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EFL STUDENTS' CHALLENGES IN WRITING ACADEMIC ESSAY INTRODUCTIONS

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Abstract: This study critically examines the challenges encountered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in composing effective academic introduction sections. Employing a qualitative case study design, this research involved undergraduate students enrolled in an academic writing course at English Education Department, Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng. Data were collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews to capture both textual deficiencies and learner perceptions. The findings revealed that students encounter multifaceted challenges, including inadequate synthesis of scholarly sources, inability to establish a coherent research territory, and limited awareness of gap identification strategies. Furthermore, linguistic constraints such as restricted academic vocabulary and syntactic inaccuracies exacerbate these issues. Notwithstanding these challenges, some students exhibit adaptive strategies, including the utilization of model texts and collaborative peer feedback. The study underscores the necessity for explicit pedagogical interventions focusing on genre awareness, critical reading, and structured writing scaffolds.

Keywords: academic writing, EFL students, introduction section

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a fundamental skill in higher education, particularly for students engaged in research activities. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), writing academic texts presents significant challenges due to differences in linguistic competence and rhetorical conventions (Hyland, 2016). Connor (2002) explains that rhetorical patterns in writing are strongly influenced by learners' first language and cultural background, which often leads to difficulties in adapting to English academic conventions. Academic writing requires not only grammatical accuracy but also an understanding of genre-specific structures and discourse practices (Stenstrom, 1994).

Recent studies indicate that EFL students often struggle with organizing their ideas and constructing coherent arguments in academic writing. According to Graham (2019), writing difficulties among second language learners are frequently associated with limited exposure to academic discourse and insufficient development of critical thinking skills. These challenges are especially evident in writing introduction sections, which require a logical progression from general background information to specific research Problems.

The introduction section plays a crucial role in establishing the research territory, reviewing related literature, identifying research gaps, and presenting research objectives. Effective introduction must demonstrate the writer's ability to synthesize previous studies and position the current research within a broader academic context. Bhatia (2004) argues that effective academic writing depends on the writer's awareness of genre conventions and communicative purposes within a discourse community. Swales and Feak (2012) highlight that introductions typically follow a rhetorical structure that includes establishing a territory, identifying a niche, and occupying that niche. However, many students fail to synthesize sources effectively and instead present information descriptively.

Previous research has highlighted various difficulties faced by EFL students, including limited vocabulary, grammatical issues, and lack of familiarity with academic conventions. Lee (2017) found that students often struggle with rhetorical organization, particularly in structuring arguments

logically. Similarly, Aldayel, et al. (2026) reported that EFL learners frequently encounter difficulties in maintaining coherence and cohesion in academic writing. Furthermore, students often experience difficulty identifying research gaps, which is a key component of an effective introduction. Swales (2016) argues that establishing a research gap is essential in academic writing, yet many students fail to clearly indicate what is missing in previous studies. This limitation suggests that students lack sufficient awareness of genre conventions and rhetorical strategies.

In addition, linguistic challenges such as limited academic vocabulary and grammatical inaccuracies continue to hinder students' ability to express complex ideas clearly (Hamdani, et al., 2025; Duha, 2022). Ferris (2002) emphasizes that grammatical errors in L2 writing can significantly affect clarity and the overall effectiveness of academic texts. These issues often result in unclear and ineffective introductions, reducing the overall quality of academic writing.

Although several studies have explored general writing difficulties, limited research specifically focuses on how EFL students construct introduction sections. Therefore, this study aims to examine the common problems faced by EFL students in writing academic introductions and identify strategies they use to overcome these challenges. The findings are expected to contribute to improving teaching practices in academic writing courses and enhancing students' academic writing competence.

METHOD

Research Design and Participants

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to facilitate an in-depth exploration of students' experiences in composing academic introductions. The qualitative paradigm was appropriate for capturing the complexity of learners' cognitive and rhetorical processes. The case study approach enabled the researcher to investigate a bounded group within its authentic educational context, thereby providing rich and contextually grounded insights into students' writing practices.

The participants in this study comprised 25 undergraduate EFL students enrolled in an academic writing course, 4th semester students at English study program Unika Santo Paulus Ruteng. Purposive sampling was

employed to ensure that participants possessed prior experience in producing academic texts. There were 5 selected participants taken for interview.

Data Collection and Data Analyses

Data were collected over a four-week period. Students' written assignments were gathered as primary textual data for analysis. Subsequently, individual interviews were conducted to triangulate findings and provide deeper insight into students' writing experiences.

Data collection instruments included semi-structured interview questions and document analysis. The interviews were designed to elicit detailed accounts of students' perceptions and challenges. The interview questions focused on; 1) Students difficulties when writing an academic introduction; 2) How to start writing introduction of academic text; 3) Difficulties in writing a clear thesis statement; 4) Problems in organizing ideas in the introduction; 5) Students perception on the effect of English ability introduction writing.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving systematic coding and categorization of emerging themes. This analytical approach facilitated the identification of salient patterns related to students' difficulties and coping strategies, which were interpreted in light of existing theoretical frameworks.

RESULTS

The analysis revealed three primary categories of difficulty experienced by students: rhetorical organization, source integration, and linguistic competence. First, many students struggled to establish a clear research territory and often failed to transition effectively from general background to specific research gaps. Second, source integration was frequently limited to descriptive summaries, lacking critical synthesis. Finally, linguistic limitations, including restricted vocabulary and grammatical inaccuracies, impeded students' ability to articulate complex academic arguments effectively.

Based on the interview results, several difficulties were experienced by English students when writing an academic introduction. Most students

reported that explaining the background of the topic clearly was one of the main challenges. Some students stated that although they understood the topic, they often did not know how to present it in an academic way. In addition, students also mentioned difficulties in connecting their ideas with previous studies. This indicates that students still struggle with integrating sources and building a strong academic context in the introduction.

Furthermore, the findings show that students generally begin their introductions by explaining the general background of the topic before moving to the specific problem. They also try to explain why the topic is important to study. This pattern shows that students attempt to follow the common structure of academic introductions, which usually moves from general information to more specific issues.

Another important finding is related to writing a clear thesis statement. Many students admitted that they find it difficult to express the main idea of their research in one clear sentence. Some students reported that they were unsure whether their thesis statements were specific enough. This suggests that students need more guidance in formulating clear and focused thesis statements. In addition, students also experience problems in organizing their ideas within the introduction. Several respondents stated that they often feel confused about how to arrange ideas logically from general to specific. As a result, their introductions sometimes lack coherence and clarity.

The interview results indicate that English proficiency also influences students' ability to write academic introductions. Students explained that limited vocabulary and grammar often make it difficult for them to express their ideas clearly and academically. This finding shows that language proficiency plays an important role in academic writing development.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that, EFL students face complex challenges in writing academic papers, particularly in composing the introduction section, which serves as the core of a paper and helping readers understand what is being studied and discussed. Students encounter difficulties in mastering rhetorical structure, integrating sources, and using appropriate language. These findings reinforce the idea that academic writing is not merely a

linguistic skill but a complex interplay of discourse knowledge, cognitive ability, and genre awareness (Hyland, 2004).

One of the main difficulties experienced by students is their inability to construct introductions in accordance with academic rhetorical structures. Many students fail to develop a logical progression from a general background to a specific research gap. This suggests a lack of understanding of the CARS (Create A Research Space) model, which specifically explains how to structure academic introductions (Swales, 1990; Yulandari & Suryadi, 2025). In addition, Johns (2008) found that novice writers often struggle to understand rhetorical boundaries in academic writing. This highlights a key weakness that contributes to students' difficulties in composing introductions.

Another challenge lies in summarizing sources, which reflects insufficient academic literacy and critical reading skills. Students tend to summarize sources without establishing connections between them. Leki (2007) states that writers often struggle with synthesizing academic texts, while Hyland (2016) emphasizes the importance of intertextuality in academic writing. The recommendations proposed aim to minimize errors in writing.

Another issue is the lack of coherence in students' writing, where ideas are often poorly organized. Matsuda and Silva (2010) argue that L2 writers frequently experience difficulties in discourse organization. Similarly, Silva (1993) found that L2 writing tends to be fragmented and lacks clear direction. In addition, limited language proficiency significantly affects writing quality. Nation (2013) states that limited vocabulary hinders academic expression. Grammatical errors reduce clarity. A lack of vocabulary makes writing appear weak and underdeveloped.

Writing is a fundamental skill that students must possess. Students who lack adequate writing skills will struggle to produce clear academic papers and even theses. Tribble (1996) argues that academic writing requires the ability to clearly express purpose, while Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) emphasize the importance of explicit instruction in teaching thesis statements.

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that many students experience difficulties in establishing clear research backgrounds, formulating coherent thesis statements, developing logical argumentation, and maintaining appropriate academic style and cohesion. Linguistically, limitations in grammar mastery, vocabulary range, sentence construction, and the use of academic expressions further hinder students' ability to produce effective and persuasive introductions. In addition, cognitive challenges such as generating ideas, organizing information critically, synthesizing sources, and understanding the expectations of academic discourse contribute significantly to the complexity of academic writing.

These findings indicate the urgent need for more targeted and contextualized instructional strategies that integrate explicit teaching of rhetorical structures, academic language features, and critical thinking skills through systematic guidance and sustained writing practice. Teachers are therefore encouraged to implement process-oriented pedagogical approaches, collaborative feedback activities, genre-based instruction, and scaffolded learning experiences that can support students in overcoming these difficulties and gradually developing confidence in academic writing. Furthermore, future research should investigate the long-term effectiveness of innovative pedagogical interventions, including digital writing platforms, corpus-based instruction, and genre-focused approaches.

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