Students' Problems and Coping Strategies in Writing Undergraduate Theses

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the factors contributing to the challenges faced by students in undergraduate thesis writing within the English Education Study Program at Hamzanwadi University, Nusa Tenggara Barat, Indonesia. It also explores the strategies students employ to overcome these challenges. A mixed-methods approach was used, involving 36 eighth-semester students. Data were collected through a closed-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The results show that psychological factors were the most significant challenge (78.72%), followed by sociocultural (16.51%) and linguistic factors (4.7%). To address these challenges, students adopted strategies such as identifying novel research topics from recent publications, grounding research in real-world issues, and using digital tools like Grammarly and Quillbot for grammatical refinement. These findings provide valuable insights into the thesis-writing process and highlight strategies for improving the experience for students and educators in higher education.

Keywords: Thesis Writing Challenges, Coping Strategies, Undergraduate Thesis, English Education, Higher Education

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi tantangan mahasiswa dalam penulisan skripsi pada Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di Universitas Hamzanwadi, Nusa Tenggara Barat, Indonesia. Penelitian ini juga mengeksplorasi strategi yang digunakan mahasiswa untuk mengatasi tantangan tersebut. Pendekatan campuran diterapkan dengan melibatkan 36 mahasiswa semester delapan. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner tertutup dan wawancara semi-terstruktur. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa faktor psikologis merupakan tantangan terbesar (78,72%), diikuti oleh faktor sosiokultural (16,51%) dan linguistik (4,7%). Untuk mengatasi tantangan ini, mahasiswa menerapkan strategi seperti mengidentifikasi topik penelitian baru dari publikasi terbaru, mendasarkan penelitian pada isu nyata, dan menggunakan alat digital seperti Grammarly dan Quillbot untuk perbaikan tata bahasa. Temuan ini memberikan wawasan berharga mengenai proses penulisan skripsi dan menyoroti strategi untuk meningkatkan pengalaman mahasiswa dan pendidik di pendidikan tinggi.

Kata kunci: Tantangan Penulisan Skripsi, Strategi Penyelesaian Masalah, Skripsi, Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Pendidikan Tinggi

INTRODUCTION

Writing is widely recognized as one of the most complex and demanding skills in language acquisition, particularly for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Many students encounter difficulties in generating ideas, organizing their thoughts, and maintaining focus, even when tasked with basic paragraph writing. These challenges are further compounded in academic writing, which demands higher-order thinking, systematic organization, and adherence to formal academic conventions.

White and Arndt (1991) assert that second-language learners require considerable time to develop their ideas for writing, while Bracewell (as cited by White & Arndt, 1991) describes writing as "the most complex and demanding of all cognitive activities." Academic writing, particularly thesis writing, is even more challenging as it requires students to synthesize research findings into a formal, coherent structure.

Thesis writing is not merely an exercise in presenting research results; it involves the systematic organization of ideas, adherence to academic conventions, and effective communication of findings. Hardling (2004) defines thesis writing as the activity wherein researchers document their findings, while Budiharso (2009) emphasizes its dual purpose of conducting research and presenting the results in a structured format.

However, this process is fraught with psychological, sociocultural, and linguistic challenges for many students. Psychological factors, such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and lack of focus, hinder the ability to produce quality work. Sociocultural challenges, including limited understanding of institutional guidelines and insufficient supervisory support, add further complexity to the thesis-writing process.

Additionally, linguistic barriers, such as limited grammatical proficiency and difficulty with paraphrasing, exacerbate these struggles. Empirical studies have highlighted the multifaceted nature of these difficulties. Lestari (2020) identified English proficiency, time management, and research methodology as significant barriers to thesis writing for students at Muhammadiyah University in Bengkulu.

Similarly, Al-Farrosi, Umamah, and Sholihah (2023) found that students at the University of Malang faced challenges such as qualitative data analysis, limited access to relevant literature, and differences in advisor expectations. Puspita (2019) reported that linguistic, sociocultural, and psychological factors significantly influenced thesis writing at IAIN Curup, with linguistic challenges being the most prevalent. While these studies provide valuable insights into the challenges students face, they often lack a comprehensive exploration of how students cope with these difficulties.

In light of the complexities of thesis writing and the gaps identified in existing research, this study aims to examine the factors that contribute to students' difficulties in undergraduate thesis writing, with a particular focus on psychological, sociocultural, and linguistic dimensions. Additionally, the study seeks to investigate the coping strategies employed by students to overcome these challenges. The research aims to answer the following questions: (1) What challenges do students encounter during the process of writing their undergraduate theses? (2) What strategies do students employ to address these challenges and successfully complete their theses?

The findings of this study will offer valuable insights into the challenges faced by students during thesis writing and provide practical

recommendations to enhance educational practices. By examining the obstacles and coping strategies, this research aims to improve support systems that can assist students in overcoming these difficulties, thereby improving their thesis-writing experiences. The study holds significance for educators, supervisors, and institutions seeking to develop more effective strategies and support mechanisms to aid students in higher education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to investigate the challenges students face in undergraduate thesis writing and the coping strategies they employ. The integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches provided a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Mixed-methods research is particularly valuable for addressing complex issues by combining statistical data with in-depth qualitative insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The study adopted a sequential explanatory design, wherein the quantitative phase identified key challenges, while the qualitative phase provided a deeper exploration of coping mechanisms. This approach ensured that qualitative data contextualized and enriched the interpretation of quantitative findings (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006).

Participants in this study were eighth-semester students from the English Education Study Program at Hamzanwadi University. This group was selected due to their active engagement in thesis writing, making them a relevant population for examining the research objectives. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants had relevant experience in thesis writing, thereby enhancing the study's validity (Palinkas et al., 2015).

In the quantitative phase, all eighth-semester students completing their theses were invited to participate in an online survey distributed via Google Forms, ensuring accessibility and efficiency (Sekaran & Bougie, 2020). For the qualitative phase, 12 participants were selected from the quantitative sample using maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2015), ensuring the inclusion of students with diverse experiences and coping strategies.

Two primary data collection instruments were utilized: a questionnaire and an interview guide.

The questionnaire was developed based on Brown's (2007) theoretical framework, categorizing writing difficulties into psychological, sociocultural, and linguistic factors. It consisted of 30 close-ended items measured on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (4). The interview guide was designed to explore students' coping strategies in greater depth, consisting of 13 open-ended questions aligned with the study's second research question.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to maintain consistency across sessions while allowing flexibility in probing participants' responses (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This methodological approach facilitated the collection of rich qualitative data, complementing the survey findings.

Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed using distinct yet complementary approaches.

The quantitative data were examined using descriptive statistical analysis, wherein percentages were calculated to determine the prevalence of various thesis-writing challenges. The problem category with the highest percentage was recognized as the most dominant issue affecting students' writing

processes, ensuring a structured approach to data interpretation (Field, 2017).

The qualitative data were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, which includes familiarization, coding, theme identification, and interpretation. The process began with data reduction, wherein transcripts were reviewed, and non-essential content was excluded. Emerging themes were systematically categorized, allowing for a structured interpretation of students' coping mechanisms. To enhance trustworthiness, iterative analysis was performed to verify emerging themes and ensure credibility (Nowell et al., 2017). This rigorous analytical process strengthened the reliability of qualitative findings while enhancing their interpretive depth.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This study yielded two primary findings derived from both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative analysis, based on a questionnaire survey, addressed the first research question regarding the challenges students face in writing undergraduate theses. In contrast, the qualitative analysis of interview data revealed the coping strategies employed by students to overcome these challenges, responding to the second research question.

Types of Students' Problems in Writing Undergraduate Theses

The quantitative data collected through the questionnaire enabled the categorization of students' problems into three primary factors: psychological, sociocultural, and linguistic. The following table summarizes the findings, displaying the prevalence of each factor based on the percentage of responses from the 36 participants.

The analysis of students' responses to the self-efficacy questionnaire revealed valuable insights into their perceptions of their capabilities in learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The following table presents a summary of their responses:

Table 1. The Factor of Problems in Writing Undergraduate Thesis

Factors	Total Score	Percentage
Psychological Factors	1206	78.72%
Sociocultural Factors	253	16.51%
Linguistic Factors	73	4.7%

As indicated, psychological factors emerged as the most significant challenge, with 78.72% of the responses attributing these as primary obstacles. Sociocultural factors represented 16.51%, while linguistic factors were identified as the least significant, accounting for only 4.7% of the challenges students encountered.

Psychological Factors

Psychological challenges were identified as the most significant barriers to undergraduate thesis writing. Students frequently reported difficulties related to generating research ideas, a lack of motivation, and inadequate prior knowledge of emerging issues in English language teaching. A significant portion of the participants attributed these challenges to limited exposure to current academic trends during their research methodology courses. Furthermore, students reported that a lack of both internal and external motivation exacerbated these difficulties, particularly in the face of the demanding nature of thesis writing.

Sociocultural Factors

Sociocultural factors ranked as the second most prominent challenge, with issues arising primarily from ineffective communication with

supervisors and peers. Participants frequently reported receiving brief and unclear feedback from their supervisors, particularly under time constraints. Moreover, peer discussions occasionally led to conflicting advice, further complicating the thesis writing process. These difficulties in navigating academic and social dynamics were identified as major barriers to effective thesis progress.

Linguistic Factors

Linguistic challenges, though less frequently reported, remained a significant concern, especially with regard to issues related to tense usage. Students struggled with maintaining tense consistency, particularly when transitioning from the proposal stage (which typically uses the future tense) to the final thesis (which requires the past tense). This challenge reflects the nuanced differences between English and Indonesian grammar, particularly in the use of tenses.

Students' Coping Strategies in Writing Undergraduate Theses

The qualitative analysis, based on interviews, highlighted various coping strategies employed by students to address the challenges identified in the survey. These strategies were diverse and illustrated the adaptability and resourcefulness of students in overcoming both academic and psychological obstacles.

Psychological Strategies: To combat challenges related to low self-confidence, students adopted a step-by-step approach, beginning with simpler tasks before advancing to more complex sections of their theses. Additionally, they set small, achievable goals and rewarded themselves for progress, which helped maintain motivation. Both internal and external motivations played critical roles in helping students remain focused and determined. Internally, students set personal

deadlines and visualized their accomplishments. Externally, support from family, friends, and peers was acknowledged as essential to maintaining motivation.

Sociocultural Strategies: Students addressed communication challenges with supervisors and peers by seeking further clarification from their supervisors, consulting recent academic literature, and attending webinars. Peer discussions were used as a strategy to help reconcile conflicting advice and gain clearer insights into the thesis writing process.

Linguistic Strategies: To address grammatical issues, students employed both conventional methods, such as proofreading and peer reviews, and technological tools, including Grammarly and Quillbot, for grammar checks and paraphrasing. Additionally, citation management tools such as Mendeley and Google Scholar were used to streamline the process of bibliography management and ensure accuracy in citations.

Plagiarism Prevention: Concerns regarding plagiarism were mitigated through careful reading of original texts, rephrasing ideas using synonyms, and restructuring sentences to ensure originality. These strategies not only addressed plagiarism concerns but also contributed to a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

Discussion

Interpretation of Results

The findings of this study revealed that **psychological factors** represent the most significant barrier to undergraduate thesis writing, followed by sociocultural and linguistic factors. These results are consistent with previous research, which has identified cognitive and emotional challenges as the predominant obstacles faced by English as a

Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Writing, particularly academic writing, is inherently a cognitively demanding task, complicated further by challenges related to language proficiency, cultural expectations, and psychological stressors. The findings here underscore the critical role that internal factors, such as anxiety, lack of motivation, and self-doubt, play in hindering students' ability to complete thesis tasks effectively.

Psychological difficulties, such as the inability to generate novel research ideas and a lack of motivation, reflect a disconnect between students' academic preparation and the demands of thesis writing. This is particularly evident in the limited exposure to contemporary academic trends during their coursework, which impedes their ability to engage effectively with the evolving demands of their fields of study. These findings align with those of Lee and Tajino (2008), who emphasized the gap between research methodology courses and the actual demands of thesis writing, suggesting that a lack of exposure to current trends exacerbates students' struggles. Furthermore, the absence of both internal and external motivation, as noted in the study, highlights the critical importance of fostering intrinsic motivation to sustain long-term academic effort. Research by Deci and Ryan (1985) affirms that intrinsic motivation is vital in maintaining the sustained effort needed for completing academic tasks such as writing a thesis.

Sociocultural factors, which were the second most prevalent challenge identified in this study, primarily stemmed from communication difficulties with supervisors and peers. Many students reported receiving brief or unclear feedback from their supervisors, particularly under time constraints. This echoes the findings of Canagarajah (2016), who noted that hierarchical academic relationships often create barriers for EFL students. The report of

misaligned expectations and conflicting feedback from peers highlights an additional layer of sociocultural complexity, underscoring the need for improved communication and clarity in academic support. It is evident that fostering better communication channels, both between students and supervisors and among peers, could significantly alleviate these challenges. Furthermore, a supportive academic culture that encourages open dialogue and feedback could enhance the thesis writing experience for students.

Although **linguistic factors** were less frequently reported, they remained significant for EFL students, particularly with respect to tense usage. Students struggled with maintaining tense consistency, particularly when transitioning from the proposal stage (which typically uses future tense) to the final thesis (which requires past tense). This issue is consistent with Bardovi-Harlig's (2000) findings, which highlighted the difficulties EFL learners face in mastering tense distinctions in English. While the relatively low prominence of linguistic challenges in this study might reflect the participants' prior exposure to academic English as part of their curriculum, it raises questions about the adequacy of language instruction in preparing students for the specific demands of thesis writing. Hyland (2013) argued that academic writing courses should go beyond general language skills and focus more on the genre-specific conventions required for tasks such as thesis writing.

The coping strategies identified by students in this study further reinforce their adaptability and resourcefulness in overcoming these barriers. Many students turned to a range of digital tools and online resources, suggesting that technology plays an increasingly vital role in supporting students' academic efforts. Tools such as Grammarly and Quillbot helped address grammatical issues, while citation management tools like Mendeley and Google Scholar

streamlined the research process. These strategies reflect the broader trend of technology integration in education, as highlighted by Kirkwood and Price (2014), who noted that digital tools have transformative potential in enhancing learning outcomes. However, while these coping strategies are useful, they also highlight gaps in formal instruction, particularly in areas such as language-specific conventions and thesis writing techniques. The reliance on self-directed strategies and external resources suggests that academic institutions may need to provide more structured support in these areas.

The challenges highlighted by the study also point to the need for targeted interventions to better support students throughout the thesis writing process. Educational institutions should consider embedding research-focused modules earlier in students' academic journeys to develop the skills and confidence required for thesis writing. Furthermore, enhancing supervisor training and offering peer mentoring programs could help students navigate the sociocultural complexities of the academic environment. Finally, addressing psychological barriers, such as anxiety and low motivation, by integrating stress-management techniques and providing mental health resources would be beneficial in improving students' overall academic well-being.

Comparison with Prior Studies

The results of this study also provide a valuable comparison to previous research on the challenges of thesis writing. Similar to Dwihandini, Marhaeni, and Suarnajaya (2013), the study identified psychological, sociocultural, and linguistic factors as key challenges for undergraduate thesis writers. However, the findings diverged from those of Puspita (2019), who found linguistic factors to be the most dominant challenge. These differences may be attributed to variations in institutional contexts, participant demographics, and the availability of academic support services. Notably, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the thesis writing process by investigating not only the challenges students face but also the strategies they employ to overcome these obstacles.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the complex nature of thesis writing for EFL learners and highlights the multifaceted challenges they encounter. While psychological factors are the most significant barrier, sociocultural and linguistic issues also play important roles in hindering progress. The coping strategies employed by students demonstrate their resilience, yet they also reveal the need for more comprehensive academic support to address these challenges effectively. Future research could explore the long-term effectiveness of these coping strategies and investigate the role of academic support systems in mitigating the challenges associated with thesis writing

CONCLUSION

This study explored the multifaceted challenges that eighth-semester English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students face in writing their undergraduate theses and the strategies they employ to navigate these difficulties. The findings revealed the intricate interplay of psychological, sociocultural, and linguistic factors, with psychological barriers emerging as the most significant challenge. These psychological factors highlight the critical role of self-efficacy, motivation, and emotional regulation in the academic writing process. The internal struggles experienced by students often stem from their limited exposure to research practices and the novelty of managing an independent research project, both of which

present considerable obstacles to successful thesis completion.

Sociocultural factors, although secondary, contribute to the complexity of thesis writing by reflecting structural and relational barriers within the academic environment, particularly those arising from interactions between students and their supervisors. The students reported that unclear or brief feedback from supervisors, as well as inconsistent advice from peers, hindered their progress. Linguistic challenges, though less prominent, remain a significant concern due to the unique grammatical and rhetorical demands of English academic writing, which often diverge from the conventions of students' first languages. These challenges highlight the difficulty of mastering the academic writing norms of a second language, especially when they differ from those in the students' native linguistic frameworks.

The students' coping strategies demonstrated their capacity for adaptability and resilience, reflecting their reliance on external resources, digital tools, and peer networks to mitigate the challenges they encountered. Technological tools such as Grammarly and Mendeley were commonly used, facilitating grammar checks and reference management, respectively. Despite these efforts, the findings suggest that students' reliance on such tools underscores significant gaps in institutional support. While these tools are valuable, their widespread use indicates that the current educational framework may not sufficiently address the practical demands of thesis writing. The reliance on external resources and peer networks also points to a need for more structured guidance within the curriculum to better align academic preparation with the realities of independent research.

The findings of this study contribute to the theoretical understanding of academic writing in an EFL context, emphasizing the interplay of psychological, sociocultural, and linguistic factors. Specifically, the prominence of psychological barriers reinforces the importance of addressing self-efficacy, motivation, and emotional regulation in the development of academic writing skills. This understanding highlights the need for more tailored interventions that support students in overcoming these internal struggles. From a practical perspective, the study underscores the necessity for curriculum reforms that provide explicit instruction on research practices, foster more consistent and effective supervision, and incorporate digital tools into the learning process. Additionally, enhancing the communication between students and supervisors, and encouraging collaborative peer networks, could alleviate some of the sociocultural challenges that students face.

Furthermore, the study suggests several avenues for future research. Longitudinal studies could explore the evolution of students' coping strategies throughout the thesis-writing process, shedding light on how these strategies develop and whether they become more effective as students gain experience in research and writing. Investigating the impact of institutional support structures on the development of these strategies, particularly the role of supervisor-student interactions and peer collaboration, would also provide valuable insights into the factors that contribute to successful thesis completion. Additionally, further research into the integration of technology in academic writing could yield recommendations on how digital tools can be more effectively employed to enhance the quality of student writing. Finally, comparative studies across different disciplines and academic contexts would help to identify whether certain fields of study experience

unique challenges in thesis writing or if these challenges are consistent across the EFL student population. Such research could inform the development of more targeted interventions that address the specific needs of students in different academic domains.

In conclusion, this study underscores the complexity of thesis writing in an EFL context, where psychological, sociocultural, and linguistic challenges intersect. It highlights the need for greater institutional support to address these challenges and provides a foundation for future research aimed at improving the thesis-writing experience for EFL students.

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