



EFL First-Year Students' Writing Challenges and Strategies in the Transition from High School to University Writing

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ABSTRACT

Writing at the university level presents significant challenges for EFL students. Although many studies have investigated EFL students' academic writing challenges, few have focused specifically on paragraph writing, the foundational stage of academic writing development among first-year university students, particularly those transitioning from high school to university writing. Addressing this gap, this present study investigates students' writing challenges, strategies, and their perceptions of differences and feedback. A total of 315 first-year Indonesian EFL students enrolled in the English study programs were selected through convenience sampling to complete a Likert-scale questionnaire adapted from the ESLP 82 Questionnaire. The findings reveal idea organization as the most prominent difficulty ($M = 4.4$; 83.5% agree), followed by issues of grammar and sentence structures ($M = 4.3$; 78.9% agree). Whereas, 85.7% students answered that university writing is more complex than high school writing activities, because it is needed a higher level of critical thinking, as 88.2% students acknowledged. As many as 80.8% students like to discuss with their teachers about their writing difficulties, and 89.5% prefer to use digital tools such as Grammarly and ChatGPT. At about 89.4% students stated that teacher feedback on grammar was considered helpful, but students rarely got peer feedback. These findings emphasize the urgent need

for structured writing support that focuses on idea organization, grammar, vocabulary enhancement, and opportunities for peer interaction. To explore effective pedagogical interventions and the evolving role of digital tools in supporting academic writing development, further studies are highly recommended.



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INTRODUCTION

For EFL students, writing a paragraph is important to their academic progress, moreover in their first year at the university (Abdalla, 2023). Writing a paragraph as the foundation of the next writing activities needs the ability to present ideas, develop arguments, and build coherence (Yasuda, 2023). Writing an effective paragraph means a lot for EFL students in their course because it prepares them for more complex writing tasks in the years ahead (Abed, 2024). In contrast, many students still struggle with organizing ideas, building coherence, and using grammar and vocabulary effectively within a paragraph.

There are some research findings in investigating students' writing challenges in some academic contexts. Shepard and Rose (2023) find that organizing ideas, moreover, in maintaining coherence, is the most difficult, while Mehat and Ismail (2021) state that students often struggle in selecting appropriate vocabulary for academic purposes. Further, Khadawardi (2022) emphasizes grammatical errors in tenses and subject-verb agreement, mostly found in students' writing products. In Indonesia, generating ideas, revising drafts, vocabulary development, and grammatical accuracy also become similar issues among university students (Bisriyah, 2022; Pakaya & Nabu, 2022). In contrast, Li and Pei (2024) find that by giving students proper organizing ideas instruction, they will know how to use appropriate vocabulary, master grammatical structure, and demonstrate clear improvements in their writing performance.

Additionally, Siekmann et al. (2022) find that the problems shown in organizational issues are caused by abrupt or disjointed transitions, which makes the topic sentences and supporting details become disconnected from the ideas within the paragraphs. Alnefaie (2023) agrees that students' challenges are not only in producing well-structured sentences but also in maintaining focus and cohesion throughout a text. Further, Alsariera and Alsarairh (2024) explain that EFL students in Jordan face similar problems,

those are the use of complex verbs, the interference of the first language, and the useless instructional feedback. Even though these studies give valuable information into the process of academic writing in general, they only focus on essays or research papers, and little is uncovered about how first-year students meet paragraph writing during their transition into university writing activities as their foundational skill.

In the university context, students must move from high school writing to university-level writing, and they must be able to work from simpler to more complicated academic texts that they should be able to use critical thinking, making, and developing coherent argumentation (Siregar et al., 2024; Tasker, 2022). This is due to, in high school, the writing activities focus on correctness and form, while university writing students must write in depth, analyze, and understand the academic conventions (Huong & Huong, 2019). Indeed, in the process, students always find it difficult to begin to write with clear ideas, build paragraphs well, and use appropriate vocabulary (Abed, 2024), which can cause writing anxiety or decrease their confidence and motivation (Keane et al., 2022). The further problem comes when university writing requires independence, original thinking, and strong academic integrity, which can be overwhelming for new students because they were not prepared in high school contexts (Subandowo & Sardi, 2023).

Research on writing has shown that paragraph writing skills are important to success in the next academic genres (Besral et al., 2023; Johnson, 2024). Students who are not able to organize clear and coherent paragraphs will find it difficult to build an essay, make reports, and research papers as well. In fact, many writing courses and activities still focus on complexity and larger textual forms and often overlook the paragraph as the foundation of academic writing. This gap shows the need for focused research that uncovers the paragraph writing challenges faced by first-year EFL students during their transition from high school to university writing. Paragraph writing is also taught in high school, but the goals and expectations are considerably different from the university-level writing context. High school writing tends to focus on grammar and templated formats, while university-level writing focuses on helping students build arguments, using critical thinking, and integrating ideas from some references to create cohesive paragraph texts (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2024; Karakoc et al., 2022).

Based on the explanation above, it is important to understand the difficulties and problems in paragraph writing faced by first-year EFL students. It is also important for teachers and institutions to design clearer pedagogical strategies that can directly meet students' needs and support their progress during the transition to a university setting. Further, conceptualizing students' transition is also important to understand; it is important to know their strategies to overcome these problems. It is because

knowing students' perceptions can give a good impact on their motivation, confidence, and willingness to keep improving their writing (Zhang & Hasim, 2023) while knowing their strategies reflects how they adapt to new academic requirements (Liem, 2022). Exploring these dimensions will give a clearer understanding of the students' management of new writing requirements and how teachers can give better support in their adaptation process.

Based on the background explained above, the present study objectives are to explore EFL students' experiences during their transition from high school to university-level writing. It analyzes the problems they face, the differences they recognize between high school and university writing, their ways of study or strategies, and their perceptions on the role of feedback to improve their writing development. The findings are hoped to contribute to the teaching practices development especially in writing courses, which can support students to improve the base foundation of students' writing journey.

More specifically, this study addresses the research questions as follows:

1. What are the writing challenges do EFL students face during their transition from high school to university-level studies?
2. How are students' perceptions of the differences between high school and university writing?
3. How do students deal with their writing challenges?
4. What are students' perceptions of the role of feedback in their writing development?

METHOD

Research Design

This research explores the experiences of first-year Indonesian EFL students in their writing activities using a descriptive survey design. The students were enrolled in *Paragraph Writing* courses. The research examined four main areas that focused on those writing challenges faced in university-level paragraph writing, followed by the students' perceptions of differences between high school and university writing. Next, it will explain strategies and coping mechanisms used to conquer the writing problems students face, and their perceptions of feedback from teachers and peers.

To collect the data, a Likert-scale questionnaire was developed using the survey design principles stated by (Punch, 2005) and (Cresswell, 2012). The questionnaire consisted the demographic information and writing challenges data. It explored students' background characteristics, their challenges in academic writing, their perceptions differences between writing contexts, their coping strategies and learning behaviors, and their evaluation of feedback effectiveness in supporting their writing progress.

Instruments and Procedures

Survey questionnaire

This study used a questionnaire as the primary data collection instrument, which was adapted from the ESLP 82 Questionnaire: Self-Assessment of English Writing Skills and Use of Writing Strategies, which originally had 108 items. In this present study, the questionnaire was reconstructed and reduced to 29 items. The process of reconstruction involved the selection of appropriate items from the original instrument that focused on writing difficulties, strategy use, and feedback, and next, the words were modified to suit EFL students' experiences and the Indonesian higher education context. Some additional items were included based on recent literature on writing transition (Abdalla, 2023; Bisriyah, 2022) to capture students' perceptions of the differences between high school and university writing.

The step continued to organize the final instrument into four thematic sections to match the research aims. Section 1 focuses on students' writing challenges at the university level to know the specific difficulties they face. Next, the exploration of students' perceptions of the differences between high school writing and university writing is thematized in Section 2. Section 3 explores students' writing strategies and coping mechanisms to improve their academic writing skills throughout their university program. Finally, Section 4 examines the role of support and feedback in the students' writing experiences and writing development.

To have a clear understanding, the questionnaire was translated into Bahasa Indonesia, to enable the participants to respond to it without any misinterpretations or problems with language limitations. The researchers ensured to minimize the ambiguity to get reliable responses. The researchers also revised the sentences or paraphrased the items to reflect cultural and linguistic appropriateness.

Before distribution, the questionnaire was reviewed by two academic colleagues with expertise in EFL writing and questionnaire design. Based on their feedback, further adjustments were made to improve clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. The final version of the questionnaire was then shared with English Education programs' first-year students at ten universities under the PGRI organization in East Java, Indonesia.

Table 1. Item Distribution of the Questionnaire

Questionnaire sections		Information to elicit	Item number
Background Demographic Data	Information/	Sex, age, and years of studying English	a–d
Section 1. Writing Challenges in University		Fundamental aspects of paragraph writing	1–10

Section 2. Differences Between High School and University Writing	Key differences, such as difficulty level, critical thinking requirements, length and detail, structural understanding, and perceived preparedness	11–15
Section 3. Writing Strategies and Coping Mechanisms	Proactive and reactive strategies and behaviors	16–22
Section 4. Support and feedback	Feedback from both teachers and peers, as well as preferred pedagogical approaches	23–29

Participants

A total of 315 first-year university students from ten different universities under PGRI organization in East Java, Indonesia, and took Paragraph Writing courses in their first-year program, have participated in this study. There were 61.3% female and 38.7% male students. For the age distribution, there were 72% of participants were 19 years old, 21.9% were 18 years old, and 6.1% were 20 years old. In terms of English learning experience, most participants (58.1%) had studied English for six years, 33.3% had studied English for five years, and 8.6% had studied English for seven years. The detailed of the participants demographic information is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic Information of Participants

Category	Subcategory	Frequency (n)	Percentage
Sex	Male	122	38.7%
	Female	193	61.3%
Age	18 years old	69	21.9%
	19 years old	227	72%
	20 years old	19	6.1%
Years of Studying English	5 years	105	33.3%
	6 years	183	58.1%
	7 years	27	8.6%

Data Analysis Procedures

The survey was conducted online, the researchers sent Google Forms to the lecturers from ten universities then they distributed the questionnaire by sending the link to their students through WhatsApp groups. This study used a convenience sampling method (Cresswell, 2012; Punch, 2005), that recruited the participants through well-established networks within English Education programs. This sampling technique was used because its accessibility and still provide diversity among the participating institutions. Unlike more formal sampling method that often require administrative permissions, convenience

sampling allows direct communication with students by collaborating with the lecturers and academic partners who understand the context of this study.

Participation in the survey was completely voluntary; students were encouraged to respond honestly based on their real writing experiences. They were also informed that all responses would remain confidential and be used only for research purposes. A total of 315 students from 10 different universities across East Java completed the questionnaire. The participant's distribution was detailed in the Table 3.

Table 3. The Participants Distribution

University	Participants (n)	Percentage (%)
University A	24	7.6
University B	28	8.9
University C	61	19.4
University D	22	7.0
University E	32	10.2
University F	26	8.3
University G	33	10.5
University H	26	8.3
University I	29	9.2
University J	34	10.8

Ten universities that participated in this study are institutions under the PGRI organization in East Java, and have a similar structure for the first-year writing curriculum. Based on the collected curriculum documents from participating universities, the *Paragraph Writing* course is offered to first-year EFL students as a compulsory subject, usually taken in the first semester and in some cases in the second. This ensures that students from participating institutions have comparable instructional objectives, materials, and assessment criteria. Importantly, since the subject matter is the same, their perspectives on paragraph writing can also be considerably comparable.

Participants could share their challenges during the writing courses when transitioning from secondary to tertiary education by filling in the questionnaire. The data were analyzed descriptively and converted into percentages. Mean percentages were calculated for each thematic category to illustrate the most common writing problems experienced by the students, as well as the perceptions of writing differences, their coping strategies, and their perceptions of the feedback from teachers and peers.

FINDINGS

Challenges in University Writing

Transitioning from high school writing programs challenges the students when they are writing at the university level. The increased complexity of academic tasks, the emphasis on critical thinking, and the expectation to

construct well-organized arguments contribute to students' writing difficulties.

The results of the survey showed the most frequently reported challenges faced by first-year university students in writing courses. These findings highlight the specific areas where students require additional support and guidance. Table 4 summarizes the key difficulties identified in Section 1 of the questionnaire explained that students mostly needed writing assistance.

Table 4. Results of Section 1 Survey Item

Survey Item	Mean (M)	SD	% Agree (4 & 5)
Generating ideas for writing topics is challenging.	4.4	0.8	83.5%
I struggle with organizing my ideas logically when writing.	4.3	0.9	78.9%
Grammar and sentence structure are major challenges for me.	4.2	0.9	78.3%
I find writing in English at the university level challenging.	4.2	0.9	80.1%
I have difficulty understanding academic writing conventions.	4.1	1.0	72.8%
I have difficulty using appropriate vocabulary in my writing.	4.0	1.0	71.3%
I find it difficult to shift between ideas smoothly.	4.0	1.0	70.1%
I struggle with writing clear and complete sentences.	3.9	1.1	67.1%
Using correct punctuation is difficult for me.	3.8	1.2	63.2%

Based on 315 participants' responses, the survey data gave information that idea generation related to the topic of writing was the most significant challenge, as shown in a high mean score of 4.4, with 83.5% of students agreeing that it is difficult to generate ideas. Students struggled to generate or develop initial ideas before even beginning the writing process shown in a substantial number. The second-highest mean score (4.3) was associated with organizing ideas logically, with 78.9% of participants agreeing with this statement. This told us that even when students can generate ideas, they often find it difficult to structure them coherently.

In terms of grammar and sentence structure, which had a mean score of 4.2, 78.3% of students agree that grammar and sentence structure were major problems for them, proved by many students have difficulties to construct the good grammatical order and well-structured sentences. Generally, as many 80.1% students agreed that paragraph writing at the university level is difficult, with a mean of 4.2. It indicated that writing not

only needs the ability to write grammatically correct, but also how to use the formal and academic style in academic requirements.

Students' understanding of the structure of writing was another concern, with a mean score of 4.1, with 72.8% agreement. This finding indicated that the students need more help with formal writing styles, source citations, and genre. Vocabulary use and idea transition were also identified as difficulties faced by the students, with mean scores of 4.0 and percent agreement of 71.3% and 70.1%. These results revealed that students not only find it difficult to choose the correct vocabulary for academic writing but also to build logical issues in their writing.

Next, students found difficulties in writing clear and complete sentences, as indicated by a lower mean score of 3.9 (67.1% agree), while correct use of punctuation was reported as the least challenging, with a mean of 3.8 and 63.2% agreement. Overall, the results implied that students face multiple difficulties in writing, and especially during the early stages of the writing process like in terms as idea generation, idea organization, grammatical structure, and sentence clarity.

Based on the results, providing targeted instructional support in these key areas can help to improve students' writing skills and strengthen their confidence as university writers.

Differences Between High School Writing and University Writing

As mentioned in the background, there are significant differences between writing in high school and writing in university, and students must begin to approach both reading and writing differently. In university, expectations for students' critical engagement as well as the length and depth of the work are greater, and adherence to academic conventions is subject to closer scrutiny. Many students struggle during this transition and feel unprepared to write successfully at the university level. The results of the survey prove that students can easily identify these differences, and there is clearly an appeal for further steps in how to approach writing at the university level. See Table 5 for further details.

Table 5. Results of Section 2 Survey Item

Survey Item	Mean (M)	SD	% Agree (4 & 5)
University writing is significantly more difficult than high school writing.	4.5	0.8	85.7%
University writing requires more critical thinking than high school writing.	4.6	0.7	88.2%
I feel overwhelmed by the length and detail required in university writing.	4.3	1.0	81.2%
I need more support in understanding the structure of university writing.	4.2	0.9	77.4%

I feel that high school prepared me well for university writing.	2.7	1.1	27.9%
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The results of the survey provide evidence of participants' differing experiences with writing in high school compared to writing in university. Over three-quarters of participants (M = 4.5; 85.7% agree) reported that writing as a university student is much more difficult than writing as a high school student, and the transition is also challenging. Their struggles in writing in university are mostly due to the higher emphasis on critical thinking, which achieved the highest mean and percent agreement score (M= 4.6; 88.2%). This indicates that students view university writing as more complex, necessitating a greater depth of thinking through nuanced texting for analysis and reasoning that they were not comfortable engaging in as high school students.

Further, students felt overwhelmed with high cognitive load as university students, students as participants also reported that their tasks in university were longer, deeper, and detailed (M = 4.3; 81.2% agree). Furthermore, 77.4% of students agreed that they still need support in understanding the university writing rules and structures (M = 4.2). This shows that students were expected to adjust their writing to academic conventions, but they did not get enough support.

Only 27.9% of students felt that high school prepared them for university demands, as indicated by the lowest mean score of 2.7. This showed a clear gap between writing taught in high school and university, which may result in students' difficulty adapting to performing their writing to meet the increased expectations at the university level. Therefore, instructional support and services should focus on helping students bridge this transition.

Writing Strategies and Coping Mechanisms

Students need to implement different strategies to improve their writing skills, it can be done as getting help from teachers to utilizing digital technology. Some students adopted revision and planning strategies, while others used collaborative work and peer discussion to gain different perspectives from their classmates. The results of the survey produced valuable insights about students' writing practices and strategies, as well as the way they ask for help to better understand more in university writing instruction. Table 6 presents the results of the survey in Section 3.

Table 6. Results of the Section 3 Survey Item

Survey Item	% Frequently Used (4 & 5)
I use brainstorming or outlining before writing.	66.7%
I review and revise my writing before submitting it.	80.2%

I seek help from my teacher when I face difficulties.	80.8%
I discuss my writing challenges with classmates.	40.2%
I use online tools (for example Grammarly, ChatGPT).	89.5%
I avoid writing in English whenever possible.	26.1%
I feel motivated to improve my writing skills.	69.5%

As shown in Table 6, most students (89.5%) often use digital tools, such as Grammarly or ChatGPT, to help their writing practices. In other words, students relied on online digital writing assistance. 80.8% of students stated that they like to ask for help from their teacher whenever they get stuck, which shows that teacher assistance is still needed in their writing development. Similarly, the results show that 80.2% of students usually review and revise their writing before submitting it. This indicated that students understand the importance of self-editing to improve their work.

While many students have adopted pre-writing strategies, only 66.7% of them frequently carry out brainstorming or outlining before writing. This suggests that, although most students find these techniques helpful, a significant portion of students may remain struggling to plan their writing effectively. Additionally, peer collaboration seems to be less common; only 40.2% of students wanted to discuss their writing problems with their classmates. The low percentage revealed that students may not fully want to have peer support as a learning strategy, which is due to the potential missing value of the given feedback on their learning experiences.

As many as 69.5% of participants hoped to have significant improvements in their writing; it was shown that they want a positive writing progression. However, in contrast with the previous findings, a small number of participants (26.1%) avoided writing in English. This indicated that although many students wanted to improve their writing, a small number of students experienced substantial anxiety or felt unconfident in their writing products. These results showed that it is important to create a collaborative environment, and all students can have opportunities to improve their writing.

Support and Feedback

Getting constructive feedback, especially from teachers, is an important factor in the process of students' writing at the university level. However, students did not truly appreciate peer feedback. Furthermore, their responses revealed from the questionnaire, students expressed their need for pedagogical exercises to better structure writing and vocabulary practices. The results of the survey in Section 4, as shown in Table 7, gave insight into students' views and perspectives on feedback from teachers or peers, they also shared about

their instructional needs, and the best practices to improve their writing they beliefs.

Table 7. Results of Section 4 Survey Item

Survey Item	Mean (M)	% Agree (4 & 5)
Teacher feedback on grammar helps me to improve my writing skills.	4.7	89.4%
Teacher feedback, especially on writing organization, is helpful.	4.5	86.1%
Peer feedback helps me improve.	3.6	52.5%
I need more vocabulary-building exercises.	4.3	78.9%
I need more structured paragraph/essay practice.	4.4	80.5%
More collaborative writing activities would help.	3.9	65.1%
I believe my writing will improve with practice.	4.8	93.1%

Table 7 shows that most participants (93.1%) strongly agree that they will improve their writing with more practice, with a mean score of 4.8. The students believed that their writing would get better if they always continued to write and had more practice in writing. Most participants also agreed of valuable teacher feedback, both on grammar (M = 4.7; 89.4%) and on organization (M = 4.5; 86.1%). Regarding this, students appreciated the teacher's feedback that explicitly encouraged their language accuracy and writing organization. However, students did not believe in peer feedback, as shown by the mean score (M = 3.6) and 52.5% participants. This explored that students have less convince in their peers' capabilities, that maybe can provide them with useful feedback on their writing.

For the instructional needs, students expressed that they need more structured writing practices to support them in producing better writing, with 80.5% of students agreeing that more paragraph and essay tasks would be helpful for them (M = 4.4). They said it is also necessary to have more vocabulary-building activities, with a mean score of 4.3 and a percent agreement of 78.9%. These results identified some important areas of writing practices that students believe would benefit them in improving their writing. Collaborative writing activities received moderate support for 65,1% or, with a mean score of 3.9. It was indicated that not all students want to write collaboratively. In conclusion, the findings gave us an understanding that the teacher's feedback was important to their writing. Students also stated that they needed more organized writing practice because it was important to their writing development. Students also believed that peer feedback did not really give them benefits, and the collaborative writing for them was not really work; it is suggested that these areas should still be developed to gain students' belief in both peer feedback and collaborative writing activities.

DISCUSSION

This research gives a comprehensive view of the different challenges, perceptions, and pedagogical needs of the first-year university students in EFL university writing settings. The overall results indicate a complex interaction of cognitive, linguistic, pedagogical, and affective factors on students' writing development.

The most difficulty faced by students in the early stages of writing was with the generation and logical organization of ideas. For about 83,5% students who reported that generating ideas was their main challenge, it was shown that they lacked confidence at the beginning of the writing process. This was then followed by the structural understanding, where students mostly fail in structuring their topic sentences and supporting details. These findings are related to previous research explaining how novice writers, especially in EFL settings, often demonstrate weak organization skills, which is important for generating clear and coherent written output (Aljoundi & Tappe, 2025; Rofiqoh et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2024). Moreover, the early-stage challenges were worsened by grammar and sentence structure problems, as reported by 78.3% of the respondents. This reflects the sustained difficulties with linguistic accuracy and clarity, which was supported by previous research by Nguyen & Vu, 2024 and Taye & Mengeshe, 2024. These findings reveal a mismatch between students' previous learning experiences and the academic writing demands at the university level, which affected their difficulties with idea generation, organization, and language accuracy.

Further, the study also finds the students' problems when transitioning from high school to university-level writing. 85.7% of the participants answered that writing at the university level was more difficult, which was due to the need for using critical thinking, a skill that many students have not developed in their previous learning and teaching experiences. Next, 88.2% identifying this complexity of university writing as a major barrier, the results reveal that students' ability in performing abstract, interpretive, and analytical activities that are expected at the tertiary level still need to be improved (Golden, 2023; Hilario et al., 2025). The complexity of university writing was also compounded by the longer and more complex assignments from another course, compounded by an improper understanding of academic writing conventions. 77.4% of students stated they needed further support. Fortunately, 27.9% felt well prepared for university writing due to their high school studies, which had prepared them for appropriate writing instruction. The findings show that it is needed to strengthen the coherence between high school learning outcomes and university requirements (Gebremariam, 2023).

Besides revealing some problems students face in their paragraph writing, the study also found some positive aspects of students' writing strategies and support mechanisms to cover their problems. Most students

(89.5%) reported having regular use of online writing artificial intelligence (AI) like Grammarly and ChatGPT. This finding showed that the students are willing to increase and solve their problems through digital technologies, especially in the aspects of their grammar, vocabulary, and idea generation. But this way could make another problem. As we know, Grammarly and ChatGPT can help to write fluently and accurately (Marzuki et al., 2023; Miranty et al., 2023). There is worried about the over-reliance that would affect students' ability, moreover, their autonomous writing skills, and deeper cognitive development with their writing. That is why 80.8% of students reported that teacher support was totally needed; they would approach their teachers for consultation whenever they found it challenging. These findings confirmed that teacher feedback is important in improving students' writing than letting them overuse tools like Grammarly and ChatGPT (Umamah et al., 2022).

These findings stated that writing instruction in higher education should place a stronger focus on the strategic and reflective use of writing activities. Students are suggested to have clear instructions in the process of writing, like prewriting activities such as brainstorming, outlining, and mind mapping, which can help them build idea-generation and ease them into engaging in textual coherence (Aljoundi & Tappe, 2025; Aziz et al., 2024). One important thing is peer collaboration, as dialogic exchange and peer feedback have been shown to foster critical awareness and metacognitive engagement in writing (Davison et al., 2025). Moreover, while digital tools like Grammarly and ChatGPT can support accuracy and fluency, their pedagogical integration should be carefully scaffolded to encourage reflective use rather than passive dependence. A synthesis of these approaches and strategic planning, collaborative engagement, and guided technology use can cultivate students' agency, critical thinking, and evolving sense of writer identity in higher education contexts.

Encouragingly, 80.2% of students reported revising their writing before submission, indicating an appreciation for the value of self-editing and reflection. Yet, prewriting activities like brainstorming and outlining were less frequently practiced (66.7%), indicating a need for greater instruction in planning processes that support idea organization and content development (Aziz et al., 2024). More alarming is the comparatively low degree of peer collaboration, with a mere 40.2% of students reporting that they discuss writing difficulties with peers. This underuse of peer support represents lost opportunities for shared learning and reciprocal reflection, as collaborative practices have been demonstrated to enhance writing quality and motivation (Davison et al., 2025). Students' attitudes towards writing also demonstrate optimism and apprehension. Although 93.1% believed firmly that writing will get better with practice, a growth mindset indicator (Setyowati et al., 2022) a

notable minority (26.1%) indicated that they avoid writing in English when they can, which is indicative of anxiety or lack of confidence (Sun et al., 2024). This juxtaposition highlights the affective aspect of writing, where encouragement and support need to be counterbalanced with the cultivation of independence and risk-taking in using language.

In terms of instructional needs, students showed strong interest in more structured writing practice, with 80.5% opting for more paragraph and essay assignments and 78.9% perceiving vocabulary-building exercises as necessary. These choices suggest a desire for guided opportunities to use academic writing conventions in proper contexts. At the same time, collaborative writing received moderate approval (65.1%), which suggests that, even as some students appreciate collaborative writing activities, others might feel uneasy or unsure about group dynamics. The relatively low support for peer feedback (52.5%) further demonstrates students' lack of confidence in their peers' skills, a perception that echoes the results of earlier studies (Jin et al., 2024).

Taken together, the findings reported the need for a holistic and responsive approach to writing instruction. Writing pedagogy should aim to offer scaffolded support in idea generation, text organization, and language use, while also building metacognitive awareness and confidence. There is also a need to tackle the transition issue between secondary education and post-secondary writing demands through preparatory programs before university entry and early intervention at the university. While the roles of tutors and technology are important, there is also a need to focus on building collaborative learning, feedback literacy, and student agency in writing practices. By handling these interconnected needs, teachers can create more inclusive and more powerful writing contexts that support the needs of students' development. Future studies can explore the possibilities of combining different instructional interventions like genre-based pedagogy, peer feedback training, and scaffolded AI-assisted writing, in an attempt to help EFL students become more independent, self-assured, and competent as academic writers.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the challenges, strategies that influence the academic writing ability of first-year EFL students transitioning from high school writing to university-level writing. The results showed that students struggled most with idea organization, grammatical and sentence construction, and adaptation to academic writing conventions. The transition from high school to university writing was challenging, and many students felt overwhelmed by the expectations of academic writing because of insufficient preparation. However, students were working to overcome these

challenges through the use of teacher feedback and digital writing tools, and they also participated actively in structured writing tasks.

A key finding of this study is that students need more support and guidance in developing organized and coherent writing. Teacher feedback is still very helpful, especially in grammar and structure feedback. These findings suggested that academic writing instruction should focus on foundational writing skills, such as paragraph development, cohesion, and sentence clarity. While most students mainly wrote for academic purposes, the data also shows that they are not fully involved in peer collaboration. This highlighted the need to teach peer review practices, which can help students recognize that writing is a communicative and interactive process.

Furthermore, this study showed that the writing courses should include more systematic vocabulary instruction. Many students believed that their limited vocabulary makes it difficult to express their ideas effectively. This signified the importance of integrating vocabulary development into writing lessons. The ongoing writing anxiety also suggested that teachers should provide low-stakes writing activities and create a supportive environment to help students build their confidence.

To conclude, this study informed the imbalance of current teaching approaches from high school to university level, which is why there is a clear need to have more explicit instruction in vocabulary, appropriate writing structure, and to build peer collaboration. Future studies should explore innovative teaching strategies and the how of effective use of digital tools, especially generative AI in writing production, to support writing skills. By focusing on these areas, writing instruction and products in higher education can be improved, and students can have better preparation to meet the requirements of advanced academic writing.

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