

Between Ideas and Words: Students' Experiences in Expressing Thoughts Through Academic Writing

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Abstract: Academic writing is an important skill for EFL students because it allows them to express their ideas, arguments, and critical viewpoints in a formal academic setting. However, many students still struggle to turn their ideas into coherent academic writing. This study sought to investigate EFL students' experiences expressing their thoughts through academic writing, including the difficulties they encountered, the strategies they employed, and their emotional experiences during the writing process. This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach with 10 TBI students from a higher education institution. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on their academic writing experience and use of AI tools like ChatGPT, Grammarly, and QuillBot. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and documentation, and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which included data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings revealed that students found academic writing both challenging and meaningful. Grammar, vocabulary, idea organization, coherence, idea development, and emotional challenges like anxiety, nervousness, pressure, and lack of confidence were among the most difficult. Despite these challenges, students used a variety of strategies to improve their writing, such as outlining, revising drafts, reading academic references, practicing writing, using AI-based writing tools, and employing self-management strategies. The findings also revealed that academic writing required not only linguistic competence, but also cognitive organization, emotional regulation, motivation, and strategic learning behaviors. This study concludes that EFL students require ongoing writing practice, supportive learning environments, emotional support, and effective writing strategies to improve their academic writing skills and confidence in expressing ideas. Furthermore, when used responsibly and ethically, AI tools can help students improve their writing skills.

Keywords: Academic Writing, EFL Students, Writing Experiences, AI Tools, Emotional Challenges, Writing Strategies

Introduction

Academic writing is one of the most valuable traits in higher education, especially for students starting to learn English as a foreign language. Academic writing requires students to communicate ideas, arguments, and critical perspectives in a clear, coherent, and formal manner.

According to H. Douglas Brown (2007, 2010), writing is more than just a productive language skill; it is also a complex cognitive process that requires students to organize ideas, apply critical thinking, and use appropriate linguistic forms. Writing is an important medium in academic settings because it allows students to demonstrate knowledge, participate in academic discourse, and construct intellectual identities. As a result, the ability to effectively express ideas in academic writing is regarded as a strong predictor of students' academic success.

Despite its importance, many EFL students continue to struggle with transforming their ideas into structured academic texts. Although students may have ideas, expressing them in formal written English remains difficult. Previous research has found that EFL students often struggle with grammar, vocabulary, coherence, idea organization, and academic conventions. According to Utemuratova (2023), students often struggle to follow formal writing rules and systematically develop ideas. Similarly, Jimenez et al. (2024) discovered that grammar limitations, insufficient vocabulary, poor organization, limited references, and time management issues all have a negative impact on students' writing quality and coherence. Furthermore, Nawangsih et al. (2024) emphasize that academic writing difficulties are not only linguistic but also psychological and cognitive in nature, including anxiety, low confidence, and critical thinking challenges during the writing process. These findings suggest that academic writing is a multidimensional activity that combines cognitive, linguistic, and emotional aspects.

Along with these challenges, the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) has significantly transformed academic writing practices in higher education. EFL students are increasingly using AI tools like ChatGPT, Grammarly, and QuillBot to help them generate ideas, correct grammar, paraphrase, and organize academic texts. According to Dwivedi (2024), AI systems are intended to perform tasks related to human intelligence, such as language processing and content generation. In educational settings, these technologies serve as learning support systems, guiding students through the various stages of writing. Studies by Fauziah and Minarti (2023), Domingo et al. (2025), and Nhan et al. (2025) show that AI tools help students reduce writing anxiety, improve language accuracy, and gain confidence when expressing ideas in English. According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), AI can also serve as a mediating tool, scaffolding students' learning processes with feedback, examples, and writing assistance.

However, despite the benefits of AI, several ethical and pedagogical concerns have arisen about students' reliance on such technologies. According to Shidiq (2023) and Semel and Uli (2026), students' creativity, critical thinking, and originality in academic writing may suffer as a result of overreliance on AI. Furthermore, plagiarism, authorship, and academic integrity continue to be hotly debated topics. According to Malik (2025), many students continue to lack a clear understanding of ethical boundaries in AI-assisted writing. As a result, while AI provides practical support for EFL learners, it also raises new questions about responsible usage and independent intellectual engagement.

Another critical issue is that students' lived experiences in expressing themselves through academic writing are underexplored. Existing research has primarily focused on writing outcomes, language problems, instructional strategies, and the efficacy of AI tools. According to Rahnuma (2025), social and learning contexts have a significant impact on writing processes, whereas Saaty (2023) emphasizes the importance of confidence in students' ability to express ideas. Rizaldi et al. (2026) and Abdul Rahman (2026) argue that supportive learning strategies and technological assistance can boost students' writing confidence and coherence. However, little research has been conducted to specifically investigate how EFL students experience the process of bridging the gap between having ideas in their heads and transforming those ideas into coherent academic writing while dealing with cognitive, linguistic, emotional, and technological dimensions. As a result, this study fills a knowledge gap in experiential research.

According to preliminary interview findings from this study, students face a variety of challenges when writing academic papers. The majority of participants reported difficulties with

grammar, vocabulary, idea development, coherence, and formal academic language. Several students admitted to feeling nervous, anxious, pressured, or overwhelmed while writing academic papers, especially when dealing with unfamiliar topics, academic standards, and deadlines. At the same time, students expressed positive emotions such as satisfaction, relief, confidence, and pride after completing their writing assignments. These findings show that academic writing is more than just a linguistic process; it also involves emotion and cognition.

The interviews also reveal that students actively use various coping strategies to overcome their writing difficulties. Many participants reported using outlines, revising drafts several times, reading academic references, writing on a regular basis, and using AI tools like Grammarly and ChatGPT to improve clarity and organization. Some students also mentioned taking breaks and focusing on the main message they wanted to convey as strategies for reducing stress while writing. These findings suggest that EFL students constantly negotiate their internal ideas, emotional states, language limitations, and external technological support throughout the academic writing process.

Based on these considerations, the purpose of this study is to investigate EFL students' experiences with expressing themselves through academic writing. This study focuses on the cognitive, linguistic, and emotional challenges that students face when converting ideas into written academic texts, as well as the strategies they use to overcome these difficulties. This study adds to the growing discussion about academic writing in EFL contexts by combining students' experiences, emotional dimensions, and AI-supported writing practices into a single comprehensive framework. Moreover, the findings are expected to provide valuable insights for students, educators, and institutions seeking to create more supportive, ethical, and effective academic writing environments in the age of AI-powered learning.

Research Questions

- 1) How do EFL students experience expressing their thoughts through academic writing?
- 2) What difficulties do EFL students face when expressing their ideas in academic writing?
- 3) What strategies do EFL students use to express their ideas better in academic writing?
- 4) How do EFL students feel during the process of academic writing?

Methods

This was a qualitative research study conducted using a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach was used because the primary goal of this study was to investigate EFL students' lived experiences when using AI tools for academic writing. In this study, the researcher was especially interested in identifying the opportunities provided by AI tools, the ethical challenges that students faced, and the strategies they used to maintain originality and academic honesty in their writing activities. Furthermore, this study looked at students' perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and experiences when they used AI tools like ChatGPT, Grammarly, QuillBot, and other writing assistants to complete academic assignments.

This study involved ten EFL students from a single higher education institution. The participants in this study were all students from three TBI (Tense But Interesting) writing workshop classes: TBI 4A, TBI 4B, and TBI 4C. Students used a variety of AI tools in class, including ChatGPT, Grammarly, QuillBot, and other writing assistants, to help them with their academic writing. The researchers chose these students because they had previously used AI tools to assist with their writing processes and academic assignments. As a result, they were able to provide the researcher with useful data and information for answering the study's research questions.

The researchers used purposive sampling to select the study's participants. Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate because participants were purposefully chosen based on criteria relevant to the study's objectives. Participants were chosen based on their active use of AI tools to support academic writing activities such as idea generation, grammar checking,

writing structure organization, vocabulary improvement, sentence paraphrasing, and academic text development. Furthermore, the participants were open about their experiences during the interviews. The researcher chose participants who met these criteria because they had firsthand experience and differing perspectives on the use of AI tools in academic writing contexts.

This study's data collection methods included semi-structured interviews and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method because they provided the researcher with detailed and in-depth information about the participants' experiences. All participants in this study were interviewed individually. The researcher conducted interviews to learn about students' experiences using AI tools for academic writing, including the opportunities and benefits they gained, the ethical challenges they faced, and the strategies they used to maintain originality and honesty in their writing processes. The interview guidelines were developed systematically using the study's research questions, indicators, and sub-indicators. During the interviews, probing questions were used flexibly to elicit deeper explanations and richer information from the participants. All interviews were recorded and meticulously transcribed for future analysis.

The researcher also used documentation to supplement data collection. Documents gathered included participants' academic writing assignments, notes, writing drafts, and other materials pertaining to the use of AI tools in writing activities. The researcher examined these documents to support and strengthen the findings from the interviews. The use of multiple data sources improved the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

The data from this study were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive qualitative data analysis model. The analysis had three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. During the data reduction stage, all interview recordings were transcribed, read multiple times, and thoroughly reviewed. Important information related to the research questions was identified and coded, while irrelevant data that did not support the study's focus was excluded. Several themes emerged during the coding process, including students' experiences with AI tools, the opportunities they received, the ethical challenges they faced, and the strategies they used to maintain originality in academic writing.

During the data display stage, the researcher organized and presented the findings using themes, categories, and descriptive explanations. The researcher found recurring patterns, similarities, and differences in the participants' experiences. Several quotes from participants were also used to reinforce and illustrate the emerging themes. The findings were organized into themes such as students' perceptions of AI tools, the role of AI in academic writing, ethical awareness, originality, grammar and vocabulary support, idea development, and strategies for dealing with academic writing challenges.

The final stage of the analysis process involved drawing conclusions and verifying the findings. The researcher continuously reviewed and cross-checked the information obtained from interviews and documentation to ensure consistency and credibility. In addition, the researcher interpreted the relationships among the identified themes in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of EFL students' experiences in using AI tools for academic writing, including the opportunities, ethical boundaries, and strategies related to maintaining academic integrity and originality in writing.

Results and Discussion

Results

This chapter presents the results of the study "Between Ideas and Words: Students' Experiences in Expressing Thoughts Through Academic Writing." The results were obtained through semi-structured interviews with ten EFL students from semester 4 classes A, B, and C. The data from the interviews were coded and categorized using Miles and Huberman's interactive qualitative data analysis model, which included data reduction, data display, and

conclusion drawing and verification. The findings were organized around the study's four research questions, which sought to identify patterns in students' experiences, challenges, strategies, and emotional responses during academic writing activities.

Research Question 1: How do EFL students experience the process of expressing their ideas in academic writing?

The outcomes of the first research question were divided into five major themes: ability to express ideas, understanding of academic writing, idea transformation process, writing engagement, and perceived writing experiences.

Theme 1: Ability to Express Ideas

The findings for Research Question 1 revealed that most students had ideas and opinions to express, but they most often struggled to translate those ideas into academic writing. Participant 1 stated that academic writing was difficult, given the difficulty in expressing ideas and staying motivated. Similarly, participant 2 stated that even though ideas could be generated pretty fast, expressing them academically was difficult due to vocabulary limitations. Participant 6 also mentioned that turning ideas into complete paragraphs was still difficult. These findings suggest that students generally may have ideas and opinions, but they struggle to express them effectively in formal academic writing.

Theme 2: Understanding of Academic Writing

Another significant finding from this study was students' perception of academic writing as a formal and structured process requiring grammar accuracy, academic vocabulary, and critical thinking. Participant 3 mentioned feeling less confident due to uncertainty about academic vocabulary. Participant 7 explained that academic writing required focus, grammar accuracy, and idea organization. These findings indicate that students viewed academic writing as a complex task that necessitated linguistic proficiency and careful organization.

Theme 3: Idea Transformation Process

The findings also revealed that students frequently used gradual writing processes to develop their ideas into academic paragraphs. Participant 1 stated that simple ideas were generally speaking written first before being expanded into paragraphs. Participant 4 explained that ideas were organized step by step before being written as paragraphs. Participant 10 reported developing ideas gradually while writing. These findings show that students used gradual writing processes to organize and develop their academic ideas.

Theme 4: Writing Engagement

Writing engagement was also identified as an important theme in this study. Despite the difficulties, students attempted to participate actively in writing activities, according to the data. Participant 4 stated that maintaining clarity and focus was essential when writing. Participant 8 expressed enjoyment and active participation in academic writing activities. These findings suggest that writing engagement was critical in enhancing students' academic writing experiences.

Theme 5: Perceived Writing Experiences

Academic writing was perceived by participants to be both challenging and meaningful. Participant 5 explained that one's emotional state and mood had a significant impact on their writing experiences. Participant 7 believed that academic writing enhanced critical thinking and organizational abilities. According to the findings, students saw academic writing as more than just an academic task, but also as a learning process that helps them improve themselves.

Research Question 2: What challenges do students face when transforming their ideas into written form?

The results for Research Question 2 were organized into six major themes: vocabulary difficulties, grammar and sentence structure, idea organization, idea development, maintaining coherence and focus, and emotional challenges.

Theme 1: Vocabulary Difficulties

Most participants stated that a limited vocabulary hampered their ability to express ideas academically. Participant 2 stated that selecting academic vocabulary was difficult, whereas participant 3 expressed low confidence due to vocabulary limitations. These findings suggest that vocabulary mastery remains a significant barrier in academic writing.

Theme 2: Grammar and Sentence Structure

Students reported the most difficulty with grammar and sentence construction. Participant 1 discussed difficulties with grammar and idea development. Participant 7 also mentioned challenges with sentence structure and connectors. These results show that students struggled to write grammatically correct and formal academic sentences.

Theme 3: Organization of Ideas

Several participants had difficulty organizing ideas coherently into paragraphs. Participant 6 stated that organizing ideas into coherent paragraphs was difficult, whereas participant 9 described confusion when arranging ideas logically. These findings indicate that coherence and logical organization pose significant challenges for EFL students.

Theme 4: Idea Development

Students also had trouble expanding ideas into detailed paragraphs. Participant 6 stated that it was difficult to create detailed paragraphs, and participant 10 admitted to having difficulty clearly expressing ideas. These findings show that idea expansion remains a significant challenge in academic writing.

Theme 5: Maintaining Coherence and Focus

Another challenge identified by the findings was maintaining coherence and focus while writing. Participant 4 emphasized the importance of connecting ideas, whereas participant 5 mentioned mood changes and a lack of focus while writing. These findings indicate that coherence and concentration are important but challenging aspects of academic writing.

Theme 6: Emotional Challenges

Participants also reported feelings of anxiety, pressure, stress, and low confidence. Participant 9 stated that a lack of motivation hampered writing productivity, whereas participant 10 described feelings of nervousness during academic writing. These findings suggest that writing difficulties are caused by more than just linguistic factors.

Research Question 3: What strategies do students use to express their ideas in academic writing?

The results for Research Question 3 were divided into five major themes: outlining and planning, reading references and examples, revising and practicing writing, using supportive tools, and self-management strategies.

Theme 1: Outlining and Planning

Before beginning the writing process, most students created outlines. Participant 1 stated that outlines helped organize ideas, whereas participant 7 stated that simple outlines aided the systematic development of paragraphs. These findings show that outlining was one of the most popular strategies among students.

Theme 2: Reading References and Examples

Participants frequently used academic references and examples to enhance their writing quality. Participant 2 stated that academic articles and examples aided comprehension of academic writing. Participant 8 mentioned using journals and books for writing. These findings suggest that exposure to academic texts helped students improve their vocabulary and writing structure.

Theme 3: Revising and Practicing Writing

Revision and repeated practice became important writing strategies for participants. Participant 1 explained that revising drafts and practicing writing helped him improve his writing skills. Participant 3 also mentioned revising vocabulary and sentence structures several times. These findings suggest that revision activities played a significant role in writing improvement.

Theme 4: Using Supportive Tools

Many participants relied on technological tools like Grammarly and AI applications to help them write. Participant 6 stated that AI tools helped him create outlines and develop ideas. Participant 9 also stated that AI tools aided idea generation and organization. These findings indicate that supportive technological tools played a significant role in students' academic writing processes.

Theme 5: Self-Management Strategies

Students also used self-management strategies to stay focused and motivated while writing. Participant 5 explained that listening to music and taking breaks helped him concentrate. Similarly, participant 10 stated that taking short breaks helped him overcome writing difficulties. These findings suggest that emotional management and a comfortable learning environment improved students' writing performance.

Research Question 4: How do students feel during the process of academic writing?

The findings for the fourth research question revealed five emotional themes: confidence, anxiety and nervousness, motivation, satisfaction, and emotional pressure.

Theme 1: Confidence in Writing

Students also used self-management strategies to stay focused and motivated while writing. Participant 5 explained that listening to music and taking breaks helped him concentrate. Similarly, participant 10 stated that taking short breaks helped him overcome writing difficulties. These findings suggest that emotional management and a comfortable learning environment improved students' writing performance.

Theme 2: Anxiety and Nervousness

Anxiety and nervousness were frequently present during academic writing. Participant 2 described feeling nervous due to her limited academic writing ability. Participant 10 expressed nervousness during the writing process. These findings show that academic writing caused emotional stress for many students.

Theme 3: Motivation in Writing

Despite various challenges, many students remained committed to improving their writing skills. Participant 1 described feeling stressed and motivated at the same time. Participant 7 also expressed a strong desire to improve his academic writing abilities. These findings suggest that motivation played a significant role in students' persistence.

Theme 4: Satisfaction After Writing

Most participants felt relieved and satisfied after finishing their writing assignments. Participant 3 described feeling more confident after finishing writing, whereas Participant 8 described feeling proud and satisfied. The findings suggest that students had positive emotional experiences while completing writing tasks.

Theme 5: Confidence in Writing

Academic expectations, deadlines, and the fear of making mistakes all contributed to emotional stress during the writing process. Participant 6 mentioned academic pressure, while Participant 9 described stress caused by deadlines and writing difficulties. These findings suggest that emotional pressure had a significant impact on students' academic writing experiences.

Summary of Findings

This study discovered that EFL students found academic writing both challenging and meaningful. The findings revealed that students frequently struggled with grammar, vocabulary, idea organization, coherence, idea development, and emotional stress during writing activities. Students also felt anxious, nervous, and lacked confidence when expressing their academic ideas.

Despite these challenges, students actively used a variety of strategies to improve their writing skills. These strategies included outlining, revising drafts, reading academic references, practicing writing, utilizing AI and technological tools, and dealing with emotional states while writing. The study also found that students saw academic writing as a process that included cognitive organization, emotional regulation, motivation, and strategic learning behaviors.

Overall, the study discovered that academic writing for EFL students is a multifaceted process that combines idea transformation, linguistic competence, emotional experiences, and strategic efforts to improve writing quality.

Discussion

This is a qualitative phenomenological study that investigates EFL students' experiences expressing ideas through academic writing. The study sought to uncover how students experienced the process of transforming their thoughts into academic writing, as well as the challenges they faced, strategies they employed, and emotional responses they felt during writing activities. Data were gathered through interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis.

The results of Research Question 1 revealed that the majority of participants had ideas and opinions but struggled to express them academically. Students described academic writing as a complex and demanding process that required grammar accuracy, vocabulary mastery, idea organization, and critical thinking. The majority of participants used gradual writing processes, beginning with simple ideas and developing them into complete academic paragraphs. These findings back up the notion that academic writing necessitates cognitive organization and systematic thinking.

The findings also revealed that students faced the most significant challenges in grammar, vocabulary, and idea organization. Similar to previous research on EFL academic writing, students frequently lacked confidence in using academic vocabulary and constructing formal academic sentences. Emotional factors such as anxiety, nervousness, pressure, and low

motivation also influenced students' writing performance. These findings suggest that academic writing difficulties include not only linguistic competence but also emotional and psychological factors.

To overcome these challenges, students used a variety of strategies, including outlining, reading references, revising drafts, practicing writing, and utilizing helpful technological tools such as Grammarly and AI applications. The findings indicate that students actively used cognitive, technological, and self-management strategies to support their writing processes. The utilization of technological instruments also demonstrated how Students attempted to increase writing efficiency, organization, and language accuracy.

Another significant finding from this study concerned students' emotional experiences during academic writing. Despite feeling stressed, nervous, and pressured during writing activities, students remained motivated to improve their academic writing skills. Many participants reported feeling relieved, satisfied, and more confident after finishing their writing assignments. These findings suggest that academic writing not only challenges students linguistically, but also promotes their emotional and intellectual development.

Overall, the study's findings indicate that academic writing for EFL students is a multidimensional process that includes linguistic competence, cognitive organization, emotional regulation, motivation, and strategic learning behaviors. As a result, academic writing instruction should not only emphasize language accuracy, but also offer emotional support, strategic guidance, and opportunities for ongoing writing practice.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate EFL students' experiences with expressing ideas through academic writing. The findings revealed that students found academic writing both challenging and meaningful. During writing activities, students faced a variety of challenges, including grammar issues, vocabulary limitations, idea organization, idea development, coherence, and emotional pressure.

Despite these challenges, students remained motivated to improve their writing skills. They used a variety of strategies, including outlining, revising drafts, reading academic references, practicing writing, using technological tools, and managing emotional states while writing. These strategies assisted students in organizing ideas, improving language accuracy, and staying focused during writing assignments.

The study also discovered that academic writing requires not only linguistic competence, but also emotional regulation, cognitive organization, motivation, and strategic learning behaviors. As a result, academic writing instruction should offer students not only language support, but also emotional and strategic guidance in order to boost their confidence and writing performance.

Overall, this study concludes that EFL students need continuous practice, supportive learning environments, and effective writing strategies to improve their academic writing skills and confidence in expressing ideas academically. The study also recommends that future research include a larger sample size and investigate other aspects of academic writing experiences among EFL students.

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