Students' Challenges in Academic Writing; Evidence from the EFL Context of Papua Pegunungan

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ABSTRACT
This research reported a qualitative study investigating the challenges faced by university students in academic writing in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context of Papua Pegunungan, Indonesia. The study employed a qualitative case study design. There were 12 EFL students at STKIP Kristen Wamena who contributed to this study. Data were collected through a semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns of difficulties and their underlying causes. The findings revealed that students experience serious challenges in four interrelated areas: (1) linguistic aspects, particularly grammar, vocabulary, and sentence construction; (2) rhetorical and organizational aspects, including coherence, cohesion, and paragraph development; (3) cognitive aspects, such as difficulties in generating and developing ideas; and (4) affective aspects, especially low confidence and writing anxiety. These problems were further shaped by contextual constraints, including limited exposure to English and restricted access to academic resources. The study confirms previous findings in EFL writing research and provides contextualized evidence from Papua Pegunungan.
Keywords: academic writing, EFL, qualitative study, student challenges, Papua Pegunungan

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing plays a central role in higher education because it is the primary means through which students demonstrate knowledge, construct arguments, and participate in academic communities (Elloway, 2018; Hyland, 2001). Through academic writing, students are not only assessed on what they know, but also on how effectively they can organize ideas, engage with sources, and present arguments in ways that conform to disciplinary conventions (Lahuerta, 2018; Wilson, 2022). For this reason, academic writing is not merely a linguistic skill. It is a core academic competence that strongly determines students' academic success and persistence in university study (Romrome & Mbato, 2023).

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, academic writing is widely recognized as one of the most difficult skills to master. It requires learners to control several complex dimensions simultaneously: grammatical accuracy, appropriate vocabulary, coherent organization, and discipline-specific rhetorical conventions (Romrome, 2024). Unlike everyday communication, academic writing demands precision, explicit logical structure, and a formal and impersonal style, which often contrasts sharply with students' previous writing experiences (Leki, 1986; Coffin et al., 2005). As a result, many EFL students struggle to meet academic writing expectations at the tertiary level (Lee & Lee, 2023).

Studies in the last decade consistently report that EFL learners experience serious problems in grammar, vocabulary use, coherence and cohesion, and the development of critical and well-supported arguments (Almarwani, 2020; Alsariera & Yunus, 2023; Fareed & Bilal, 2016; Klimova, 2015; Wei et al., 2024). At the discourse level, students also have difficulty constructing

introductions, developing body paragraphs, and writing effective conclusions (Teng, 2020). These surface-level problems are usually rooted in deeper issues such as limited linguistic competence, insufficient exposure to academic texts, weak reading habits, and inadequate familiarity with academic discourse conventions (Hyland, 2019; Lee, 2020; Grabe & Zhang, 2016).

Moreover, academic writing is not only a cognitive and linguistic activity but also an affective one. Recent studies have shown that writing anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-confidence significantly influence students' writing performance and their willingness to engage in extended writing tasks (Cheng, 2017; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014; Teimouri et al., 2019; Barjesteh et al., 2021). Students who experience high levels of anxiety tend to avoid complex sentence structures, limit their ideas, and focus excessively on surface-level accuracy rather than on meaning and argumentation (Cheng, 2017; Hyland, 2019).

Within the Indonesian EFL context, similar patterns have been reported in recent studies. Research in the last decade shows that Indonesian university students often struggle with grammar, vocabulary, coherence, and academic style, and tend to produce texts that are descriptive rather than analytical or argumentative (Emilia, 2014; Marzuki et al., 2018; Sugiharto, 2019; Nuradila & Marlina, 2020; Setyowati & Sukmawan, 2021). These problems are frequently linked to limited reading culture, insufficient practice in academic writing, and instructional approaches that emphasize grammar exercises over process- and genre-based writing instruction (Emilia, 2014; Marzuki et al., 2018; Setyowati & Sukmawan, 2021).

However, these challenges are not evenly distributed across all regions of Indonesia. They tend to be more acute in peripheral and under-resourced regions, particularly in eastern Indonesia such as Papua Pegunungan. Students in this region generally grow up in multilingual environments, using local languages and Indonesian in everyday communication, while English is encountered almost exclusively in formal educational settings. Opportunities to use English outside the classroom are extremely limited, and access to academic resources such as libraries, up-to-date books and journals, and stable internet connections is often constrained. From an educational and literacy development perspective, such conditions significantly reduce students' exposure to both English input and academic literacy practices, which are crucial for the development of academic writing competence (Hyland, 2019; Grabe & Zhang, 2016; Setyowati & Sukmawan, 2021).

Although a growing number of studies in Indonesia have examined students' difficulties in EFL writing, most of them have been conducted in more developed and resource-rich regions such as Java and Sumatra. Empirical studies that specifically investigate the EFL academic writing context of Papua Pegunungan and similar remote areas remain very limited. As a result, little is known about how students in this region experience academic writing, what kinds of difficulties they face in real academic writing tasks, and how they themselves understand the causes of these difficulties. This lack of context-sensitive and in-depth qualitative evidence constitutes a significant gap in the current literature on EFL writing in Indonesia.

To address this gap, the present study aims to provide a qualitative, empirically grounded, and contextually sensitive exploration of students' challenges in academic writing in the EFL context of Papua Pegunungan. By combining observations with in-depth interviews, this study

seeks not only to describe the problems students face, but also to interpret why these problems occur within their specific educational and sociolinguistic environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study is guided by the following research questions: 1). What challenges do students in Papua Pegunungan experience in writing academic texts in English? 2). How do students explain the causes of these challenges?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate students' challenges in academic writing in the EFL context of Papua Pegunungan. A qualitative approach was adopted to enable an in-depth and context-sensitive exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions, and to capture the complexity of their writing practices rather than to test hypotheses or quantify variables.

The participants comprised 12 undergraduate students who enrolled writing 3 class at a STKIP Kristen Wamena in Papua Pegunungan. They were selected through purposive sampling on the grounds that they were directly engaged in academic writing tasks and therefore constituted information-rich cases. To ensure confidentiality, all participants are identified using pseudonyms.

Data were collected using one instrument: semi-structured interviews. This type of interview was chosen because it allows the researcher to prepare guiding questions while still giving students freedom to explain their experiences in their own words. The questions focused on students' experiences in academic writing, the difficulties they face, their learning backgrounds, and their opinions about the causes of these difficulties. During the interviews, the researcher asked follow-up questions when answers were not clear or when more explanation was needed. The interviews were conducted individually in Indonesian so that students could speak comfortably and clearly. Each interview lasted about 25 - 40 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission and then written down word for word for analysis.

In addition, the data analysis followed a thematic analytic procedure. The interview transcripts were read iteratively, coded to identify recurrent patterns, and subsequently clustered into higher-order themes representing students' challenges and their perceived causes. Analytical rigor was enhanced through triangulation between the two data sources. Ethical standards were observed by securing informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation, and anonymizing all identifying information.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

1. Students' Challenges in Academic Writing

Based on the interview data, students faced four main kinds of problems namely language problems, problems with text organization, problems with developing ideas, and emotional problems.

A. Language Problems

Based on the interview section, many students said that grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure are their biggest problems. One of them admitted that,

> *"When I write in English, I am always confused about grammar. I know what I want to say in Indonesian, but when I change it to English, the sentence becomes wrong"* (Student 3).

Another student also emphazised that,

> *"Sometimes I know the idea, but I don't know the correct grammar to write it"* (Student 6).

Besides that, one of them added that,

> *"My vocabulary is very little, so I repeat the same words again and again"* (Student 7).

These statements indicated that they did not have enough English language knowledge to express their ideas clearly and accurately. Many scholars argue that academic writing requires strong control of grammar and academic vocabulary because meaning in academic texts must be precise and explicit (Hyland, 2019; Bitchener & Storch, 2016; Coffin et al., 2021). When this control is weak, students tend to write short and simple sentences and avoid complex ideas, which makes their texts sound basic and sometimes unclear (Teng, 2020; Lee, 2020). Similar findings have been reported in many studies: grammar errors and limited vocabulary are the most frequent problems in EFL academic writing (Klimova, 2014; Fareed et al., 2016; Jabali, 2018). In Indonesia, Marzuki et al. (2018) and Setyowati and Sukmawan (2021) also show that students often repeat the same words and make many basic grammar mistakes, which reduces the academic quality of their writing. This means that the problem found in Papua Pegunungan is not unique, but part of a wider EFL pattern.

Furthermore, Grabe and Zhang (2016) explain that language knowledge is the foundation for higher-level writing skills such as organizing ideas and building arguments. If students struggle at the sentence level, they will also struggle at the text level. Hyland (2019) also notes that when students lack linguistic resources, they focus too much on correctness and have little attention left for meaning and ideas. In addition, Richards and Renandya (2002) explain that learners with limited target-language resources often translate directly from their first language, which produces unnatural sentences. Therefore, the language problems in this study should not be seen only as personal weaknesses, but as the result of limited exposure to English and limited opportunities to practice academic writing (Hyland, 2019; Grabe & Zhang, 2016).

B. Problems with Text Organization

Another problem that was usually encountered by the participants was text organization. Many of them clarified that they do not really understand how to organize an academic essay. One student pointed out that;

> *"I don't really understand how to start the introduction and how to connect one paragraph to another. I just write what I think"* (Student 1).

This statement was underpinned by one of them, She pinpointed stated that;

"Usually I focus on grammar first. About the structure of the essay, I am not sure" (Student 9).

Another student also confirmed that;

"I know an essay has introduction, body, and conclusion, but I don't know what must be in each part" (Student 4).

These findings showed that students knew the names of the parts of an essay, but they did not really understand the function of each part or how to connect them into a clear and logical text. Many experts argue that academic writing is not only about correct sentences, but also about organizing ideas in a clear structure that readers can easily follow (Hyland, 2019; Coffin et al., 2021; Wingate, 2015). When students do not understand this structure, their writing often becomes a list of ideas without a clear direction or argument (Teng, 2020; Lee, 2020). Similar findings have been reported by Emilia (2014) and Setyowati and Sukmawan (2021), who found that many Indonesian students can write sentences but have difficulty building coherent paragraphs and complete essays.

According to Hyland (2019), students need explicit teaching about how academic texts are organized and what each part of the text is supposed to do. Without this knowledge, students tend to focus only on grammar and ignore the overall shape of the text. This explains why many students in this study say that they write ideas as they come to mind, without planning or connecting them. Therefore, students' problems with text organization in this study are not just individual weaknesses, but also show a lack of sufficient guidance and practice in writing full academic texts in a structured way.

C. Problems with Developing Ideas

Besides problems of language and text organization, students also undergone a problem that made them could not write academic text correctly. It was problem of developing ideas. One of them clarified that, *"*

Sometimes I don't know what to write because I don't really understand the topic. Even in Indonesian it is difficult" (Student 5).

One of them also identified that,

"I can write one or two sentences, but after that I don't know how to continue" (Student 8).

Another student also supported other opinions by saying that;

"I am not used to give examples or explanations. I just write the main idea" (Student 10).

These statements showed that students do not only have language problems, but also problems in thinking and developing ideas. Many experts explain that academic writing requires students to explain, support, and connect ideas, not just to state them (Hyland, 2019; Wingate, 2015; Coffin et al., 2021). When students cannot develop ideas, their writing becomes very short and looks more like notes than an academic text (Teng, 2020; Lee, 2020). Similar results were found by Klimova

(2014) and Grabe and Zhang (2016), who argue that weak idea development is often related to limited reading and limited experience with academic texts.

From a learning perspective, Grabe and Zhang (2016) explain that reading and writing are closely connected. Students who read little usually have little knowledge and few examples to write about. Hyland (2019) also states that without enough input from academic texts, students do not learn how ideas are built, explained, and supported in academic writing. This explains why many students in this study can only write main ideas without explanation. Therefore, students' problems in developing ideas are not only individual weaknesses, but also the result of limited reading habits and limited exposure to academic discourse.

D. Emotional Problems

Emotional problems has been analyzed as an another core problem that students faced during the writing process. Most of them feel afraid, nervous, or not confident when they write in English. One student stated that;

> "I am afraid if my lecturer reads my writing and sees many mistakes, so I just write short"
> (Student 11).

Another students also mentioned that;

> "When I write, I am not confident. I always think my English is wrong" (Student 12).

Besides that, one of them also said that;

> "If the task is a long essay, I feel stressed before I start writing" (Student 2).

These statements show that students' writing problems are not only about language and ideas, but also about feelings. Many researchers explain that writing anxiety and low confidence can strongly reduce students' writing performance (Cheng, 2017; Teimouri et al., 2019; Barjesteh et al., 2021). When students are afraid of making mistakes, they usually avoid long sentences, avoid difficult ideas, and write very little (Hyland, 2019; Lee, 2020). This makes their writing even weaker.

Cheng (2017) explains that students who often feel anxious about writing will try to protect themselves by writing less and keeping their language very simple. This explains why many students in this study prefer short and simple texts. Therefore, students' emotional problems should not be seen as small issues, but as important factors that directly influence how much and how well they write in English.

2. *Causes of the Challenges*

Based on the interviews, three main factors explained why students face these problems such as limited exposure to English and learning resources, influence from other languages, and students' learning and teaching experiences. These causes can be seen as follows.

A. Limited Exposure to English and Learning Resources

The most reason why EFL students faced the difficulty during writing process was limited exposure to English and learning resources. Majority of them described that;

> *"Actually, I don't really like reading, that's why when I want to write something, my brain is always blank"* (Student 2).

Another student also explained that;

> *"Outside campus, we almost never use English"* (Student 6).

These statements showed that students have very limited contact with English and academic texts. Many experts explain that regular exposure to language input and academic texts is very important for developing writing skills (Hyland, 2019; Grabe & Zhang, 2016; Coffin et al., 2021). When students rarely read English texts, they do not learn new words, sentence patterns, or how academic texts are organized. Similar findings are reported in Indonesian studies by Setyowati and Sukmawan (2021) and Marzuki et al. (2018), who found that limited access to reading materials reduces students' academic writing development.

From a learning perspective, Grabe and Zhang (2016) explain that reading provides models of how ideas, arguments, and paragraphs are built. Without these models, students have little guidance on how to write. Therefore, the limited resources in Papua Pegunungan should be seen as a major structural cause of students' writing problems, not simply as a personal weakness.

B. Influence from Other Languages

Some students said that their English sentences often follow Indonesian or local language patterns. One student said,

> *"Sometimes my sentence in English follows Indonesian order"* (Student 3).

Another one also underlined that,

> *"In my local language, the sentence structure is different, so when I write in English, it is mixed"* (Student 5).

These statements show that students' first language and local languages strongly influence their English writing. Many scholars explain that this kind of language transfer is normal in foreign language learning, especially when learners do not yet have strong control of the target language (Richards & Renandya, 2002; Hyland, 2019; Bitchener & Storch, 2016). When students depend too much on their first language, their English sentences often become unnatural or grammatically incorrect.

In accordance with this, Richards and Renandya (2002) explain that learners use their first language as a support when their knowledge of the new language is still limited. This explains why students in this study often translate directly from Indonesian. Therefore, language interference in this context should be understood as a natural result of limited English proficiency and limited exposure, not as a serious individual failure.

C. Learning and Teaching Experience

Students also said that in their previous learning experiences, they learned more about grammar than about how to write full academic texts. One student said,

"Before, we learned more about tenses, not about how to make an essay" (Student 9).

Another student also reflected that,

"We seldom revise our writing. Usually we just submit once" (Student 1).

These statements show that students do not get enough practice in planning, drafting, and revising their writing. Many experts argue that good academic writing cannot be developed only by learning grammar rules, but needs process-based and genre-based practice (Hyland, 2019; Coffin et al., 2021; Wingate, 2015). When students are not trained to revise and improve their texts, they do not learn how to develop ideas and organize arguments.

According to Hyland (2019) students need clear guidance, models, and feedback to learn how academic texts work. This explains why many students in this study focus only on grammar and not on ideas or organization. Therefore, students' learning experiences play an important role in shaping their current difficulties in academic writing.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study has explored in depth the challenges faced by EFL students in academic writing in the context of Papua Pegunungan using writing tests, text analysis, and interviews. The findings show that students experience serious difficulties in language use, text organization, and idea development, and that these difficulties are closely linked to affective factors such as low confidence and anxiety as well as to contextual constraints such as limited access to learning resources.

The study suggests that academic writing instruction in this context should adopt a holistic approach that integrates language development, genre-based instruction, and reading-to-write activities, while also creating a supportive learning environment. Future studies may involve larger samples and classroom-based interventions to improve students' academic writing skills.

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