UNIBRAH : Journal of Education, Social, and Humanities Studies
Volume 1 Number 2, October (2026) | Hal 16-23
DOI: 10.68678/jeshs.v1i2.19



THE STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN EFL ACADEMIC WRITING: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW (SLR)

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Article History

Submitted: 10-09-2026
Revised: 22-10-2026
Accepted: 25-10-2026
Published: 31-10-2026

Keywords:

Keyword 1: academic writing
Keyword 2; EFL
Keyword 3; writing difficulties
Ketwords 4; systematic literature review

Abstract

Academic writing is a complex language skill requiring mastery of linguistic, cognitive, and academic integrity dimensions. The research question in this study is what are the main difficulties faced by students in academic writing based on existing literature?. This study aims to identify the primary obstacles faced by EFL students in academic writing through a systematic literature review approach. In this literature review, the researcher acted as the primary instrument (key instrument) which was independently collecting, reading, documenting and analysing the data from current literature. Based on data synthesis from recent literature (2023 – 2025), the difficulties encountered by students are multidimensional and span three primary domains. Percentage analysis reveals that linguistic and stylistic barriers dominate student challenges, which was led by grammar at 36% and academic style at 32%. Furthermore, vocabulary limitations and paraphrasing/referencing skills contribute equally at 22% each, indicating that restricted academic diction directly impairs students' ability to paraphrase ethically without risking plagiarism. Although idea organization recorded the lowest percentage at 12%, it underscores a significant cognitive load when aligning theoretical ideas with standard structural formats. Overall, these findings highlight the necessity for integrated higher education pedagogical interventions specifically contextual grammar instruction, academic vocabulary expansion, and intensive training in referencing and structural coherence to elevate the quality and integrity of students' scholarly output.

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INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a fundamental productive skill that students must master across various educational stages, ranging from secondary education to higher education institutions. Unlike general or informal writing, academic writing requires higher-order cognitive capabilities. It involves not only advanced language proficiency but also critical thinking, logical argumentation, and the systematic application of writing conventions that comply strictly with scientific principles. In both global and local educational contexts, mastery of academic writing serves as a key indicator of scholarly success and literacy competence. However, recent empirical literature consistently demonstrates that students at various levels continue to experience significant difficulties and obstacles in producing high-quality academic texts.

The literature highlights several core dimensions of academic writing challenges faced by students. Primary among these is the severe limitation in organizing ideas coherently and systematically. Students frequently struggle to construct well-structured paragraphs, formulate persuasive arguments, and synthesize complex literature. Furthermore, obstacles in linguistic competence remain a persistent barrier. Empirical findings indicate that students face recurring difficulties in formal linguistic aspects, including the appropriate selection of academic vocabulary,

mastery of varied sentence structures, and grammatical precision. These linguistic limitations directly impair the overall clarity, rigor, and scholarly quality of their writing (Nurjadi , et al., 2025).

Beyond basic language proficiency and structural organization, compiling comprehensive literature reviews represents a particularly formidable challenge, especially for graduate-level students. Developing a literature review requires sophisticated synthesis rather than mere summarization. For instance, recent research investigating students across two state universities revealed that learners encountered substantial hurdles in identifying relevant subtopics, locating high-quality scholarly sources, synthesizing prior research findings, and establishing strong, coherent arguments within the literature review section (Satriani et al., 2024).

In addition, (Nurjadi , et al., 2025) remarked that the factors underlying these writing difficulties are multifaceted, encompassing both internal and external domains. Internally, students are often affected by psychological and cognitive barriers, such as high writing anxiety, insufficient critical thinking skills, and low intrinsic motivation. She also added that externally, the pedagogical environment plays a critical role; ineffective mentorship or guidance from educators, combined with restricted access to quality academic resources and scientific databases, exacerbates students' writing struggles (Nurjadi , et al., 2025).

In response to these pervasive challenges, recent scholar underscores the necessity of implementing structured and pedagogical interventions to alleviate writing barriers. Evidence suggests that explicit instructional strategies such as pre-writing planning techniques, systematic peer and instructor feedback, the integration of visual writing aids (e.g., mind mapping), and embedding targeted writing workshops into the curriculum significantly enhance students' academic writing proficiency and confidence (Nurjadi , et al., 2025).

Given the evolving demands of academic literacy and the persistent challenges encountered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, conducting a comprehensive literature study remains highly critical and relevant. Synthesizing current empirical evidence provides valuable insight into the core obstacles students face and highlights actionable strategies to improve writing instruction across diverse educational settings. To address this need, this article provides a systematic literature review designed to identify the main obstacles faced by EFL students in academic writing and analyze the contributing factors influencing these difficulties. In order to achieve the objective, this study addresses the following research questions: What are the main difficulties faced by students in academic writing based on existing literature?.

Themes of Academic Writing Difficulties

Academic writing is a fundamental skill for students at various levels of education. However, many studies found that most students experience significant difficulties in developing their writing skills, especially in the context of academic writing. These difficulties are related to many aspects, ranging from understanding the material to be written to the technical ability to compose clear, coherent writing that complies with academic rules.

Linguistic Difficulties

Another difficulty often faced by students is the application of appropriate academic language. (Leki et al., 2010) highlights the great challenge faced by students in mastering academic vocabulary and formal grammar. Students often use vocabulary that is inappropriate or unsuitable for the academic context, which can reduce the quality of their writing. Writers who are unfamiliar with academic language have difficulty mastering complex sentence structures and tend to produce sentences that are too simple or ambiguous, which reduces the depth of their writing.

One of the main areas of difficulty is the hurdle in linguistic aspects, including grammar and academic vocabulary. (Riadil et al., 2023) shows that grammar and academic style are two of the three most significant barriers for EFL learners in academic writing. A comprehensive study by (Alzahrani, 2025) also found that vocabulary, writing organization, paraphrasing, grammar, and references were the most problematic aspects for 48 of the youngest EFL students at a Saudi university.

Academic Structure and Genre

EFL students often have less understanding of the structure of academic texts, including the introduction, literature review, methodology, and other characteristic of academic writing. This is in

line with the research of (Asnas & Hidayanti, 2024), who reported that students come through structural difficulties in many parts of their academic writing.

Organization of Ideas and Text Coherence

One of the main difficulties the students face in academic writing is organizing ideas logically and coherently. (Hayes, 2006) explain in their cognitive theory that writing is a process involving planning, organizing, and revising, all of which require high-level thinking skills. Students often find it difficult to organize their ideas systematically, resulting in poorly structured and difficult-to-understand writing. This often makes it complicated to construct clear arguments that support the main thesis of the paper. Coherence and organization of ideas are other aspects that often pose significant obstacles. (Ihsan & Musdizal, 2025) found that although students were able to generate ideas, they had difficulty organizing those ideas logically and coherently throughout their paragraphs.

Access and Integration of Academic Sources

Writing the literature review section is often a major challenge because students face difficulty in selecting relevant references and synthesizing them effectively for an academic narrative. Research by (Yova Diana, 2021) in an English language study program found obstacles in selecting relevant references, limited access to journals, and references written in a language that was difficult to understand.

Psychological Factors: Writing Anxiety

Writing anxiety is also a common finding in EFL studies. (Pambayun, 2024) reported that most students experience cognitive anxiety when writing in a foreign language, which significantly affects the quality of their writing and their perception of their abilities.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to investigate the primary difficulties and pedagogical strategies associated with academic writing among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007; Snyder, 2019; Snyder et al., 2016). (The SLR approach provides a structured, transparent, and reproducible methodology to synthesize existing empirical evidence from published literature, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the research topic (Page et al., 2021).

Subjects and Samples (Data Sources)

The subjects of this study are reputable scientific documents and literature containing the results of empirical research related to the challenges of academic writing. Literature sampling was conducted using purposive sampling based on the following inclusion and exclusion criteria:

Inclusion Criteria:

1. Indexed national and international scientific journal articles and relevant reference books published between 2023 and 2025.
2. The discussion focuses on at least one aspect of academic writing challenges, such as language (grammar and vocabulary), organization of ideas, writing style and citation (academic style, paraphrasing, and referencing), or holistic writing challenges.
3. Must have a full-text version available via open access.

Exclusion Criteria:

1. Publications that present only an abstract without including an in-depth report of research results or findings.
2. Literature that does not address the context of academic writing at the secondary or higher education levels.

Data Collection Instrument

In this literature review, the researcher acted as the primary instrument (key instrument), independently collecting, reading, documenting, and analyzing the data. To ensure a systematic data collection process, the researcher utilized the following supporting instruments:

1. Literature Search Protocol: Guidelines for searching scientific databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and SINTA using a combination of keywords: “academic writing difficulties,” “grammar

obstacles in writing," "organization in academic writing," and "paraphrasing and referencing challenges."

2. Data Extraction Matrix: A worksheet in the form of a table used to classify key information from each selected study, including: author's name, year of publication, title, original research sample/subjects, aspects of the identified challenges, and main findings.
3. Reference Management Software: Mendeley or Zotero software was used to automatically organize and manage citations and the reference list in a validated manner.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data collected from all the literature was analyzed qualitatively using a combination of Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis techniques. The data analysis steps were carried out as follows:

1. Data Reduction: Eliminating literature that did not meet the criteria and screening specific findings relevant to the aspects of writing challenges.
2. Thematic Categorization: Grouping the synthesized data into four main themes, namely:
   Language-Related Challenges (Grammar and vocabulary).
   Complexity of Organizing Ideas (Structure and coherence of the text).
   Adherence to Academic Style and Citation Ethics (Use of formal language, paraphrasing, and references).
   Holistic Nature of Academic Writing Challenges (Comprehensive Interconnections Among Aspects).
3. Narrative Synthesis: Critically combining, comparing, and summarizing findings from various researchers to describe causal relationships, pedagogical implications, and the cognitive load experienced by learners.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Finding

Quantitative Data: Summary of Findings

Many studies collect quantitative data through questionnaires to measure students' perceptions of their writing difficulties. The following is a summary of findings from several studies that are numerical in nature:

Table 1. Summary of Academic Writing Difficulty Burden (Average Score/Reported Problems)

Main Issues	Reference Study	Key Findings
Grammar	Riadil (2023)	9 out of 25 students had difficulty with grammar
Academic Style	Riadil (2023)	8 students reported style barriers
Organization	Riadil (2023)	3 students experienced organizational barriers
All aspects	Alamyar (2024)	All aspects of academic writing
Vocabulary	Alzahrani (2025)	Including significant obstacles
Paraphrasing & Referencing	Alzahrani (2025)	Common obstacles
organization	Yulandari & Suryadi (2025)	Students find it difficult to organize ideas

Source: compiled based on quantitative studies analyzed.

The table above summarizes the main issues in academic writing along with key findings from several reference studies. A study by (Riadil et al., 2023) highlights that grammar is the most prominent difficulty faced by students (9 out of 25 students), followed by academic style barriers (8 students) and organization barriers (3 students). Meanwhile, (Alamyar, 2024) reported that difficulties encompass all aspects of academic writing. Furthermore, (Alzahrani, 2025) identified vocabulary,

paraphrasing, and referencing as common and significant obstacles. Lastly, (Yulandari & Suryadi, 2025) emphasized that students particularly struggle with organizing their ideas effectively.

Graph: Distribution of Academic Writing Barriers

The following descriptive graph shows the proportion of academic writing issues based on the findings of *Riadil (2023), Mariam & Alamyar (2024), Alzahrani (2025)*, and *Yulandari & Suryadi (2025)*, two studies with numerical data mapping of the problems available.

Table 1. Proportion of EFL Writing Barriers (Percentage of respondents reporting difficulties)

No	Barriers	%
1	Grammar	36
2	Academic Style	32
3	Organization	12
4	Vocabulary	22
5	Paraphrase/Ref.	22

Note: Percentage representation based on a combination of data from two main studies.

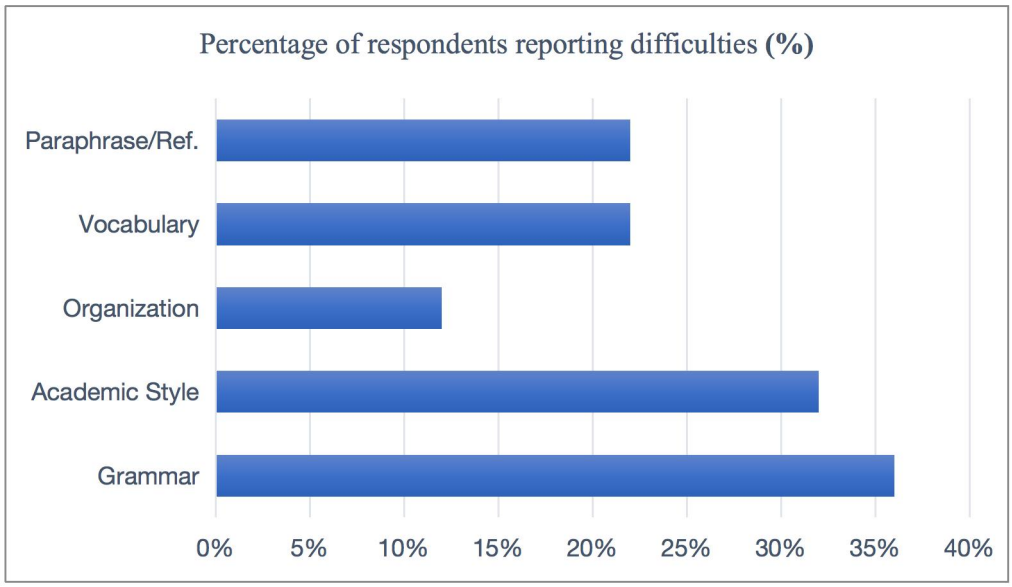


Chart 1. Proportion of EFL Writing Barriers

Based on the percentage data presented in the table, there is a clear distribution of the various barriers faced by students in academic writing. Grammar emerges as the most dominant technical obstacle, accounting for the highest proportion at 36%, which highlights that mastering grammatical rules remains the primary challenge for students when producing academic texts. Following closely in second place, Academic Style accounts for 32% of the reported barriers, indicating that students frequently struggle with adopting the appropriate tone, formality, and sentence structures required in academic discourse. Meanwhile, Vocabulary and Paraphrasing/Referencing (Paraphrase/Ref.) present an equal level of difficulty, each representing 22% of the total barriers, whereas Organization records the lowest percentage among all categories at 12%. Overall, the data suggests that linguistic and stylistic issues pose significantly greater challenges to students than structural idea organization

Discussion

Academic writing is a complex language skill that requires mastery of various linguistic, cognitive, and academic ethical aspects. Based on a synthesis of data from various sources (2023–2025), the challenges students face in writing scholarly papers are not singular but multidimensional. Key findings from previous studies provide a comprehensive overview of the challenges experienced by novice academic writers.

Academic Writing Difficulty Burden

1. Linguistic Challenges: Grammar and Vocabulary

Language proficiency is the cornerstone of academic writing. Based on the synthesized data, linguistic components remain one of the most significant challenges:

- Grammar Challenges: Riadil (2023) reported that 9 out of 25 students experienced significant difficulties in mastering grammar. Grammatical errors not only disrupt the aesthetic quality of a sentence but also have the potential to create ambiguity in meaning and undermine the logical flow the author intends to convey.
- Vocabulary Limitations: Alzahrani (2025) emphasizes that limited vocabulary poses significant obstacles for students. The inability to choose precise scientific terms often causes academic arguments to sound superficial or lack substance.

The interaction between these grammatical weaknesses and vocabulary limitations creates barriers to effectively conveying abstract ideas.

2. The Complexity of Organizing Ideas (Organization)

The organization of ideas is a critical aspect that determines the readability and coherence of an academic paper:

- Riadil (2023) noted that three students explicitly experienced difficulties in organizing their writing.
- In line with these findings, Yulandari and Suryadi (2025) identified that difficulty in allocating and structuring ideas is a central issue faced by students.

These problems with organizing writing reflect the high cognitive load on students when they must align theoretical ideas with standard writing structures.

3. Adherence to Academic Style and Citation Ethics (Academic Style, Paraphrasing, & Referencing)

In addition to technical language issues, academic writing requires a deep understanding of writing conventions and academic ethics:

- Academic Writing Style: Riadil (2023) found that 8 students reported difficulties in applying academic writing style. This is generally due to students' lack of familiarity with distinguishing between informal language and the objective, straightforward style of scholarly writing.
- Paraphrasing and Citation (Paraphrasing & Referencing): Alzahrani (2025) categorized difficulties with paraphrasing and citation as common obstacles. Difficulty in paraphrasing effectively often triggers concerns about plagiarism, while also highlighting the need for a better understanding of literature synthesis techniques.

4. The Holistic Nature of Academic Writing Challenges (All Aspects)

An interesting finding was presented by Mariam and Alamyar (2024), which shows that the challenges of academic writing encompass all aspects of academic writing. This indicates that these barriers do not exist in isolation but are interconnected. A lack of vocabulary, for example, directly hinders the process of paraphrasing and the application of appropriate academic style.

Distribution of Academic Writing Barriers

1. The Dominance of Linguistic and Stylistic Barriers (Grammar & Academic Style)

The results of the data analysis show that grammar and academic style are the two most dominant barriers:

- Grammar: Ranks highest with a percentage of 36%. The high proportion of grammar-related barriers underscores that mastery of standard sentence structure, tenses, and subject-verb agreement remains the most fundamental technical challenge for the majority of students.

- Academic Style: Ranks second at 32%. This indicates that most students find it difficult to apply a formal, objective, and straightforward style of language, and tend to be influenced by informal writing patterns or colloquial language.

The combination of these two aspects (totaling 68%) shows that the majority of academic writing challenges stem from the formulation and execution of language at the level of formal sentences and discourse.

2. Challenges in Organizing Ideas (Organization)

The aspect of organizing writing (organization) recorded the lowest percentage among all categories, at 12%. Although the lowest, this figure still indicates that some students still face challenges in structuring a logical flow of thought, designing an outline, and creating coherent transitions between paragraphs.

3. Lexical Challenges and Academic Ethics (Vocabulary & Paraphrasing/Citation)

The percentage of barriers in the intermediate category was attributed to aspects of vocabulary and citation techniques:

- Vocabulary: Accounts for 22%. Limited academic vocabulary hinders students from expressing their ideas in a specific and varied manner.
- Paraphrasing and Citation (Paraphrase/Ref.): This accounts for an equivalent percentage, namely 22%. This identical proportion makes conceptual sense, given that paraphrasing skills are highly dependent on the richness of one's vocabulary. Students with limited vocabulary tend to struggle to synthesize source texts without falling into plagiarism.

Interaction between Linguistic and Cognitive Barriers

Many studies confirm that linguistic barriers, such as grammar and vocabulary, do not stand alone but are often related to students' ability to organize ideas and text structure. For example, vocabulary limitations can slow down the writing process, which affects paragraph coherence.

The Role of Instruction and the Learning Environment

Research by (Yulandari & Suryadi, 2025) shows that a teaching approach that combines scaffolding, feedback, and the use of technology can help reduce structural and linguistic barriers in academic writing.

Pedagogical Implications

From the above literature review, several important implications for academic writing instruction practices are:

1. Integrating Academic Vocabulary Teaching: Vocabulary development needs to be emphasized as a core part of writing instruction.
2. Focus on Genre Structure: Teachers need to explicitly teach the structure of academic texts so that students understand important sections such as the introduction, literature review, and discussion.
3. Support for Writing Anxiety: Interventions to reduce anxiety, such as peer feedback and coping strategies, need to be provided.
4. Use of Technology and Feedback: Tools such as Grammarly, Quillbot, and reference software can help, but must be combined with strong instruction.

CONCLUSION

Based on the synthesis of data from various literature studies and the percentage analysis of academic writing barriers, several key conclusions emerge. First, linguistic and stylistic barriers dominate student difficulties, with grammar accounting for 36% and academic style representing 32% of the reported obstacles (Riadil, 2023), together comprising more than half of the total challenges. Second, lexical obstacles are closely linked to academic integrity, as both vocabulary limitations and paraphrasing/referencing challenges account for 22% each (Alzahrani, 2025), suggesting that restricted vocabulary directly hinders ethical paraphrasing. Third, despite idea organization registering the lowest proportion at 12% (Riadil, 2023; Yulandari & Suryadi, 2025), findings across studies (e.g., Mariam & Alamyar, 2024) confirm that academic writing obstacles are inherently holistic and interrelated. Overall, these insights highlight the necessity for structured higher education pedagogical

interventions specifically focusing on contextual grammar instruction, academic vocabulary enrichment, and intensive training in referencing and structural coherence to improve students' scholarly output.

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