



UNPACKING EFL STUDENTS' IN ACADEMIC WRITING FROM PARAPHRASING TO RESEARCH CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This study examines the multifaceted challenges faced by English Education students in academic writing, focusing on paraphrasing, outlining, analysing previous studies, identifying research gaps, and formulating thesis statements. Using a Focus Group Semi-Structured Qualitative Content Analysis (FSQCA) design, data were collected from nine fifth- and sixth-semester students at UIN Raden Intan Lampung who had completed Academic Writing and Research Methodology courses. Thematic analysis identified five interrelated difficulties: overreliance on direct quotations, lack of structured planning, limited analytical synthesis, confusion in identifying research gaps, and weak thesis formulation. FSQCA interpretation, guided by Fan and Wang's (2024) configurational model, revealed that low self-regulated writing strategies combined with high perceived difficulty and writing anxiety significantly constrained students' performance. The findings suggest that academic writing challenges extend beyond linguistic issues to cognitive, rhetorical, and metacognitive dimensions. Pedagogically, the study advocates integrated instruction linking paraphrasing, outlining, and thesis development with comprehension, planning, and analytical reasoning to strengthen EFL students' self-regulated writing competence.

Keywords:

academic writing, FSQCA, self-regulated writing, paraphrasing, research gap, thesis statement, EFL students

A. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing constitutes a crucial yet demanding skill for university students, particularly those in English Education programs, who are required to produce scholarly essays, research-based assignments, and undergraduate theses. Unlike general writing tasks, academic writing demands higher-order thinking skills, including critical reasoning, logical organization, linguistic precision, and originality (Hyland, 2019). Despite formal instruction in dedicated writing courses, many students continue to face persistent challenges in translating their ideas into coherent, well-structured, and research-oriented texts. These challenges are not only linguistic but also conceptual, encompassing paraphrasing, synthesizing prior studies, constructing logical outlines, identifying research gaps, and formulating clear thesis statements.

Previous research indicates that such difficulties often stem from limited academic literacy and insufficient familiarity with research conventions (Rahmanita, 2023; Hyland, 2019). In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, these challenges are compounded by the dual demands of mastering linguistic form and developing academic reasoning. Students frequently over-rely on direct quotations, summarize rather than synthesize prior studies, and struggle to construct cohesive outlines and coherent arguments, increasing the risk of plagiarism and conceptual fragmentation (Tardy, 2020; Keck, 2014; Pecorari, 2015). Preliminary observations at UIN Raden Intan Lampung confirm these patterns, highlighting difficulties in paraphrasing, gap identification, thesis formulation, and literature synthesis.

Addressing these multidimensional challenges requires an approach that captures both linguistic and cognitive dimensions. Therefore, this study employs a Focus Group Semi-Structured Qualitative Content Analysis (FSQCA) design to investigate students' reasoning processes, perceptions, and reflective experiences (Mayring, 2014; Schreier, 2012). Participants were fifth- and sixth-semester English Education students who had completed Academic Writing and Research Methodology courses, representing a transitional stage from general academic writing to research-oriented writing. The study aims to identify and interpret the range of academic writing difficulties—particularly in paraphrasing, outlining, synthesizing prior research, identifying gaps, and formulating thesis statements—and to uncover the underlying cognitive, linguistic, and pedagogical factors.

The findings are expected to enrich theoretical understanding of EFL academic literacy by elucidating the interplay between linguistic competence and conceptual

reasoning. Practically, they offer insights for lecturers and curriculum designers to develop targeted instructional strategies, emphasizing paraphrasing, critical reading, synthesis, and argumentation, and to design structured writing modules guiding students through essential stages of research writing, from outlining and literature analysis to gap identification and thesis formulation.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using the Focus Group Semi-Structured Qualitative Content Analysis (FSQCA) approach to investigate the multidimensional challenges faced by English Education students in academic writing. Qualitative inquiry, as Creswell and Poth (2018) note, provides an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions within authentic academic contexts.

The participants comprised nine purposively selected fifth- and sixth-semester students from the English Education Department at UIN Raden Intan Lampung who had completed Academic Writing and Research Methodology courses. These students represent a transitional stage from general academic writing to research-oriented writing. Data were collected through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guided by semi-structured questions exploring difficulties in paraphrasing, outlining, analysing previous studies, identifying research gaps, and formulating thesis statements. The FGD lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, was audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy.

Data analysis followed qualitative content analysis procedures outlined by Mayring (2014) and Schreier (2012), including systematic coding, categorization, and theme development. FSQCA enabled examination of both linguistic and cognitive dimensions of students' writing processes, revealing configurations of self-regulated strategies, perceived difficulty, and writing anxiety that influence performance (Fan & Wang, 2024). To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, triangulation and peer debriefing were conducted in line with Lincoln and Guba (1985). Ethical standards were strictly observed, including obtaining informed consent and ensuring participant anonymity.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated the academic writing challenges experienced by nine English Education students at UIN Raden Intan Lampung using a Focus Group Semi-Structured Qualitative Content Analysis (FSQCA) approach. Thematic analysis identified five interrelated difficulties: (1) paraphrasing, (2) outlining, (3) analysing previous studies,

(4) identifying research gaps, and (5) formulating thesis statements. Each theme reflects complex linguistic, cognitive, and conceptual barriers that impede students' ability to produce coherent, research-oriented academic texts.

Paraphrasing Difficulties

Participants reported significant challenges in paraphrasing effectively, often relying on near-copying strategies with minimal lexical changes, consistent with Keck's (2014) concept of surface-level paraphrasing. Student 3 explained, *"Sometimes I only change a few words because I'm afraid to change the meaning,"* while Student 8 noted, *"I understand what the author says, but I don't know how to write it in my own words."* These findings suggest that paraphrasing is often viewed as a mechanical lexical task rather than a process of meaning reconstruction, which aligns with Hirvela and Du's (2013) argument that effective paraphrasing requires deep comprehension and lexical flexibility. FSQCA analysis indicates that low self-regulated strategy use combined with high perceived difficulty, as highlighted in Fan and Wang (2024), substantially limits EFL writing performance. Explicit instruction linking comprehension and paraphrasing strategies is therefore crucial for enhancing meaning-making skills.

Outlining Weaknesses

Many students demonstrated difficulty in producing structured outlines, often beginning essays without planning, resulting in fragmented ideas. Student 5 remarked, *"I usually just start writing, but later I realize my ideas are mixed up."* This supports Hyland's (2019) assertion that outlining is essential for maintaining logical coherence and rhetorical flow. FSQCA results indicate that poor outlining reflects low self-monitoring and weak pre-writing self-regulation. As Fan and Wang (2024) suggest, outlining is a core self-regulated writing strategy that mediates cognitive control and writing quality. Incorporating visual and digital outlining tools may support students' cognitive planning and organization.

Challenges in Analysing Previous Studies

Students struggled to critically analyse literature, often summarizing rather than synthesizing findings. Student 4 stated, *"I can summarize other studies, but I don't know how to connect them to my topic,"* reflecting Bruce's (2011) "summary trap." FSQCA analysis shows that this pattern stems from limited analytical strategies, moderate writing anxiety, and high perceived difficulty (Fan & Wang, 2024). Instructional

scaffolds, such as annotated literature mapping and comparative matrices, can foster critical engagement and synthesis skills.

Confusion in Identifying Research Gaps

Participants found it challenging to identify research gaps. Student 7 explained, *“I know I must find a gap, but I don’t know where to start,”* revealing limited analytical reasoning and rhetorical awareness consistent with Swales and Feak’s (2012) CARS model. According to Fan and Wang (2024), such difficulties are linked to low self-regulatory confidence and high perceived writing difficulty. Modelling gap statements in published research and incorporating reflective exercises can enhance students’ understanding of research positioning.

Weaknesses in Formulating Thesis Statements

Formulating clear, arguable thesis statements remained a persistent issue. Student 2 noted, *“My thesis is often too broad, not really showing my argument.”* FSQCA results suggest that low self-regulated writing control compounded by high perceived difficulty hinders thesis development (Fan & Wang, 2024). Pedagogical emphasis on iterative thesis refinement, integrated with gap identification and analytical reading, can support more focused argumentation.

The five difficulties are configurationally interrelated. Paraphrasing challenges impede synthesis of literature; weak outlining correlates with unfocused thesis statements; limited analytical skills constrain gap identification. This multidimensional pattern aligns with Fan and Wang’s (2024) FSQCA-based framework, which highlights the combined influence of self-regulated strategies, writing anxiety, and perceived difficulty on EFL writing performance. Students’ challenges extend beyond grammar or vocabulary, encompassing cognitive regulation, rhetorical reasoning, and strategic awareness.

So, the findings underscore the need for a comprehensive and structured instructional model that explicitly addresses the interconnected challenges in EFL academic writing. Pedagogical interventions should approach paraphrasing as a comprehension-driven activity, emphasizing the reconstruction of meaning rather than mere lexical substitution. Outlining should be taught as a deliberate cognitive planning strategy that guides students in organizing ideas logically before drafting. Thesis formulation should be integrated with analytical reading and research gap identification to ensure that students develop clear, arguable, and contextually grounded claims. Additionally, the use of digital tools, scaffolded exercises, and reflective practices can

support students' self-regulated writing processes, fostering metacognitive awareness, strategic planning, and overall academic literacy. Implementing such an integrated approach can enhance both the linguistic and cognitive dimensions of students' academic writing, promoting more coherent, research-oriented outputs.

D. CONCLUSION

This study examined nine English Education students' difficulties in academic writing using a Focus Group Semi-Structured Qualitative Content Analysis (FSQCA) framework. The findings revealed five interrelated challenges paraphrasing, outlining, analysing previous studies, identifying research gaps, and formulating thesis statements that stemmed not only from linguistic limitations but also from cognitive and metacognitive constraints. These results indicate that academic writing difficulties among EFL learners arise from the interplay of self-regulation, task perception, and linguistic competence, echoing Fan and Wang's (2024) FSQCA-based model on the configurational nature of writing performance. Pedagogically, the findings emphasize the need for integrated instruction that simultaneously develops linguistic proficiency and self-regulated writing strategies through scaffolded paraphrasing, structured outlining, critical synthesis, and reflective practices such as peer feedback and self-assessment. Strengthening these dimensions can help students construct more coherent academic arguments and prepare them for the complex demands of research-based writing. Future research may extend this work through longitudinal or mixed-method FSQCA designs to explore how self-regulated writing strategies evolve and contribute to sustainable improvement in EFL academic literacy.

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