


Challenges Faced by Islamic Higher Education Students in English Writing Classes: A Qualitative Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at the challenges university students face in English writing classes at STAIN Mandailing Natal, Indonesia, using a qualitative approach. Writing is often seen as one of the hardest skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), especially at the university level, where students must produce academic texts. Although English academic writing is becoming more important in higher education, there has been little qualitative research on students' writing challenges in Indonesian Islamic universities, particularly in regional areas. This study employed a descriptive qualitative design and included undergraduate students enrolled in English writing courses at STAIN Mandailing Natal. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and students' reflections on their writing experiences. Thematic analysis was used to find common patterns in students' writing difficulties and their views on teaching practices. The findings reveal four major themes of challenges: linguistic challenges, cognitive and rhetorical challenges, affective challenges, and instructional challenges. Students reported difficulties in grammar usage, limited vocabulary, and sentence construction. They also struggled with organizing ideas, developing arguments, and maintaining coherence in academic writing. Affective factors such as writing anxiety, low confidence, and fear of making mistakes further hindered students' engagement. In addition, students perceived that instructional practices and feedback were often insufficient to support their writing development. The study concludes that English writing challenges among Indonesian EFL university students are multidimensional and context-dependent. The findings suggest the need for more student-centered, process-oriented, and context-sensitive writing instruction. This study contributes to the EFL writing literature by providing empirical insights from an under-researched Islamic higher education context in Indonesia.

Keywords: *Challenges faced; English Writing Classes; Islamic Higher Education*

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the hardest and most complicated skills to learn in English, especially for students who are learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in places like Indonesia. Writing necessitates the simultaneous integration of linguistic

knowledge, cognitive skills, and academic conventions. These expectations grow increasingly important for university students because they have to write academic papers in English, like essays, reports, and research papers (Harmer, 2015). As a result, a lot of Indonesian EFL students have trouble with English writing classes all the time. In Indonesian higher education, English writing is very crucial for helping students do well in school and in their future jobs. Students must not only show that they know how to use grammar correctly, but also that they can organize their thoughts rationally, build arguments critically, and follow the rules of academic writing. Hyland (2019) stresses that academic writing is a social and disciplinary activity that requires knowledge of rhetorical frameworks, awareness of the audience, and knowledge of what the institution expects. But for many Indonesian university students who are learning English as a foreign language, these academic requirements are sometimes hard to achieve because they don't get enough practice writing in English.

Previous research in EFL environments has delineated the problems encountered by university students in English writing. Some of the most common challenges are linguistic ones, such as having a limited vocabulary, making grammatical mistakes with grammar, and having trouble with sentence construction (Richards & Renandya, 2002). In addition to language issues, kids also have trouble with higher-level writing skills like coming up with ideas, making them flow, and thinking critically. These obstacles demonstrate that writing difficulties are multifaceted and cannot be attributed entirely to language skills.

In addition to linguistic and cognitive challenges, affective factors also influence students' writing performance. Studies have shown that EFL students often experience writing anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of negative evaluation, which may hinder their willingness to express ideas in written form (Horwitz, 2017). Such affective barriers are particularly evident in academic writing classes, where students are required to meet formal standards and are frequently assessed based on their written output.

In the Indonesian Islamic higher education system, particularly at Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri (STAIN) Mandailing Natal, English writing instruction poses distinct obstacles. Students have different levels of English exposure and come from different educational backgrounds. English is often taught as a secondary subject instead of the main language of instruction. Even though English academic writing is very important, there isn't much research that looks at the writing problems that students at Islamic higher education institutions, especially in remote universities outside of big cities, face.

Most existing studies on EFL writing challenges in Indonesia tend to employ quantitative methods, focusing on test results or questionnaire data. While these studies provide general patterns of students' difficulties, they often fail to capture students' personal experiences, perceptions, and contextual realities. There is a lack of qualitative research that deeply explores how university students experience English writing classes, how they perceive their challenges, and how instructional practices affect their learning process. This gap is especially evident in the context of STAIN Mandailing Natal, where students' voices have rarely been documented in academic research.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this research gap by employing a qualitative approach to explore the challenges faced by university students in English writing classes at STAIN Mandailing Natal. The objectives of this study are: (1) to identify the linguistic, cognitive, and affective challenges experienced by students in learning English writing; (2) to explore students' perceptions of English writing instruction and classroom practices; and (3) to provide insights that may inform more effective and context-sensitive writing pedagogy in Indonesian EFL higher education. Based on the research gap identified and the objectives of the study, the following research questions are formulated: 1) What linguistic challenges do university students at STAIN Mandailing Natal face in English writing classes?. 2) What cognitive and rhetorical challenges do students experience in developing ideas, organization, and coherence in English academic writing? 3) What affective factors influence students' engagement and performance in English writing classes?. 4) How do students perceive English writing instruction and classroom practices at STAIN Mandailing Natal?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a descriptive qualitative approach, to explore the challenges faced by university students in English writing classes. Qualitative research was considered appropriate as it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and meanings constructed within their learning context (Creswell, 2014). Rather than measuring variables quantitatively, this study focused on understanding how students experience English writing instruction and how they interpret the difficulties they encounter.

The study was conducted at Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri (STAIN) Mandailing Natal, an Islamic higher education institution in Indonesia, where English is taught as a foreign language. The participants consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in English writing courses. They were selected using purposive sampling, as they had direct experience with English writing instruction and were considered capable of providing rich and relevant data.

The participants came from diverse educational backgrounds, reflecting varying levels of English proficiency and prior exposure to English writing. This diversity allowed the study to capture a wide range of challenges experienced by students in learning English writing within the institutional context.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and classroom-related reflective responses. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to provide flexibility while ensuring that key themes related to writing challenges were consistently explored across participants. The interview questions focused on students' experiences with English writing tasks, perceived difficulties, emotional responses, and views on teaching practices. In addition, students' reflective responses on their writing experiences were used to support and triangulate the interview data. These instruments enabled the researcher to gain deeper insights into students' internal thoughts and perceptions that may not always emerge during interviews.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following systematic procedures of data familiarization, coding, categorization, and theme development. The analysis aimed to identify recurring patterns and themes related to linguistic, cognitive, affective, and instructional challenges. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was applied by comparing interview data with students' reflective responses.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals that university students at STAIN Mandailing Natal encounter multidimensional challenges in English writing classes, encompassing linguistic, cognitive–rhetorical, affective, and instructional dimensions. These findings are consistent with, yet contextually extend, previous research on EFL writing in higher education. First, linguistic challenges emerged as a fundamental barrier to students' writing development. Participants consistently reported difficulties related to grammatical accuracy, limited vocabulary, and sentence construction. This finding aligns with earlier studies indicating that linguistic limitations remain persistent among EFL university students (Richards & Renandya, 2002; Ferris, 1997). Similarly, Dar and Khan (2015) found that insufficient linguistic resources often force learners to rely on simplified structures, reducing clarity and precision in academic writing.

However, unlike studies conducted in English-major or urban universities (e.g., Al-Buainain, 2011), the present study suggests that linguistic challenges at STAIN Mandailing Natal are intensified by limited exposure to English beyond the classroom. Students had few opportunities to practice English writing in authentic or academic contexts, indicating that linguistic difficulties are shaped not only by individual proficiency but also by institutional and environmental constraints. In addition to linguistic issues, students experienced substantial cognitive and rhetorical challenges, particularly in generating ideas, organizing arguments, and maintaining coherence across texts. These findings support Flower and Hayes' (1981) cognitive process theory, which emphasizes the complexity of planning and organizing written discourse. Consistent with Hyland (2019) and Wingate (2012), the students struggled to apply academic writing conventions, such as thesis statements and logical argument development. Nevertheless, this study diverges from findings by Emilia and Hamied (2015), who reported that genre-based instruction significantly improved Indonesian students' rhetorical competence. In contrast, participants in the present study demonstrated limited awareness of genre conventions, suggesting that the absence of systematic genre-based pedagogy at STAIN Mandailing Natal may exacerbate cognitive and rhetorical difficulties. This contrast highlights the crucial role of instructional design in shaping students' academic writing development. Affective challenges also played a central role in students' writing experiences. Feelings of anxiety, low confidence, and fear of negative evaluation were frequently reported. These findings resonate with Horwitz et al.'s (1986) and Cheng's (2004) work on foreign language and writing anxiety, which emphasizes the detrimental impact of anxiety on language performance. Similar patterns have been observed in other EFL contexts (Rezai & Jafari, 2014).

However, compared to Han and Hyland's (2019) findings, where students' emotions were primarily shaped by feedback practices, the present study indicates that anxiety was also influenced by students' broader academic and cultural context. In the Islamic higher education setting, making linguistic errors was often perceived as academic inadequacy, intensifying students' fear of failure. This contextual nuance suggests that affective challenges in EFL writing are culturally mediated and cannot be fully understood without considering institutional values and expectations.

Furthermore, instructional and feedback-related challenges were identified as significant factors affecting students' writing development. Participants perceived that writing instruction tended to focus on final products rather than the writing process. This finding supports Hyland and Hyland's (2006) critique of product-oriented writing pedagogy and echoes Lee's (2008) observation that unclear or non-dialogic feedback limits students' ability to revise effectively. Bitchener and Ferris (2012) similarly argue that corrective feedback alone is insufficient without opportunities for guided revision. In contrast to Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) emphasis on formative feedback and learner autonomy, students in this study demonstrated limited feedback literacy and passive engagement with lecturers' comments. This discrepancy suggests that feedback practices at STAIN Mandailing Natal remain largely teacher-centered, thereby restricting students' active involvement in the writing process. The findings underscore the need for process-oriented and interactive feedback approaches to support students' writing development.

Overall, while the challenges identified in this study reflect patterns reported in the broader EFL writing literature, their persistence and intensity appear to be amplified by contextual factors specific to regional Islamic higher education institutions. Rather than viewing writing difficulties as isolated learner deficiencies, this study demonstrates that students' challenges emerge from the complex interaction between linguistic competence, cognitive demands, emotional responses, and instructional practices.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that university students at STAIN Mandailing Natal face complex and interconnected challenges in learning English writing. These challenges encompass linguistic limitations, cognitive and rhetorical difficulties, affective barriers, and instructional constraints. The findings highlight that English writing problems in EFL contexts cannot be attributed solely to students' language proficiency but are shaped by emotional factors and teaching practices within specific institutional settings. The implications of this study suggest the need for more process-based and student-centered writing instruction in Indonesian higher education. Lecturers are encouraged to integrate explicit instruction on academic writing conventions, provide continuous and constructive feedback, and create a supportive classroom environment that reduces students' writing anxiety. Additionally, incorporating reflective and collaborative writing activities may help students develop greater confidence and autonomy in writing.

From a broader perspective, this study contributes to the limited qualitative literature on EFL writing in Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions. Future

research may expand this study by involving multiple institutions, integrating lecturers' perspectives, or examining the role of digital and electronic feedback in supporting students' academic writing development.

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