficient instructional scaffolding. Fowler (2022) also noted that higher education frequently lacks structured academic writing support (utoronto.scholaris.ca). The reliance on templates and examples, as reported by participants, suggests procedural imitation rather than genuine skill development. Without consistent feedback and guided instruction, literacy development remains fragile and task-oriented rather than process-oriented, which may hinder long-term academic progression.

In terms of motivation and emotional states, the findings reflect Hussain et al. (2020), who argued that although adult learners are generally intrinsically motivated, environmental pressures can weaken this motivation. The emotional accounts of discouragement, isolation, and academic inferiority illustrate that affective factors are deeply intertwined with literacy development. Emotional fatigue not only reduces persistence but also shapes students' academic identities, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy compared to traditional full-time students. Conversely, moments of recognition and praise function as powerful motivational triggers, emphasizing the importance of affective support in academic success.

The coping strategies adopted by students demonstrate strong self-regulatory capacity, consistent with Alonso (2021), who highlighted digital platforms as essential

adaptive tools for adult learners. However, the participants' concern that survival strategies do not always promote meaningful learning reveals a structural gap between institutional expectations and students' lived realities. The use of AI summaries, selective reading, and recycled materials reflects pragmatic responses to overload, but also risks reinforcing surface learning rather than deep comprehension.

Finally, the lack of institutional support identified by participants reinforces Baker et al.'s (2021) argument that literacy interventions must be embedded within disciplinary instruction rather than offered as generic support services (files.eric.ed.gov). Beighton (2025) similarly emphasized the role of structured literacy processes and conceptual mentorship (tandfonline.com). The desire for night-based consultations, integrated writing support, and asynchronous resources indicates that institutional inflexibility disproportionately affects working students. As universities increasingly serve non-traditional learners, responsiveness to scheduling, feedback mechanisms, and pedagogical design becomes central to educational equity rather than optional accommodation.

In summary, the findings reveal a complex interplay between work commitments, emotional well-being, institutional structures, and academic literacy development. Time constraints and fatigue impair not only cognitive performance but also emotional engagement and learning confidence. While students demonstrate resilience through self-regulation and adaptive strategies, these are not sufficient substitutes for structured, context-sensitive academic support. Therefore, improving academic literacy among night-class students requires systemic pedagogical adjustments that acknowledge their socio-economic realities and promote equitable learning opportunities in English language education.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the academic literacy challenges faced by night class students in English Language Education, particularly those who balance their academic pursuits with full-time employment. Using in-depth, narrative-driven interviews, the research illuminated how time limitations, cognitive fatigue, and a lack of institutional support compound the difficulties of academic reading and writing in English. These learners do not struggle in isolation; they are embedded in systems that are often unresponsive to their needs, with few accommodations for their working schedules and emotional burdens.

The findings highlight that literacy barriers for night students are not simply a matter of inadequate language skills but are deeply intertwined with structural and emotional realities. Although many students exhibit strong intrinsic motivation and resilience, they face an uphill battle in environments that overlook their constraints. Limited opportunities for one-on-one guidance, feedback, and tailored literacy support lead many students to adopt surface strategies for academic survival, strategies that may help them pass, but not thrive. This research thus underscores the urgent need for higher education systems to become more inclusive, flexible, and responsive to diverse learner profiles.

In light of these findings, several recommendations can be made. First, higher education institutions should develop flexible and accessible academic literacy

support systems that are sensitive to the working schedules of night students. This may include asynchronous writing clinics, online feedback mechanisms, or extended access to academic advisors. Universities must also provide clearer information about available support services and ensure they are practical for part-time learners. Second, lecturers should embed academic literacy instruction into content-based teaching, using scaffolded models, contextualized examples, and inclusive classroom practices. Providing extended feedback, flexible consultation hours, and validation of students' lived experiences will not only support academic growth but also strengthen motivation and engagement. Lastly, future researchers are encouraged to further investigate the long-term impacts of academic literacy challenges on night students' academic performance, retention, and post-graduation outcomes. Action research or participatory approaches that empower students to co-create solutions would offer more sustainable and grounded interventions. Comparative studies between day and night students may also shed light on systemic inequities within English language education programs.

In conclusion, the silent struggles faced by night students must no longer be seen as individual shortcomings but as indicators of institutional gaps. Supporting their academic literacy is not only a pedagogical task, it is a commitment to educational equity. If universities wish to serve all learners equally, they must listen to these quiet narratives after sundown and respond with both compassion and concrete **action**.

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