



Investigating the Challenges Faced by English Education Students in Writing Undergraduate Theses

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the difficulties experienced by English Language Education students at Universitas Muhadi Setiabudi Brebes in writing their undergraduate theses and identifies the most dominant challenges encountered during the process. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews involving students who were in the process of or had completed their thesis writing. The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns of difficulties. The findings reveal that students face multidimensional challenges, including linguistic difficulties (grammar, vocabulary, and paraphrasing), academic writing and research-related difficulties (literature review development, methodology selection, organization of findings, and citation practices), psychological and affective factors (lack of confidence, anxiety, and fear of making mistakes), as well as supporting factors such as limited research experience and poor time management. Among these, academic writing and research-related difficulties, particularly in literature review development and methodology selection, emerge as the most dominant challenges. The study also shows that psychological factors significantly intensify students' writing difficulties by reducing motivation and increasing dependence on supervisors, which in turn interacts with linguistic and academic limitations and creates a cyclical pattern of writing obstacles. Overall, the study concludes that undergraduate thesis writing is a complex, multidimensional process involving linguistic, cognitive, academic, and emotional components, requiring comprehensive support from lecturers and supervisors to help students successfully complete their theses.

Keywords: undergraduate thesis writing, writing difficulties, academic writing, English Education students, qualitative study

INTRODUCTION

Writing an undergraduate thesis is the final academic requirement that students must complete to obtain a bachelor's degree. Through the thesis-writing process, students are expected to demonstrate their ability to identify research problems, develop

theoretical frameworks, apply appropriate research methodologies, and communicate research findings systematically in the form of a scholarly work. Therefore, a thesis serves not only as a means of academic assessment but also as evidence of students' ability to think critically, conduct research, and engage in academic writing. For students of English Language Education, writing a thesis presents even greater challenges. In addition to understanding the research content, they are required to produce an academic text in English that adheres to academic writing conventions. Academic writing demands the use of formal, objective, well-structured, and logical language (Bailey, 2011). Furthermore, academic writing involves complex cognitive processes, including developing arguments, synthesizing information from various sources, and presenting ideas coherent (Forough Kasiri, 2016). These demands make thesis writing one of the most challenging academic tasks faced by university students.

Previous studies have revealed that students encounter various difficulties in academic writing. Al-Badi found that students struggled with language use, cohesion, coherence, citation, and referencing. Similarly, Asma Belkhir reported that limited writing practice, first-language interference, and weak idea development negatively affected students' writing quality. In addition, Pablo and Lasaten (2018) found that students frequently experienced difficulties in generating ideas, constructing effective paragraphs, and using appropriate grammar and vocabulary. These findings suggest that academic writing remains a significant challenge for many university students, including those majoring in English. Despite the growing body of research on students' academic writing difficulties, most previous studies have focused on academic essay writing or academic writing skills in general. Research specifically examining students' difficulties in writing undergraduate theses remains limited, particularly among English Language Education students in the Indonesian context. In fact, thesis writing is more complex than essay writing because it requires students to conduct research, manage academic sources, analyze data, and participate in a long-term academic supervision process.

Given these circumstances, further research is needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the difficulties experienced by students during the thesis-writing process. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on exploring not only linguistic difficulties but also the academic and research-related challenges encountered by students while writing their undergraduate theses. Therefore, this study aims to explore the difficulties experienced by English Language Education students in writing their undergraduate theses and to identify the most dominant challenges they face throughout the process.

METHODS

The design of this research is a qualitative research with a case study approach. This study focuses on exploring the difficulties experienced by English Education students in writing their undergraduate theses. According to Arikunto (1988), descriptive research aims to collect specific data factually and accurately. In addition Donald Ary

(2010) states that descriptive research is intended to describe characteristics of a group or to examine attitudes and opinions toward certain issues. This research design was considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of students' thesis-writing difficulties. The participants of this study were English Education students who were either in the process of writing or had completed their undergraduate theses in Universitas Muhadi Setiabudi. They were selected based on their relevance to the research focus, as they had direct experience in thesis writing.

The instruments used in this study were semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain detailed information about students' experiences and difficulties in writing their theses, including challenges in developing research backgrounds, reviewing literature, selecting methodologies, organizing findings, and applying citation styles. Document analysis was also used to support interview data by examining students' thesis drafts, particularly in relation to grammar, vocabulary, paraphrasing, and academic writing structure. To collect the data, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the selected participants. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. In addition, thesis documents were collected and analysed to identify recurring writing difficulties. The combination of interviews and document analysis was used to ensure data validity through triangulation. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The researcher identified, categorized, and interpreted patterns or themes emerging from the data. The analysis focused on students' difficulties in thesis writing, including linguistic issues such as grammar and vocabulary, as well as academic challenges such as literature review development, methodology selection, and citation practices. The analysis followed systematic steps of organizing data, coding, grouping themes, and interpreting findings to draw conclusions about the dominant difficulties experienced by students.

RESULTS

The findings of this study indicate that English Education students experience various difficulties in writing their undergraduate theses. These findings are classified into several main categories based on the results of thematic analysis from interviews and document analysis.

The first category is **linguistic difficulties in academic writing**. This category includes grammar errors, limited academic vocabulary, and paraphrasing problems. Students frequently experience difficulties in constructing grammatically correct sentences and expressing ideas using appropriate academic language. Grammar problems appear in sentence structure, tense usage, and subject-verb agreement. In addition, limited vocabulary leads to repetition of words and lack of lexical variety, while paraphrasing is identified as a major challenge because students tend to rely on direct copying from sources rather than rewording them in an academic form.

The second category is **academic writing and research-related difficulties**. This is identified as one of the most dominant findings in this study. It includes difficulties in

developing research backgrounds, conducting literature reviews, selecting appropriate research methodologies, organizing research findings, and applying citation and referencing styles. Among these aspects, literature review development is the most challenging stage because students struggle to synthesize and connect multiple sources into a coherent discussion. Furthermore, students also face confusion in selecting research methodologies, particularly in determining research design, instruments, and data analysis procedures. Citation and referencing are also problematic due to inconsistency in applying academic writing styles and lack of mastery of referencing rules.

The third category is **psychological and affective factors**. These factors include lack of confidence, anxiety, and fear of making mistakes in English writing. Students often feel unsure about their ability to produce academic writing and are afraid of negative evaluation from supervisors. This psychological condition leads to reduced writing productivity and hesitation in developing ideas. In some cases, students become overly dependent on supervisors rather than attempting to independently develop their thesis writing.

In addition, the study also identifies **supporting factors** that contribute to students' difficulties, namely limited research experience and time management issues. Students with limited exposure to research tend to struggle in understanding thesis structure and academic procedures. Meanwhile, poor time management causes delays in completing thesis writing stages and increases academic pressure.

Overall, the findings show that difficulties in writing undergraduate theses are multidimensional, involving linguistic, academic, and psychological aspects. Thesis writing is not only a matter of language proficiency but also requires research competence, emotional readiness, and effective time management skills.

When compared with previous studies such as Pablo and Lasaten (2018), which mainly focused on grammar and idea development issues in academic writing, this study extends the findings by showing that thesis writing involves broader challenges, particularly psychological factors and research-related difficulties.

Table 1. Results of the study

Category	Sub-categories	Description	Category
Linguistic Difficulties	Grammar, academic vocabulary, paraphrasing	Students face problems in language accuracy and academic expression	Linguistic Difficulties
Academic Writing & Research Difficulties	Research background, literature review, methodology, organization of findings, citation & referencing	Students struggle in structuring thesis and applying research writing conventions	Academic Writing & Research Difficulties
Psychological & Affective Factors	Lack of confidence, anxiety, fear of mistakes, dependence on supervisor	Emotional barriers affect students' writing performance and independence	Psychological & Affective Factors
Supporting Factors	Limited research experience, time management issues	External factors that hinder thesis completion process	Supporting Factors

Category	Sub-categories	Description	Category
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DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that undergraduate thesis writing difficulties experienced by English Education students Universitas Muhadi Setiabudi are highly multidimensional and interconnected. These difficulties do not occur in isolation but form a complex interaction between linguistic competence, academic literacy, psychological conditions, and students' behavioral patterns during the thesis writing process. This indicates that thesis writing is not merely a technical writing task, but a cognitive, emotional, and academic process that requires integrated skills (Hyland, 2019; Flower & Hayes, 1981).

Academic Literacy and Research Competence

One of the most dominant findings is students' difficulty in academic literacy, particularly in literature review development and methodology selection. Students reported that they struggle to identify research gaps, synthesize multiple sources, and connect theories into a coherent discussion.

One participant explained:

"The hardest part is literature review. I read many journals, but I don't know how to combine them into one discussion." (Student 5)

This statement reflects that students are not only facing difficulty in reading academic sources, but also in transforming knowledge into structured academic discourse. The problem is not simply understanding the content of journals, but in organizing and integrating multiple perspectives into a unified argument. According to Swales (1990), literature review writing requires "creating a research space" by connecting, comparing, and evaluating previous studies.

Another student added:

"I am confused about the research methodology in my thesis. I am not sure how to explain the research procedures clearly, especially when dealing with quantitative research such as using questionnaires, numbers, and statistical data analysis." (Student 2)

This indicates that students experience uncertainty in methodological reasoning, particularly in understanding how quantitative research is operationalized. The difficulty lies not only in writing the methodology section, but also in understanding the logic of research design, including data collection and statistical interpretation. This suggests that students' problem is rooted in limited research schema development, meaning they have not fully internalized how research is constructed as a systematic process. Thus, thesis writing difficulties in this dimension are not merely linguistic, but represent a lack of academic reasoning and research literacy.

Linguistic Limitations as a Supporting Barrier

Based on the interview findings, linguistic limitations were identified as a significant

supporting barrier in students' academic writing process, particularly in developing literature reviews and discussion sections. Several participants reported that although they were able to understand the content of academic sources, they struggled to express the ideas in appropriate academic English.

One participant stated:

"I actually understand the journal content, but when I try to rewrite it in academic English, I often get confused about the correct words and sentence structure. Sometimes I end up copying because I am afraid of making grammar mistakes." (Respondent 3)

Another participant also highlighted vocabulary as a major difficulty in paraphrasing:

"Paraphrasing is difficult mainly because of vocabulary limitations. I often cannot find suitable synonyms, so my sentences become very similar to the original text." (Respondent 5)

In addition, some students admitted that weak grammatical competence reduced their confidence in constructing academic sentences, which led them to avoid fully developing their own ideas in writing. These findings indicate that linguistic limitations particularly in grammar and vocabulary significantly hinder students' ability to perform effective paraphrasing and academic writing. This condition aligns with previous studies which found that EFL students commonly face challenges in lexical and grammatical control, affecting their ability to rephrase and synthesize academic ideas properly (Ali et al., 2023; Ovilia et al., 2022). Similarly, research by Do Na Chi and Nguyen (2017) and Azkar (2021) shows that limited vocabulary knowledge often leads students to rely on surface-level paraphrasing or direct copying from sources. This reinforces the notion that linguistic competence and academic literacy are closely interconnected in academic writing performance (Swales, 1990).

Psychological Factors as Amplifiers of Writing Difficulties

Psychological factors such as lack of confidence, anxiety, and fear of making mistakes significantly intensify students' writing difficulties. These affective barriers not only influence writing performance but also shape students' attitudes toward thesis completion.

One participant stated:

"I feel scared every time I submit my draft because I think my supervisor will reject it again." (Student 1)

This reflects that supervision feedback is perceived as a threat rather than a learning process. Following Brown (2000), anxiety can reduce cognitive performance and limit language production. In this study, anxiety leads to avoidance behavior, where students delay writing or become overly dependent on supervisors instead of developing independent writing skills. Therefore, psychological factors function as **amplifiers**, strengthening the negative impact of both linguistic and academic difficulties.

Time Management and Procrastination Behaviour

Students also experience significant difficulties in managing time during thesis writing. Many students tend to stop writing after receiving revisions or feedback from supervisors.

"I usually stop writing after revision because I feel tired and afraid to continue." (Student 4).

This indicates that procrastination is not merely caused by poor planning but is closely related to emotional resistance and fear of failure. Mack (2017). states that poor time management leads to delayed completion, but the findings of this study suggest a deeper explanation: procrastination serves as a psychological coping mechanism to avoid academic stress and uncertainty. Thus, time management issues are not isolated behavioural problems, but are closely linked to students' emotional condition.

Topic Selection and Academic Engagement

Another important finding is students' difficulty in selecting research topics, which is strongly influenced by limited academic reading habits.

"I just chose my topic because my friend suggested it, I didn't read many journals before." (Student 6)

This shows that topic selection is often based on external influence rather than academic exploration. Jamison (2017) emphasizes the importance of reading in understanding research issues, but this study further suggests that limited reading also reduces students' ability to develop academic curiosity and independence. As a result, students enter the thesis writing process without sufficient conceptual preparation.

Motivation and Attitude as Cross-Cutting Factors

Motivation and attitude emerge as cross-cutting factors that influence all stages of thesis writing. Low motivation reduces persistence, while negative attitudes toward writing increase avoidance behaviour and delay completion.

"Sometimes I lose motivation because the thesis feels too difficult and takes a long time." (Student 3)

This suggests that motivation is not static but fluctuates based on students' experiences during the thesis process. Repeated difficulties reduce motivation, which in turn decreases effort, creating a cyclical pattern of disengagement. Brown (2000) and Harmer (1998) highlight motivation as a key factor in language learning success. However, in this study, motivation is also shaped by failure experiences, making it both a cause and a consequence of writing difficulties.

Integrated Analysis of Findings

Overall, the findings indicate that thesis writing difficulties form a **systemic and cyclical pattern**, where each factor reinforces the others: Limited academic literacy leads to confusion in literature review and methodology, Linguistic limitations restrict expression of academic understanding, Psychological barriers reduce confidence and writing persistence, Time management issues delay progress and increase pressure, Low motivation reduces engagement and academic effort. These interconnected factors create a continuous cycle of difficulty that prevents students from completing their thesis effectively. Therefore, thesis writing should be understood as a **multi-layered academic process involving cognitive, linguistic, and emotional dimensions simultaneously**.

Comparison with Previous Studies

Compared to Pablo and Lasaten (2018), which primarily focus on grammar and paragraph development issues in academic writing, this study provides a broader perspective. It demonstrates that undergraduate thesis writing difficulties are not limited to linguistic competence, but also include academic literacy gaps, psychological barriers, and behavioural challenges. This expands the understanding of thesis writing as a more complex academic process requiring integrated support systems.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the difficulties experienced by English Education students Universitas Muhadi Setiabudi Brebes in writing their undergraduate theses and to identify the most dominant challenges they face. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that students encounter multidimensional difficulties involving linguistic, academic, psychological, and behavioral factors. Therefore, thesis writing is confirmed as a highly complex academic task that requires not only English language proficiency but also research competence, emotional readiness, and effective learning strategies.

The findings clearly answer the research questions by showing that students experience significant difficulties in several areas, including English proficiency (grammar, vocabulary, and paraphrasing), academic writing processes (literature review, methodology, citation, and organization of ideas), psychological factors (lack of confidence, anxiety, and fear of making mistakes), as well as time management, motivation, attitude, and topic selection. Among these, academic writing and research-related difficulties, particularly literature review development and methodology selection, emerge as the most dominant challenges. This indicates that students' main problem is not only linguistic deficiency but also limited academic literacy and research understanding.

The study also confirms that psychological factors play a crucial role in shaping students' writing performance. Consistent with Brown (2000), anxiety and lack of confidence significantly reduce students' ability to perform academic writing tasks effectively. These affective barriers interact with linguistic and academic difficulties, creating a cycle that hinders students' progress in completing their theses.

In comparison with previous studies such as Pablo and Lasaten (2018), which primarily focus on grammar and idea development issues in academic writing, this study provides a broader perspective by demonstrating that undergraduate thesis writing difficulties are more complex. They involve not only language-related issues but also research competence gaps and psychological challenges. This expands the understanding of academic writing difficulties in higher education, particularly in the Indonesian EFL context.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding of academic writing as a multidimensional process that integrates linguistic competence, academic literacy, and affective factors. Practically, the findings suggest that lecturers and thesis supervisors should provide more comprehensive guidance, not only in language correction but also in research methodology, academic writing structure, and psychological support to reduce students' anxiety and increase confidence. However, this study has several limitations. First, the number of participants is limited to English Education students at one institution, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Second, the data were collected through interviews and document analysis, which rely on participants' subjective experiences. Third, this study does not measure the level of difficulty quantitatively, so the findings are descriptive in nature. For future research, it is recommended that studies involve a larger and more diverse sample across different universities to obtain broader generalization. Future studies may also combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to measure the intensity of each difficulty more precisely. In addition, further research could focus on developing intervention strategies or instructional models to help students overcome thesis writing difficulties.

In conclusion, thesis writing is not merely a language task but a complex academic process influenced by multiple interconnected factors. Understanding these difficulties is essential for improving academic writing instruction and supporting students in successfully completing their undergraduate theses.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research. This means that the study was conducted independently and objectively without any personal, financial, institutional, or commercial relationships that could be considered to influence or bias the research process, findings, interpretation, or conclusions. All stages of the research, including data collection, analysis, and reporting, were carried out solely based on academic principles and scientific integrity. Therefore, the results presented in this study are expected to be free from any external pressure or interest that might affect the credibility and neutrality of the research.

AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

The author, Hilda Elzahra, was responsible for the conceptualization and design of the study, development of the methodology, data collection, and formal analysis. The author also prepared the original draft of the manuscript and was involved in reviewing, editing, and revising the final version of the paper. In addition, supervisory guidance was acknowledged as supporting input throughout the research process.

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