

# Synthesising, Referencing, and Beyond: Difficulties in Academic Writing Faced by ESL Pre-University Students

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## ABSTRACT

Writing is a crucial skill for language learners, particularly in achieving academic success in the English language. Since writing requires a high level of cognitive engagement, many language learners, especially ESL students, are struggling to perform well in writing tasks assigned to them. This issue is prevalent at the tertiary level, where academic writing is essential for students to complete their assignments and further meet academic expectations. Thus, this recent study aims to investigate which elements of academic writing are perceived as most challenging by ESL pre-university students. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 102 ESL pre-university students who identified which of the 15 academic writing aspects were difficult for them. The findings revealed that referring to and selecting sources, summarising/paraphrasing information, and synthesising information are the most challenging elements in academic writing. These insights are valuable for ESL educators, as they offer guidance in identifying students' challenges and help them develop targeted instructional strategies to improve academic writing proficiency among tertiary learners.

**Keywords:** ESL pre-university students, academic writing, synthesising, writing difficulties, referencing

## INTRODUCTION

Academic writing plays a pivotal role in higher education, serving as the foundation for much of the scholarly work students are expected to produce. Beyond meeting assignment requirements, academic writing develops essential skills such as critical thinking, logical reasoning, and effective communication, as these skills are fundamental to both academic success and professional development (Brodowicz, 2024). It serves not only as a means for assessing students' understanding of subject matter but also as a medium through which they engage with complex ideas, analyse different perspectives, and synthesise information across various disciplines. Mastery of academic writing, therefore, enables students to express their ideas clearly, construct coherent and well-supported arguments, and contribute meaningfully to academic discourse.

Producing high-quality academic writing requires a specialised set of skills. As Rkhmatova (2024) notes, students need to develop logical structuring in thesis and topic sentences, alongside the ability to create smooth and coherent transitions between ideas and paragraphs. These elements are considered essential for producing cohesive texts that are both logically organised and easily understood by readers. A key strategy for achieving such coherence lies in the ability to paraphrase, summarise, and synthesise information from credible sources. Acquiring these skills not only enriches the content and originality of students' academic work but also plays a crucial role in producing good academic writing but also to maintaining academic integrity by helping to prevent plagiarism (Aprianto et al., 2024). These skills are also interconnected with the students' ability to cite and quote sources, another important skill in academic writing to uphold scholarly standards and ethical writing practices (Ramzan et al. 2023). Despite the critical importance of academic writing skills, mastering them remains a considerable challenge for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners (Bui et al., 2023; Nikbakht & Miller, 2023; Ma et al., 2023). This difficulty is particularly evident across various levels of proficiency, from pre-university students to advanced learners such as doctoral candidates (Phyo et al., 2023).

Academic writing is widely perceived as complex and demanding due to its requirement for students to organise ideas logically, construct coherent arguments and paragraphs, and effectively integrate external sources into their writing (Bui et al., 2023; Phyo et al., 2023; Zhang, 2013). Among these competencies, synthesising information from multiple sources and the ability to paraphrase and summarise without plagiarising are consistently reported as some of the most challenging for ESL students (Bui et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2023; Zhang, 2013). Phyo et al. (2023) found that only a small proportion of students could consistently apply these academic writing skills, even when they had received formal instruction and demonstrated adequate language proficiency.

While existing literature has extensively documented the general challenges faced by ESL students, research specifically examining the aspects of academic writing that pre-university ESL students in Malaysia find most difficult remains limited. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates 15 aspects of academic writing to determine which are perceived as most challenging by this learner group. By identifying these challenges, the study aims to inform targeted pedagogical strategies that support ESL pre-university students in developing and refining their academic writing skills.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic writing proficiency is important to ensure success in tertiary education. However, navigating the complexities of academic writing presents significant hurdles, particularly for ESL tertiary-level students (Hyland, 2019). While various aspects of academic writing are perceived as challenging, past studies have consistently highlighted specific aspects that are deemed challenging for ESL students. Hence, this section will explore the literature concerning four challenging aspects of academic writing, namely: referencing and selecting sources, summarising and paraphrasing, synthesising information, and lastly writing coherent paragraphs.

### Challenges Key Aspects of Academic Writing among ESL Students

One of the important key aspects in academic writing is the ability to engage with scholarly articles by effectively referring to and selecting sources. This aspect is frequently perceived as demanding and challenging for most ESL students (Ramli et al., 2024) as they need to evaluate sources for credibility and relevance critically. Somehow, selecting sources is considered hard due to ESL students' linguistic barriers that can limit comprehension of complex academic texts (Blakeslee, 2020; Liu & Braine, 2005). Furthermore, academic citation and referencing are considered foreign for novice writers, which can further increase the risk of unintentional plagiarism or citation errors (Sutherland-Smith, 2008; Yamada, 2021). For instance, Bui et al. (2023) reported that insufficient practice with citation among Vietnamese EFL pre-service teachers led to frequent citation errors and instances of unintentional academic misconduct. Both native and ESL writers may have limited understanding of the expectations regarding source use in writing from sources since some may lack the skills needed to choose sources critically, attribute and integrate them appropriately and coherently in argument construction (Dugartsyrenova, 2024). However, for expert writers, selecting and integrating sources into their writing is considered less challenging since they have strong academic writing self-efficacy and thus it does not affect the expectations in writing success (Eddy et al., 2025). This highlights a gap between conceptual understanding and the practical execution of academic referencing.

The skills to summarise and paraphrase are considered a core competency for students pursuing university studies, but the demands can demotivate students, especially those who are new to the university context, particularly international students for whom English is an additional language (Li et al., 2024). Linguistic barriers can potentially affect ESL students' ability to summarise and paraphrase information from academic sources. ESL students often struggle to find appropriate vocabulary and grammatical structures to rephrase complex academic ideas. Therefore, this resulted in students producing inadequate or surface-level summarising or paraphrasing of information (Howard, 2010; Pecorari, 2013). Bui et al. (2023) observed that EFL pre-service teachers often relied on L1–L2 translation as a coping mechanism when direct paraphrasing in English is challenging for them. This will negatively impact the originality and clarity of the academic writing.

These difficulties faced when paraphrasing and summarising will further affect the students' ability to synthesise information effectively, since paraphrasing and summarising are the foundation for synthesising.

Synthesis is widely recognised as one of the most cognitively demanding components of academic writing. It requires students to extract key information from multiple sources, identify relationships among them, and construct a coherent and original argument using their own words (Spivey, 1997; Lee, 2022). In universities, students need to be able to use English for academic purposes, especially to synthesise information for their academic essays. But as for ESL students, whose English is not their first language, this might influence them to write effective synthesis essays (Rahman et al, 2024). Other than that, successful synthesis is one of the pieces of evidence of deep critical engagement with texts and good summarising and paraphrasing skills (Behrens & Rosen, 2019). Numerous studies have highlighted the difficulties ESL students face in synthesis tasks, often attributing these challenges to limited reading comprehension and low proficiency in the second language (Plakans & Gebril, 2012, as cited in Nikbakht & Miller, 2023). These same factors also hinder ESL students' ability to effectively refer to and select sources, as well as to summarise and paraphrase academic texts. As Zhang (2013) observed, a limited understanding of academic materials can impair students' ability to select, organise, and connect ideas meaningfully. Furthermore, ESL students frequently encounter difficulty in integrating multiple perspectives into a single, unified argument (Petrić, 2007; Stapleton & Helms-Park, 2006), which often results in incoherent paragraph construction. This highlights the interconnected nature of synthesis, source integration, and paragraph coherence in academic writing.

A coherent paragraph requires clarity of focus, logical progression of ideas, and smooth transitions (Hinkel, 2004; Wingate, 2012). Although this aspect of academic writing is often perceived as less difficult than source-based tasks, previous studies reported significant challenges in crafting coherent and logically structured paragraphs among ESL students (Bulqiyah et al., 2021). This difficulty often stems from a limited or incorrect use of cohesive devices and potential interference from first-language rhetorical patterns (Chen & Sager, 2021). Despite these challenges, language learners are aware of the importance of coherent paragraph structure. For example, Bui et al. (2023) revealed that EFL pre-service teachers acknowledged the role of well-structured paragraphs in strengthening their arguments in academic writing. Therefore, ESL students are encouraged to develop and enhance their skills to write a coherent paragraph, especially when linking synthesised information to ensure the clarity and reader comprehension (Ma et al., 2025).

In summary, existing research consistently identifies referencing and selecting sources, summarising/paraphrasing, synthesising information, and paragraph coherence as the most challenging aspects in academic writing among ESL academic writing (Bui et al., 2023). These challenges are closely related to linguistic limitations, unfamiliarity with academic writing conventions, and the high cognitive demands of tasks such as synthesis, which may contribute to poor academic writing.

## METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to examine ESL pre-university students' perceived level of difficulty across 15 key aspects of academic writing. A quantitative research design was employed, as this approach is widely recognised for its ability to identify patterns, make generalisations, and support predictive analysis across disciplines such as psychology, sociology, education, and the natural sciences (Trochim, 2006; Zyoud et al., 2024). Given that the respondents in this study came from diverse academic backgrounds, a quantitative method was deemed appropriate for capturing and analysing broad trends in perception.

The participants consisted of 102 ESL pre-university students enrolled in one of the foundation centres located in Selangor. These students represented three academic streams, namely, engineering, science, and law. These students were selected using a non-random sampling method based on specific inclusion criteria and to be eligible for participation, students were required to (1) be enrolled in their second semester and registered in an English course offered by the institution, and (2) have prior exposure to academic writing and the 15 targeted aspects of academic writing instruction.

Data collection was conducted using an adapted version of the questionnaire by Sibomana (2016), which originally examined the academic writing challenges faced by postgraduate students in Rwanda. For this study,

minor modifications were made to include a demographic section to gather general information about the participants. The final questionnaire consisted of 17 items and was administered via Google Forms. Before participation, respondents were briefed on the confidentiality of their responses and assured that their personal information would remain anonymous and be used solely for this research purpose.

The collected data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29. Descriptive statistics were employed to determine the mean scores for each of the 15 academic writing key aspects. A five-point Likert scale was used to assess the students' perceived difficulty, with the following interpretation: mean scores ranging from 1.00 to 2.33 were classified as a low level of perceived difficulty, scores between 2.34 and 3.66 indicated a moderate level, and scores from 3.67 to 5.00 reflected a high level of perceived difficulty. This approach enabled a systematic evaluation of the specific areas where ESL pre-university students encounter the greatest challenges in academic writing.

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

This study aims to investigate the perceived level of difficulty experienced by 102 ESL pre-university students towards 15 key aspects of academic writing. The following sections report and discuss the findings from the questionnaire.

### The Demographic Profile of the Respondents

This current study has a sample size of 102 participants, with 48% (n=49) of them being male, while females make up 52% (n=53) of the sample. All of them are ESL pre-university students who are in their second semester from three different courses. Out of the 102 participants, 37.3% or 38 are pursuing science, followed by 34.3% (n=35) are engineering students, and finally 28.4% (n=29) of the total number of participants are studying law.

### ESL Pre-University Students' Perceived Difficulty Score for Key Aspects in Academic Writing

Section B of the questionnaire was used to determine the ESL pre-university students' perceived difficulty level for 15 elements in academic writing.

Table 1: The Difficulty Score for Key Aspects in Academic Writing

No	Academic Writing Element	Mean
1	Writing the Introduction	2.51
2	Referring and Selecting Sources	3.38
3	Revising the Written Academic Essay	2.84
4	Writing In-text Citation and References	2.58
5	Writing the Conclusion	2.26
6	Writing Body Paragraphs	2.42
7	Summarising/Paraphrasing Information	3.20
8	Planning the Written Assignment	2.63
9	Expressing Personal Ideas Clearly/Logically	2.68
10	Synthesising Information (Combining Sources)	3.14

11	Writing Coherent Paragraph (Coherent = Nice flow)	3.05
12	Proofreading the Written Academic Essay	2.86
13	Linking Sentences Smoothly	2.85
14	Expressing Ideas in Correct English	2.80
15	Using Appropriate Academic Style of Writing and Tone	2.88

### Overall Perceived Difficulty Aspects of Academic Writing

The data presented in *Table 1* illustrate the perceived levels of difficulty across 15 key aspects of academic writing among ESL pre-university students. Overall, the findings suggest that students view most academic writing components as moderately challenging, with the majority of mean scores ranging between 2.0 and 3.0. Among these, “*Referring and Selecting Sources*” emerged as the most challenging aspect (M=3.38), followed by “*Summarising/Paraphrasing Information*” (M=3.20) and “*Synthesising Information*” (M=3.14). These results are expected, as these skills demand higher-order thinking and a strong command of academic language, making them particularly difficult for ESL learners. Additionally, “*Writing Coherent Paragraphs*” was also rated as difficult (M=3.05), indicating that organising ideas logically and maintaining flow within paragraphs poses a substantial challenge for students in academic essay writing.

Several other aspects, including “*Writing the Introduction*” (M=2.51), “*Writing In-text Citations and References*” (M=2.58), “*Planning the Written Assignment*” (M=2.63), and “*Expressing Personal Ideas Clearly and Logically*” (M=2.68), were rated as moderately challenging. These mid-range scores suggest that although these elements are not perceived as the most demanding, they still require considerable effort and support. Similarly, tasks such as “*Revising the Written Academic Essay*” (M=2.84), “*Proofreading the Written Academic Essay*” (M=2.86), “*Linking Sentences Smoothly*” (M=2.85), and “*Using Appropriate Academic Style and Tone*” (M=2.88) were also clustered within the moderate difficulty range. These findings imply that ESL pre-university students experience ongoing challenges with maintaining cohesion, ensuring clarity, and adhering to academic conventions during the revision and editing phases.

Conversely, the least difficult aspects identified by the students were “*Writing the Conclusion*” (M=2.26) and “*Writing Body Paragraphs*” (M=2.42). These results may be attributed to students’ being familiar with basic essay structures, which often receive more instructional emphasis during earlier stages of academic writing instruction.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed the ESL pre-university students’ perceived level of difficulty for 15 key aspects of academic writing. Based on the results, these ESL pre-university students believed that, out of 15, four aspects of academic writing that are challenging for them which are “*Referring and Selecting Sources*” (M=3.38), “*Summarising/Paraphrasing Information*” (M=3.20), followed by “*Synthesising Information (Combining Sources)*” with the mean of M=3.1 and finally, “*Writing Coherent Paragraphs*” (M=3.05).

In this study, the element of “*Referring and Selecting Sources*” recorded the highest mean score, M=3.38, for perceived difficulty among the elements of academic writing, which highlighted the ESL pre-university students’ challenges in locating and integrating appropriate sources into their work. This finding is consistent with AlMarwani (2020), who observed similar difficulties among postgraduate students in the TESOL program at Tabih University, Saudi Arabia, where students struggled to select credible and relevant references to support their academic arguments. Similarly, Alhojailan (2021) reported that Saudi graduate students enrolled in various academic programs at American universities also faced considerable challenges in sourcing appropriate materials for academic writing tasks. Hence, these findings proved that referencing and source selection are one of the most demanding aspects of academic writing, particularly for ESL students. This

aspect not only requires the ability to identify and critically evaluate scholarly sources but also demands the comprehension of complex texts that often contain specialised terminology and dense content (Alhojailan, 2021). These linguistic and cognitive demands may discourage ESL students from engaging fully with academic materials (Blakeslee, 2020), thus impeding their ability to extract and integrate key points into their writing effectively. Moreover, since this is the first time these ESL pre-university students encountered academic writing, some might not be familiar with academic databases and experience uncertainty regarding source credibility to be used to support their academic writing. Hence, proper guidance in the classrooms and a series of workshops on finding and selecting literature are crucial when students are tasked with academic writing.

However, despite these pre-university students believed that it was hard for them to refer and select their sources for academic writing, “*Writing In-text Citation and References*” (M=2.58) is perceived as moderately hard. This finding is contradictory with a finding from a study by Nenotek et al., (2022) that undergraduate students at the Universitas Kristen Artha Wacana, studied English Education Study Program, were struggled with citation and references using the APA style where some of them mentioned the author’s complete name, full name with the complete and initial name, punctuation in the citation, and also the use of brackets at the start of the sentence.

The other two most challenging aspects of academic writing identified among ESL pre-university students are “*Summarising/Paraphrasing Information*” (M=3.20) and “*Synthesising Information (Combining Sources)*” (M=3.10). These aspects are essential in academic writing, as they enable students to process and convey ideas drawn from various sources using their language to avoid plagiarism and to demonstrate critical engagement with the sources. However, the findings of this study indicate that ESL pre-university students struggle to effectively integrate, rephrase, and synthesise information from multiple sources using their own words. This is consistent with Sulistyaningrum (2023), who found that undergraduate students enrolled in the Magister of English Language Education (MELE) program in Indonesia experienced similar difficulties, particularly in paraphrasing and presenting their viewpoints based on synthesised experts’ opinions. As discussed previously, the complexity of academic texts, unfamiliar vocabulary used in academic papers, as well as limited reading comprehension, pose a significant barrier for ESL students, not only in selecting appropriate sources (Alhojailan, 2021; Nikbakht & Miller, 2023) but also in paraphrasing and summarising information accurately. This observation is supported by Mustafa et al. (2022), who reported that limited comprehension of academic texts and inadequate grammatical knowledge significantly affect ESL students’ ability to paraphrase and summarise effectively. Language educators may consider incorporating structured comparative analysis tasks alongside visual mapping tools, as these approaches can help students identify thematic links, integrate ideas effectively, and thereby reduce the difficulties they face in summarising, paraphrasing, and synthesising information.

Given that paraphrasing and summarising are fundamental aspects of academic writing, limited proficiency in these areas can significantly hinder ESL students’ ability to synthesise and integrate ideas effectively. Although this study identified paraphrasing, summarising, and synthesising as particularly challenging, it also found that “*Expressing Personal Ideas Clearly and Logically*” (M=2.68) and “*Expressing Ideas in Correct English*” (M=2.80) were perceived as moderately difficult. This contrast suggests that students find it more challenging to process and manipulate information from external sources than to articulate their ideas. Synthesising demands a high level of comprehension and analytical skill to identify key points across multiple texts and rephrase them accurately and concisely in an original form. Mastering these skills is therefore crucial not only for producing coherent and high-quality academic writing but also for upholding academic integrity by avoiding plagiarism. Consequently, language educators should provide targeted support to help ESL students develop and strengthen their paraphrasing and summarising abilities (Aprianto et al., 2024).

The final key aspect that is perceived as difficult by ESL pre-university students is “*Writing Coherent Paragraphs*” (M=3.05). This suggests that constructing coherent paragraphs remains a significant challenge for them while writing an academic essay. As suggested by Chen and Sager (2021), a limited or incorrect use of cohesive devices and potential interference from first-language rhetorical patterns (Chen & Sager, 2021) might be the reason why ESL pre-university students found it difficult to write coherent paragraphs. Similar

findings were reported by Aldabbus and Almansouri (2022), who found that graduates majoring in English at the University of Benghazi also struggled with paragraph coherence in academic writing due to first-language interference. Likewise, Bulqiyah et al. (2021) reported that undergraduate students enrolled in a writing course experienced difficulty in composing coherent paragraphs to support their scholarly arguments. While coherence may not always be perceived as a primary barrier, it plays a critical role in organising ideas logically and ensuring that meaning is conveyed to the reader. As noted by Alsariera and Yunus (2023), coherence facilitates the flow of thought within a text, making it more accessible and comprehensible. Therefore, enhancing coherence in academic writing is essential to improve both the readability and overall effectiveness of students' work. Moreover, although ESL pre-university students reported experiencing high difficulties with writing coherent paragraphs, they perceived "*Writing Body Paragraphs*" (M=2.42) as less challenging. This may be attributed to their general familiarity with the overall structure of an essay. However, their primary struggle lies in constructing body paragraphs that demonstrate coherence. This difficulty is likely linked to their limited ability to paraphrase, summarise, and synthesise information, which these skills are considered essential skills to ensure the coherence and logical connection of ideas within a paragraph. As noted by Ramli et al. (2024), such limitations can hinder students' ability to maintain logical progression and smooth transitions, both of which are critical for coherence. Interestingly, "*Writing the Introduction*" (M=2.51) and "*Writing the Conclusion*" (M=2.26) received even lower difficulty scores, suggesting that ESL pre-university students perceive these sections as more straightforward. Unlike body paragraphs, which require more complex critical engagement with source material and a higher level of analytical writing, introductions and conclusions are often more formulaic and thus easier to manage for novice academic writers. Ultimately, ESL pre-university students can be encouraged to engage in peer-review activities, which support them in organising ideas logically and enhancing the clarity of their written paragraphs.

Finally, most ESL pre-university students perceived the aspects of "*Revising the Written Academic Essay*" (M=2.84), "*Proofreading the Written Academic Essay*" (M=2.86), and "*Using Appropriate Academic Style and Tone*" (M=2.88) as moderately difficult. These cohesive aspects of writing may be considered less challenging due to the structured guidance provided throughout the academic writing process. These students received explicit instruction on essay composition from the outset and participated in consultation sessions where they revised their work based on feedback from their language instructors and peers. In addition, the students were constantly reminded of academic integrity, particularly the consequences of plagiarism, which likely motivated them to take revision and proofreading seriously. As Nurhayati (2022) observed, tertiary students in Indonesia are increasingly aware of the risks of plagiarism, making revision and proofreading a common and essential practice. Moreover, with the integration of technological tools and artificial intelligence (AI) in education, these stages of the writing process have become more accessible and manageable, further reducing the perceived difficulty when "*Referring and Selecting Sources*" for their academic writings.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study reveal that while ESL pre-university students generally perceived most aspects of academic writing as moderately challenging, the four aspects that stood out as challenging are: '*Referring and Selecting Sources*', '*Summarising/Paraphrasing Information*', '*Synthesising Information (Combining Sources)*', and '*Writing Coherent Paragraphs*'. These aspects are fundamental to academic writing proficiency and are essential for students' success in producing well-structured, original, and academically sound texts. Therefore, language instructors or educators must consider effective preventative measures in assisting ESL learners to minimise the difficulties faced by the students when writing an academic paper.

Among these, '*Referring and Selecting Sources*' recorded the highest perceived level of difficulty, highlighting that Malaysian ESL pre-university students experienced challenges in identifying, evaluating, and incorporating credible and relevant scholarly sources. Likewise, the difficulties students faced in summarising, paraphrasing, and synthesising information point to notable gaps in their ability to engage critically and independently with academic texts. These are also indeed vital aspects in academic writing, as they can potentially avoid plagiarism and help to write coherent arguments. Additionally, the difficulty in producing coherent paragraphs indicates a need for greater instructional support in organising ideas logically and maintaining cohesion throughout their writing.

## Implications

Considering these findings, it is recommended that tertiary-level language educators provide explicit and sustained instruction in the more complex aspects of academic writing, particularly for novice academic writers. Educators should prioritise the teaching of paraphrasing, summarising, and synthesising techniques through scaffolded and process-based approaches, moving beyond formulaic essay structures. Moreover, higher institutions should consider integrating targeted workshops or instructional modules that focus on academic source evaluation and citation practices to address students' difficulties in sourcing and referencing.

Finally, given that this study focused exclusively on second-semester ESL pre-university students, future research might consider investigating how students' perceptions and academic writing competencies evolve across different semesters or stages of study. Additionally, incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews could provide deeper insights into the cognitive and metacognitive processes that underpin students' writing challenges, thereby enriching the understanding of their academic writing development

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