Academic Writing Challenges and Strategies among Indonesian EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study investigates the challenges, attitudes, and strategies of Indonesian EFL learners in academic writing, focusing on EFL learners from Central Kalimantan, a context that has received limited scholarly attention. Employing a mixed-method design, data were collected from 163 undergraduate students through questionnaires and interviews. The findings revealed that learners experienced difficulties in academic writing, with sentence structure, grammar, and topic familiarization emerging as the most challenging aspects. The degree of difficulty significantly varied across gender and academic year, with female and sophomore students reporting greater challenges. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated generally positive attitudes toward academic writing, considering it essential for their academic and professional development. The participants reported various strategies to overcome difficulties, such as initiating self- and peer-review, and implementing extensive use of AI tools like Grammarly, QuillBot, and ChatGPT. While these digital tools were perceived as beneficial in enhancing accuracy and organization, the participants also expressed caution regarding overreliance. The results emphasize the importance of developing context-specific strategies to strengthen writing practice and grammar instruction. The study contributes a contextualized understanding of EFL learners' academic writing experiences and emphasizes the balance between human effort and technological support.

Keywords: academic writing attitude, academic writing challenges, academic writing strategies, AI-assisted writing

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a fundamental skill for university students, as many academic tasks require well-structured essays (Bailey, 2003). Unlike other types of writing, academic writing is particularly challenging because it demands a formal and serious tone (Oshima & Houge, 2006). Most importantly, academic writing requires critical thinking (CT) skills. To produce well-structured writing, students must first engage in critical reading to analyze relevant information about their topic; they then need to synthesize their ideas and present them in a clear, organized, and coherent (Oshima & Houge, 2006), making the process both rigorous and intellectually demanding. This challenge seems to be intensified in a foreign language (L2) setting because English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners must navigate their language proficiency while engaging in critical reading and synthesizing information.

Despite its complexity, research have shown that academic writing offers significant cognitive benefits, particularly in enhancing mental processes. Hu (2017) argues that writing is an effective medium for promoting critical thinking (CT) as it involves a complex analysis and reasoning process. Supporting this, correlational studies revealed a positive and significant relationship between L2 writing skills and CT (Afshar et al., 2017; Nejad et al., 2022; Sharadgah et al., 2019). Furthermore, writing proficiency is closely linked to cognitive

skill development, which, in turn, contributes to more significant academic growth (Curtis, 2019).

Although L2 academic writing offers numerous cognitive and educational benefits, it remains particularly challenging for Indonesian university students. They reported organization, coherence, cohesion, vocabulary, grammar, lack of interest, anxiety, and time as the challenges (Bulqiyah et al., 2021; Toba et al., 2019). Previous studies on L2 academic writing difficulties in Indonesia have primarily focused on either internal or external factors, and mainly were conducted in more developed areas, such as Java and East Kalimantan (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Bulqiyah et al., 2021; Toba et al., 2019), while limited attention has been given to less-represented regions like Central Kalimantan. Additionally, most studies applied qualitative approach to describe the challenges (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020).

Therefore, present study adopts a mixed-methods approach to explore not only the perceived challenges and attitude of L2 academic writing but also the strategies employed by EFL students in Central Kalimantan. By focusing on language learners in Palangka Raya, Central Kalimantan, a context that remains largely unexplored, and by combining quantitative and qualitative data, this research provides a more comprehensive and contextual perspective. Specifically, it aims to explore Indonesian EFL learners' academic writing difficulties through the following research questions:

1. What are the main challenges Indonesian EFL learners encounter in academic writing? Do the challenges differ by gender and academic year?
2. What are Indonesian EFL learners' attitudes toward academic writing? Do the attitudes differ by gender and academic year?
3. How are Indonesian EFL learners' strategies to overcome the academic writing challenges?

LITERATURE REVIEW
Academic Writing Challenges in Global EFL/ESL Contexts
Academic writing challenges appear to vary across settings. In Saudi Arabia, English as a Second Language (ESL) students struggled throughout the writing process due to a lack of knowledge of terminology, creativity, awareness of the writing process, poor peer review, and over-reliance on teacher feedback (Farooqui, 2023). ESL learners in Saudi Arabia also reported encountering challenges in spelling, understanding, and topic familiarity, as well as mastering grammar (Khadawardi, 2022), supporting Bailey's (2003) assertion that academic writing is particularly challenging for non-native English speakers because it requires high linguistic proficiency. Consequently, students with limited English proficiency often struggle to demonstrate CT in writing (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020; Pei et al., 2017).

Similar problems appear in other Asian countries. Pakistani students struggled with cohesion and coherence, topic selection, referencing and citations, and language usage (Mahmood, 2020). Furthermore, among postgraduate international students from Korea, China, Taiwan, and Oman, 72% perceived academic writing as difficult, mainly due to coherence, developing voice, finding relevant topics, and handling sources. The findings suggest that writing becomes even more challenging when students have the option to choose their own topics.

Studies in Africa confirm that such L2 writing challenges are not limited to Asian contexts. In Ethiopia, students faced time constraints, limited language competence, and

inadequate resources, yet demonstrated a positive attitude when using the questioning method (Seyoum et al., 2022). Taye & Mengesha (2024) further highlighted dissatisfaction with the duration of writing in the classroom as a challenge that needs to be addressed. The findings indicate that L2 writing is a time-intensive process, as students must carefully evaluate source material and transform it into their own text. The challenge is likely to be compounded when source access is limited.

EFL learners in Indonesia appear to face comparable problems. For example, Ariyanti & Fitriana (2017) reported that students in English Education Department struggled significantly with grammar, coherence, and cohesion, large class sizes and limited instructional time. In Palangka Raya, Yulitriana & Emeral (2024) found that Indonesian EFL students struggled with academic writing due to unfamiliarity with the topic. Regarding this finding, they suggest EFL learners must explore multiple credible sources to obtain a more comprehensive understanding about the topic. These challenges are shaped not only by linguistic and cognitive factors but also by affective variables such as interest, confidence, anxiety, and motivation (Seyoum et al., 2022). Studies across Indonesia show that low motivation, anxiety, and insufficient instruction contribute to poor writing performance (Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020; Bulqiyah et al., 2021; Toba et al., 2019).

Affective factors seem to strongly influence learners' engagement. Digital tools can enhance writing self-efficacy and motivation by fostering active participation (Bekturova et al., 2024). Conversely, when students do not view writing as equally important as other skills, they tend to neglect it (Emeral & Farid, 2024). Emeral & Yulitriana (2025) reinforce this, finding that Indonesian learners strongly prefer receptive activities like listening to songs or watching subtitled videos for extramural English, highlighting the difficulty of fostering writing skills in local EFL contexts.

Despite the growing body of research on academic writing challenges among EFL learners in Indonesia, most existing studies tend to focus either on linguistic difficulties (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Toba et al., 2019) or on affective factors in isolation (Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020; Bulqiyah et al., 2021; Toba et al., 2019). These studies were also primarily conducted in major urban centres, such as Java and East Kalimantan, with little attention paid to less-represented regions, such as Central Kalimantan. Moreover, previous research predominantly employed a qualitative approach.

EFL Learners' Strategy in Academic Writing
The internal and external challenges discussed above have led EFL learners to employ various strategies in academic writing, ranging from seeking feedback from teachers or peers to using AI-assisted writing. However, over the past few years, as technology has advanced rapidly, AI-assisted writing tools have become increasingly popular among EFL learners.

A study by Al-Sofi (2024) reported that EFL university students in Saudi Arabia largely agreed ChatGPT facilitates their L2 academic writing, particularly by helping to produce research texts, synthesize literature, refine academic work, and proofread. Similarly, Chinese students using ChatGPT significantly exhibited better results than the control group in organization, coherence, grammar, and vocabulary (Song & Song, 2023).

As grammar and vocabulary is widely mentioned as one of challenges in L2 academic writing, Grammarly, another type of AI, has become a reliable grammar checker used by EFL learners. Ecuadorian participants reported that using Grammarly improved their English

writing skills, finding the user-friendly tool effective for providing feedback on grammar, punctuation, mechanics, and style, which enhanced their overall writing accuracy and made them willing to use it again (Lorena & Ximena, 2019).

Although AI tools are evidently effective in improving the quality of L2 academic writing, their use must be cautious. Despite these benefits, excessive AI reliance may undermine academic integrity, creativity, and critical thinking, along with the risk of inaccurate content, overreliance, and plagiarism (Al-Sofi, 2024). Yan & Zhang (2024) argued that only learners with higher language proficiency were able to effectively engage cognitively with ChatGPT's automated feedback by applying metacognitive regulatory strategies. The studies suggest that critical analysis in AI use is crucial for minimizing errors and maximizing learning.

METHOD

A mixed-methods was employed to investigate Indonesian EFL learners' challenges in L2 academic writing. The method allows the researchers to gain both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a better understanding of a research problem (Creswell, 2012). Quantitative data provide information about EFL learners' main challenges in L2 academic writing and their attitudes toward it. Meanwhile, qualitative data provide insights into EFL learners' coping strategies in L2 academic writing.

The participants of this study were students from the English Language Education program at a university in Palangka Raya, Indonesia. The study included first-, second-, and third-year students from the English Language Education program in Palangka Raya, Indonesia. Convenience sampling was used to select participants for the survey, as they were selected based on their willingness to participate (Creswell, 2012). Meanwhile, purposive sampling was applied to select interview participants, ensuring representation of specific characteristics relevant to the study (Ary et al., 2013). The interviewees included two students from each year level.

A Likert-scale questionnaire adapted from Khadawardi (2022) examined learners' writing challenges and attitudes. Instrument validity was reviewed by the researchers to confirm that it measured what it was intended to measure (Ary et al., 2013). The reliability coefficients for L2 academic writing challenges and attitudes were 0.78 and 0.68, respectively, indicating acceptable reliability (Creswell, 2012). For qualitative data, a semi-structured interview was conducted. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was employed by sharing summaries of interview interpretations with participants for confirmation and feedback (McKim, 2023).

Data were collected via an online questionnaire distributed through Google Forms. The questionnaire included a detailed explanation of the study's purpose and a consent form to ensure participants fully understood the nature of the research and that their responses would remain confidential. Participants had seven days to respond. Furthermore, two students from each semester were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews aimed at exploring their coping strategies in dealing with academic writing challenges. This qualitative approach enabled a deeper understanding of participants' personal experiences, providing rich, contextual data to complement the questionnaire findings.

To analyse the scale data, descriptive statistics and inferential statistics (Mann Whitney and Kruskal Wallis-H) were conducted in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 29.

Meanwhile, a theme-based analysis was conducted for the interview analysis. First, the participants' responses were thoroughly read, tabulated, and coded using NVivo 12. The coding process used an in vivo strategy, meaning the codes were derived directly from the participant's responses (Creswell, 2012). Finally, the themes were generated to interpret the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
FINDINGS
Demographic Variables of the Study Participants
Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 163 participants, with 21.5% males and 78.5% females. In terms of academic year, 53.4% were first-year students, 17.2% were second-year students, and 29.4% were third-year students.

Table 1.
Demographic Variables of the Participants

Demographic Variable	Frequency	Percentage
	n	%
Gender		
Male	35	21.5
Female	128	78.5
Year of Study		
Freshman	87	53.4
Sophomore	28	17.2
Junior	48	29.4

L2 academic writing challenges encountered by Indonesian EFL Learners
A total of 10 items were used to collect data on students' perceived challenges in academic writing. The mean score for students' perceived challenges in academic writing was 33.37 (*SD* = 5.20), with scores ranging from 17 to 48.

Table 2.
L2 Academic Writing Challenges

	Descriptive Statistics						
	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean		Std. Deviation
Writing Challenge	163	31	17	48	33.37	.407	5.196

As shown in Figure 1, most participants (76%) identified sentence structure as their greatest writing challenge, while 62% a noted that frequent grammar errors hinder their performance. The finding aligns with responses to item 9, where 61% of students expressed a lack of confidence in their grammatical accuracy. Furthermore, 75% of participants reported spending significant time understanding the topic before writing. Although organization was not the main issue, over half still struggled with it.
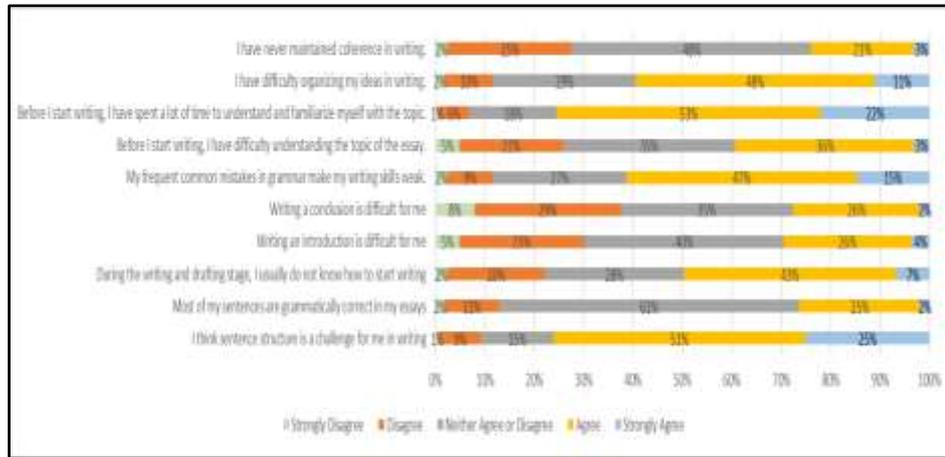
Figure 1. Frequency Distribution of Students' Perceived Challenges

The results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (Table 3) indicated that one group was not normally distributed ($p<.05$). Consequently, non-parametric analysis was carried out for subsequent group comparisons.

Table 3.

Test of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			
	Gender	Statistic	df	Sig.
Writing Challenge	1	.109	35	.200*
	2	.094	128	.007

Mann-Whitney U analysis (Table 4) indicated that females ($M = 88.32$) showed significantly higher challenges in academic writing than males ($M = 58.9$), $U = 1431.50$, $Z = -3.27$, $p = .001$.

Table 4.

L2 Academic Writing Challenge Scores by Gender

Test Statistics	
	L2 Academic Writing Challenge
Mann-Whitney U	1431.500
Z	-3.274
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.001

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (Table 5) on students' academic writing challenges across years of study indicated that the second group scores was not normally distributed ($p<.05$).

Table 5.
Test of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			
	Year of Study	Statistic	df	Sig.
Writing Challenge	1	.065	87	.200[*]
	2	.287	28	.000
Academic Writing Challenge	3	.098	48	.200[*]

A Kruskal-Wallis H test (see Table 6) revealed a statistically significant difference on academic writing challenge scores across three semester groups, $H(2)=9.47$, $p<.05$.

Table 6.
L2 Academic Writing Challenge Scores by Year of Study

	L2 Academic Writing Challenge
Kruskal-Wallis H	9.468
df	2
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.009

Figure 2 showed that sophomore students ($M = 106.32$) reported significantly higher writing challenge scores than first-year students and juniors. However, no significant difference was found between freshman ($M = 78.99$) and junior students ($M = 73.27$). These results suggest that sophomore students experience greater writing challenges compared to first- and third-year students.
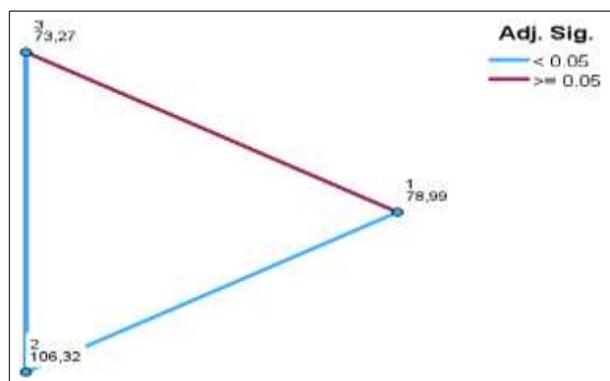

Figure 2. Students' Perceived Challenges in L2 Academic Writing by Year of the Study

Indonesian EFL learners' attitudes toward academic writing
The analysis of 11 items revealed that the mean score of students' writing attitude was 39.23 ($SD = 4.28$), with scores ranging from 23 to 55 (see Table 7). The data indicated that, despite some challenges in writing, students generally held a positive attitude toward the writing process, with a score of 71.33%.

Table 7.

Descriptive Statistics of L2 Academic Writing Attitude

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean		Std. Deviation
				Descriptive Statistics			
Writing Attitude	163	32	23	55	39.23	.335	4.279

As depicted in Figure 3, 90% of students perceived writing as an important ability for their future career, which aligns with the finding that 82% agreed English writing is an essential skill to master. Furthermore, online searching emerged as one of the most popular pre-writing activities, reaching as high as 81%. Interestingly, 54% of students watched videos as references for the topic. In addition, 77% of the students appreciated peer assessment.
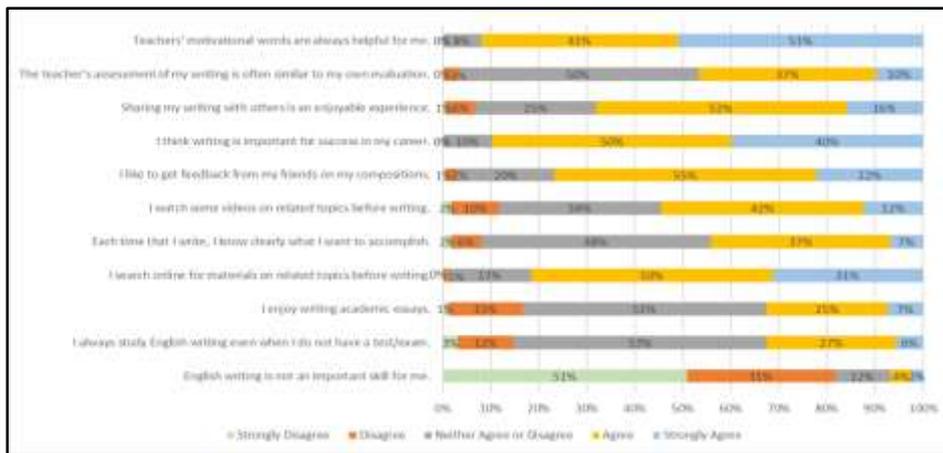

Figure 3. Frequency Distribution of Students' Attitudes towards L2 Academic Writing

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov analysis (see Table 8) revealed that the academic writing attitude across gender groups was not normally distributed ($p<.05$).

Table 8.

Test of Normality

		Kolmogorov-Smirnov		
	Gender	Statistic	df	Sig.
Writing Attitude	1	.099	35	.200[*]
	2	.090	128	.013

The Mann-Whitney U test (see Table 9) showed there was no statistically significant difference in academic writing attitude scores between male ($M = 90.64$) and female students ($M = 79.64$), $U = 1937.50$, $Z = -1.23$, p = .220, suggesting that gender did not significantly influence students' attitudes toward academic writing.

Table 9.

L2 Academic Writing Attitude Scores by Gender

Test Statistics	
	L2 Academic Writing Attitude
Mann-Whitney U	1937.500
Z	-1.228
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.220

According to Table 10, the academic writing attitude scores across years of study were found not to be normally distributed.

Table 10.

Test of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			
	Year of Study	Statistic	df	Sig.
Writing Attitude	1	.101	87	.027
	2	.182	28	.018
Academic Writing Challenge	3	.141	48	.018

The Kruskal–Wallis H test was employed (see Table 11). A significant difference was found among the three groups, $H(2) = 7.45$, p = .024, indicating that students' academic writing attitudes varied by year of study.

Table 11.

L2 Academic Writing Attitude Scores by Year of Study

	Academic Writing Challenge
Kruskal-Wallis H	7.453
df	2
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.024

In figure 4, revealed that junior students ($M = 66.76$) had significantly lower academic writing attitude scores than the freshmen ($M = 87.00$). No significant differences were found between first- and second-year students ($M = 92.59$) or between sophomore and junior students.
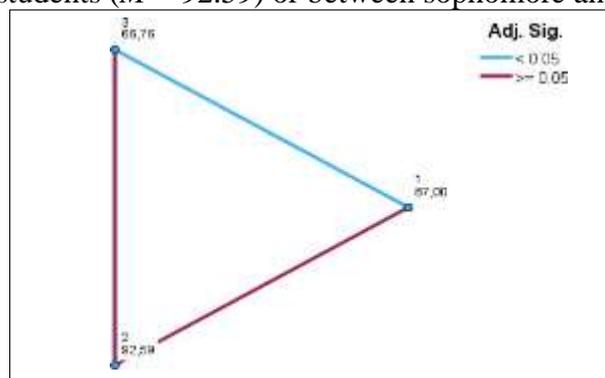

Figure 4. L2 Academic Writing Attitude by Year of the Study

Indonesian EFL learners' strategy to overcome academic writing challenges
EFL learners in Indonesia have developed varied strategies across the writing phases, likely stemming from their positive attitudes toward writing.

Topic Familiarization
The participants asserted that they try to familiarise themselves with the topic through various types of media before writing.
"As I am currently working on my own articles, I regularly read journal publications. To find relevant sources, I sometimes use databases such as Elsevier's Scopus and DOAJ." said Student 1.

"*I usually obtain information from Google Scholar, particularly from journal articles*," Student 4 expressed.

Student 5 claimed, "I use *ResearchGate*."

The result suggests that some participants are familiar with credible online sources. Nonetheless, it was also found that participants use AI chatbot in the pre-writing stage, highlighting difficulties in topic familiarization. Student 4 said,
"*I usually begin by searching for information on the internet, and if further clarification needed, I also consult AI tools such as ChatGPT.*"

Student 1 also stated, "*When I am unable to find the information I need, I consult AI such as Perplexity.*"

Lacking Practice
The participants tend to spend less time on L2 writing in their spare time. If any, they seem to do it for writing short captions on social media, which takes a small amount of time.
Student 4 said, "*I occasionally write in English during my free time, such as in my personal diary. I also frequently use English on social media platforms like Instagram through captions, posts, or stories, as well as in WhatsApp stories.*" "*So far, I have not engaged in writing for pleasure, as I do not particularly enjoy it. I tend to prefer reading over writing,*" stated student 5.

The Awareness of the Writing Process
They stated that their main goal in drafting was to generate ideas, indicating an understanding that writing fluency is the priority at this stage.

Student 3 stated, "*Usually… I begin by developing and organizing the content, and once I am confident in its organization and flow, I then focus on refining the sentence construction.*"

Student 2 convinced, "*I always ensure that the organization is coherent and aligned with my intended ideas… For sentence construction, I often make use of digital applications to support clarity and accuracy.*"

Grammar and Vocabulary as the Challenge
In congruent with the quantitative findings, the participants argued that grammar and vocabulary are the challenges.

Student 3 claimed that, "*My focus is on identifying and correcting typographical and grammatical errors, as I consistently review and edit texts to ensure accuracy in these aspects.*"

"*My main concern is grammar and spelling, as I am not very proficient in these areas and therefore always check them first,*" Student 5 added.

Student 1 highlighted that, "*For now, in terms of language use, my concern is to incorporate more advanced expressions, aiming for levels such as B2 or C1 whenever possible.*"

Self-review, peer-review, and AI review
As the quantitative data revealed that accuracy in writing is perceived as the most difficult aspect in academic writing, Indonesian EFL learners appear to use various coping strategies. It appears that they always take time to conduct a self-review.

"*Of course, I always conduct a self-review. If I feel that my writing is still lacking in any way, I continue to revise and polish it until I am fully confident that it is ready for submission,*" urged Student 6.

Student 5 also added, "*I used to review my work as many as five times to check for grammatical errors, unclear expressions, or other issues.*"

Besides the self-review, some participants also considered the peer-review.
Student 3 stated that, "S*ometimes I also ask my friends for feedback on whether my writing is good or if there is anything that should be added. I usually seek their input after completing a draft.*"

"*In fact, it is quite often,*" added Student 5.

These days, it seems almost impossible to separate students from AI, as technology has become an integral part of their environment. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the participants also relied on AI when polishing their final drafts. The most frequently used AI tools among participants seem to be Grammarly and Quillbot.

Student 4 claimed that, "*I also make use of Grammarly for checking my writing. For translation, I usually rely on DeepL Translate, while for the final review, I turn to Grammarly. Among the tools I use, Grammarly and QuillBot are the ones I rely on most frequently.*"

Student 1 said, "*I usually complete my writing first and then check it using Grammarly or QuillBot. I also consult a website called WordHippo, for instance, to refine some words.*"
"*I use QuillBot and Grammarly to check whether my grammar is correct. I also use thesaurus to look up synonyms,*" added student 5.

As the majority of participants use AI to polish their work, it seems undeniable that they demonstrate a positive attitude toward AI use in writing.

Student 6 argued, "*It is indeed beneficial. However, excessive reliance on AI may hinder the development of our own thinking ability. Therefore, I would say we need to combine our own*

thoughts and ideas with AI support."

Student 1 asserted, "*I find it very helpful, as sometimes I struggle to understand certain sentences when reading an article. In such cases, I copy the sentence into ChatGPT, which explains. After that, I construct my own sentences based on the explanation.*"

"*It is quite helpful, but it can also disrupt the coherence of our writing. If the suggestions remain within the scope of what we intend to express, the tool is handy. However, if we fail to review the output carefully, the ideas may become scattered,*" highlighted student 2.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study offer a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges, attitudes, and strategies of Indonesian EFL learners in academic writing. At the pre-writing stage, most participants reported spending considerable time understanding and familiarizing themselves with the topic, confirming previous studies (Khadawardi, 2022; Yulitriana & Emeral, 2024). Qualitative data revealed that participants used a variety of media sources for pre-writing, including journal articles and AI chatbots like ChatGPT and Perplexity, a finding consistent with survey results that identified online searching as one of the most frequent pre-writing activities.

Apart from completing the task, the interview result indicated that the participants appeared to spend less time practising actual writing. This finding supports the results of (Seyoum et al., 2022; Toba et al., 2019), who similarly reported that students tend to lack sufficient writing practice. Moreover, many participants stated that they watched videos as supplementary references to enhance their understanding of the topic, corroborating with (Emeral & Yulitriana, 2025), who reported that audio-visual activities are among the most popular extramural English activities compared to writing.

Although students prioritized ideas and content in their writing, they acknowledged the essential role of grammar and vocabulary, which they believed should not be overlooked. Quantitative data confirmed that sentence structure and grammar were the most challenging aspects (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Bulqiyah et al., 2021; Toba et al., 2019). Low confidence in grammatical accuracy led many to spend additional time revising, highlighting the need for sufficient writing practice and feedback opportunities.

Writing difficulties were also found to differ by gender and academic year. Females and sophomore students experienced higher challenges in L2 academic writing, likely due to the syllabus demands. First-year students are required to master the structure of paragraphs and the fundamentals of essay writing. Second-year students are required to write various text types, including biography, narrative, and report texsts, while third-year students can explore more engaging fiction and non-fiction writing in a *Creative Writing Course based on Local Content*. As participants are required to produce various types of texts at the second-year, this situation may be a reason why sophomores face the highest challenge.

Despite its complexity, EFL learners generally exhibit a positive attitude towards the writing process, which contrasts with Al Badi's (2015) findings. The reasons for this are possibly because the participants perceived writing as an important ability for their future careers and agreed that writing is an essential skill to master. Although gender did not significantly influence students' attitudes toward academic writing, the academic years did. The junior showed a significantly lower attitude towards writing than the freshman. First-year students likely maintain a strong enthusiasm for writing development, whereas third-year students may experience writing fatigue from repeated academic assignments over time.

Regarding academic writing difficulties, participants reported various strategies to cope

with these challenges. Commonly, they allocated time to review their work before submission. In contrast with Farooqui (2023), the participants in the present study appreciate the value of peer review. Most also used AI tools to polish their work. ChatGPT, Grammarly, QuillBot, WordHippo, and Thesaurus are the most frequently mentioned. Nevertheless, they admitted that they did not rely solely on AI, as they are aware of the limitations of AI, supporting a previous finding (Al-Sofi, 2024).

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted challenges Indonesian EFL learners face in academic writing, particularly in sentence structure, grammar, vocabulary, and topic familiarization. While participants showed strong engagement in the pre-writing stage by exploring various media and digital tools, they tended to spend less time on actual writing practice, which aligns with previous studies on learners' limited exposure to writing activities. Differences in difficulties were also observed across gender and academic year, with females and sophomore students reporting greater struggles, likely due to the demands of the syllabus. Despite these obstacles, learners maintained a positive attitude toward writing, viewing it as a vital skill for their academic and professional future.

To address their challenges, participants employed a range of strategies, including allocating time for revisions, engaging in peer review, and increasingly utilizing AI tools such as Grammarly, QuillBot, and ChatGPT. Their reliance on such tools demonstrates both an awareness of their linguistic limitations and a willingness to leverage technology for improvement, while using it cautiously. This balanced approach reflects the adaptability of EFL learners in Central Kalimantan, suggesting that with targeted support in grammar and writing practice, they can further enhance their confidence and competence in academic writing.

However, these findings should be generalized cautiously, as they are based on self-reported data from a limited number of participants in a single Indonesian region and may not represent all EFL learners. Additionally, teachers' perspectives and classroom observations were not included, which could have offered a more comprehensive picture. Therefore, future research should involve more extensive and diverse sampling populations and integrate multiple perspectives to strengthen the findings.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted challenges Indonesian EFL learners face in academic writing, particularly in sentence structure, grammar, vocabulary, and topic familiarization. While participants showed strong engagement in the pre-writing stage by exploring various media and digital tools, they tended to spend less time on actual writing practice, which aligns with previous studies on learners' limited exposure to writing activities. Differences in difficulties were also observed across gender and academic year, with females and sophomore students reporting greater struggles, likely due to the demands of the syllabus. Despite these obstacles, learners maintained a positive attitude toward writing, viewing it as a vital skill for their academic and professional future.

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