

# EFL NEW UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' STRATEGIES TO COPE WITH WRITING FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES IN ONLINE LEARNING

Chelsea Indy Karisma<sup>1</sup>, Sri Lestari<sup>2</sup>

Universitas Esa Unggul, Kebon Jeruk, Jakarta Barat, Indonesia

<sup>1</sup> chelseaindy97@gmail.com, <sup>2</sup> sri.lestari@esaunggul.ac.id

## Abstract

The study aimed to explore EFL new university students' challenges and strategies to cope with academic writing in the online learning process. This study focuses on how EFL students in higher education adapt and adjust to the academic situation by exploring their challenges and strategies to write for academic purposes, especially in the online learning process. The study involves freshmen in the English Language Education department of a private university in Jakarta, Indonesia, who are taking English writing skills courses. This study was conducted using a qualitative approach, to know the challenges and strategies used by university students. This study used purposeful sampling, by choosing the participant that matches the requirements. The data collection of this study used a questionnaire with an open-ended question, and semi-structured interview to investigate the students' experience of writing for academic purposes in online learning. This study revealed that EFL new university students have various difficulties and faced some challenges in learning writing for academic purposes in online learning. However, it is found that EFL new university students have their own strategies of writing for academic purposes in online learning.

**Keywords:** Academic Writing; EFL New University Student; Writing for Academic Purposes

## INTRODUCTION

Having good writing skills is important in communication. Writing is a way of communication with written expression and transmitting information (Chen, 2021). People can share and communicate their idea through their pieces of writing. However, writing skill is considered a difficult skill to learn because people have to use effective sentences to deliver clear ideas. Writing skills have complexity in grammatical structure, vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation (Rao, 2017). Therefore, at schools, students learn how to write accurately to be able to communicate effectively in any context, especially learning how to write effective English sentences. In Indonesia, students learn the English language, as a core subject to be able to communicate in spoken and written forms. According to the National Curriculum in Indonesia (Kemendikbud, 2020), the goal of learning English in high school is to try, process, and present knowledge in the concrete and abstract domains that are following what is learned in school and other sources. Students learn to compose texts of oral and written interpersonal and transactional interactions that can be used in academic and non-academic contexts or daily activities. Students in high school levels are expected to be able to write effectively in academic and non-academic contexts. However, the English lesson for high school students is only available for around one or two sessions per week, which makes students unable to focus on writing skills in those limited sessions. Writing skill is integrated into other English skills: reading, listening, and speaking skills. Based on my experience when I was in high school, students were not used to practising writing complex paragraphs. Students had learned about the paragraph, but they have difficulties generating and organising the idea of the paragraph

(Lastari & Saraswati, 2018). Therefore, students might still find it difficult to write in the English language when they enter universities.

Furthermore, EFL new students might have a more specific problem in constructing the writing for academic purposes. Nonkukhetkhong (2013) shows that the most frequent errors made by freshmen were general grammatical errors and in using the correct grammatical forms and structures. Similarly, Alghazo and Alshraideh (2020) found out that freshmen have difficulties with grammar. Alharbi (2019) stated that most of the students had difficulty in general writing and the writing mechanism. They lack knowledge of how to properly write a good sentence or paragraph. Lack of academic writing knowledge leads EFL new students to struggle with the learning process. Writing experience in senior high school is not enough for students to learn writing (Ramadhani et al., 2021).

Those issues of writing for academic purposes might be happened until recently, especially during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. EFL university students have to adapt to writing for academic purposes and adjust to online learning. Although online learning is not something new, learning English skills virtually during the pandemic might become an issue for some universities and their students. In teaching English writing skills, Sheerah et al. (2022) found out that EFL university students have problems in writing and challenges in academic writing skills while learning English skills online, such as: lack of knowledge on how to write a good sentence, lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge that can lead them to make less interesting sentences. The issues might also come from the technical stuff, for example, the lack of skills to operate the online tools both the hardware and software to check their writings. Lack of ICT (Information Communication Technology) skills, can be one of the issues faced by students and make them frustrated and discourage them while learning writing (Jong & Kim Hua, 2021). Recently, there has been growing interest in researching students writing skills in online learning mode. There have been several investigations into the issues around EFL students' writing skills as discussed earlier in this section, including the problems in English writing for academic purposes (Alharbi, 2019), the challenges of writing in online learning mode (Sheerah et al., 2022), and the advantages of online learning academic writing skills on (Altohami et al., 2022). However, few studies addressed the issue of academic writing among EFL new university students. For example, a study by Aunurrahman et al. (2017), this study aims to know the competencies of academic writing of EFL students. They might find challenges in academic life including writing for academic purposes. It might be even worse when they did not learn to write effectively when they were in high school. The study from Ramadhani et al. (2021) stated that experience in school is not enough, and students have to continue their practice in writing. They need to struggle with this situation. In addition, during the pandemic era, EFL new students should learn fully online mode until now. They might find other challenges and strategies to learn writing skills. Therefore, this study will explore EFL new university students' challenges and strategies to cope with writing for academic purposes in online learning.

Writing for academic purposes is a type of writing that uses an academic or formal tone when writing sentences. Writing for academic purposes has a process where the writer has to observe important characteristics. It has norms and rules for academic writing (Christzer et al., 2018). To write with this type of writing, the writer should know how to write with academic form, paraphrase, and use citations. Writing for academic purposes usually should be logical, rational, and have a reasoning as a written form for academics (Yamin, 2019). It can be seen as the process of thinking, constructing and revising, and developing the concept (Yundayani et al., 2017). In university, writing for academic purposes will be used as assessment or academic work. This writing aims to know the development of learners' knowledge, skills, or abilities in academic writing through classroom activities that are related to writing. The purpose of learning academic writing is for preparing the students for the concrete application of field-

specific and academic language skills in their studies and the development of their academic expertise (Tuomainen, 2016).

Writing for academic purposes required writing with academic word choice. According to Swales and Feak (2012), academic writing has an abundance of noun phrases and tends to carry out a meaning in it, rather than a compact form. Academic writing is usually used both active and passive voice, but commonly academic writing uses the passive voice. The use of passive voice in academic writing has an important textual function (Hinkel, 2013). This type of writing also needs the use of references, need a paraphrase, and quotations from a source that is related to the writing topic. Academic type competencies include writing at an appropriate level, providing clear, concise, and unambiguous language, and can develop responses (Parkes et al., 2015). Writing for academic purposes can be in the form of essays, journal articles, research reports, thesis, and dissertations. An essay is a piece of writing that argues. The process of writing for academic purposes includes four steps, such as: prewriting, outlining, writing, and polishing (Oshima & Hogue, 2007). Writing for academic purposes is taught in university since it is different from writing in high school. It is common for students to get problems in writing for academic purposes because of the differences in writing skills in high school (Yundayani, 2018). In university, the courses can be varied but writing course usually starts from basic to more complex writing. From doing the writing paragraph to essays, it can help EFL university students with an intermediate ability to develop their confidence in form of writing for academic purposes (Randaccio, 2013). By teaching writing for academic purposes, students can have the opportunities to practice writing in academic form.

Writing for academic purposes in online learning mode can also give advantages for students to improve their writing skills through online tools. Through an online learning platform, students can monitor their outcomes by being involved in composing academic prose and improving the quality of written texts and knowing their academic ability (Fernando, 2018). It can be done by checking the writing through some online platform by offering clear, effective, and fewer mistakes in your writing. For example, Grammarly, as a grammar checker has benefits for students in the process of writing, and students believed that it helps them to check their grammar, punctuation, spelling, and language style (Pratama, 2020).

## **METHOD**

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach. In qualitative approaches, the researcher can use open-ended questions to ask general questions to participants to get more information from participants (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, to know more about the challenges and strategies used by EFL new university students to cope with writing for academic purposes in online learning, this study will describe students' efforts in learning writing skills.

The procedure process conducted in this research, such as:

1. Choosing participants, first-year EFL university students that are taking English writing courses.
2. Sending the consent form to the participants.
3. Developing the questionnaire and the interview guideline.
4. Validating the questionnaire and interview protocol to the expert.
5. Sending the questionnaire to the participants.
6. Analyzing the questionnaire responses.
7. Choose the participants that match the requirements to be interviewed
8. Scheduling the interview with the participants.
9. Interviewing with the participants.
10. Analyzing the interview recording and transcription.
11. Interpreting the findings from the questionnaire and interview

## 12. Writing the research report.

This study used purposeful sampling, by choosing the participant that matches to the requirements. The participants are EFL new university students who are taking the writing course. They are students in the essay writing class at the English Language Education department in one of the private universities in West Jakarta, Indonesia. They got chosen because they fulfilled the requirements to participate in this study. They are still in their first year and are taking the writing course. The consent form was sent to the participants through the Google Form link, and the participants were interviewed after they confirmed their willingness to take part in this study. The data of the participants collected by the researcher and it kept safe with the researcher. The data was used only for research purposes. The researcher used the participants' details as anonymous. This data collection used questionnaire with open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews.

The data analysis of this study used descriptive qualitative research. Data from the questionnaire were described qualitatively based on the themes. Creswell (2012) stated, that in qualitative research, the words will be grouped into meanings of understanding, such as codes, categories, or themes. The data was analyzed by thematic analysis, to get the code or theme. Similarly, the data from the interview was transcribed and analyzed with thematic analysis which concluded into code or themes. With the thematic analysis method, the data will be described and it will also involve the interpretation in the process of selecting codes and constructing the themes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). After combining and analysing the data, the researcher decided on the findings of the study and interpreted the findings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

#### **The Challenges that EFL New University Students Faced in Writing for Academic Purposes in Online Learning**

Participants mentioned that writing in university is difficult yet challenging. Some of the participants admitted that they did not focus on learning to write when in senior high school. In senior high school, they stated that they only learned basic knowledge of the English language, including writing stories, letters, cards, and advertisements. The challenges they find in learning writing for academic purposes in university are a lack of knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, having a difficulty in constructing words, and determining if their writing is interesting and coherent. They also found, difficulty in identifying the main idea, combining all ideas into a sentence that is unity and coherence, shortening sentences, or choosing the topic sentence.

Participant A had difficulty with grammar. Participant A sounds to be fixated on value or score.

*"Grammar must be right, a little wrong can reduce the value."* (Participant A)

Participant B had problems determining a topic, and synchronizing the words in paragraph from the beginning to the end of it.

*"Writing is a bit difficult, and challenging, from putting together the topic and content of the first paragraph onwards."* (Participant B)

Participant C also struggled with the lack of vocabulary.

*"It's difficult, because this is a new thing for me, the vocabulary that I have is still minimal unlike the others, so it's still fumbling/guessing."* (Participant C)

Similar to participants A and B, participant D also had difficulty with grammar and connecting the sentences.

*"The challenges such as making a strong thesis statement, how to make a connecting sentence."* (Participant D)



These challenges also happened in the writing class. Most participants have the same difficulties which are grammar, lack of vocabulary, difficulties with spelling, lack of knowledge on how to combine the idea that they have, and also difficulty in making unity and coherence sentences. The participant mostly likes to have a live session with lectures such as Zoom or Google Meet, but some of them also like to have self-study.

Participant A prefers self-study rather than live sessions, because participant A can prepare and focus to study the topic.

*"I prefer to study on my own. Because I do not understand it well, because I'm still a bit sleepy and can't concentrate. If in self-study, we are ready for studying. We can look for ourselves when we are ready and our brains are very fresh and we will not be sleepy. If we are with our lecturers, sometimes we are in a sleepy state, so it is very forced, but if you are learning by yourself, you are ready to learn so you enter all the subjects."* (Participant A)

Participant B chooses the live session with the lecturer, so the participant can understand the topic.

*"If it's me, I should be taught that firsts, so I can understand, like oh.. that's how it is, and my friends all say that during the meeting, if it's just a module, we won't understand that, we are still confused if there is no Gmeet schedule."* (Participant B)

Participant C prefers to have a live session with the lecturer, because if the participant did not understand the topic, they could ask the lecturer.

*"It's better if there's a lecturer, because if we have a problem we can immediately ask..", "If in self-study, we're a bit confused and afraid to ask, we're afraid to disturb the teacher or something like that.. If we use Google Meet, the timing is indeed the time you have to teach, and we can be more focused, I think."* (Participant C)

Participant D prefers to have a self-study. Participant D likes both of the processes of learning.

*"For me, if it is a theory, I prefer live sessions, and in practice I prefer self-study.", "In theory, what do I have to do with the lecturers?, record it, and when I forget, I just have to remember it. In Google Meet the topic is already determined, sometimes it makes it difficult if I don't like the topic"* (Participant D)

From all above the challenges and experiences that students faced. They also feel the challenges in online learning. Some of them feel difficult to ask the lecturer, difficulty from the signal, limited time, cannot understand what the lecturer explained, cannot ask immediately to the lecturer, have difficulty to adapting to every material, too focus on practice and practice makes them bored, and cannot discuss with a friend directly.

Participant A expressed that when learning writing skills in online learning tend to feel sleepy and difficult to focus on the live session or Gmeet and Zoom with the lecturers.

*"Ehh., the first thing is, when you are online you like to be sleepy, so you are afraid if the lecturer explains it, you don't understand it, you keep asking questions, it's confusing"* (Participant A)

Participant B has difficulty with grammar and in the process of writing.

*"From the grammar, the main thing is on how to connect from the first paragraph to the last paragraph, that's the most difficult thing", "Sometimes suddenly I don't outline, sometimes I forget, sometimes it (the sentences) doesn't connect in the middle of the writing process, so I made it again."* (Participant B)

Participant C has difficulty if they have online learning without the lecturer or if they have to self-study with a module that the lecturer gave to them.

*"The challenge of writing..., the first one is for example online without a lecturer, the challenge is really big, right..?, we are clear that the challenge is to learn independently with a module like that, we have to find out what it means by ourself... online, yes, it's more like that,*

*more.., I mean if you're online learning independently, it's like that..., that's it..*" (Participant C)

Participant D said bravely that he/she did not have difficulty learning writing in online learning.

*"Ehh.., so far, nothing, if it's from me."* (Participant D)

### **The Strategies EFL to Write for Academic Purposes in Online Learning**

Despite all of the challenges and experiences in learning writing for academic purposes in online learning, they all have their solutions and strategies on how to learn writing in online learning. They use technology, program, or application to help them in writing for academic purposes. Most of them use outlines to write their writing, and a bit of them said did not use outlines while writing.

Participant A used the outline to write and it was important.

*"Ehh.., yes I have to make it, yes.."* (Participant A)

Participant B made an outline, so she/he would not forget the idea that they wanted to share through their writing.

*"Maybe from ehh.., make an outline so it will be easy, make it from the beginning of the topic, write from the beginning of the topic so that the contents, from the body from the paragraph to the conclusion, so that I can understand better too, and it will be more connected from the beginning to the end. ..., so I don't lose the idea of it.."* (Participant B)

Participant C used the outline after knowing how to use the outline, and she/he finds it easier to make their writing with the outline.

*"Yes.., after studying essays..., after studying essay writing, it turns out that it is indeed easier if we outline first.., because it is the most difficult, in my opinion, yes.., in my opinion, it is the most difficult to outline, because everything is there, right...?, with the outline it seems easier, just like continuing the writing...", "The methods are as shown..., coincidentally (name of lecturer) is the one who teaches writing and (name of lecturer) it's very clear that the lecturer teaches that if the outline is the first to look for, the idea, basically looks for the idea first, then follow immediately, hmmm, what?, follow according to the steps, what to make, and when applying, that's all, but The most important thing is to looking for is, what do you want to write about?"* (Participant C)

Participant D mentioned that after learning essay writing, the participant started to make an outline writing.

*"Eh.., not at first, but since writing essays, I started to make an outline, because it really helps so I don't get out of topic when I write...", "The outline, as far as I know, I'll look for the hook first, then make a thesis statement, after that I write it in paragraphs, in paragraphs I make a chart, such as topic statements, explanations, examples, and others, I write ehh.., one sentence, one sentence in each chart, then I will explain again"* (Participant D)

Through this outline, some of them also have other strategies in learning writing for academic purposes in online learning. Many of them revised their draft before writing, but some of them also did not use that strategy. One of the participants explained that the participant used applications to improve their writing *"I always revise and edit my writing. I always use the Grammarly application to check grammar, and also I use websites such as writing tools where on the website it can correct all my essays and detect errors and mistakes in writing"*

Participant A said that the participant just re-read it and did not revise it.

*"If it's me.., re-read it first..."* (Participant A)

After that interviewer asked if participant A re-read it and revised it, participant A answered that the participant just read it, and sent it immediately.

*"Ehh.., no, if me, I just reread it."* (Participant A)

Participant B also said to read it again, to minimize some errors.

*"Yes, re-read it again..., I'm afraid something will go wrong..."*

Participant C also said the participant usually re-read it, to find some errors.

*"Yes.. I usually write, and I read it again, sometimes there is like, ohh..., it turns out that there are words that are odd or there are double spellings of words..., and I thought it should be reviewed again."* (Participant C)

Participant D has the same reaction as the participants B and C. Participant D also reviewed and revise the writing so it will be more scientific and formal.

*"Yes, I revised it, ehh..., the first one is a spelling error that I have the most..., I..., then also look at the grammar, after that ehh..., look for words, replace some words with simple ones..., so what is more..?, so that it is more scientific and more formal.."* (Participant D)

From all of those outlines and the revision process, they also use some technology, program, or application to help them in writing. For example, there is a Basic note app, English dictionary, Grammarly, Internet or Google, Youtube, Microsoft word, and Thesaurus.

Participant A use Grammarly, Google Translate, and Youtube in learning writing.

*"Yes..., Grammarly..., then Google Translate, then Youtube also sometimes we really forget that .., how to do that (the materials) .., then there is a tutorial on how to do it (in Youtube)."* (Participant A)

Participant B use Google and Grammarly to learn writing.

*"Hmm..., I think it will be Google or Grammarly, Grammarly application like that.."* (Participant B)

Participant C uses Grammarly in writing because it can help participants' grammar while writing.

*"Ehh..., to be honest, I use grammar, Grammarly..., it helps me to improve grammar. When I write, I use Grammarly."* (Participant C)

Participant C explained how the participant use the application.

*"Ehh..., so we, so I downloaded, downloaded the Grammarly program on my laptop. So, when we write something, if the grammar is wrong, they correct it, they tell us that the sentence should be written like this... Do you want it to be written as we do or want it to be corrected according to Grammarly's demands.."* (Participant C)

Participant D had a different program to help the participant in writing. Participant D used the Basic note app that every phone has and used Microsoft word. She/He focuses on the word count so it can help the participant to know the word limit that the lecturer gives to the university students.

*"Eh..., use..?, if I make an outline, I make it in the note application, which is usually a cellphone, there's a note, I usually make it there and then I also continue to make, write all my essays there, then copy it to word, and then that's it. I edited, for example, the size of the paper, I matched the layout with the requirements of the lecturer.", "After that one, ehh..., word count so you know how many words I have written, so I put it there so I can reduce it if I have excess again."* (Participant D)

## Discussion

Most of them have difficulty with the writing process and writing structure, such as grammar, lack of knowledge on how to start their writing, do not know how to make interesting sentences and how to organize the sentences from the first until the conclusion of the paragraph. The challenges shown in the findings are almost similar to the study of Sheerah et al. (2022), which found the challenges from students, such as: lack of knowledge on how to write a good sentence, lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge can lead them to make less interesting sentences. In this study, the researcher found out that EFL new university students have difficulties in writing. Their issues include, lack of grammar and vocabulary, word choice, and coherence.

They also found challenges in identifying the main idea, combining all ideas into a sentence, shortening sentences, or choosing the topic sentence. They also have some problems in learning writing skills in online sessions, like, maintaining the internet signal, limited time, too focus on practice and practice makes them bored, cannot discuss with a friend directly, having difficulty in adapting to every material. They also have difficulty that related to lecturers, for example, asking the lecturer, cannot understand what the lecturer explained, cannot ask immediately to the lecturer. From the interview, it is shown, that some of them are not confident enough to write because they are still scared it will not be appropriate, and not confident with their vocabulary.

Some of the students said that they want to ask the lecturer, but sometimes they were afraid if they bother or interrupted the teacher's break time. From this statement, it can be implied that the role of lecturer in the writing learning is important. It is similar to the study of Sogutlu and Veliaj-ostrosi (2022), one of the teachers said that teacher's help is essential to the students. But despite it, some of the students like to self-study, so this situation can be happened depending on the students.

Despite all of the challenges that the EFL new university students faced in online learning, they also have strategies to cope with writing for academic purposes in online learning. Most of them use an outline, re-read and revise their writing to minimize some errors. Some of them did not use outlines. According to the study by Oshima and Hogue, (2007), outlining before writing is one of the steps of writing for academic purposes processes. It can be implied, that the participants use the right strategies to start their writing process. Al-Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014) stated that writing strategies included revising, brainstorming, using a dictionary in the writing process, making outlines, peer editing, and seeking help from writing centres or facilities. From all of those strategies, the participants of this study used some of that writing strategies as their own strategies, so it can be stated that they are doing the right thing to do their writing for academic purposes.

The students also used technology, program, or applications to help them in writing. These are the technology, program, and application used in writing Basic note app, English dictionary, Grammarly, Internet, Google, Youtube, Microsoft word, and Thesaurus. Most of the participants in this study, use Grammarly as the application to help them to write their writing. Pratama (2020) stated that Grammarly can help students to improve, and correct students' grammar, punctuation, and spelling error in their writing. The participant also used Dictionary and Thesaurus to help them understand some words while writing. The study by Al-Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014) stated that using a dictionary in the writing process and seeking help from a writing centre or facilities are some of the strategies in writing.

## CONCLUSION

Writing for academic purposes is a type of writing that uses an academic or formal tone when writing sentences. In university, writing for academic purposes will be used as an assessment or academic work. This type of writing aims to know the development of learners' knowledge, skills, or abilities in academic matters through classroom activities that are related to writing. This study aims to know the challenges and strategies that EFL new university students faced in writing for academic purposes in online learning. The researcher collected the data from questionnaires, and interviews. It is revealed that EFL new university students have various difficulties in learning writing for academic purposes in online learning. The researcher found out that the students have some difficulties in writing, for example, lack of knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, having a difficulty in constructing words, and determining if their writing is interesting and coherent. They also found, difficulty in learning writing, includes identifying the main idea, combining all ideas into a sentence that is unity and coherence,



shortening sentences, or choosing the topic sentence. From there, they also felt difficulties in learning writing for academic purposes in online learning, like difficulty with the signal, limited time, having difficulty adapting to every material, too focus on practice and practice makes them bored, and cannot discuss with a friend directly. They also have difficulty that related with lecturer, such as, asking materials to the lecturer, cannot understand what the lecturer explained, cannot ask immediately to the lecturer while in online learning. However, they have strategies to do their academic writing. For example, they make an outline, review and revise their writing, and use technology like Grammarly, Dictionary, Thesaurus, Basic note app, Google, and Youtube. Due to some limitations in this study, this is some recommendation for future research. Further research might need more participants that wanted to be interviewed, so the researcher can have more rich data on how EFL new university students faced the challenges and how they do their strategies to do their writing. Future research also can interview the lecture or observe how the lecture teaches the EFL new university students and how the students learn through online learning. Further research can continue to know the background of EFL new university students' education background and knowledge of writing skills is also important to get to know their characteristics on how they study process.

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