Navigating Rhetorical Challenges: Indonesian EFL Master's Students Publishing in Sinta 2–Indexed Journals

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Abstract

Publishing research articles in English poses unique rhetorical challenges for non-native English-speaking scholars, yet little is known about how Indonesian EFL Master's students navigate these demands when converting theses into articles for nationally accredited journals. This qualitative exploratory–interpretive study examines four Indonesian EFL Master's students who successfully published thesis-derived work in Sinta 2–indexed journals, focusing on their rhetorical struggles, cultural and institutional contexts, identity shifts, and adaptive strategies. Data were collected via 65–85 minute semi-structured interviews conducted in Indonesian, and analyzed through thematic analysis. Findings show the introduction section is the primary bottleneck—especially crafting explicit research gaps and contribution claims—while grammar was perceived as far more manageable than argument structure, critical synthesis, and appropriate hedging. Tensions between Indonesian norms of indirectness and modesty and Anglo-American academic conventions of explicit positioning further complicated writing. The publication process also shifted participants' identities from "deficient learners" to legitimate knowledge producers. Key supports included supervisory mentoring, peer discussion, and critical use of writing tools. Implications include calls for genre-based rhetorical instruction, structured thesis-to-article training, and institutionalized writing communities in Indonesian EFL graduate programs.

Keywords: *academic identity; academic writing for publication; genre-based instruction; rhetorical challenges; writing for publication support*

INTRODUCTION

Publishing research articles in English is widely recognized as a complex task for non-native English-speaking (NNES) scholars, who must align their writing with global norms of disciplinary argumentation, genre organization, and evaluative stance in high-stakes venues (Esfandiari et al., 2022; Othman & Lo, 2023; Wei et al., 2024). Empirical studies show that NNES authors across EFL contexts struggle not only with grammar but, more fundamentally, with establishing research significance, articulating precise gaps, and positioning their contributions within dense bodies of literature (Arianto & Basthomi, 2021; Bian & Wang, 2016; Chang, 2016; Farnia & Barati, 2017). These rhetorical and linguistic demands are amplified when publication is tightly linked to academic recognition, career advancement, and access to international knowledge networks (Birhan, 2018; Hyland, 2016; Stockemer & Wigginton, 2019).

In Indonesia, these global pressures intersect with a national policy environment that increasingly institutionalizes publication as a graduation and promotion requirement for postgraduate students. Postgraduate regulations and institutional guidelines encourage or mandate publication in nationally accredited, Sinta-indexed journals as evidence of research quality and scholarly productivity. Sinta-2 journals, in particular, are perceived as

key sites of national visibility, carrying significant weight in academic evaluation while still operating within a predominantly Indonesian readership (Negretti & McGrath, 2020). Within this ecology, EFL Master's students are expected to convert their theses into publishable articles that comply with journal templates, methodological reporting norms, and genre-specific expectations for introductions, reviews, and discussions.

Research on research article (RA) writing has extensively documented the rhetorical challenges that NNES writers face when constructing introductions, reviews, and argument structures. Studies drawing on Swales' Create A Research Space (CARS) model show that novice authors often struggle to move from establishing a broad territory (Move 1) to carving out a clear niche (Move 2) and claiming an explicit contribution (Move 3), resulting in under-realized gap statements and weakly articulated contributions (Arianto & Basthomi, 2021; Swales, 2004). NNES writers frequently rely on narrative background or descriptive summaries instead of critical synthesis, which weakens the perceived novelty and persuasiveness of their work (Dudău et al., 2024; Farnia & Barati, 2017). These challenges extend beyond introductions to paragraph-level organization and literature reviews, where writers may list studies one by one rather than constructing a coherent argumentative thread that positions their research in relation to prior work (Bian & Wang, 2016; Chang, 2016; Singh, 2019).

At the same time, a substantial body of research has examined publication writing as a site of identity work and anxiety management for emerging NNES scholars. These studies have established that EFL graduate writers often position themselves as linguistically and academically deficient, which can intensify fear of negative evaluation, reduce willingness to take rhetorical risks, and encourage reliance on "safe" summarizing rather than assertive argumentation (Alharbi, 2019; Gu & Xu, 2021; Othman & Lo, 2023). They have also shown that peer review, rejection, and revision are deeply intertwined with authors' sense of legitimacy and agency: harsh or opaque feedback may be read as confirmation of incompetence, whereas constructive mentoring and dialogic feedback can transform anxiety into motivation and promote more agentive engagement with revision(Carter et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2023; Negretti & McGrath, 2020)

In Indonesian contexts, researchers have begun to recognize that cultural norms of modesty, indirectness, and harmony may discourage overt critique and self-promotion, potentially making the expectation to claim contribution within Anglo-American genre conventions especially tension-filled (Esfandiari et al., 2022; Wei et al., 2024). What this work has not yet fully explained, however, is how Indonesian EFL Master's students who have already succeeded in Sinta-2 publication negotiate these identity and anxiety dynamics during thesis-to-article conversion. In particular, it remains unclear how they reconcile local modesty norms with explicit gap and contribution claims, how feedback and mentoring reshape their self-positioning, and how publication success may move them from deficit-oriented to contribution-oriented scholarly selves. This study therefore treats identity not as a background variable but as a central dimension of rhetorical decision-making in the Sinta-2 publication ecology.

Previous research on NNES publishing and EFL academic writing can be grouped into three main strands. First, genre- and text-oriented studies have documented how novice NNES writers struggle with RA introductions, especially in moving from establishing a broad territory to carving out a clear niche and claiming an explicit contribution, often producing under-realized gap statements, narrative background, and descriptive summaries instead of critical synthesis(Arianto & Basthomi, 2021; Bian & Wang, 2016; Chang, 2016; Farnia & Barati, 2017; Singh, 2019; Swales, 2004). Second, identity-oriented studies have shown that EFL graduate writers' perceptions of deficiency, fear of negative evaluation, and experiences of peer review and revision shape their willingness to write assertively and their sense of scholarly legitimacy(Alharbi, 2019; Carter et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2023; Gu & Xu, 2021; Negretti & McGrath, 2020; Othman & Lo, 2023). Third, policy-oriented work

has highlighted how publication requirements tied to graduation, promotion, and academic recognition intensify pressure on NNES scholars (Birhan, 2018; Hyland, 2016; Stockemer & Wigginton, 2019).

Yet these strands have rarely been brought together to examine Indonesian EFL Master's students who successfully convert their theses into articles for Sinta-2-indexed journals. Many studies focus on undergraduate thesis introductions or final projects in local assessment contexts, or analyze RA texts at a distance without connecting textual patterns to writers' lived experiences of learning to write for publication. Identity, agency, and anxiety research tends to foreground doctoral students or broad NNES populations, and it often treats national indexing systems and programme-level publication mandates as background conditions rather than as central components of the publication ecology (Carter et al., 2021; Deiniatur & Cahyono, 2024). Consequently, little is known about how these Master's-level writers perceive their rhetorical struggles, how they navigate tensions between local discourse norms and global expectations, and how institutional requirements, supervisory support, and prior experiences (e.g., conferences or occasional international publications) shape their trajectories (Alsariera & Alsaraireh, 2024; Othman & Lo, 2023). By addressing this gap, the present study offers a section-level, experience-near account of thesis-to-article conversion in Sinta-2 journals. Its novelty lies not merely in studying Indonesian EFL writers but in connecting rhetorical challenges—especially introduction gap and contribution claims—with cultural discourse norms, institutional publication mandates, supervisory mediation, identity shifts, and adaptive strategies among writers who have already achieved successful national publication.

Responding to these gaps, this study investigates how Indonesian EFL Master's students experience and negotiate rhetorical challenges when converting their theses into research articles for Sinta-2-indexed journals. The study offers a section-level account of students' difficulties in establishing research territories, articulating gaps, and formulating clear objectives in introductions and related sections, while also examining how these difficulties intersect with cultural discourse norms, institutional pressures, linguistic resources, and academic identities (Arianto & Basthomi, 2021; Boginskaya, 2024; Dudău et al., 2024; Esfandiari et al., 2022; Thaksanan & Chaturongakul, 2023). By focusing on writers who have already achieved publication in Sinta-2 outlets, the study seeks to illuminate both persistent obstacles and emergent strategies, foregrounding how publication can catalyse shifts from deficit-oriented to contribution-oriented scholarly selves in the Indonesian EFL postgraduate context. Accordingly, the objectives of this research are: (1) to identify the rhetorical challenges Indonesian EFL Master's students encounter in crafting RA introductions and related sections for Sinta-2 publication; (2) to explore how local institutional, disciplinary, and cultural conditions shape these challenges; (3) to analyze how students' academic identities and writing-related anxieties are implicated in their rhetorical decision-making; (4) to document the individual and collaborative strategies they mobilize to address these challenges, including the use of models, feedback, and mentoring; and (5) to derive empirically grounded implications for the design of graduate-level writing-for-publication support in Indonesian EFL programs and comparable contexts (Alsariera & Alsaraireh, 2024; Chung et al., 2024; Mochizuki, 2025).

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory interpretive design (Gillan et al., 2014; Mihas, 2022) to examine how Indonesian EFL Master's students experience rhetorical challenges, contextual influences, identity shifts, and adaptive strategies when converting their theses into research articles for Sinta-indexed journals. This specific approach was selected because the nuanced intersection of local institutional mandates, global publication pressures, and personal academic identity among these students is currently an

underexplored phenomenon. By combining an exploratory approach with an interpretive lens, the research captures the deeply subjective meaning-making processes of emerging scholars, deliberately foregrounding their narrative accounts to understand how they internalize and negotiate the rigid rhetorical demands of academic publishing.

This design differs fundamentally from other qualitative traditions by emphasizing the contextual, culturally embedded, and socially situated nature of individual publication journeys, rather than seeking a single, universal "essence" of a lived experience like phenomenology. Unlike grounded theory, which strictly aims to build a new substantive theory from scratch, this study is informed by existing conceptual frameworks—such as genre analysis, identity construction, and writing anxiety—and uses an exploratory lens to observe how they manifest within the specific Sinta index ecosystem. Furthermore, instead of relying on the prolonged, embedded observation required by ethnography, this design utilizes retrospective, reflective narrative accounts and cross-case comparisons to thoroughly understand the writers' internal cognitive and emotional processes during their writing journeys.

Participants

The study involved four Indonesian EFL Master's students or recent graduates from three higher-education institutions offering programs in English Education and English Studies located in Yogyakarta, Malang, and Surabaya (see table 1). These institutions were selected because they require or strongly encourage graduate publication in nationally accredited journals and offer some forms of writing-for-publication support (e.g., academic writing courses, workshops, mentoring).

Table 1. Participant Profiles and Publication Trajectories

Participant	Institution	Disciplinary Focus	Sinta 2 Publication	Prior Experience
P1	University A, Yogyakarta	Literature	1 article	Conference presentation
P2	University B, Malang	ELT	1 article	Prior Scopus publication
P3	University C, Surabaya	Teacher Development	1 article	None
P4	University C, Surabaya	Parental Support	1 article	None

Purposive maximum-variation sampling was used to capture heterogeneous publication trajectories. Inclusion criteria were that participants: (1) were Indonesian EFL Master's students or recent graduates; (2) had written at least one research article for peer-reviewed publication; (3) had at least one Sinta-2 article derived from a Master's thesis, with varied submission histories (acceptance, revision, rejection, rerouting); and (4) represented different disciplinary emphases (e.g., literature, ELT, teacher professional development, sociocultural/parental support). This sampling ensured diversity in institutional context, publication pathways, and disciplinary orientations while maintaining a shared focus on thesis-derived Sinta-2 publications.

Data Collection

Data were generated primarily through in-depth semi-structured interviews with each participant (Elwood & Martin, 2000). One interview was conducted per participant, lasting approximately 65–85 minutes. The interview protocol was organized around the study's five research questions and covered: (1) rhetorical challenges in research article writing (especially introductions and related sections); (2) institutional, disciplinary, and broader contextual factors shaping these challenges; (3) academic identity and writing-related anxiety; (4) individual and collaborative strategies for managing rhetorical, linguistic, and

psychological demands; and (5) perceptions of programme-level preparation and support for writing for publication.

Potential participants were identified via supervisors' recommendations and professional networks within the three graduate programs. Initial contact served to check eligibility against the inclusion criteria and to gauge willingness to participate. Those who agreed received an information sheet outlining the aims, expected time commitment, voluntary nature of participation, and the use of audio-recording. Written informed consent was obtained before data collection.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face on campus and online, depending on participants' location and scheduling constraints. The semi-structured protocol was used flexibly so that participants could narrate their trajectories in their own sequence while still addressing the main topical clusters. Follow-up probes were used to elicit concrete episodes (e.g., drafting introductions, responding to specific reviewer comments, rerouting manuscripts after rejection) and to clarify participants' expressions (e.g., what counted as "too theoretical," "too long-winded," or "not academic enough").

Participants were invited to use Indonesian, English, or a mix of both, according to their comfort. The interviewer adjusted language choice and probing accordingly. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission. During and immediately after each interview, the researcher noted key points, emergent patterns, and potential follow-up issues; these notes later supported both transcription accuracy and reflexive engagement with the data.

In addition to interview data, the study drew on two secondary sources: (1) participants' descriptions of their published Sinta-2 articles and thesis-to-article conversion processes, and (2) the methodological templates and author guidelines of the target journals. These documents were used to contextualize the rhetorical and structural expectations that participants were attempting to meet.

Ethical considerations focused on informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. All participants signed consent forms that specified their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Pseudonyms are used in reporting, and potentially identifying institutional or contextual details were generalized or omitted where necessary.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis informed by the five research questions and by constructs related to rhetorical move-making, contextual influences, identity, anxiety, and adaptive strategies. Analysis proceeded through iterative stages from familiarization to cross-case comparison(Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019).

First, the researcher read and reread the full interview transcripts and associated notes to gain a holistic sense of each participant's trajectory, paying particular attention to episodes that were rhetorically dense (e.g., drafting and revising introductions) or emotionally salient (e.g., first rejection, first Sinta-2 acceptance).

Second, line-by-line initial coding was carried out, supported by a qualitative data analysis software Evivo 14. Segments of text were coded for:

- rhetorical challenges (e.g., constructing research gaps, organizing introductions, synthesizing literature, writing discussions and conclusions);
- linguistic issues (e.g., tense and voice, hedging, academic vocabulary);
- contextual and cultural influences (e.g., institutional publication requirements, disciplinary training, local academic traditions);
- academic identity and anxiety (e.g., feelings of deficit, legitimacy, fear of evaluation); and
- adaptive strategies (e.g., reading of model articles, rhetorical outlining, engagement with feedback, technology use, peer and supervisor support).

Codes were both deductive, derived from the research questions and interview protocol,

and inductive, emerging from participants' own expressions, metaphors, and narrative emphases.

Third, related codes were clustered into higher-order categories and then into overarching themes. For example, codes related to gap-building, move structure, and literature integration were grouped under categories such as "Introduction as site of rhetorical struggle," which contributed to themes describing the introduction as a key rhetorical bottleneck. Codes concerning self-positioning, deficit perceptions, and evolving confidence were assembled into categories like "Negotiating EFL identity and non-nativeness," feeding into themes describing shifts from deficit- to contribution-oriented scholarly selves. Codes on institutional requirements, program expectations, and national indexing pressures were organized into categories such as "Publication as institutional mandate," informing themes about the role of institutional ecologies. Similarly, codes on mentoring, peer support, and technology use formed categories such as "Mentoring as scaffold and gatekeeper" and "Technology as double-edged scaffold," which supported themes on adaptive repertoires and self-regulated writing.

Fourth, cross-case analysis was conducted through matrices that compared how each participant experienced key processes (e.g., crafting introductions, responding to reviewers, converting theses into articles, selecting journals) across different institutional and disciplinary contexts. Constant comparison was used to refine categories and themes, highlight convergences and divergences, and ensure that each theme was grounded in multiple participants' accounts where possible.

Finally, several strategies were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the corpus, iterative movement between data and emerging interpretations, and selective follow-up contacts for clarification of ambiguous segments. Dependability and confirmability were strengthened by maintaining an analytic trail documenting coding decisions, category and theme development, and key interpretive shifts. Thick, illustrative excerpts are presented in the Findings section to demonstrate the grounding of interpretations in participants' own words.

RESULTS

Overall, the four Indonesian EFL Master's students reported intertwined rhetorical, linguistic, contextual, and identity-related challenges when publishing thesis-derived research articles in Sinta-2 indexed journals, while also describing gradual movement toward more strategic and agentive writing practices across their publication trajectories. As shown in Table 1, they represented different institutions and disciplinary focuses but shared comparable experiences of navigating their first thesis-based Sinta-2 publication.

Rhetorical Bottlenecks: Introduction as Primary Challenge (RQ1)

Across all four cases, the introduction emerged as the key **rhetorical** bottleneck, particularly when participants had to condense dense theoretical frameworks, construct explicit and persuasive gap statements, and formulate clear contribution claims within strict word limits. Participants reported that moving from general background to a sharply focused, researchable problem and then to clearly stated objectives and questions required unfamiliar forms of explicitness. P2, for example, struggled to arrange "the flow from general context to specific problems, then clearly show the gaps and research questions so that readers feel this is important," while P1 had to shift from "too literary and abstract" background writing to a concise, IMRD-compatible problematization.

These challenges extended into literature review and paragraph-level argumentation. P1 realized he needed to abandon "telling twisted stories" and instead craft paragraphs with clear functions and transitions, while P4 recognized that her early literature

review "looked like a collection of summaries" rather than a critical synthesis that positioned her study. Participants agreed that grammar was relatively manageable compared to constructing strong, coherent arguments and selecting appropriate academic vocabulary and hedging devices. The main rhetorical difficulties reported by participants are summarized in Table 2, underscoring that gap statements, contribution claims, and critical synthesis were universal pressure points.

Table 2. Main Rhetorical Challenges Reported by Participants

Challenge Category	Specific Difficulty	Frequency (n=4)
Introduction writing	Gap statement construction	4/4 (100%)
	Contribution claims	4/4 (100%)
	Theory condensation	3/4 (75%)
Literature review	Critical synthesis vs. summary	4/4 (100%)
	Positioning within field	3/4 (75%)
Linguistic issues	Academic vocabulary selection	4/4 (100%)

As shown in Table 2, all participants struggled with constructing clear gap statements and contribution claims, and all reported difficulty balancing concise theory presentation with persuasive argumentation in the introduction.

Cultural-Institutional Tensions Shaping Writing Practices (RQ2)

Participants consistently framed their rhetorical difficulties as inseparable from Indonesian cultural discourse norms and institutional ecologies. Culturally, they described a tendency toward indirectness, modesty, and narrative exposition, which clashed with the expectation in Sinta-2 journals for explicit problematization and self-positioning. P2 noted that she "tends to be more indirect and subtle," which initially led her to state that topics were important without providing strong empirical justification. P1 associated his vague and cautious criticism of prior studies with a cultural habit of avoiding direct confrontation and reported learning to use hedging and evaluative language to "keep criticizing without feeling personally offensive."

Institutionally, all four were enrolled in programs that formally required or strongly encouraged publication in Sinta-2 or equivalent journals, yet they perceived a gap between these expectations and sustained, hands-on support for publication. They viewed Sinta-2 outlets as important national platforms for visibility and evaluation, which heightened pressure to conform to journal templates and rhetorical norms. At the same time, participants felt that local academic traditions emphasised thesis completion and essay-type assignments more than explicit training in journal selection, thesis-to-article conversion, or responding to reviewers. These cultural and institutional forces together shaped how they argued, critiqued, and positioned themselves in their texts (see also Figure 1 for an overview of how such influences connect with identity and strategy).

Identity Transformation Through Publication Process (RQ3)

The publication process functioned as a catalyst for **identity** transformation for all participants. Before acceptance, P1 saw himself as "just a student writing a thesis," and P2 often felt "not academic enough or not enough like a native speaker," especially when facing rejection. After successfully publishing in Sinta-2 journals, they began to see themselves as legitimate knowledge producers, even while acknowledging ongoing limitations. P3 described moving from viewing writing as a "scary scourge" to treating it as an avenue for exploring and absorbing new knowledge, while P4, as a rural teacher, started to see herself as "a driver of change, not just a learner," responsible for ensuring that her research had local impact.

Experiences with peer review and rejection were central to these identity shifts. Initially, rejection letters were interpreted as confirmation of personal inadequacy: P2

tended to see negative decisions as proof that her work did not meet standards, and P3 felt "not good enough as a writer." Over time, with supervisor support, they learned to dissociate criticism of manuscripts from criticism of self and to treat review comments as a guide for improvement rather than a final judgment. This re-framing enabled them to adopt more agentive stances toward revision and to perceive themselves as developing scholars rather than permanent novices. Figure 1 schematically represents how rhetorical challenges, contextual influences, and identity shifts interacted to shape participants' adaptive pathways.



Figure 1. Thematic Map: From Challenges to Adaptive Strategies

As suggested in Figure 1, encountering rhetorical difficulties within specific cultural and institutional settings triggered identity negotiations that, in turn, motivated the development of more deliberate and self-regulated writing strategies.

Strategic Repertoires: Reading, Revision, and Technology Use (RQ4)

Across time, participants assembled increasingly sophisticated **strategic repertoires** combining intensive reading, rhetorical outlining, structured engagement with feedback, collegial support, and selective use of digital tools. All four highlighted sustained reading of target-journal articles as foundational. P2 urged junior students to "fall in love with reading" and to read daily while taking notes, arguing that this practice helps internalize rhetorical patterns and vocabulary so that writing "does not start from empty." P1 systematically examined Sinta-2 articles to see "how they open, state gaps, and close," then built outlines specifying the function of each paragraph. P3 and P4 similarly relied on Sinta-2 articles as concrete models for section structure and phrasing.

Revision routines evolved from ad hoc edits into more planned, metacognitive procedures. P2 adopted a staged approach: first reading all reviewer comments, consulting supervisors or co-authors for clarification, strengthening evidence where arguments were weak, and then revising with attention to the reasoning behind each change. P1 converted review letters into a revision table with columns for each comment, planned response, and completion status, which helped transform revision from an emotional burden into a manageable workflow. P3 delayed immediate revision, discussed comments with her supervisor, reread relevant literature, and then revised, thereby reducing anxiety and improving coherence.

Digital tools were used as scaffolds rather than replacements for judgement. All participants reported using grammar checkers (e.g., Grammarly, Hemingway) to address surface-level issues, but final decisions about structure, stance, and argumentation were grounded in their own evaluation and supervisory feedback. Some experimented carefully with AI-based language tools to find alternative formulations, yet they consistently emphasized the need to rephrase, adapt, and critically assess any suggested wording for disciplinary appropriateness. In this way, technology became one component of broader, self-regulated writing systems centered on human feedback, reading, and reflective revision (see Figure 1).

Pedagogical Gaps and Support Needs (RQ5)

Participants perceived their Master's programs as providing valuable conceptual foundations in academic writing and research methodology, but only partial preparation for the full publication cycle. They appreciated courses on academic writing, thesis proposal,

research methods, and, where available, writing for publication. However, they identified notable gaps in: (1) explicit guidance on journal selection and targeting; (2) structured training on thesis-to-article conversion; (3) concrete support for responding to reviewer comments; and (4) sustainable writing communities or discussion groups beyond individual supervision.

P2 felt "partially prepared," crediting coursework and conference experience but noting continued weaknesses in advanced academic vocabulary and the absence of a long-term writing community after coursework. P1 described himself as "half ready": comfortable with essay writing but less familiar with "methodology that can be published" and with formal journal standards. P3 recommended more dedicated courses on research article and international publication writing, along with improved access to reputable journals and resources. P4 appreciated a Writing for Publication course but argued that "step-by-step assistance until the publication process is not very strong" and suggested program designs in which each student is supported to produce at least one ready-to-submit article.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that Sinta-2 publication simultaneously functions as an institutional requirement, a powerful identity marker, and a demanding learning space. To better support students' movement from rhetorical struggle to strategic, contribution-oriented writing, participants called for integrated, genre-based instruction; long-term, dialogic mentoring; institutionalized writing communities; and explicit, structured pathways for thesis-to-article conversion and publication.

DISCUSSION

Navigating Rhetorical Bottlenecks: The Introduction as a Primary Challenge (Addressing RQ1: What are the primary rhetorical and structural bottlenecks Indonesian EFL Master's students face during manuscript preparation?)

The findings reveal that the introduction section serves as the most formidable rhetorical bottleneck for Indonesian EFL Master's students, particularly regarding the construction of explicit research gaps and contribution claims. This result aligns with previous empirical studies demonstrating that non-native English-speaking (NNES) authors frequently struggle with establishing research significance and carving out a clear niche within dense bodies of literature (Arianto & Basthomi, 2021)(Swales, 2004)(Arianto & Basthomi, 2021; Flowerdew, 2015; Swales, 2004). Participants uniformly reported that condensing theoretical frameworks and transitioning from descriptive summaries to critical synthesis posed significantly greater hurdles than sentence-level grammatical accuracy.

These results critically contradict the initial assumption—often held by novice writers and implicitly reinforced by traditional EFL curricula—that linguistic deficiency and vocabulary limitations are the primary barriers to successful publication (Alharbi, 2019)(Alharbi, 2019; Casanave, 2019). Instead, the data support the hypothesis that the challenge is fundamentally generic and rhetorical (Farnia & Barati, 2017)(Farnia & Barati, 2017). The significance of this finding addresses the crucial "so what?" question: mastering advanced English syntax is ultimately insufficient for publication success if students cannot strategically manipulate genre conventions to position their research persuasively. However, it is necessary to consider alternative interpretations. What appears as a purely "rhetorical" or generic struggle is likely deeply intertwined with cognitive load; students may default to descriptive, "safe" summaries simply because synthesizing complex literature in a second language overwhelms their working memory, thereby temporarily constraining their critical voice (Mochizuki, 2025)(Othman & Lo, 2023)(Mochizuki, 2025; Othman & Lo, 2023).

Cultural-Institutional Tensions and Discourse Norms (Addressing RQ2: How do cultural and institutional tensions influence students' adaptation to global

academic discourse norms?)

Participants' rhetorical difficulties were profoundly shaped by the tension between Indonesian cultural norms of indirectness, harmony, and modesty, and the Anglo-American academic expectation for explicit problematization and intellectual self-promotion. This finding mirrors research indicating that rhetorical difficulties in academic writing are often deeply culturally embedded and ideologically contested (Bian & Wang, 2016)(Bian & Wang, 2016). Students reported profound initial discomfort with aggressively critiquing prior studies, viewing such rhetorical moves as potentially offensive or arrogant, which consequently led to under-realized gap statements and muted contribution claims.

Crucially, this cultural friction occurs within an institutional ecology that heavily mandates publication in Sinta-indexed or Scopus-indexed journals as a strict prerequisite for graduation. The intersection of these forces means students are not merely learning a neutral, new text type; they are actively navigating competing epistemological values. This highlights a critical systemic issue: institutions demand globalized academic outputs while students operate from a localized habitus. The results support the hypothesis that systemic publication pressures exacerbate cultural-rhetorical dissonance. Nevertheless, alternative perspectives caution against a crude "native vs. non-native" cultural polarization. Scholars like(Hyland, 2016) Hyland (2016) argue that these struggles are common to all novice academic writers adjusting to the exclusionary practices of expert discourse communities, suggesting the friction is as much about disciplinary enculturation as it is about national culture.

Academic Identity Shifts and Anxiety Management (Addressing RQ3: In what ways does the mandatory publication process impact students' academic identity and writing anxiety?)

The publication process proved to be an intense site of identity work, catalysing a profound shift in participants from feeling like "deficient language learners" to viewing themselves as legitimate knowledge producers within their respective fields. Consistent with previous narrative inquiries(Othman & Lo, 2023) (Othman & Lo, 2023), early drafts and initial peer review stages were characterized by acute writing anxiety, imposter syndrome, and a fear of negative evaluation. This anxiety initially reduced students' willingness to take rhetorical risks, encouraging a reliance on "safe" summarizing rather than authoritative, critical argumentation(Gu & Xu, 2021) (Gu & Xu, 2021).

The transition to a contribution-oriented scholarly self is a highly significant finding, answering the "so what?" question by demonstrating that publication is fundamentally an emotional and ontological journey, not just a technical or linguistic exercise. When students learn to navigate peer review and structural demands, they actively renegotiate their academic identities. This supports the premise that explicit engagement with the nuances of stance-taking can transform anxiety into a sense of agency and control over generic conventions(Chang, 2016)(Negretti & McGrath, 2020) (Chang, 2016; Negretti & McGrath, 2020). The meaning of this finding is clear: emotional scaffolding is just as critical as structural feedback in the development of novice scholars.

Adaptive Strategies and the Role of Support Ecologies (Addressing RQ4: What adaptive strategies and support ecologies do students utilize to overcome publication barriers?)

To overcome these intersecting linguistic, rhetorical, and emotional challenges, participants mobilized a diverse range of adaptive strategies, relying heavily on supervisory mentoring, peer discussion networks, and the critical use of digital writing tools. Constructive, dialogic mentoring was particularly vital in demystifying the opaque publication process and transforming harsh reviewer feedback into actionable, structured revisions. This reflects recent findings that continuous, dialogic feedback is essential for

international graduate writing success, moving beyond mere corrective editing (Carter et al., 2021)(Carter et al., 2021). Furthermore, the strategic use of digital tools and corpus-based modelling helped students dynamically scaffold their understanding of rhetorical move-structures (Deiniatur & Cahyono, 2024)(Alsariera & Alsaraireh, 2024)(Deiniatur & Cahyono, 2024; Alsariera & Alsaraireh, 2024).

The reliance on collaborative and technological strategies indicates that successful academic writing is inherently a socially situated and networked practice (Wei et al., 2024)(Wei et al., 2024). The significance of this is profound for program design: independent trial-and-error is an inefficient and often detrimental model for graduate publication. While the results strongly support the efficacy of external scaffolding, an alternative perspective might caution that over-reliance on digital templates and supervisory heavy-lifting could risk formulaic writing—colloquially known as "painting by numbers"—if students do not simultaneously develop deep, internalized genre awareness and critical autonomy (Negretti & McGrath, 2020)(Negretti & McGrath, 2020).

Pedagogical Implications and Future Trajectories (Addressing RQ5: What are the pedagogical implications of these rhetorical challenges for EFL graduate curricula?)

The cumulative findings suggest an urgent need to reform graduate EFL curricula from a focus on general academic English to targeted, genre-based pedagogies that explicitly deconstruct the rhetorical moves of high-impact journal articles (Nirwanto et al., 2024). The traditional hypothesis that general proficiency naturally translates to publication readiness is entirely contradicted by the data. Students require explicit instruction in the epistemology of their disciplines, particularly concerning how knowledge is contested, how gaps are justified, and how authority is established in text (Arianto & Basthomi, 2021).

The implication of this final inquiry lies in institutional sustainability. If universities maintain mandatory publication requirements without providing commensurate, specialized rhetorical training, they risk exacerbating student burnout and producing superficial, template-driven research (Alzahrani, 2025; Arianto & Basthomi, 2021). A critical analysis suggests that curriculum designers must integrate "rhetorical consciousness-raising" early in the Master's program. Acknowledging different perspectives, some faculty may argue that content-area knowledge should remain the sole focus of disciplinary coursework; however, the findings unequivocally demonstrate that separating content from the rhetorical means of communicating it severely limits a student's capacity to participate in the global academic community. Therefore, writing support must be decentralized, integrated into content courses, and framed as a core component of scholarly identity development.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study demonstrates that converting Master’s theses into Sinta 2 indexed articles is fundamentally a rhetorical and identity-shaping process rather than merely a linguistic exercise. Findings across participant trajectories reveal that the introduction section serves as the primary rhetorical bottleneck, where constructing explicit research gaps, articulating contribution claims, and synthesizing literature critically pose far greater hurdles than surface-level grammar. These difficulties stem from a structural tension between local Indonesian cultural norms—which favour indirectness, modesty, and non-confrontational discourse—and global Anglo-American academic conventions requiring assertive positioning, amplified by institutional publication mandates for graduation. Nevertheless, when supported by dialogic supervisory mentoring, peer networks, and metacognitive revision strategies, navigating the peer-review cycle acts as a transformative catalyst, shifting students' self-perceptions from deficient L2 learners to legitimate knowledge producers. Consequently, graduate EFL programs must move beyond general

writing instruction toward specialized genre-based training, structured thesis-to-article conversion frameworks, and sustained writing communities.

While these insights offer an experience-near understanding of thesis-to-article conversion, the study is limited by its small sample size of four Master's students across three higher education institutions, focusing predominantly on English language education and humanities disciplines. Furthermore, data collection relied primarily on retrospective semi-structured interviews, capturing participants' self-reported perceptions rather than longitudinal, direct tracking of manuscript revisions across drafting stages. Future research should address these limitations by engaging larger, cross-disciplinary cohorts across diverse geographical regions, incorporating direct corpus-based textual analysis of draft iterations, and conducting longitudinal studies to evaluate the empirical impact of targeted genre-based writing interventions on postgraduate publishing success.

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