Uncovering EFL students’ frequent difficulties in academic writing and the coping strategies: The case of a college in Indonesia

Sania Alinda Mouli Asnas1*, Ika Hidayanti2

1Master’s Program in ELT, Graduate Program, Universitas Islam Malang, Malang, Indonesia
2English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Islam Malang, Malang, Indonesia
*Email: sania.alindaa@gmail.com (corresponding author)

Abstract

Presently, writing research articles causes anxiety for EFL students because they have to modify their writing to fit the English academic writing style, so academic writing is the most difficult skill to master because it requires an intricate process. Therefore, this study aims to uncover the frequent difficulties of academic writing and the coping strategies faced by EFL students. This study used a mixed method. Fifty-five participants from the English Department at a private university in Malang, Indonesia, filled out the questionnaire, and five participants were interviewed. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and the qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The results showed that students experienced frequent difficulties, namely structure, developing ideas, vocabulary, and grammar, and the most frequent difficulty was grammar. To overcome challenges in grammar aspects, there were four manual coping strategies that they applied such as reading more articles, looking carefully at the function of conjunction, learning more about spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, and editing their work, and three automatic coping strategies that they used, namely using Grammarly, using an online English monolingual dictionary, and using Microsoft Word. The implications are to assist students in identifying and overcoming their frequent difficulties when writing academically.
Keywords: academic writing; coping strategies; EFL students; frequent difficulties; research articles


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Introduction

Numerous studies have identified the challenges associated with academic writing, yet there is still disagreement on which challenges are the most challenging. Some research claims that grammar is the most challenging component of academic writing (Roxas, 2020; Sajjad et al., 2021), whereas other earlier studies claim that vocabulary (Mumtaz, 2021), punctuation and structure (Ahmed, 2019), and translation (Ma, 2021) are the most challenging components. Additionally, some earlier research does not specify the kind of academic writing under investigation (Akhtar, 2020; Thao & Quyên, 2020). Thus, this present research focused on academic writing, particularly research articles. It is the controversy surrounding the most challenging problems that English as a foreign language (EFL) encountered in academic writing.

For EFL students majoring in English education, academic writing is the most challenging skill since it involves a complex process that causes problems with vocabulary, grammar, and idea development (Bulqiyah et al., 2021). Students struggle with academic writing, such as expressing ideas by attracting readers' interest. Consequently, critical thinking abilities are required to improve academic writing (Harb et al., 2022). They must adhere to writing rules because university students have difficulty adapting their writing to academic writing conventions (Fatemi & Saito, 2020). Because of the structural and cultural disparities between EFL students’ mother tongue and the target language, writing in English can be classed as complicated because they have challenges coming up with writing ideas, grammar, and mechanics (Uمامah et al., 2019). Therefore, when faced with English academic writing conventions that can be drastically different from those of their first language, L2 students frequently experience more serious challenges.
Academic writing at the university level is crucial because it demonstrates students’ capacity for clear and concise communication as well as their ability to express ideas and construct well-constructed sentences (Asnas et al., 2022). Additionally, academic writing highlights students’ capacity to solve problems analytically and shows students’ ability to synthesize, evaluate, and express their opinions based on a variety of sources (Asnas, 2022). Moreover, it is a significant requirement for students’ success in pursuing higher education and career paths (Maamuujav et al., 2021). However, EFL students experience apprehensiveness when asked to write academic writing because they must adapt their writing to fit the English academic writing style (Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020). Given the anxiety and stress that they experience when writing for academic purposes, it is important to look into the challenges that they face further, particularly the ones that come up most frequently, and to find suitable solutions to those challenges.

Some studies show how difficult academic writing can be for many language learners. The difficulties faced by students such as formulating topics, translating vocabulary, maintaining coherence, employing formal language, organization, spelling, and capitalization (Ahmed, 2019; Güler, 2022; Roxas, 2020; Shirejini & Derakhshan, 2020; Thao & Quyên, 2020). While students encounter various difficulties when writing academically, grammar stands out as the most frequent difficulty aspect for them (Akhtar, 2020; Lin & Morrison, 2021; Roxas, 2020; Sajjad et al., 2021; Thao & Quyên, 2020). The main causes of grammatical difficulties are the grammatical rules of the first language, differences in English, and inadequate knowledge and application of grammar (Ahmed, 2019). However, Mumtaz (2021) declared students struggle to choose proper vocabulary in academic writing. Therefore, EFL students’ most frequent difficulties in academic writing are still debatable. Lecturers can employ general strategies to surmount difficulties in academic writing for their students, including showing them videos that outline the steps involved in writing academically and explaining writing strategies (Ahmed (2019), and the students can use general strategies to overcome their difficulties such as reading grammar books, using online help, and using a dictionary (Lin & Morrison, 2021). Previous research has solely addressed broad coping strategies that students can employ to address their challenges in academic writing; however, none of these studies have addressed particular coping strategies that students can employ to address the most frequently difficult aspect of academic writing.

Consequently, there were three research gaps, which are the reasons for conducting this research. First, previous research was conducted on higher education students outside Indonesia, and the genre of academic writing was essay (Mumtaz, 2021; Shirejini & Derakhshan, 2020) and high school students...
outside Indonesia without mentioning the specific genre of academic writing they discussed (Roxas, 2020), so this research was carried out on English undergraduate learners in Indonesia by discussing research articles. Second, previous research did not examine with a deep understanding of the frequent difficulties in academic writing (Güler, 2022) and coping strategies used by college EFL students (Ahmed, 2019; Akhtar, 2020; Güler, 2022; Thao & Quyên, 2020), so this research investigated them. Third, previous research did not use mixed-method because previous research mostly used qualitative and quantitative methods (Akhtar, 2020; Güler, 2022; Lin & Morrison, 2021; Mumtaz, 2021; Roxas, 2020; Sajjad et al., 2021; Thao & Quyên, 2020), so this research examined the students using mixed-method. Therefore, the research objectives were to uncover the frequent difficulties of academic writing and the coping strategies faced by EFL college students. Two research questions were formulated in this study:

1. What are the frequent difficulties in academic writing posed by EFL college students?
2. What are the coping strategies for frequent difficulties in academic writing posed by EFL college students?

Literature review

Difficulties in academic writing

Accurate use of grammar, L1 transfer to L2 writing production, and lexical writing are the academic writing difficulties students face (Lathif et al., 2021). Lack of research expertise, poor time management, disinterest, difficulty locating relevant articles, and financial difficulties are other writing difficulties (Saman & Fereshteh, 2019). Apart from the difficulties in writing faced by EFL students above, grammar is the most challenging element to acquire in writing because it involves intricate verb formations and tenses (Toba et al., 2019). Due to the students' poor grammar skills, grammar has the highest percentage as the most challenging aspect of writing (Husna & Multazim, 2019).

Due to a lack of prior writing experience, students' bad writing skills result from their ignorance of grammar (Al-Mukdad, 2019). Their written task quality is primarily hampered by grammar issues (Aldabbus & Almansouri, 2022). Grammar is the primary skill that must be mastered because it is a fundamental component of a language, making it the most difficult to acquire, and this is seen by the struggles English lecturers have while trying to explain grammar to their students (Sekeon et al., 2022). Moreover, due to a lack of knowledge and
application of grammatical rules, grammar is the most challenging component of writing (Riadil et al., 2023).

A communicative approach can be used to promote language use in the classroom because students prefer the idea of adopting a meaning-based approach with grammar taught in class as needed, and they believe language teachers should not overemphasize teaching rules (Savignon & Wang (2003). Furthermore, this methodology accepts learner errors as a sign of constructive development toward communicative competence (Richards, 2006). Errors made by learners are a natural part of learning, and the presence of these errors can encourage EFL lecturers to show more tolerance for these errors (Asassfeh et al., 2012). Although academic writing presents a variety of difficulties, numerous studies indicate that grammar is the most frequent source of difficulty. This means that it is reasonable to regard their inability to produce errors in their writing as a normal learning process.

Possible strategies for overcoming difficulties in academic writing

Grammar is students’ most challenging writing aspect (Akhtar, 2020; Lin & Morrison, 2021; Sajjad et al., 2021). Cognitive (taking notes and utilizing resources), metacognitive (organizing their learning and assessing the effectiveness of various strategies), and social strategies (working together and asking for explanations) are used in grammar learning strategies (Azizmohammadi & Barjesteh, 2020). Cognitive strategies help students construct their knowledge because the strategies have a solid conceptual comprehension of the subject matter; metacognitive strategies help them in planning, observing, and assessing learning outcomes; social strategies help them in emotional self-control, drive, learning mindsets, and interpersonal interactions so that students can manage their learning through the use of crucial grammar learning strategies (Fauziah et al., 2022).

Furthermore, using digital interactive resources such as machine translation, spell checkers, and grammar checkers is a way to address academic writing issues (Bezus et al., 2021). Moreover, collaborative writing offers advantages to students, like broadening their knowledge base and giving them motivating learning experiences. However, the drawbacks are uncooperative group members and dissimilar personalities, so several strategies can be employed, such as adopting an optimistic outlook, asking for assistance from others, fostering effective communication and teamwork, and taking breaks (Roxas, 2023). Then, they can imitate scholarly articles from reputable journals, take workshops, use Google Translate, and look up more research articles (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). Considering the significance of academic writing as a means of
showcasing critical thinking skills for EFL college students (Asnas et al., 2022), as well as the numerous challenges associated with academic writing and the dearth of strategies employed, identifying the most frequent difficulties faced by EFL students and their coping strategies in this current study should aid in the production of high-quality academic writing.

**Method**

**Research design**

This study used a mixed-method design to integrate quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The research used qualitative data as the follow-up to quantitative data. The quantitative method aims to uncover the most frequent aspect of academic writing difficulties encountered by Indonesian EFL students. Meanwhile, the qualitative method was used to investigate strategies used by the EFL students to overcome the most frequent aspect of the difficulties. This selected method offered a more precise understanding by fusing quantitative and qualitative methods. Additionally, integrating the two methods could improve the research's validity and reliability.

**Participants**

The participants were English Department students in the seventh semester at a private university in Malang, Indonesia. They previously had writing experiences in academic writing during their third to sixth semesters when they wrote essays and research articles. Fifty-five students filled out the questionnaire. The demographic information of the research participants is shown in Table 1.

The interviews were conducted with five students who responded to the questionnaire. All the selected interview participants’ grades in the writing courses were A (very good). Purposive sampling was utilized because we selected participants who shared the research’s required features, which allowed the sample data source to be accepted and tailored to the study’s objectives (Robinson, 2014). This purposive sampling technique was employed because the selected participants were most knowledgeable about the difficulties associated with academic writing and strategies for these difficulties. Students with excellent academic writing grades who successfully published their research articles were another important factor considered when choosing participants for this sampling technique. Therefore, female students were chosen as interview participants because, at this university, only female students satisfied the
research requirements, which included having written research articles with the best grades and publishing them in international conferences and reputable national journals. We conducted participant recruitment in the subsequent phases. First, we estimated the participants and sample size based on the necessary study criteria. Second, we used WhatsApp to get in touch with participants. Third, they voluntarily participated in the research after we obtained their informed consent. Last, we preserved the privacy and security of participants’ data by employing anonymized data.

Table 1
The demographic information of the research participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants for the questionnaire:</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender:</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages (year):</td>
<td>21-23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The learning experience in academic writing:</td>
<td>3rd semester</td>
<td>Writing essays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4th-6th semester</td>
<td>Writing research articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7th semester</td>
<td>Writing thesis proposal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Participants for the interview: | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participant code: | P1 | P2 | P3 | P4 | P5 |
| Ages (year): | 21 | 22 | 21 | 22 | 21 |
| Gender: | Female | Female | Female | Female | Female |
| Total publication: | One | Two | One | One | One |
| International conference: | ISSN proceeding article | ISSN proceeding article | ISSN proceeding article | | |
| National journal: | | | | Sinta 3 indexed journal | Sinta 2 indexed journal |

Data collection

Two techniques were utilized to collect data: questionnaire adapted from Evans and Green (2007) in which we added and subtracted some items to adjust participants’ difficulties in academic writing, and interviews validated by the lecturer of the Writing IV Course (this course has the output of writing research articles). The adapted questionnaire had a significance value of 0.000, which is valid because the significance value was less than 0.05. It had a Cronbach’s alpha of .916, which is reliable because the Cronbach’s alpha value was greater than 0.70 (Evans & Green, 2007). Employing a questionnaire was to get information from a large number of participants on the challenges they encountered in academic writing. Seventeen questionnaire items consisting of academic writing
difficulties are shown in Table 3. It was delivered in Indonesian using Google Forms. Before the participants responded to the questionnaire, they were made aware of the aim of the study. They willingly responded to the questionnaire, and their identities were kept a secret.

The interview was done using a semi-structured format (Adams, 2015). Interviews were used to get information from participants by delving deeper into their experiences with the particular strategies they employed in academic writing. The interview questions included why participants had frequent difficulties in grammar in academic writing, what difficulties they faced in grammar, and how to overcome these difficulties. The interview protocol consisted of several stages: First, we began by welcoming the participants, giving a brief introduction, and outlining the goal of the interview. Second, participants verbally agreed to record the interviews through Zoom Meetings. Third, we gathered their age, educational background, and prior academic writing experience. Fourth, participants were asked to talk about their typical challenges in academic writing. Fifth, participants were questioned about coping strategies to address the most frequently encountered challenges. Last, we expressed gratitude for their involvement and provided them with contact information in case they needed any additional information or clarifications regarding their answers. The interview lasted around two hours.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics (Lewin, 2005). It aimed to provide an objective picture of data distribution without in-depth interpretation. There were several analysis steps. First, we calculated data from the questionnaire to find the percentage of each item. Second, we calculated a mean for each aspect of academic writing and determined the highest mean of that aspect to determine the most difficult aspects faced by students. Finally, we decided to get an interpretation of the calculated data.

The qualitative data obtained from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Using thematic analysis was to understand the context and subjective meaning behind words and provide space for in-depth interpretation and complex understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2012). We used steps to analyze the interview data, such as organizing and interpreting it, coding it, and working with it (Creswell, 2009). The following steps: We first transcribed every interview session verbatim from the recorded interviews. We then found the emerging themes. The themes that emerged were the automatic coping strategies and the manual coping strategies. We then created a coding system.
Next, we pinpointed the key topics about difficulties in academic writing and coping strategies. Next, we incorporated qualitative data into a coherent narrative by finding connections between themes and participant experiences. We ensured that the coding procedure aligned with the research inquiries. To verify interpretations, we did member checking. Last, we synthesized the data into an extensive report about the difficulties and coping strategies associated with academic writing. The summary of emerging themes is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coping strategies for frequent difficulties in academic writing</td>
<td>Manual coping strategies</td>
<td>MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Automatic coping strategies</td>
<td>AS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings

This study aims to uncover the frequent difficulties in academic writing and the coping strategies posed by EFL college learners. The detailed findings are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Student's difficulties in academic writing</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Writing introduction</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>.754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Writing literature review</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>.696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Writing method</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>.816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Writing result and discussion</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>.732</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Writing conclusion</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>.738</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Writing abstract</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>.747</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Using the appropriate academic style</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>.701</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Expressing ideas</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>.818</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Coherence and cohesion</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>.668</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Thinking critically when writing academic writing</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>.730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Translating</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>.900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Summarizing</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>.896</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Paraphrasing</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>.809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>.840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Linking sentences</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>.886</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Grammatical aspects</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>.769</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>.900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 shows that the highest mean was the grammatical aspect, so students’ frequent difficulties were grammar because the mean was 4.04. It was categorized as a great difficulty in academic writing. The lowest mean was writing the conclusion, indicating they had medium difficulty. Meanwhile, fifteen other difficulties show a mean above 3.5, indicating a high mean. Therefore, it was concluded that most EFL students experienced difficulties in all aspects of academic writing.

**The frequent difficulties in academic writing**

Obtaining the data from the questionnaire adapted from Evans and Green (2007) on the difficulty of academic writing, there are some academic writing challenges experienced by EFL learners. In the writing structure, they had seven difficulties, which are explained in more detail in Table 4.

**Table 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulties in writing structure</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>SA (%)</th>
<th>A (%)</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
<th>D (%)</th>
<th>SD (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(I have difficulty in …)</td>
<td>1 Writing introduction</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Writing literature review</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>55.0</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Writing method</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>51.0</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 Writing results and discussion</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>51.0</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 Writing conclusion</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 Writing abstract</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 Using the appropriate academic style</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>51.0</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 4, students acknowledged the difficulty in writing the introduction, such as effectively establishing a context and introducing the topic. Most students reported difficulty compiling literature reviews, such as conducting a comprehensive literature search and synthesizing information. Two-thirds of the students expressed difficulty in writing the methodology, such as detailing research methods and describing procedures accurately. Students also faced challenges in writing and discussing the results, such as presenting research findings coherently and interpreting their implications effectively. Although the percentage of difficulty in writing conclusions is slightly smaller, students experience difficulty summarizing the main findings and providing a meaningful conclusion. Students found it difficult to write abstracts, like summarizing important information and presenting a concise summary of their research. The highest percentage of difficulty was found in using the appropriate...
academic style, including correct citations and formality. It was concluded that they had difficulty in all structural aspects.

There were four issues in developing ideas. The data about the challenges in developing ideas are shown in Table 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>SA (%)</th>
<th>A (%)</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
<th>D (%)</th>
<th>SD (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. Expressing ideas</td>
<td></td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Coherence and cohesion</td>
<td></td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>51.0</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Thinking critically</td>
<td></td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Translating</td>
<td></td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 indicates that students had difficulty conveying their ideas, such as expressing thoughts clearly and effectively. They acknowledged difficulties in achieving coherence and cohesion, such as organizing and connecting ideas logically and coherently. Students faced difficulty in critical thinking, such as evaluating information, constructing arguments, and developing in-depth analysis. Additionally, students faced translation challenges, like transferring native language understanding into the target language with sufficient accuracy. It was concluded they had challenges in all aspects of developing ideas.

Students faced three issues in vocabulary. The data about the challenges in vocabulary are shown in Table 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>SA (%)</th>
<th>A (%)</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
<th>D (%)</th>
<th>SD (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12. Summarizing</td>
<td></td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Paraphrasing</td>
<td></td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>51.0</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 shows that most students had difficulty summarizing information, such as presenting the essence of a text briefly and precisely. They experienced difficulty in paraphrasing, such as expressing ideas in different words but maintaining the same meaning. They also faced challenges in their vocabulary, like choosing the right words or enriching their vocabulary. It was concluded they had difficulty in all vocabulary parts.

Students encountered three grammar problems. The data about the challenges in grammar is presented in Table 7.
Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>SA (%)</th>
<th>A (%)</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
<th>D (%)</th>
<th>SD (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Linking sentences</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Grammatical aspects</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 indicates that the majority of students admitted they faced challenges in connecting sentences, such as maintaining fluency and connection between sentences in their writing. They also had difficulty with grammatical aspects like sentence structure and verb usage. They faced difficulties with spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, so they had difficulty applying these rules correctly in their writing. It was concluded they had challenges in all aspects of grammar.

Table 8 provides an overview of EFL students' academic writing difficulty. It is feasible to determine which aspect of academic writing they struggle with the most using the mean.

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Aspects</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>12.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Developing ideas</td>
<td>15.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>15.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>18.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 8, the aspect of the structure presented the least difficulty in academic writing. It was followed by developing ideas and vocabulary aspects. Grammar was the highest challenge in academic writing. It was concluded that students experienced difficulties not only in grammar but also in structure, developing ideas, and vocabulary. Therefore, the most frequent difficulties in academic writing posed by EFL college students were grammatical aspects. Grammar mastery is crucial for academic writing because poor grammar can be confusing and make it harder for the reader to understand. Then, poor grammar can reflect poorly on the skill and professionalism of the writer, which can affect the academic writing's legitimacy and caliber. Next, poor grammar can make it more difficult to communicate effectively or to share information with a larger academic audience. Furthermore, poor grammar can lower a writer's self-assurance, mental acuity, and capacity for analytical thought.
The manual and automatic coping strategies for frequent difficulties in academic writing

Interviews were conducted to learn about the coping strategies for grammatical issues, which are the most prevalent problems in academic writing. The participants' responses are listed in Table 9.

Table 9
Coping strategies for frequent difficulties in academic writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Coping strategies</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Manual coping strategies (MS)</td>
<td>• Reading articles</td>
<td>P3, P4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Looking carefully at the function of conjunction</td>
<td>P1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Learning spelling, capitalization, and punctuation</td>
<td>P3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Editing their work</td>
<td>P5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Automatic coping strategies (AS)</td>
<td>• Using Grammarly</td>
<td>P1, P2, P3, P4, P5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Using an online English monolingual dictionary</td>
<td>P1, P2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Using Microsoft Word</td>
<td>P1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9 shows that the coping strategies in academic writing were divided into two parts: manual and automatic. All the participants agreed that Grammarly helped them with the difficulty they frequently faced, namely in grammar.

Manual coping strategies

The participants encountered grammar difficulties due to not reading enough research articles. To improve their ability to construct sentences, they read numerous articles. As P3 and P4 said in the interview:

Rewriting in my language presents a challenge. It is more difficult because not every sentence in the article has a direct quote from the references. My approach is reading research articles until I comprehend them to construct acceptable sentences. (P3)

The difficulty is because of the less time spent reading many articles. I am sure if I read many articles, there will be much understanding I get. It will help me to arrange the sentences in my article. (P4)

The above excerpts indicated that grammar challenges include inappropriate use of sentence structure because of a lack of reading research articles. Therefore, the coping strategy adopted by participants is reading lots of articles. It can be
interpreted they realize the importance of reading actively to understand sentence structure and correct grammar in an academic context. The more participants read more articles, the more they are expected to be able to understand sentence patterns and correct grammatical structures.

Lack of awareness of conjunctions was the second grammar issue. The participants employed a tactic by being familiar with a range of conjunctions and how they are used. P1, for example, acknowledged:

> It is difficult because I lack knowledge related to conjunctions. The strategy I use is looking carefully at the conjunctions I read in other articles and then trying to guess the function of each conjunction. (P1)

The participants also struggled with grammar due to a lack of understanding of mechanics. Relearning punctuation, capitalization, and spelling was their approach. P3 illustrated:

> The difficulty is that if our knowledge about the mechanic is low, it will be difficult to determine the correct one. My strategy is to learn more about spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. I can look at the last material in my second and fourth semesters. (P3)

In the excerpt, other grammatical difficulties were using punctuation, capitalization, and correct spelling because of a lack of understanding of writing mechanics. Relearning punctuation, capitalization, and spelling is the strategy. It demonstrates participants’ awareness of the need to return to the basics of grammar and writing mechanics as a first step in improvement.

Although some participants had the same challenge as other participants, namely ignorance of conjunctions, their approaches differed. They employed reading aloud the sentences that had been written to assess the grammar of the sentences that had been written, particularly concerning conjunctions. P5, for example, acknowledged:

> It is really hard because I just feel that I must use, like, then, next. My difficulty is making effective sentences by linking them to the other sentences; not most people use next, then. Reading the sentence aloud will help me determine whether it is clear enough so I can edit it if it is not clear. (P5)

As denoted, the participants had difficulty using conjunctions to connect sentences and ensure smooth connections between ideas. The strategy used is to read appropriate sentences aloud, especially those related to conjunctions. It demonstrated participants’ awareness of the importance of using sensory and auditory modalities in evaluating sentence structure. From the interview results, the students employed four strategies related to grammar difficulties: reading
articles, learning many conjunctions, learning about spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, and editing their works.

**Automatic coping strategies**

All the participants used Grammarly to overcome grammar issues. They appreciated Grammarly’s advantages because it could aid with spelling checks for vocabulary, verb tenses, conjunctions, and capitalization. They acknowledged:

I find the grammatical aspect challenging because I struggle with grammar understanding. Additionally, I find that using internet tools like Grammarly is a more effective technique. (P1)

Punctuation, capitalization, and spelling are areas where I make mistakes. Besides that, determining whether something is singular or plural presents a challenge for me. My strategy is to use Grammarly to verify the rules of grammar. (P2)

My ignorance caused me to make mistakes in capitalization, grammar, and spelling. Grammarly is what I use to get around this. (P3)

I have difficulty with grammar. Grammarly is a great aid to me in correcting my vocabulary, tenses, conjunctions, and capitalization in my writing (Participant 4).

Because I am only human and occasionally make mistakes with my grammar, I use Grammarly to check it. (P5)

The above excerpts revealed that Grammarly is a common choice among participants as a tool to improve the quality of grammar. Participants appreciated the advantages of Grammarly because it can provide feedback and correction for various aspects of grammar.

The next challenge is employing proper grammar when creating sentences. Some participants had a method for dealing with this issue, and it involved utilizing a monolingual dictionary since it contained examples of sentences employing the vocabulary we were trying to learn so that they could be aware of the proper sentence structure and grammar. As P1 and P2 said:

It is challenging for me to detect grammar errors. I typically check it with a monolingual dictionary, like the Cambridge Advance Learner’s Dictionary, to make writing easier using correct sentence patterns. (P1)
I will face difficulty in this part if I do not know how to make an effective sentence. My technique is to use the monolingual dictionary to translate or arrange sentences in the English language. (P2)

The above excerpts elucidated that the participants identified a further challenge: using appropriate grammar when making sentences. The strategy uses a monolingual dictionary because it provides example sentences that use the vocabulary being studied so they can be aware of correct sentence structure and grammar. By looking at examples of correct sentences, they can better understand how to use grammar appropriately.

The participants also experienced the same problems with spelling, capitalization, and punctuation problems, but they approached the problems differently. When checking spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, P1, for instance, typically utilized Microsoft Word and a dictionary.

I have poor organizing skills; thus, it is challenging for us to spot spelling errors. The challenge of knowing when to utilize uppercase letters follows. Then, it can be challenging to punctuate properly. To handle it, I usually use the dictionary to check it, or we can check it by using Microsoft Word. (P1)

As denoted, the other chosen strategy was using Grammarly. Utilizing an online monolingual dictionary and Microsoft Word were the fifth and sixth tactics.

From the questionnaire and interview results, it can be concluded that the EFL college students experienced the greatest difficulty in grammar, which caused them difficulty in producing good research articles. They use seven coping strategies to overcome their difficulties in grammar. They apply four manual coping strategies: reading research articles, learning various conjunctions, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, and editing their work. Besides that, they use three automatic coping strategies: Grammarly, an online English monolingual dictionary, and Microsoft Word. These diverse approaches highlight participants’ recognition of their efforts to address challenges in academic writing systematically.

**Discussion**

From the findings of the first research question, students have difficulties in all aspects of academic writing, although their greatest difficulty is grammar. Academic writing ability is directly correlated with grammatical accuracy, and grammar plays a crucial role in academic writing, such as improving writing and experiencing various writing styles and structures (Romano, 2019). Due to
insufficient grammar knowledge, students struggle with academic writing, so lecturers must adopt a balanced approach when teaching academic writing (Amm, 2021). On the contrary, Atashian and Al-Bahri (2018) revealed students’ first language and lack of writing experience were the causes of their grammatical errors in academic writing. Hence, students needed to master the differences between the rules of their first and second languages and practice their writing abilities. Lecturers should concentrate on pedagogical grammar instruction in academic writing contexts and traditional grammar teaching methods that isolate grammar from the writing context cause students to fail in academic writing (Omar, 2019). Conversely, conventional grammar instruction yields more syntactically and semantically correct sentences than communicative language instruction because it uses targeted vocabulary meaningfully (Çiftci & Özcan, 2021).

The findings of the first research question also revealed students struggle with the structure aspect. This finding follows Moses and Mohamad (2019), who stated students experience challenges in structure because they lack interest in developing their writing skills. Their first challenge was writing an introduction. It corresponds to Qasem and Zayid (2019) that learners frequently create a monotonous introduction that does not correspond to their research problem. Their second problem was writing a literature review. It is in line with Singh (2019) that students often undervalue writing literature reviews since they rewrite other people’s writings. Their third challenge was to write a method. It is consistent with Qasem and Zayid (2019) that students find it difficult to write the method since they do not know the proper data collection and analysis procedures.

Their fourth challenge was to write results and discussions. It follows Azizah and Budiman (2017) that students’ writing in the results and discussion sections is poor because it is unclear. Their fifth challenge was to write a conclusion. It corresponds to Noori (2020) that EFL students do not explain their conclusions. The sixth difficulty was writing an abstract. It follows Susanti and Mahaputri (2022) that the arrangement of information needed to write their abstracts has not been presented properly. The seventh difficulty was using academic style. It is consistent with Lin and Morrison (2021) that students lack awareness of academic writing conventions and frequently write in their own style.

Furthermore, the findings of the first research question found students faced challenges in the aspect of the development of ideas. Akhtar (2020) supports the idea that students have difficulty generating new ideas because they tend to use the same ideas in their sentences. Their first challenge was to express clear and logical ideas. It corresponds to Altınmakas and Bayyurt (2019) that students lack
the necessary English vocabulary, so they have difficulty organizing their ideas. Their second challenge was coherence and cohesion. It follows Rahman and Hasan (2019) that a lack of understanding of transitions makes it difficult for students to connect their sentences. Their third challenge was to think critically. It corresponds to Altunmakas and Bayyurt (2019) that the lack of reading sources makes it difficult for students to think critically. Their fourth challenge was translating. It follows Singh (2019) that because learners lacked sufficient scientific vocabulary, they translated their papers using Google Translate.

Moreover, students experienced difficulties with vocabulary. It is consistent with Thao and Quyên (2020) that students have limited experience using appropriate vocabulary due to the unfavorable conditions in their English learning environment. Their first challenge was summarizing. It follows Ankawi (2020) that students struggle with summarizing because they lack the skills to create concise summaries that reflect the original material. Their second challenge was paraphrasing. According to Thao and Quyên (2020), students have trouble paraphrasing since they do not comprehend the original text. The third difficulty was using academic vocabulary. It follows Noori (2020) that their inability to contextually appropriate vocabulary choices is another factor contributing to their paraphrasing difficulties.

Additionally, the students’ challenges were linking sentences and grammatical aspects. Then, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation were other challenges in the grammar aspect, so they had challenges in the grammar aspect. It follows Sajjad et al. (2021) that grammar is the most common difficulty students face. Their first challenge was connecting sentences. Noori (2020) supports the idea that students struggle to connect sentences because they have trouble choosing the proper conjunctions. Their second challenge was the grammatical aspect. It corresponds with Thao and Quyên (2020) that due to their erroneous usage of subject-verb agreements and tenses, students also struggle with grammar. Their last challenge was spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. It follows Al-Tamimi (2018) that they struggle with spelling, capitalization, and punctuation because they do not comprehend mechanics conventions.

Students experience the most dominant difficulty in academic writing in grammar. It follows Roxas (2020) that the students tend to focus on checking grammar errors because most of them struggle with grammar as their biggest challenge in academic writing. The most challenging aspect of academic writing is employing accurate grammar (Lin & Morrison, 2021). This finding corresponds with Umamah et al. (2019), who state that Indonesian students majoring in English Education generally struggle with grammatical accuracy because they lack a strong grasp of grammar and struggle to write complete sentences.
Based on the findings of the second research question, here are some strategies students use when facing grammar difficulties. The first strategy was reading more articles. It follows Pawlak (2018) that a metacognitive strategy creates opportunities to practice grammar structure, like paying attention to grammar structure when reading text. On the contrary, Barus et al. (2021) claimed if students’ reading does not align with their needs and interests, assigning them to read for practice will be less beneficial.

The second strategy was looking carefully at the function of conjunction. Conjunctions are used to join together words, phrases, or clauses. It corresponds to Najamuddin (2020), who carefully examines the function of a conjunction; a sentence can be understood clearly when it is written. Furthermore, the significance of providing clear instruction on conjunctions can aid writers in refining their work and structuring their ideas (Alawerdy & Alalwi, 2022). Conversely, the reasons why conjunctions are misused include a lack of structure or sequence, inadequate knowledge about conjunctions, inadequate practice and vocabulary, and a lack of understanding of the differences between the purposes of each conjunction (Riadi et al., 2023). For the reasons outlined above, it is believed that students will benefit less from strategies that focus solely on conjunction function; instead, they also need to learn structures, exercises, and a large vocabulary.

The third strategy was editing their work. Students reread their writing to ensure that their sentences still make sense. It follows Pawlak (2018) that proofreading one’s writing is a form of cognitive strategy. On the other hand, English composition cannot be corrected by traditional proofreading (Min, 2021).

The fourth strategy was using Grammarly. Students used Grammarly to examine their grammar, spelling, and punctuation. It corresponds to Fitriana and Nurazni (2022) that Grammarly aids learners in understanding grammar conventions. Inversely, Grammarly has some drawbacks, like the expense of accessing all features and the tendency to encourage students to rely too much on Grammarly (Yousofi, 2022).

The fifth strategy was utilizing an online English monolingual dictionary. The students used Meriam Webster. The monolingual dictionary is a highly useful resource for checking spelling and confirming word definitions (Suryanudin, 2020). Conversely, employing a monolingual dictionary has disadvantages, such as more complex definitions and difficulty picking vocabulary in a single reading (Abbasi et al., 2019).

The sixth strategy was employing Microsoft Word. Microsoft Word recommends showing the red line below the word when students make mistakes. Due to their grammatical weaknesses and limited exposure to the target
language, spelling and grammar checks are two of Microsoft Word’s few functions most commonly used by students (Chandra & Yuyun, 2018; Shadiev & Feng, 2023). On the flip side, Microsoft Office has the potential to exacerbate depressive and anxious feelings (Zaini, 2018). Although Grammarly and Virtual Writing Tutor perform better than Microsoft Word, none of the online grammar checkers can be trusted to provide in-depth analysis of a student’s work, so students cannot rely on them to provide in-depth criticism of their compositions (John & Woll, 2020).

The seventh strategy was learning more about spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Shweba and Mujiyanto (2017) reported learning and following spelling, capitalization, and punctuation rules can lead to high-quality writing to construct a meaningful paragraph. In contrast, some students believe that learning spelling, punctuation, and capitalization from textbooks is insufficient and that instead of merely receiving teacher explanations and examples from student textbooks, they also need to be supported by digital resources such as training videos and other digital text resources (Ivanova et al., 2022).

To sum up, students encounter challenges in four different areas of academic writing, including structure, ideas development, vocabulary, and grammar, and grammar presents the biggest challenge. They use four manual strategies, including reading scholarly articles, learning conjunctions, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, and revising their work. They also employ three automatic strategies: Grammarly, a monolingual dictionary, and Microsoft Word.

Conclusion

The present research objectives were to uncover the frequent difficulties of academic writing and the coping strategies faced by EFL students. The findings displayed four aspects of academic writing difficulties: structure, ideas development, vocabulary, and grammar. The grammar difficulty becomes their challenging part. They employ seven specific strategies to get beyond grammar. First, by reading research papers, students can learn the grammar structure. Second, learning various conjunctions can create cohesive and cohesive sentences. Third, editing their work by reading aloud makes it easier for them to find grammar errors in their writing. The fourth to sixth strategies are using Grammarly, an online English monolingual dictionary, and Microsoft Word to correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation. The last strategy is learning spelling,
capitalization, and punctuation so others can easily understand their paragraph construction.

The significance of the findings is that undergraduate EFL learners can be more sensitive to the frequent difficulties they often face and can overcome their problems in writing research articles. There are several limitations in this research. First, there was a lack of samples who completed the questionnaire because only students enrolled in the seventh semester filled out the questionnaire. Second, there were only five participants interviewed, all of whom were female. Therefore, there are several recommendations for future research. First, future research could involve larger sample sizes in similar studies. Second, further researchers can interview more participants with an equal number of male and female genders to avoid bias.

The study’s implications will aid in developing academic writing, particularly research articles for undergraduate learners. For students, this research will assist them by being attentive to the difficulties they encounter and the reasons behind those difficulties, enabling them to overcome those challenges in academic writing by employing various tactics. Lecturers might encourage their students to produce research articles by offering extensive feedback and other novel strategies to assist students in learning writing more quickly. So, pedagogical implications are raised by this study.

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ORCID

Sania Alinda Mouli Asnas https://orcid.org/0009-0006-9670-9250
Ika Hidayanti https://orcid.org/0009-0004-0965-9765
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