

Exploring challenges and learning preferences in academic writing among ELT students

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Abstract

Academic writing is a critical skill in English Language Teaching (ELT), yet the challenges students face and their learning preferences remain underexplored. While previous studies have examined writing difficulties or learning strategies separately, few have addressed both dimensions in an integrated manner. In response to this gap, the present study investigates the academic writing experiences of ELT students, focusing on their challenges and preferences. Employing a mixed-method design, data were collected from 96 undergraduate students through questionnaires and open-ended responses. The findings reveal that 58.3% had experience writing research proposals, whereas only 49.0% had written theses or journal articles. Key challenges included organizing research data (67.7%), writing the discussion section (71.8%), and connecting results with theoretical frameworks (68.7%). Students also reported low motivation, often relying on deadlines or peer support to complete tasks. In terms of preferences, they emphasized the need for clear instructions, constructive feedback, and level-appropriate materials, while valuing the support of lecturers and peers. These results suggest that academic writing instruction should be structured, differentiated, and project-based, aligned with deep learning principles to enhance engagement, address individual needs, and promote critical thinking and sustainable learning outcomes.

Keywords: academic writing; deep learning; differentiated instruction; ELT students; project-based learning.

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a foundation of scholarly communication and a crucial skill for English Language Teaching (ELT) students. It is through academic writing that aspiring educators and researchers learn to articulate complex ideas, engage in scholarly discourse, and contribute to the production and dissemination of knowledge. Writing in English, particularly in research-oriented formats such as proposals, theses, and journal articles, demands not only mastery of language but also the ability to engage critically with literature, structure arguments coherently, and situate findings within broader theoretical contexts. This makes academic writing one of the most essential yet challenging competencies for ELT students to develop, especially in contexts where English is a second or foreign language (Harshalatha & Sreenivasulu, 2024; Lekamge & Rajavarathan, 2024; Nam Chi et al., 2024; Y. Wei et al., 2024).

Despite its recognized importance, a consistent body of research indicates that ELT students continue to struggle with academic writing. These difficulties span a wide range of skills: organizing ideas logically, synthesizing multiple sources, constructing coherent arguments, and applying theoretical frameworks appropriately (Aurvind & Priyadharshini, 2023; Barasa, 2024; Boonmoh & Chanchay, 2024; Saricaoglu, 2022). Furthermore, students report challenges in structuring major sections of research papers, such as the methodology, findings, and discussion, while maintaining coherence and linking results to theoretical foundations (Hart & Annear, 2020). These struggles are not trivial; they have direct implications for students' ability to complete capstone projects, publish research, and participate in professional academic communities.

Writing instruction in ELT curricula often attempts to address these challenges, but in practice it tends to adopt a one-size-fits-all model that fails to account for the diversity of students' backgrounds, needs, and learning preferences. This misalignment between expected academic standards and actual student performance represents a critical discrepancy in writing pedagogy. While some students may be able to adapt quickly to academic writing conventions, others require more scaffolding, individualized guidance, and motivational support. When instruction does not account

for such diversity, students' difficulties are exacerbated, and their potential contributions to scholarship are limited.

This discrepancy highlights a notable research gap. Existing studies on academic writing in ELT contexts have often focused on isolated aspects such as writing difficulties or learning strategies (Aldabbus & Almansouri, 2022; Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020; Gupta et al., 2022; Maharani et al., 2023; Riadil et al., 2023). While these studies provide valuable insights, few have examined both challenges and learning preferences together in an integrated framework. Even fewer have considered how contemporary pedagogical models, specifically, Project-Based Learning (PjBL) and Differentiated Instruction (DI), might be combined to address the dual dimensions of writing difficulties and student needs.

Project-Based Learning (PjBL) has emerged as a promising approach in language education. It emphasizes authentic, project-driven tasks where students engage in inquiry, collaboration, and the practical application of knowledge. In the context of writing, PjBL encourages learners to generate ideas, organize them into coherent texts, and refine their work through cycles of drafting and feedback. Empirical research demonstrates that PjBL enhances writing performance, promotes collaboration, and increases motivation (Cahyono et al., 2024; Paris et al., 2024; Rahman, 2025; Syafitri, 2023). For ELT students, it situates writing within meaningful contexts, helping them see academic writing as more than a classroom exercise, but it becomes a tool for producing knowledge that has real-world relevance.

However, despite these advantages, many implementations of PjBL treat learners as a homogeneous group (Abd Rahman et al., 2024; Andargie et al., 2025; Arqam & Asrifan, 2024). Such approaches often overlook the individual differences in students' readiness levels, prior experiences, and learning preferences. As a result, students who need additional scaffolding or differentiated support may become disengaged, while more advanced students may find the tasks insufficiently challenging. This limitation reduces the overall effectiveness of PjBL and raises questions about how it can be adapted to ensure inclusivity and equity in academic writing instruction.

Differentiated Instruction (DI) offers a potential solution to the limitations of PjBL. DI is based on the principle that instruction should be tailored to meet students' diverse needs, interests, and learning profiles. In practice, this involves varying the content (what students learn), the process (how they learn), and the product (how they demonstrate learning). By applying DI, educators can provide scaffolds such as templates and guided prompts for less experienced writers, while offering open-ended tasks and higher-level challenges for advanced learners.

Scholars such as Saidova & Ergasheva (2019) and Cahyono et al. (2024) have highlighted the potential of integrating DI into PjBL frameworks. Such integration ensures that all students, regardless of their starting points, can benefit from project-based tasks. In academic writing, DI can manifest as differentiated feedback strategies, tiered rubrics, or personalized milestones, allowing each student to progress at a pace and level appropriate to their development.

The integration of PjBL and DI becomes even more powerful when situated within a Deep Learning (DL) framework. DL emphasizes meaningful, mindful, and joyful learning, focusing not only on surface outcomes but on the development of transferable skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and lifelong learning habits. For academic writing, a DL approach encourages students to move beyond rote reproduction of formats and to engage critically with sources, develop original arguments, and reflect on their writing processes. Studies demonstrate that DL-oriented approaches can enhance motivation, deepen engagement, and foster more sustainable learning outcomes (Han, 2023; Ramadana et al., 2025; L. Wei, 2025).

This study draws on Hyland's (2008) genre-based pedagogy, which views writing as a socially situated and rhetorically purposeful act. Genre pedagogy emphasizes exposing students to models, analyzing rhetorical moves, and guiding them in producing texts that meet disciplinary expectations. Coupled with (Vygotsky, 1978) sociocultural theory, which underscores the importance of scaffolding and peer interaction, these frameworks provide a strong foundation for understanding why ELT students need both structured support and opportunities for collaborative learning. Writing, from this perspective, is not merely a technical skill but a dynamic social practice shaped by context, audience, and purpose.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrated examination of both challenges and learning preferences in ELT students' academic writing. Unlike previous research that has focused narrowly on either difficulties or strategies, this study investigates the two dimensions together, thereby providing a more holistic understanding of students' experiences. Moreover, by situating the analysis within a framework that combines PjBL, DI, and DL, the study offers a new perspective on how academic writing instruction can be reimagined to be more inclusive, engaging, and effective.

Specifically, the study contributes novelty in three ways: 1) it highlights that the most critical challenges ELT students face are cognitive and process-oriented rather than purely linguistic; 2) it documents students' clear preference for structured scaffolding and collaborative support, providing concrete directions for pedagogy; 3) it positions the integration of PjBL, DI, and DL as a transformative model for writing instruction, one that has not been systematically investigated in prior studies. By addressing these gaps, this study aims to bridge the divide between the expectations of academic writing and the realities of students' practices, offering insights that are both theoretically grounded and practically applicable.

METHODS

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to explore the academic writing challenges and learning preferences of English Language Teaching (ELT) students. A mixed-methods approach was deemed appropriate because the research questions required both the measurement of students' experiences and the exploration of their subjective perspectives. While quantitative data were useful for mapping the general patterns of challenges and preferences across the cohort, qualitative data provided deeper insight into students' expectations, perceived obstacles, and proposed solutions. Integrating the two sources of evidence allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, which aligns with the study's broader objective of designing a differentiated project-based learning (PjBL) model based on deep learning principles.

The participants were 96 undergraduate students enrolled in the English Language Education program at a university in Central Java, Indonesia. All participants had previously completed compulsory courses in Research Methodology and Academic Writing, making them an appropriate group for reflecting on challenges and preferences in academic writing. The demographic profile of the sample reflected the composition of the program, with a majority of students being female (84%). Students' participation was voluntary, and their identities were kept confidential throughout the research process. No identifying information was reported, and codes were used instead of names to ensure anonymity.

The participants were considered suitable because they represent the population of pre-service English teachers who are expected to develop academic writing competence not only as a requirement for completing their undergraduate theses but also as a foundational skill for engaging in scholarly discourse. Their experiences thus provided valuable insights into the gap between the expectations of academic writing courses and the realities of student performance.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire complemented by open-ended written responses. The questionnaire was designed to capture both students' prior academic writing experiences and their perceived difficulties across different components of the writing process. Specifically, items asked about students' experience in writing research proposals, theses, or journal articles, as well as their confidence levels in writing key sections such as the literature review, methodology, findings, and discussion. Other items addressed common writing difficulties, such as organizing research data, integrating theory into discussion, and maintaining logical flow.

In addition, the questionnaire included items on learning preferences, such as the importance of scaffolding, feedback, and collaborative activities in supporting academic writing development. The design of the instrument drew upon existing research on academic writing challenges in EFL/ESL contexts (Hyland, 2016; Negretti, 2019), ensuring both relevance and alignment with prior scholarship. The instrument also underwent a process of content validation by two experts in ELT and academic writing instruction, who reviewed the items for clarity, appropriateness, and alignment with the study's objectives.

Alongside the structured items, students were asked to provide open-ended responses elaborating on their writing challenges and expectations for instructional design. These qualitative

responses invited students to articulate, in their own words, what they found most difficult about academic writing, what types of differentiated instruction they expected, and how project-based learning could be organized to best support them. This combination of structured and open-ended questions ensured a rich data set capturing both the breadth and depth of students' experiences.

The data collection process took place after regular class sessions to minimize disruption to the academic schedule. Students were informed about the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their participation. They were assured that their responses would remain confidential and would not affect their academic standing. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were given sufficient time to complete the questionnaire and provide thoughtful responses to the open-ended items.

Clarifications were provided when necessary to ensure that participants understood the questions, particularly for technical terms related to academic writing components. Students completed the questionnaire individually, without discussion, to minimize potential bias or influence from peers. The process was completed within one session lasting approximately 45 minutes.

The analysis was conducted in two stages, corresponding to the quantitative and qualitative strands of data. Quantitative data from the structured questionnaire were analyzed descriptively, using frequencies and percentages to identify patterns in students' academic writing experiences, challenges, and preferences. This allowed the researchers to identify the most commonly reported difficulties, such as writing the discussion section, linking results to theory, and organizing research data, as well as the instructional supports most frequently requested by students.

Qualitative data from the open-ended responses were analyzed thematically. The process involved initial coding of recurring words and phrases, clustering these codes into broader categories, and refining the categories into themes that reflected students' perceptions and expectations. Themes included challenges in motivation and self-regulation, reliance on deadlines or peer encouragement, expectations for clear instructions and consistent feedback, and the importance of collaboration with peers and guidance from lecturers. This thematic analysis provided rich, contextualized insights into students' perspectives, which complemented the descriptive findings from the quantitative analysis.

The integration of the two data sources occurred during the interpretation phase. Quantitative patterns were used to identify the prevalence of particular challenges, while qualitative themes added depth by explaining why these challenges occurred and how students perceived them. This triangulated approach enhanced the validity of the findings and allowed for a more nuanced understanding of ELT students' academic writing needs.

The study adhered to ethical principles of educational research. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and students were free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Data were anonymized, stored securely, and used solely for research purposes. Because the study focused on academic writing challenges rather than personal or sensitive issues, risks to participants were minimal.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges in Academic Writing Among ELT Students

The challenges of academic writing faced by English Language Teaching (ELT) students reflect a persistent gap between the expected standards of academic discourse and the actual readiness levels of undergraduates. Although most students demonstrated familiarity with the structural components of academic writing, such as research proposals, theses, and journal articles, the data reveal that students often struggle to transform their knowledge and experiences into coherent, persuasive, and theoretically grounded academic texts.

The questionnaire results, supported by open-ended responses, highlight three major domains of challenge: (1) logical argumentation, (2) discussion and theory integration, and (3) time management and motivation. Table 1 summarizes students' self-reported challenges.

Table 1. Self-reported challenges in academic writing (N = 96)

Challenge	Mean Score (1–5)	% of Students (Agree/Strongly Agree)
Lack of confidence in academic English writing	3.77	59.4%
Difficulty managing time between research and writing	3.77	62.5%
Difficulty building logical arguments	3.69	60.4%
Difficulty sourcing and integrating literature	3.67	59.4%
Overwhelmed by technical steps (formatting, citation)	3.40	44.8%

Figure 1 further illustrates these challenges in terms of student percentages.

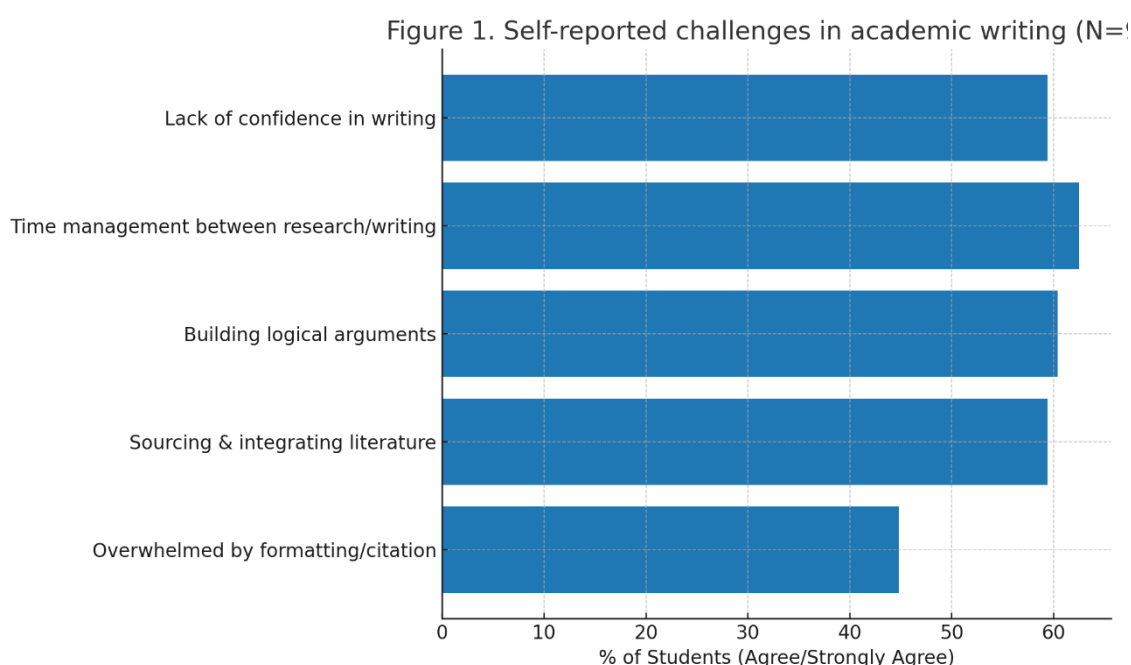


Figure 1. Self-reported challenges in academic writing (N=96)

From Table 1 and Figure 1, three key insights emerge. First, the challenge of constructing logical arguments remains a fundamental barrier. More than 60% of students admitted difficulty in transforming their ideas into structured reasoning supported by evidence. While many could paraphrase sources or summarize information, they struggled to integrate those materials into arguments aligned with research objectives. This indicates a gap between knowledge acquisition and knowledge production.

Second, students find discussion writing and theory integration particularly difficult. Nearly 59.4% reported challenges in sourcing and synthesizing literature, and a striking 68.7% (from qualitative responses) specifically mentioned problems in linking results to theoretical frameworks. This inability to move beyond “reporting” into “critical discussion” reflects a tendency to remain descriptive rather than analytical—a pattern widely noted in EFL and ELT contexts (Hart & Annear, 2020).

Third, motivational and affective barriers emerged strongly. Approximately 62.5% of students indicated difficulties managing time and balancing research with writing, while many admitted relying

on deadlines or peer encouragement as primary motivators. This suggests limited self-regulation and low intrinsic motivation, echoing earlier study by Deb (2018), who emphasizes that affective factors like motivation often shape writing persistence more than linguistic knowledge alone.

In conclusion, these findings show that the most critical obstacles are not simply linguistic (e.g., grammar or vocabulary), but rather cognitive and process-oriented: the ability to build arguments, integrate theory, and regulate one's writing process over time. These patterns provide important direction for designing instructional models that scaffold argument construction, integrate reading-writing tasks, and build in structured project timelines to support sustained engagement.

Learning Preferences in Academic Writing

The investigation into students' learning preferences reveals a strong demand for clarity of instruction, continuous feedback, and collaborative support. These preferences illustrate how students expect academic writing instruction to go beyond content delivery and instead provide structured guidance, differentiated materials, and authentic practice opportunities. Table 2 presents major learning preferences extracted from students' open-ended responses.

Table 2. Students' learning preferences in academic writing

Theme	Frequency of Mentions (Qualitative Data)	Illustrative Expectation
Clear instructions and exemplars	152	<i>"We need step-by-step guidelines and sample proposals to follow."</i>
Continuous and constructive feedback	141	<i>"Regular feedback on drafts helps us know if we are on the right track."</i>
Scaffolding through modules, templates, and rubrics	129	<i>"Provide modules and rubrics so we can self-check before submitting."</i>
Peer collaboration and group support	184	<i>"Working in groups motivates us and helps generate new ideas."</i>
Role of lecturers as guides and motivators	109	<i>"Lecturers should guide us patiently and give encouragement."</i>
Motivation through deadlines and accountability	98	<i>"Deadlines push me to finish, otherwise I delay writing."</i>

Figure 2 shows the relative frequency of each preference category.

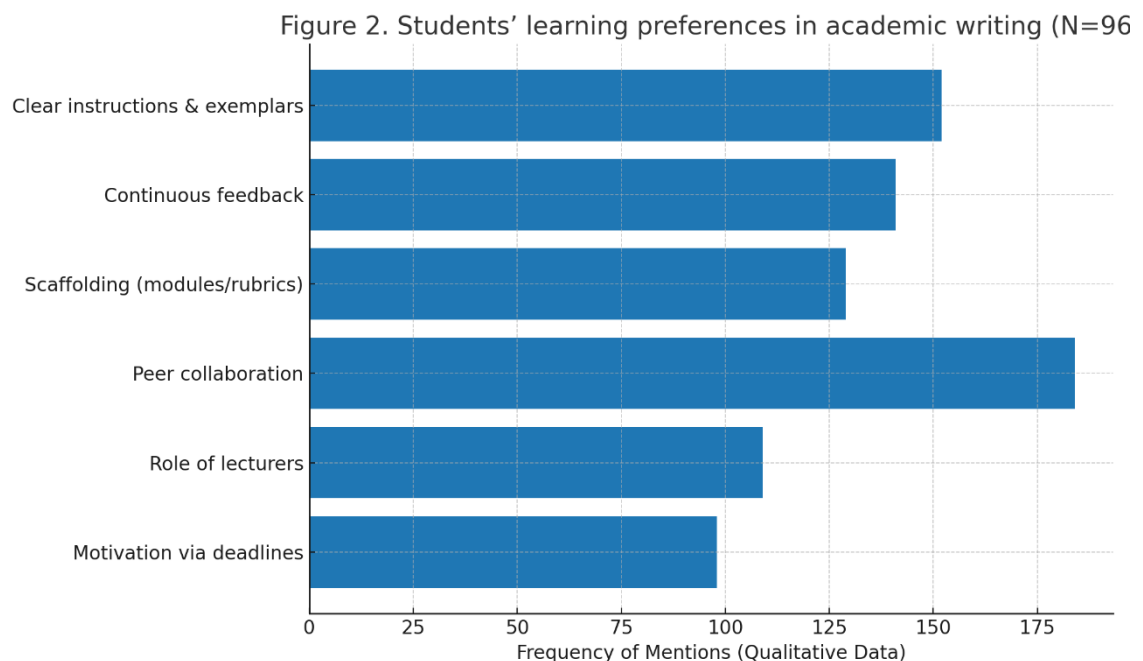


Figure 2. Students' learning preferences in academic writing (N=96)

From Table 2 and Figure 2, two broad insights can be drawn. First, students consistently request structured scaffolding in the form of clear guidelines, rubrics, and exemplars. This pattern indicates that while students are familiar with the basic sections of academic writing, they are uncertain about quality standards and rhetorical expectations. Providing tiered supports (templates for beginners, minimal prompts for advanced learners) would address this need for clarity and allow differentiated progression.

Second, the role of social interaction, both lecturer guidance and peer collaboration, emerges as central to students' preferences. Peer discussions and group projects are valued not only for knowledge sharing but also for sustaining motivation. Students view lecturers as mentors and facilitators rather than evaluators alone, expecting regular feedback and encouragement. This resonates with process-oriented and socio-constructivist approaches to writing pedagogy, which highlight the importance of feedback loops and collaborative learning environments.

To conclude, these findings underline that students expect academic writing instruction to be structured, interactive, and responsive to their diverse needs. Such expectations directly support the relevance of a Project-Based Learning (PjBL) model, enriched by Differentiated Instruction (DI) strategies, where scaffolding, peer collaboration, and continuous feedback are embedded within authentic writing projects.

Linking Findings to Instructional Implications

Taken together, the dual focus on challenges and preferences offers a clear pedagogical direction. Figure 3 presents a conceptual model linking findings to an integrated instructional framework.



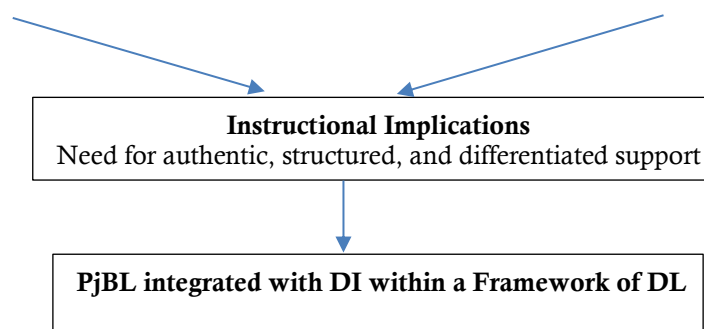


Figure 3. Conceptual link between findings and PjBL–DI–DL Framework

As the figure illustrates, students' challenges (argumentation, theory integration, motivation) and their preferences (scaffolding, feedback, collaboration) converge into the instructional implication: academic writing instruction must provide authentic, structured, and differentiated support. Anchoring this within a PjBL–DI–DL framework ensures that writing tasks are project-based (to sustain engagement), differentiated (to accommodate diverse readiness), and oriented toward deep learning outcomes such as critical thinking, reflection, and transferable writing skills.

Discussion

This study sought to explore the challenges and learning preferences of ELT students in academic writing, with the purpose of informing the development of a differentiated Project-Based Learning (PjBL) model framed within principles of Deep Learning (DL). The findings revealed persistent difficulties in logical argumentation, theory integration, and motivation, alongside strong student preferences for scaffolding, feedback, and collaborative support. Interpreted in light of prior research and theoretical frameworks, these findings offer important insights for rethinking writing instruction in English Language Education programs.

One of the most striking outcomes of this study is that students' difficulties were not primarily linguistic in nature (e.g., grammar or vocabulary), but cognitive, epistemic, and affective. Over 60% of participants indicated struggles with building logical arguments and connecting findings to theoretical frameworks, while more than 62% reported challenges with time management and motivation. These findings align with Hart & Annear (2020), who observed that many EFL writers remain at the descriptive level rather than moving toward analytical writing. Similarly, Deb (2018) emphasized that persistence in academic writing is often shaped more by motivation and self-regulation than by linguistic competence alone.

This contrasts with earlier studies that foregrounded linguistic limitations as the central barrier to academic writing. For example, Asnas et al. (2022) found that vocabulary, syntax, and grammar were the most frequently reported problems among undergraduate writers. Likewise, Sabir et al. (2024) highlighted limited exposure to academic registers as a cause of incoherent writing. While these elements remain important, the present findings suggest that ELT students, particularly those who have already taken Research Methodology and Academic Writing courses, struggle more with higher-order skills such as argumentation and theory integration than with surface-level language features.

This difference may be explained by the academic level of the participants. Unlike beginning students who are still developing basic English proficiency, the undergraduates in this study had already acquired foundational skills in research writing. Therefore, their struggles point to the transition from surface literacy (language and format) to deep literacy (analysis, synthesis, and critical argumentation). This highlights the need for pedagogical models that scaffold not only linguistic accuracy but also epistemic fluency.

Another notable finding is students' difficulty in connecting their results with existing theories. Nearly 69% of open-ended responses highlighted problems in discussion writing, specifically in synthesizing results with theoretical frameworks. This challenge has been well-documented in prior research: (Aksakalli, 2010; Liu & Zhang, 2023; Nyamubi, 2022) argued that novice academic writers

often approach theory as an external requirement rather than an interpretive lens, leading to mechanical citations rather than genuine synthesis. Similarly, Hyland (2008) emphasized that academic writing is a social practice where authors must position themselves in relation to disciplinary discourses, not simply report data.

Compared with earlier studies in EFL contexts, however, this study reveals a higher degree of self-awareness among students. While Maharani et al. (2023) noted that Indonesian undergraduates often neglect theory integration altogether, the students in this study explicitly recognized their struggles with this aspect of writing. This indicates an emerging awareness of the importance of theory, which could serve as a foundation for instructional scaffolds targeting analytical writing.

The implication is that writing instruction should prioritize activities that bridge data and theory, such as reading-writing integration tasks, discussion workshops, and guided exercises in interpreting results through theoretical concepts. By embedding these practices in project-based learning, students can learn to view theory not as an external requirement but as a tool for making sense of their findings.

Affective and process-related challenges emerged as equally important. More than 62% of students reported difficulty managing time and motivation, with many relying on external pressures such as deadlines or peer encouragement to complete writing tasks. This confirms Deb's (2018) claim that motivation often plays a more decisive role than linguistic ability in sustaining writing engagement. It also resonates with Zimmerman's (2010) model of self-regulated learning, which emphasizes the need for strategies that help learners plan, monitor, and evaluate their progress.

Previous studies have identified similar affective challenges but often treated them as secondary. For instance, Riadil et al. (2023) acknowledged that EFL students procrastinate on writing assignments due to low confidence, but did not link this to the structure of writing instruction itself. In contrast, this study suggests that motivational challenges are not simply individual weaknesses but a product of instructional design. When writing is presented as isolated assignments with little scaffolding, students naturally postpone tasks until external pressures intervene.

The implication is clear: academic writing instruction must incorporate structured project timelines, regular checkpoints, and collaborative accountability systems to cultivate sustained engagement. This is precisely where PjBL, with its milestone-driven structure, offers a promising solution.

The findings on learning preferences complement the challenges by providing concrete directions for instructional design. Students consistently requested clear guidelines, exemplars, rubrics, and feedback, alongside opportunities for peer collaboration and lecturer mentoring. These preferences align with Hyland's (2008) genre-based pedagogy, which stresses the importance of explicit instruction and modeling in helping students acquire disciplinary writing practices. They also resonate with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which highlights the role of scaffolding and peer interaction in cognitive development.

What sets this study apart is the explicit articulation of differentiated scaffolding. Students not only wanted examples but also requested tools (modules, templates, rubrics) that allow for self-monitoring. This echoes Tomlinson's (2017) principles of Differentiated Instruction, where learning processes and products are tailored to students' readiness, interests, and profiles. By asking for both guidance and autonomy, students signaled their desire for instruction that balances structure with flexibility.

Moreover, the emphasis on peer collaboration suggests that students view writing as a socially mediated process rather than a solitary task. This aligns with Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice, where learning occurs through participation in collective activities. Thus, writing instruction should not only deliver content but also foster collaborative environments where students negotiate meaning, share strategies, and co-construct knowledge.

Synthesizing these findings, the evidence points toward the need for an instructional framework that is project-based, differentiated, and oriented toward deep learning. PjBL addresses motivational and process-related challenges by embedding writing in authentic, semester-long projects with clear milestones. By treating writing as a cumulative project rather than a series of disconnected assignments, students can sustain engagement and develop time-management skills. DI responds to the diverse readiness levels of students. Beginners may need templates and guided prompts, while

advanced learners benefit from open-ended tasks. DI ensures equity by calibrating supports without lowering expectations. DL provides the overarching orientation toward higher-order outcomes such as critical thinking, theory integration, and reflective practice. By emphasizing meaningful, mindful, and joyful learning (Han, 2023), DL ensures that writing instruction does not stop at surface literacy but cultivates epistemic fluency.

The integration of these three elements offers a transformative model for academic writing instruction. While PjBL ensures authenticity, DI ensures inclusivity, and DL ensures sustainability of learning outcomes. Together, they create an ecosystem where students not only learn to write but also learn through writing.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate the challenges and learning preferences of English Language Teaching (ELT) students in academic writing, with the broader aim of identifying pedagogical approaches that can better address their diverse needs. The findings revealed that the most pressing difficulties are not merely linguistic but lie in the higher-order demands of writing: constructing logical arguments, integrating theory with findings, and sustaining motivation throughout the writing process. At the same time, students expressed a strong preference for structured scaffolding, continuous feedback, and collaborative support, underscoring the importance of social interaction and guided mentorship in their learning.

Synthesizing these findings, it becomes evident that current academic writing instruction remains misaligned with students' needs. A promising way forward is the integration of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) with Differentiated Instruction (DI), anchored within a Deep Learning (DL) framework. Such a model can offer authentic, project-driven experiences while allowing for differentiated scaffolding and feedback, ultimately enabling students to engage more critically with academic discourse and develop sustainable writing practices.

The practical implications of this study are clear. For educators, the results call for a reorientation of writing instruction toward structured, scaffolded, and interactive models that value process as much as product. For institutions, the study highlights the importance of supporting writing programs that foster deep learning and critical thinking rather than focusing solely on grammatical accuracy.

Future research should extend these findings by empirically testing the effectiveness of a PjBL–DI–DL model in academic writing classrooms. Longitudinal studies could explore how such interventions influence not only students' writing performance but also their motivation, self-regulation, and ability to transfer writing skills to professional and scholarly contexts. By doing so, research can move beyond documenting challenges to designing and validating solutions that empower ELT students as capable academic writers and reflective practitioners.

FUNDING STATEMENT

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. It is a non-funded study and was conducted without financial support from any institutions or organizations.

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