

A Literature Review on Factors Affecting EFL Students' Difficulties in Thesis Writing

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Abstract

This study employs a literature review method that aims to investigate Article information: the factors affecting EFL students' difficulties in writing their Received undergraduate theses. Writing a thesis in English poses numerous Revised challenges for EFL learners, as it demands strong academic writing skills, Accepted sufficient language proficiency, and an understanding of research methodology. The purpose of this research is to identify three dominant categories of influencing factors: linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural. Data were collected by analyzing ten relevant journal articles retrieved from SciSpace, Consensus, and Google Scholar using the Publish or Perish application. The results show that linguistic limitations, psychological barriers such as anxiety and lack of motivation, and sociocultural challenges like insufficient academic support significantly contribute to students' struggles. These findings are expected to assist educators in creating more effective strategies and supportive environments to help EFL students succeed in thesis writing.

Keywords: EFL students, thesis writing, linguistic difficulties, psychological factors, sociocultural barriers

INTRODUCTION

As an international language, English is widely taught as the first foreign language in Indonesia, both at school and university levels. Consequently, it is essential for students to master English, which includes the four fundamental language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Yuliawati, 2021). Each of these skills supports one another in the process of language acquisition and communication. Among them, writing holds a particularly important role in academic settings. It allows students to think critically, organize their thoughts, and express ideas in a structured and coherent manner (Chicho, 2022).

In various educational contexts, writing becomes not only a tool for communication but also a measure of students' understanding and analytical thinking. Writing is considered the most difficult skill among EFL learners. Its complexity increases at the academic level, especially in university contexts where students are required to produce scholarly works such as essays, reports, and, ultimately, a thesis. A thesis is not only a requirement for graduation but also a demonstration of academic competence, independent research ability, and mastery of academic writing conventions (Monica Lestari, 2020).

Thesis writing is a part of the final requirements of instructional education for university students to get a bachelor's degree. It is meant to train students in developing logical reasoning and research skills relevant to their field (Iskandar et al., 2024). For many students, particularly those in English education programs, writing a thesis becomes a significant challenge. It is a frightening task that must be completed at the end of their studies. Moreover, as English is not their native language, composing a thesis using formal and academic English becomes an even greater challenge. Writing in a second language demands linguistic precision, coherence, and fluency. All of which are difficult to achieve for EFL students.

The challenges in thesis writing are not solely caused by limited language proficiency. Difficulties may stem from various overlapping factors. Linguistic challenges include limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, and difficulties with academic phrasing (Syahaq, 2023). At the same time, psychological factors, such as anxiety, low self-confidence, and lack of motivation can negatively impact students' writing performance. Sociocultural challenges may arise due to limited access to academic resources,

unfamiliarity with research culture, or inconsistent supervisor support (Rohim et al., 2023). All of these aspects interact and contribute to the overall difficulty of thesis writing among EFL students.

Considering these complex challenges, this article aims to examine and review the existing literature related to the factors that affect English students' difficulties in writing a thesis. By analyzing previous studies, this literature review will focus on three main domains: linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural factors. The insights gained from this review are expected to support educators, curriculum developers, and students in addressing key challenges in English academic writing, especially within the EFL context.

METHODS

This study used a literature review method to explore and analyze previous research related to the difficulties faced by EFL students in writing their undergraduate thesis. A literature review is not merely a summary of existing research but also a methodological tool used to answer research questions, evaluate theoretical frameworks, examine the validity of evidence, and provide a comprehensive overview of a particular issue or research problem (Ebidor & Ikhide, 2024). More specifically, a literature review can be defined as “a study that analyzes and synthesizes an existing body of literature by identifying, challenging, and advancing the building blocks of a theory through an examination of a body (or several bodies) of prior work” (Post et al., 2020).

To conduct the review, the researcher gathered sources using online academic databases such as SciSpace, Consensus, and Google Scholar, with the help of the Publish or Perish application. The search was limited to articles published between 2020 and 2025, focusing on works that specifically discuss issues encountered by EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in thesis writing at the undergraduate level. The main keyword used in the search was: “EFL students' difficulties in writing thesis.”

After an initial screening of titles and abstracts, a total of 10 articles were selected based on their clarity, research quality, and relevance to the topic. The reviewed articles were then categorized and analyzed to identify common themes, trends, and factors influencing students' writing challenges. These findings were used to support the discussion

and interpretation of the present study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The following the result of students' difficulties in thesis writing, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The result of students' difficulties in thesis writing

No.	Researcher and Year	Journal	Research Result
1.	(Boufeldja Bakhou & Bachir Bouhanian, 2020)	A Qualitative Inquiry into the Difficulties Experienced by Algerian EFL Master Students in Thesis Writing: 'Language is not the Only Problem'	The findings revealed that thesis writing is a formidable task for Algerian EFL Master students, primarily due to sociocultural challenges such as lack of support from supervisors and families, limited cooperation from research participants, and insufficient academic preparation. Linguistic difficulties were also present but less dominant, including students' limited academic writing skills and inadequate knowledge of thesis structure and research.
2.	(Ananda Muhammad Revaldo Syahaq, 2023)	An Analysis of Students' Difficulties in Writing Theses in English Education Study Program of Raden Intan State Islamic University	The research results show that students experienced a variety of difficulties in thesis writing, such as challenges in learning to write, meeting academic quality standards, complex procedural requirements, limited time and financial resources, psychological pressures, and sociocultural issues. Interestingly, no linguistic difficulties were reported, with psychological and academic challenges being the most prominent.
3.	(Lovina Octavia Iskandar, Yuni Budi Lestari, Lalu Ali Wardana, Ni Wayan Mira Susanti, 2024)	An Analysis of Factors Affecting Students' Difficulties in Writing A Thesis	The findings revealed that the main difficulty encountered by English Department students in writing their theses was related to linguistic factors (35.58%), followed by psychological (32.67%) and sociocultural factors (31.74%). This suggests that linguistic issues were the most significant challenge in their thesis writing process.

4.	(Rizki Muliani, 2020)	An Analysis of Factors Affecting Students in Thesis Writing in English Study Program FKIP-UIR	of The research results revealed that all three factors: linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural contributed significantly to students' difficulties in thesis writing, with linguistic factors (80%) being the most dominant. Psychological factors scored 73%, and sociocultural factors scored 75%, indicating a high level of difficulty across all dimensions. The study suggests that students should pay more attention to linguistic challenges, as these were considered the main barrier to successful thesis writing.
5.	(Dwi Monica Lestari, 2020)	An Analysis of Students' Difficulties in Writing Undergraduate Thesis at English Education Program of Muhammadiyah University of Bengkulu	The findings show that students encountered various challenges in writing their undergraduate theses, with the most significant difficulty being related to their English proficiency, which was generally low. Other prominent difficulties included time management, understanding research methodology, topic selection, and motivation. The study emphasizes the importance of improving English skills and managing time effectively to reduce thesis writing difficulties.
6.	(M.S.M. Rizwar & A.R. Fahmithah Naas, 2022)	Factors Affecting Undergraduates' Difficulties in Writing Thesis	The research revealed that undergraduate students experienced difficulties across psychological, sociocultural, and linguistic factors, with the psychological factor being the most dominant (mean = 3.55). Within this factor, low self-esteem, difficulty gaining data, and struggling to choose a thesis title were major issues. For sociocultural aspects (mean = 3.25), problems centered around student-supervisor relationships and communication difficulties. Linguistic challenges (mean = 3.48) included diction, choosing the right vocabulary, and using punctuation and capitalization correctly.

7. (Abdul Rohim, Aidil Syah Putra & M. Abduh Almanar, 2023)	Students' Difficulties in Finishing a Thesis of English Study Program at Muhammadiyah University of Tangerang	The research findings revealed that students at Muhammadiyah University of Tangerang faced thesis writing difficulties mainly due to psychological and sociocultural factors. Psychological difficulties included lack of motivation, difficulty adapting research topics, and limited understanding of research methods and academic writing. Sociocultural challenges were influenced by social pressure from peers, family, and supervisors.
8. (Abedrabu A. Abu Alyan, 2022)	Thesis Writing Challenges Facing Palestinian EFL Master's Students: A Qualitative Case Study	The findings show that Palestinian EFL master's students experienced significant difficulties in thesis writing related to both linguistic and academic skill limitations, as well as methodological training deficiencies. Other problems included difficulty selecting research topics, lack of supervisory feedback, and limited access to resources and digital materials. These challenges negatively impacted the students' ability to complete their theses successfully.
9. (Jeni Santia, 2022)	Psychological Factors Affecting Bachelor Students' Difficulties in Writing Thesis	The research results revealed that three psychological factors—self-esteem, motivation, and anxiety—all significantly influenced students' difficulties in writing their thesis, with motivation being the most influential (68.28%), followed by self-esteem (73.02%) and anxiety (65.34%). Both questionnaire and interview data confirmed that psychological factors played a crucial role in the students' ability to complete their theses.
(Boufeldja Bakhou & Bachir Bouhania, 2020)	A Qualitative Inquiry into the Difficulties Experienced by Algerian EFL Master Students in Thesis Writing: 'Language is not the Only Problem'	The findings revealed that thesis writing is a formidable task for Algerian EFL Master students, primarily due to sociocultural challenges such as lack of support from supervisors and families, limited cooperation from research participants, and insufficient academic preparation. Linguistic difficulties were also present but less dominant, including students' limited academic writing skills and inadequate knowledge of thesis structure and research.

Discussion

The findings of this literature review reveal that thesis writing among EFL undergraduate students is a multidimensional challenge, primarily influenced by linguistic,

psychological, and sociocultural factors. These findings are significant because they highlight that writing difficulties cannot be addressed by focusing solely on improving language proficiency.

Linguistic difficulties, particularly in grammar, vocabulary, sentence construction, and organizing ideas into formal academic writing remain the most persistent obstacle. This indicates that many students enter the thesis stage without adequate preparation in academic discourse, which affects their ability to communicate their research clearly and coherently. It suggests a gap between general English instruction and the specific demands of academic writing, particularly in formal contexts like thesis writing.

Psychological factors such as low motivation, anxiety, and poor self-confidence also play a critical role in disrupting students' writing progress. Even when students have sufficient knowledge, emotional and mental barriers often inhibit their ability to complete tasks effectively. This implies that emotional readiness and psychological support are just as important as linguistic skills in the thesis-writing process.

Sociocultural challenges further complicate students' experiences. Limited support from family, peers, or supervisors, as well as rigid communication dynamics between students and academic advisors, are often reported as sources of discouragement. These findings emphasize the need for more collaborative and empathetic supervision models, along with access to academic resources and peer support systems.

Altogether, the evidence underscores that thesis writing is not merely a linguistic activity, it is a complex process that intersects with students' emotional well-being, social context, and institutional support. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic response from universities, including curriculum reforms, supervisor training, writing support programs, and psychological counseling services.

CONCLUSIONS

This literature review concludes that thesis writing presents complex challenges for EFL students, rooted in an interplay of linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural factors. While linguistic limitations such as poor grammar, limited vocabulary, and inadequate academic writing skills remain the most dominant, psychological barriers like low

motivation and anxiety, along with sociocultural constraints such as ineffective supervision and limited academic support, significantly impact students' ability to complete their theses.

This study advances the current understanding by emphasizing that effective thesis supervision and support for EFL students must go beyond language instruction. Institutions should integrate academic writing training with psychological support and improved advisor-student communication. These findings provide a foundation for developing holistic intervention programs tailored to the specific needs of EFL thesis writers.

Future research should explore how targeted institutional practices such as thesis writing workshops, peer mentoring systems, and supervisor training can mitigate these challenges. Longitudinal studies examining the impact of such interventions on students' thesis completion rates and writing quality would be particularly valuable.

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