

Understanding Academic Writing Difficulties in Higher Education: A PRISMA-Guided Systematic Review across Linguistic, Psychological, Pedagogical, and Contextual Dimensions

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.10200335>

Received: 21 February 2026; Accepted: 28 February 2026; Published: 09 March 2026

ABSTRACT

Academic writing is a core competency in higher education, yet students across disciplines and educational contexts continue to experience persistent difficulties that affect academic performance and progression. These difficulties are widely acknowledged as multidimensional, extending beyond surface-level language problems to include psychological, pedagogical, and contextual influences. Despite a growing body of research, existing studies remain fragmented, often addressing these dimensions in isolation rather than through an integrated perspective. To address this gap, this systematic literature review aimed to synthesize empirical evidence on academic writing difficulties in higher education by examining linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, and contextual dimensions in a unified framework. Guided by the PRISMA protocol, a systematic search was conducted using two major academic databases, Scopus and Web of Science. Advanced keyword combinations—*academic writing*, *higher education*, *strategies*, and *difficulties*—were applied to ensure comprehensive coverage. The initial search yielded 861 records, comprising 618 from Scopus and 243 from Web of Science. Following duplicate removal, screening, eligibility assessment, and quality appraisal, 24 primary studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the qualitative synthesis. The findings reveal consistent patterns across contexts: linguistically, students struggle with academic vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, text organization, and genre conventions; psychologically, low self-efficacy, writing anxiety, and fragile academic identity significantly influence engagement with writing tasks; pedagogically, fragmented instruction and limited feedback constrain writing development, while process-oriented and scaffolded approaches show positive outcomes; contextually, disciplinary norms, assessment regimes, linguistic backgrounds, and emerging technological environments shape both expectations and challenges. Overall, the systematic literature review (SLR) demonstrates that academic writing difficulties in higher education are complex and interdependent rather than isolated skill deficits. By integrating evidence across four dimensions, this review contributes a comprehensive understanding that can inform curriculum design, instructional practices, and institutional support systems, while also providing a robust foundation for future research on academic writing development in diverse higher education contexts.

Keywords: academic writing, higher education, writing difficulties. Instructional strategies, systematic literature review.

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a fundamental skill in higher education, yet it presents significant challenges for students across various disciplines. These challenges are multifaceted, encompassing linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, and contextual dimensions. For instance, students often struggle with the rhetorical structure and socio-communicative objectives of academic genres, which are crucial for effective writing (Peralta, 2023). Additionally, the transition from high school to university-level writing can be daunting, particularly for students from non-native English-speaking backgrounds, who face additional linguistic barriers (M. Li, 2024). The

complexity of academic writing is further compounded by the need for logical reasoning, creative thinking, and the ability to synthesize and paraphrase information (Listyani, 2025).

Despite the critical importance of academic writing, many students in higher education continue to experience significant difficulties. These challenges are not limited to linguistic issues but also include psychological factors such as low self-confidence and motivation (Aldayel et al., 2026)⁴. Moreover, the pedagogical approaches currently employed may not adequately address the diverse needs of students, particularly those from varied educational backgrounds (M. Li, 2024). The lack of effective institutional support and the inadequacy of current writing courses to incorporate essential skills like logical and epistemic thinking further exacerbate these difficulties (Vovou, 2023). Consequently, students often find themselves ill-prepared to meet the rigorous demands of academic writing, leading to poor academic performance and increased stress (Le & Nguyen, 2025).

This review aims to explore and understand the various dimensions of academic writing difficulties faced by higher education students. By examining linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, and contextual factors, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the challenges and propose effective strategies to mitigate them. Understanding these dimensions is crucial for developing responsive and inclusive support systems that can enhance students' writing capabilities and overall academic success (Aldayel et al., 2026; Bram & Angelina, 2022; M. Li, 2024; Peralta, 2023; Vovou, 2023). The findings of this study will offer valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and institutions to refine their pedagogical approaches and support mechanisms, ultimately fostering a more conducive learning environment for all students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Two main theories were selected to anchor this SLR. The first theory, the Cognitive Process of Writing, outlines the source of academic writing difficulties. The second theory, Motivation Theory, traces the strategies to encourage academic writers to write.

Cognitive Process of Writing

To understand the difficulties in academic writing, it is necessary to recognize the components that comprise the cognitive process of writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981). With reference to Figure 1 below, four main components make up this theory: (a) the task environment, (b) the writer's long-term memory, (c) the writing process, and the monitor.

The task environment refers to aspects of (i) writing assignment and (ii) external storage of the text produced by the writer. AT the start of the writing task, the writer considers the topic, the audience, and depends on his/her motivating cues. While writing, the writer uses other resources to improve the text produced so far. The writer's difficulty in starting to write often stems from the topic. The writer may not know much (nor like) the topic given. This snowballs into the quality of text produced so far.

The next important concept is the writer's long-term memory. This refers to the writer's background knowledge that influences his/her knowledge of the topic and the audience. In terms of difficulty is

The next factor (and the main component) in this theory is the writing process. This refers to three stages: planning, translating, and reviewing. In terms of writing difficulty, some writers face difficulty at the planning stage and may need help when it comes to organizing and goal-setting. Some writers need help at the translation stage, where they face difficulties converting oral thoughts into written thoughts. Some writers face difficulties at the reviewing stage. The last component is the monitor, and this is the ability to monitor their writing process while they write.

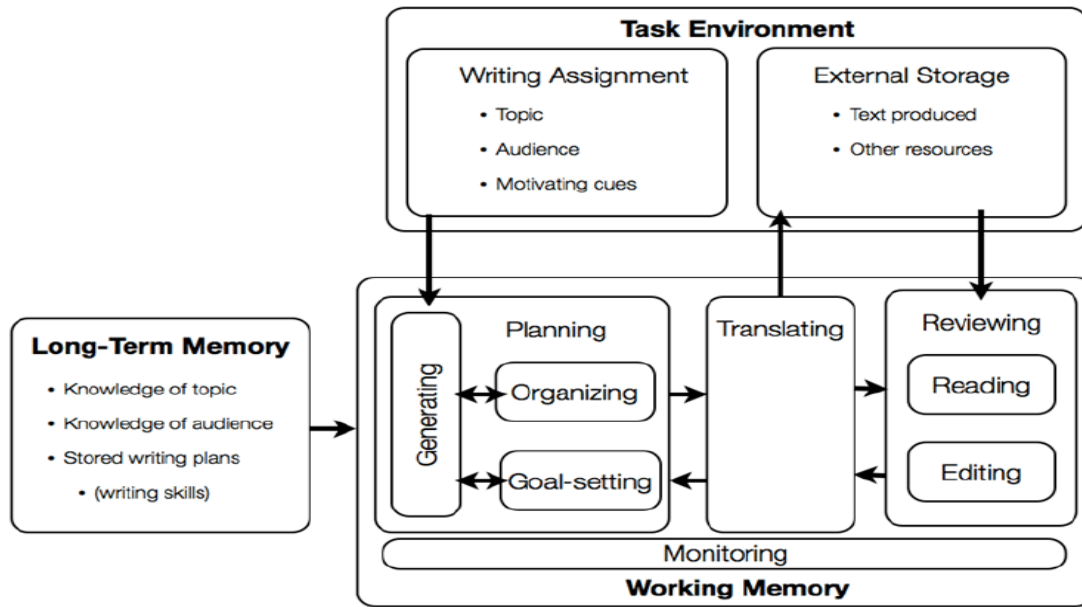


Figure 1- Cognitive Process of Writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981))

Vroom’s Expectancy Theory

(Vroom, 1964) defines motivation as a result of three main factors. The first is expectancy, and this relates to a belief that the effort leads to success in performance. The second factor is instrumentality, which is the belief that better performance will lead to a specific reward. The third factor is valence, and this refers to the value that the individual places on a particular outcome or reward. (Vroom, 1964) also states that the total motivational force to act is calculated as;

Expectancy X Instrumentality X Valence.

In the context of this SLR, perhaps academic writers do not value academic writing, and this lack of expectancy reduces their expectation to succeed in the writing task given. In addition to that, some academic writers fail to see that better performance in their academic writing leads to a specific reward in any way.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of this review. The concepts in this study are anchored by Flower & Hayes (1981) Cognitive process of Writing to explain writing difficulties, and (Vroom, 1964) Expectancy theory to signify the pedagogical and contextual dimensions.

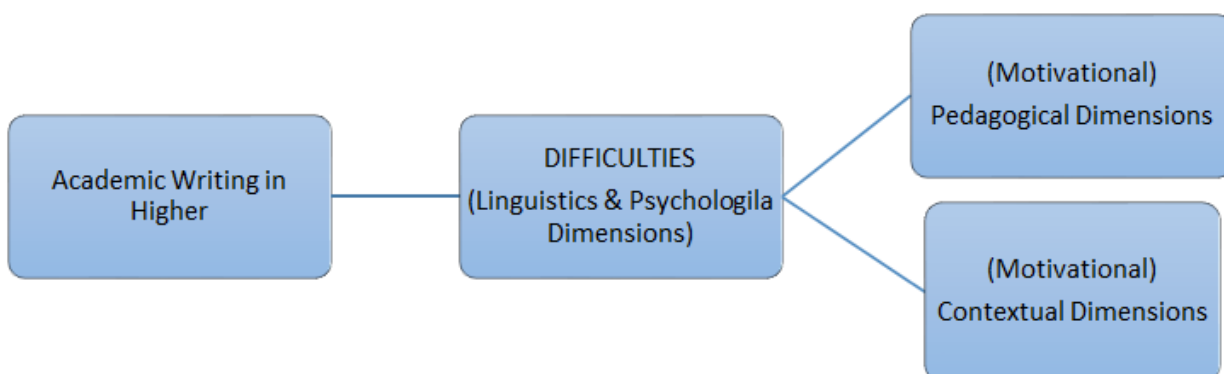


Figure 2- Conceptual Framework

Academic Writing in Higher Education

Difficulties

Linguistic Dimensions

Linguistic challenges are a significant barrier to academic writing proficiency. Students often struggle with grammar, vocabulary, and the formal conventions of academic writing. For instance, Indonesian tertiary students face issues with parts of speech, tenses, spelling, and constructing coherent essays (Bram & Angelina, 2022). Similarly, EFL students in Indonesia report difficulties with academic grammar and vocabulary, which impede their ability to produce precise and coherent texts (Aldayel et al., 2026). These linguistic barriers are compounded for NNES students, who must navigate the complexities of writing in a second language while adhering to academic conventions (M. Li, 2024; Mumin, 2022).

Psychological Dimensions

Psychological factors, such as self-perception, motivation, and confidence, play a crucial role in academic writing. Many students experience feelings of incompetence and low self-confidence, which hinder their writing performance (Aldayel et al., 2026; Vovou, 2023). The transition to university writing can exacerbate these feelings, as students must adapt to new expectations and standards (Mudau et al., 2025). Additionally, psychological challenges like study-related boredom, concentration difficulties, and time management problems further impact students' academic writing abilities (Le & Nguyen, 2025).

Motivational Dimensions

Pedagogical Dimensions

Pedagogical approaches significantly influence students' academic writing development. Effective writing instruction should integrate logical and epistemic thinking tasks to enhance students' core skills (Vovou, 2023). Workshops and courses that focus on the rhetorical structure, socio-communicative objectives, and argumentative writing are essential for helping students understand and meet academic writing standards (Peralta, 2023). Moreover, the use of collective supervision and peer-supported contexts can foster students' epistemic awareness and authorial confidence, aiding their academic writing development (Shakhsi Dastgahian, 2025).

Contextual Dimensions

Contextual factors, including prior educational backgrounds and current learning environments, shape students' academic writing experiences. Students from public schools or those with inadequate high school preparation often face greater difficulties in adapting to university-level writing (Mudau et al., 2025; Teixeira et al., 2023). Institutional support, such as responsive and inclusive support systems, is crucial for addressing these challenges and enhancing students' writing capabilities (M. Li, 2024). Additionally, the integration of digital tools and AI in writing instruction can provide valuable support, although it is essential to emphasize their role as supplementary aids rather than replacements for student effort (Du et al., 2025).

In conclusion, addressing the linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, and contextual dimensions of academic writing difficulties requires a comprehensive and multifaceted approach. By understanding and addressing these challenges, higher education institutions can better support students in developing the necessary skills for academic writing success.

Research Question

Research questions are crucial in a systematic literature review (SLR) because they provide the foundation and direction for the entire review process. They guide the scope and focus of the SLR, helping to determine which studies to include or exclude, ensuring that the review remains relevant

and specific to the topic of interest. A well-defined research question ensures that the literature search is exhaustive and systematic, covering all relevant studies that address key aspects of the topic (Kitchenham, 2007).

The research questions in this SLR are formulated based on the PICO framework. This framework is a mnemonic style used to formulate research questions, particularly in qualitative research, proposed by Lockwood et al. (2015). PICO stands for Population, Interest, and Context.

This study is done to answer the four research questions below;

RQ1-

How do undergraduate and postgraduate students in higher education (Population) experience linguistic and structural difficulties in academic writing (Interest) within English-medium higher education contexts (Context)?

RQ2- How do higher education students, particularly multilingual and international learners (Population), perceive psychological factors such as self-efficacy, anxiety, and confidence in relation to academic writing difficulties (Interest) in university learning environments (Context)?

RQ3- How do students and academic staff in higher education institutions (Population) experience pedagogical practices, instructional strategies, and academic support related to academic writing development (Interest) within formal curricula and writing support settings (Context)?

RQ4- How do students across different disciplines and institutional settings in higher education (Population) encounter context-specific and discipline-related academic writing difficulties (Interest) within diverse cultural, technological, and educational contexts (Context)?

MATERIAL AND METHODS

For conducting systematic literature reviews, the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) approach is a widely accepted standard that guarantees transparency, completeness, and consistency throughout the procedure oleh Page et al., (Page et al., 2021). Researchers can improve the accuracy and rigour of their analysis by adhering to PRISMA guidelines, which provide guidance on how to systematically identify, screen, and include studies in their review. The method also highlights the significance of randomised studies, acknowledging their ability to lessen bias and provide strong evidence for the review. Two important databases, Web of Science and Scopus, were used in this analysis because of their wide coverage and robustness.

The PRISMA approach is organized into four key stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and data abstraction. In the identification phase, databases are searched to locate all relevant studies. The screening phase then involves evaluating these studies against predefined criteria to eliminate irrelevant or low-quality research. During the eligibility phase, the remaining studies are thoroughly assessed to confirm they meet the inclusion criteria. Finally, data abstraction focuses on extracting and synthesizing data from the included studies, which is essential for deriving meaningful and reliable conclusions. This structured method ensures that the systematic review is conducted with rigor, leading to trustworthy results that can guide future research and practice.

Identification

According to the PRISMA framework, the identification stage (refer to Table 1) constitutes the foundational step of the systematic literature review process, as it ensures comprehensive coverage of the existing body of literature while minimizing selection bias. In this study, two major bibliographic databases, Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) were systematically searched using the keywords *academic writing*, *higher education*, *strategies*, and *difficulties*. These databases were selected due to their wide disciplinary coverage, rigorous indexing standards, and strong representation of high-impact, peer-reviewed journals. The search yielded 618 records

from Scopus and 243 records from Web of Science, resulting in a total of 861 records before duplicate removal. The higher number of records retrieved from Scopus reflects its broader journal inclusion and stronger coverage in education, applied linguistics, and social sciences, while WoS contributed a more selective set of highly cited and methodologically robust studies.

Table 1 The search string.

Scopus	<p>("academic writing" OR "scholarly writing" OR "academic composition" OR "academic text") AND ("strategy" OR "strategies" OR "approach*" OR "method*" OR "technique*") AND ("difficulty" OR "difficulties" OR "challenge*" OR "barrier*" OR "obstacle*") AND ("higher education" OR "tertiary education" OR "post-secondary education" OR "university" OR "college")</p> <p>Date of Access: Feb 2026</p>
WoS	<p>("teaching" OR "instruction" OR "education" OR "pedagogy") AND ("academic writing" OR "writing skills" OR "writing competence" OR "writing ability" OR "composition skills") AND ("challenges" OR "barriers" OR "difficulties" OR "obstacles") AND ("artificial intelligence" OR AI OR "machine learning" OR "automated writing") and 2026 or 2025 or 2024 or 2023 or 2022 (Publication Years) and Article (Document Types) and English (Languages)</p> <p>Date of Access: Feb 2026</p>

Screening

Potentially pertinent research items are assessed in the screening step to make sure they support the four presented research questions above. At this point, duplicate documents are eliminated. After 482 publications were initially discarded, 379 papers were left for additional analysis in accordance with particular inclusion and exclusion standards (refer to Table 2).

The literature was the first criterion because it is the primary source of useful advice. This includes book series, book reviews, meta-syntheses, meta-analyses, conference proceedings, and chapters that were not included in the most recent study. Only English-language publications from 2022 to 2024 were included in the review. Due to duplication, 14 publications in total were rejected.

Table 2 The Selection Criterion Is Searching

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English	Non-English
Subject area	Social Sciences Arts and Humanities	Apart from Social Sciences & Arts and Humanities
Time line	2022 – 2026	< 2022
Literature type	Journal (Article)	Conference, Book, Review

Eligibility

In the third step, known as the eligibility phase, 636 articles were prepared for review. During this stage, the titles and key content of all articles were carefully examined to ensure they met the inclusion criteria and aligned with the current research objectives. Consequently, 342 articles were excluded as they did not qualify as due to the out of due to the out of field, title not significant, abstract not related to the objective

of the study, or no full text access to empirical evidence. As a result, a total of 24 articles remain for the upcoming review.

Data Abstraction and Analysis

An integrative analysis was used as one of the assessment strategies in this study to examine and synthesise a variety of research designs (quantitative methods). The goal of the comprehensive study was to identify relevant topics and subtopics. The stage of data collection was the first step in the development of the theme. Figure 2 shows how the authors analysed a compilation of 24 publications for assertions or material relevant to the topics of the current study.

The authors then evaluated the current studies related to academic writing difficulties in higher education. The methodology used in all studies, as well as the research results, is being investigated. Next, the author collaborated with other co-authors to develop themes based on the evidence in this study's context. A log was kept throughout the data analysis process to record any analyses, viewpoints, riddles, or other thoughts relevant to the data interpretation. Finally, the authors compared the results to see if there were any inconsistencies in the theme design process. It is worth noting that, if there are any disagreements between the concepts, the authors discuss them amongst themselves.

Quality of Appraisal

According to the guidelines proposed by Kitchenham and Charters (Kitchenham, 2007), once we have selected primary studies, we have to assess the quality of the research they present and quantitatively compare them. In this study, we apply quality assessment from (Abouzahra et al., 2020), which consists of six QAs for our SLR. The scoring procedure for evaluating each criterion involves three possible ratings: "Yes" (Y) with a score of 1 if the criterion is fully met, "Partly" (P) with a score of 0.5 if the criterion is somewhat met but contains some gaps or shortcomings, and "No" (N) with a score of 0 if the criterion is not met at all.

- QA1. Is the purpose of the study clearly stated?
- QA2. Is the interest and the usefulness of the work clearly presented?
- QA3. Is the study methodology clearly established?
- QA4. Are the concepts of the approach clearly defined?
- QA5. Is the work compared and measured with other similar work?
- QA6. Are the limitations of the work clearly mentioned?

The table outlines a quality assessment (QA) process used to evaluate a study based on specific criteria. Three experts assess the study using the criteria listed, and each criterion is scored as "Yes" (Y), "Partly" (P), or "No" (N). Here's a detailed explanation:

1. Is the purpose of the study clearly stated?

- This criterion checks whether the study's objectives are clearly defined and articulated. A clear purpose helps set the direction and scope of the research.

2. Is the interest and usefulness of the work clearly presented?

- This criterion evaluates whether the study's significance and potential contributions are well-explained. It measures the relevance and impact of the research.

3. Is the study methodology clearly established?

- This assesses whether the research methodology is well-defined and appropriate for achieving the study's objectives. Clarity in methodology is crucial for the study's validity and reproducibility.
4. **Are the concepts of the approach clearly defined?**
 - This criterion looks at whether the theoretical framework and key concepts are clearly articulated. Clear definitions are essential for understanding the study's approach.
 5. **Is the work compared and measured with other similar work?**
 - This evaluates whether the study has been benchmarked against existing research. Comparing with other studies helps position the work within the broader academic context and highlights its contributions.
 6. **Are the limitations of the work clearly mentioned?**

Each expert independently assesses the study according to these criteria, and the scores are then totalled across all experts to determine the overall mark. For a study to be accepted for the next process, the total mark, derived from summing the scores from all three experts, must exceed 3.0. This threshold ensures that only studies meeting a certain quality standard proceed further.

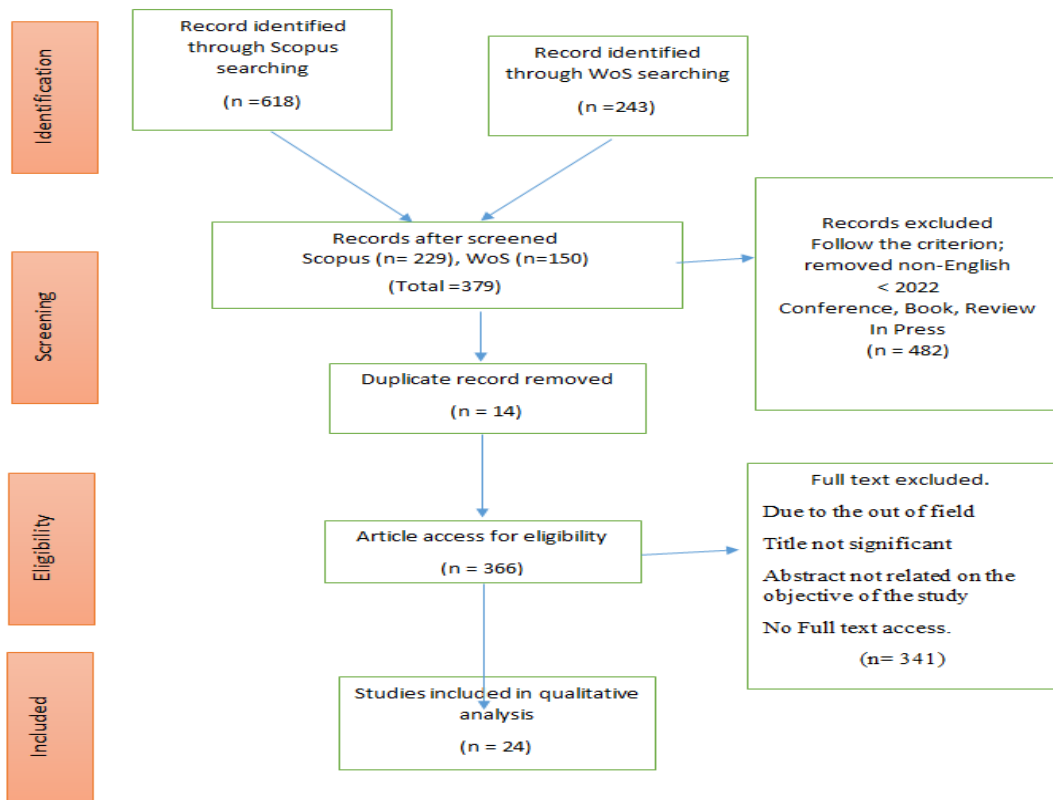


Figure 2. Flow diagram of the proposed searching study (Moher D, Liberati A, Tetzlaff J, 2009)

RESULT AND FINDING

Quality Assessment

Table 3 shows the result of the assessment performance for selected primary studies. The overall quality of the articles is as follows;

- High quality ($\geq 80\%$): Majority of studies
- Moderate quality (60–79%): Conceptual or descriptive studies

- Lower quality (<60%): Primarily survey-only or exploratory abstracts

Table 3- Quality Assessment for the selected 24 papers

Author	Title	PS	QA1	QA2	QA3	QA4	QA5	QA6	Total	%
(Apridayani, 2026)	Thai novice researchers' self-efficacy, writing difficulties, and awareness of academic rigor	PS1	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	P	5.0	83.3
(Aldayel et al., 2026)	Factors affecting academic writing difficulties among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university students	PS2	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	P	5.0	83.3
(Laohasawad & Somphong, 2025)	Writing Problems of Thai Candidates for Academic Writing Tasks in IELTS Standardized Test	PS3	Y	Y	P	P	P	N	4.0	66.7
(Alzahrani, 2020)	Academic Writing Difficulties of EFL Learners at Najran University	PS4	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	N	4.5	75.0
(Osman et al., 2025)	EFL Students' Academic Writing Challenges at the Foundation Programme in the University of Nizwa: Challenges and Remedy	PS5	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	P	5.0	83.3
(Lavado-Puente et al., 2025)	Scientific research: difficulties in writing research projects in students at a university branch in Chanchamayo (Peru); Investigación científica: dificultades en la redacción de proyectos de investigación de estudiantes de una filial universitaria en Chanchamayo (Perú)	PS6	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	4.0	66.7
(Khatami et al., 2025)	Navigating Writing Anxiety: Sources and Coping Strategies of	PS7	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	P	5.0	83.3

	University Students in Bangladesh									
(Gholiagha et al., 2025) Click or tap here to enter text.	From annotation to reflection: how participatory AI training enhances critical thinking	PS8	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	5.5	91.7
(H. Li & Haddon, 2025)	Discipline-specific language challenges faced by Chinese music student-teachers on a UK master's programme	PS9	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	P	5.0	83.3
(Caser et al., 2025)	Structural Errors and Cognitive Challenges in Academic Writing: A Study of First-Year BSEd-English Students in Eastern Pangasinan Using Text Analytics	PS10	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	P	5.0	83.3
(Miller & Hulcup, 2025)	From Theory to Practice: Addressing the Academic Writing Challenges of International Students	PS11	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	P	5.0	83.3
(Mudau et al., 2025)	First-year students' perceptions of factors affecting academic writing	PS12	Y	Y	P	P	N	P	4.0	66.7
(Shamsi & Vanci Osam, 2024)	Scholarly Writing Experiences of Doctoral Students as Nonnative Speakers of English: Encountered Challenges and Needed Support	PS13	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	P	5.0	83.3
(Cañizares & Rossana Ramírez-Ávila, 2023)	Peer Feedback and its impact on university students' writing performance; Retroalimentação entre pares e seu impacto no desempenho de escrita de estudantes universitários	PS14	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	P	5.0	83.3

(Amo Sánchez-Fortún et al., 2024)	Writing in the discipline of education: beliefs of future teachers regarding their academic literacy	PS15	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	P	5.0	83.3
(Bala & Mitchell, 2024)	Thematic exploration of educational research after the COVID pandemic through topic modelling	PS16	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	N	4.5	75.0
(Benton Z & Marwah, 2024)	The Challenges of Writing: The 'Long and Winding Road' of Belonging to Academia	PS17	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	N	4.5	75.0
(Dianastiti et al., 2024)	Contributing Factors and Challenges in Mastering Academic Writing Skills: Multiple Case Studies of Deaf Students in Inclusive Universities in Indonesia	PS18	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	N	4.5	75.0
(Zhang & Hasim, 2023)	Perceptions and Coping Strategies in English Writing Among Chinese Study-Abroad Graduate Students	PS19	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	P	5.0	83.3
(Mahmud & Rahman, 2023)	Academic Writing of Saudi Graduate Students: Issues and Improvements	PS20	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	N	4.5	75.0
(Mustafa et al., 2022)	Difficulties in Academic Writing in English as a Second/Foreign Language from the Perspective of Undergraduate Students in Higher Education Institutions in Oman	PS21	Y	Y	P	P	N	N	3.5	58.3
(Gupta et al., 2022)	Academic Writing Challenges and Supports: Perspectives of International Doctoral Students and Their Supervisors	PS22	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	P	5.0	83.3

(Bram & Angelina, 2022)	Indonesian Tertiary Education Students' Academic Writing Setbacks and Solutions	PS23	Y	Y	P	P	N	N	3.5	58.3
(Jiang et al., 2022)	Chinese ESL Students' Perceptions of Academic Writing in English in Malaysian Universities	PS24	Y	Y	Y	Y	P	P	5.0	83.3

Table 3 summarizes the quality assessment of 24 studies (PS1–PS24) included in the review, evaluated against six predefined criteria (QA1–QA6). Overall, the findings indicate that most studies clearly state their research objectives and relevance (QA1 and QA2), and the majority also provide adequate descriptions of their methodology and key concepts (QA3 and QA4), which explains why many papers achieved relatively high total scores between 4.5 and 5.5 out of 6 (75.0%–91.7%). However, fewer studies fully satisfied QA5 and QA6, as explicit comparisons with prior research and clear discussions of study limitations were often only partially addressed or absent, resulting in several “Partly” or “No” ratings for these criteria. A small number of studies (e.g., PS21 and PS23) received lower overall scores (58.3%) due to limited methodological detail and the absence of comparative analysis and limitation reporting. In general, the assessment demonstrates that the included literature is of moderate to high quality and sufficiently robust for synthesis in this systematic review, while also highlighting common reporting gaps that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Themes

Below is a PRISMA-aligned thematic categorization of the 24 finalized studies (PS1–PS24), based strictly on their titles. To ensure analytical clarity and full coverage, the studies are grouped into four coherent themes commonly used in high-quality Systematic Literature Reviews on academic writing. Each study appears in one theme only, and all data are fully categorized. The themes presented are aimed at answering the four research questions above.

Theme 1: Linguistic, Cognitive, and Structural Challenges in Academic Writing

This theme aims to answer Research Question 1-

How do undergraduate and postgraduate students in higher education (Population) experience linguistic and structural difficulties in academic writing (Interest) within English-medium higher education contexts (Context). This theme explores writing difficulties related to language proficiency, structure, grammar, genre, and cognitive load across EFL/ESL contexts.

Table 5- Articles for Theme 1

PS	Title
PS2	Factors affecting academic writing difficulties among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university students
PS4	Academic Writing Difficulties of EFL Learners at Najran University
PS5	EFL Students' Academic Writing Challenges at the Foundation Programme in the University of Nizwa: Challenges and Remedy
PS10	Structural Errors and Cognitive Challenges in Academic Writing

PS12	First-year students' perceptions of factors affecting academic writing
PS20	Academic Writing of Saudi Graduate Students: Issues and Improvements
PS21	Difficulties in Academic Writing in English as a Second/Foreign Language from the Perspective of Undergraduate Students
PS23	Indonesian Tertiary Education Students' Academic Writing Setbacks and Solutions

The reviewed literature (refer to Table 5) consistently highlights linguistic and structural weaknesses as central obstacles in academic writing across higher education contexts. Several studies report that limited mastery of academic grammar, vocabulary, and text organization restricts learners' ability to construct coherent and formally appropriate texts. Research conducted among EFL university students in Indonesia emphasizes that insufficient control of academic language forms directly affects argument development and evidence integration (Aldayel et al., 2026). Similar patterns are identified among EFL learners in Saudi Arabia, where persistent difficulties in vocabulary use, grammar accuracy, paraphrasing, and referencing are attributed to weak language foundations and limited exposure to writing-focused instruction (Alzahrani, 2020). Structural concerns are further supported by large-scale error analyses, which reveal high frequencies of misformation, omission, and misordering errors, indicating moderate proficiency levels and unstable control of sentence construction (Caser et al., 2025). Across these studies, linguistic limitations are not presented as isolated issues but as interconnected challenges that shape overall text quality. Weak grammatical control often leads to fragmented arguments, while limited vocabulary restricts precision and clarity, reinforcing the conclusion that academic writing competence requires integrated linguistic development rather than surface-level correction alone.

Beyond linguistic form, cognitive demands and educational transitions play a significant role in shaping academic writing performance. Evidence from first-year university contexts demonstrates that students often struggle to adapt to new academic expectations, particularly when prior schooling provides limited preparation for discipline-specific writing conventions (Mudau et al., 2025). These transitional difficulties are closely linked to problems in organizing ideas, synthesizing sources, and maintaining logical progression across sections of academic texts. Comparable findings emerge from research with Saudi graduate students, where challenges are concentrated in presenting complex information clearly, constructing persuasive arguments, and managing research genres such as literature reviews and research reports (Mahmud & Rahman, 2023). Cognitive overload is also reported in foundation and undergraduate programs, where learners attempt to balance content knowledge, language accuracy, and structural organization simultaneously, often resulting in fragmented or simplified texts (Osman et al., 2025). Studies conducted in Oman and Indonesia reinforce this perspective by showing that limited reading comprehension, weak summarizing skills, and inadequate paraphrasing strategies further intensify cognitive strain during writing tasks (Mustafa et al., 2022; Bram & Angelina, 2022). Collectively, these findings suggest that academic writing difficulties emerge from the interaction between linguistic limitations and cognitive processing demands, particularly during early stages of higher education.

Theme 2- Affective, Psychological, and Identity-Related Dimensions of Academic Writing

This theme answers Research Question 2- How do higher education students, particularly multilingual and international learners (Population), perceive psychological factors such as self-efficacy, anxiety, and confidence in relation to academic writing difficulties (Interest) in university learning environments (Context)? Theme 2 presents the emotional and psychological factors influencing academic writing, including self-efficacy, anxiety, coping strategies, motivation, and sense of belonging.

Table 6- Articles for Theme 2

PS	Title
PS1	Thai novice researchers' self-efficacy, writing difficulties, and awareness of academic rigor

PS7	Navigating Writing Anxiety: Sources and Coping Strategies of University Students in Bangladesh
PS17	The Challenges of Writing: The ‘Long and Winding Road’ of Belonging to Academia
PS19	Perceptions and Coping Strategies in English Writing Among Chinese Study-Abroad Graduate Students

Table 6 presents the list of articles for theme 2. Academic writing in higher education is strongly influenced by affective and psychological factors that shape how students perceive their abilities and engage with complex writing tasks. Evidence from Thai undergraduate contexts shows that self-efficacy plays a central role in determining students’ confidence and persistence during research writing, particularly in cognitively demanding sections such as literature reviews and methodological justification (Apridayani, 2026). Although relatively high confidence is reported in technical tasks such as database searching and research question formulation, uncertainty increases when students are required to synthesize sources, apply critical analysis, and maintain academic rigor. Similar affective patterns are observed among Chinese graduate students studying in English-medium instruction environments, where limited prior exposure to English academic writing contributes to reduced confidence and heightened apprehension when identifying research gaps or using disciplinary terminology (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). These findings suggest that self-efficacy in academic writing is uneven and task-specific rather than general, with students often demonstrating confidence in procedural components while doubting higher-order writing skills. Writing anxiety further intensifies these challenges, as demonstrated in Bangladeshi EFL settings where fear of negative evaluation, linguistic insecurity, and low self-belief are identified as recurring sources of stress during writing activities (Khatami et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies highlight that affective dimensions are deeply embedded in academic writing practices and significantly shape students’ engagement, performance, and perceptions of competence across diverse higher education contexts.

Beyond individual confidence and anxiety, academic writing is closely connected to identity construction and students’ sense of belonging within academic communities. Research focusing on international and multilingual students emphasizes that writing is not only a technical skill but also a symbolic practice through which scholarly identity is negotiated (Benton Z & Marwah, 2024). Experiences of marginalization often arise when students perceive dominant academic writing norms as homogenizing and misaligned with their linguistic or cultural backgrounds, leading to feelings of exclusion and self-doubt. Such identity-related tensions are echoed in studies of Chinese study-abroad graduate students, where adaptation to English academic conventions is shaped by both emotional resilience and access to social support from peers, instructors, and institutional resources (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). Coping strategies documented across contexts reveal that students actively regulate affective challenges through planning, motivational reframing, emotional self-management, and sustained practice, rather than relying solely on linguistic improvement (Khatami et al., 2025). In Thai higher education, previous academic experiences are shown to influence how novice researchers interpret their writing struggles, with repeated exposure to research tasks gradually strengthening self-efficacy and awareness of academic expectations (Apridayani, 2026). These findings collectively indicate that affective and identity-related dimensions of academic writing are dynamic and socially situated, shaped by institutional cultures, assessment practices, and interpersonal interactions. Academic writing development therefore depends not only on skill acquisition but also on creating supportive environments that validate diverse identities and reduce anxiety associated with academic gatekeeping.

Taken together, the reviewed studies demonstrate that affective, psychological, and identity-related dimensions are integral to understanding academic writing difficulties in higher education, particularly in multilingual and international contexts. Low self-efficacy, writing anxiety, and fragile academic identity consistently emerge as interconnected factors that constrain students’ ability to engage confidently with complex writing tasks (Apridayani, 2026; Khatami et al., 2025; Benton Z & Marwah, 2024; Zhang & Hasim, 2023). While linguistic competence remains important, these studies collectively suggest that emotional regulation, confidence building, and a sense of belonging are equally critical for successful academic writing. Pedagogical implications across contexts point toward the need for supportive feedback practices, opportunities for guided practice, and instructional approaches that explicitly address emotional and identity-related challenges alongside technical

writing skills. Such an orientation recognizes academic writing as a holistic process shaped by cognitive demands, emotional experiences, and social positioning within academia.

Theme 3-Pedagogical Approaches, Interventions, and Academic Support

This theme answers Research Question 3- How do students and academic staff in higher education institutions (Population) experience pedagogical practices, instructional strategies, and academic support related to academic writing development (Interest) within formal curricula and writing support settings (Context)? This third theme discusses teaching strategies, feedback practices, curriculum design, institutional support, and interventions aimed at improving academic writing.

Table 7- Articles for Theme 3

PS	Title
PS11	From Theory to Practice: Addressing the Academic Writing Challenges of International Students
PS14	Peer Feedback and its Impact on University Students' Writing Performance
PS22	Academic Writing Challenges and Supports: Perspectives of International Doctoral Students and Their Supervisors
PS24	Chinese ESL Students' Perceptions of Academic Writing in English in Malaysian Universities
PS6	Scientific research: difficulties in writing research projects in university students

With reference to Table 7 above, theme 7 is discussed. Pedagogical approaches and institutional interventions play a decisive role in shaping how academic writing difficulties are addressed in higher education, particularly for undergraduate and postgraduate students navigating research-based writing. Evidence from Latin American contexts indicates that many students experience moderate but persistent difficulties in writing research projects, especially when formulating problem statements, developing theoretical frameworks, and designing methodologies (Lavado-Puente et al., 2025). These challenges are not limited to linguistic ability but reflect gaps in formal research training within academic programs. The findings emphasize that disciplinary differences matter, as students in law-related fields face greater conceptual and structural challenges than peers in other disciplines. In response, structured curricular interventions are proposed, including the integration of research-oriented courses across semesters and the provision of extracurricular academic writing workshops. Similar concerns are echoed in international higher education contexts, where limited exposure to explicit academic writing instruction places students at a disadvantage, particularly in research-intensive tasks (Gupta et al., 2022). Across these studies, pedagogical support is framed as a systemic responsibility rather than a remedial measure, highlighting the importance of embedding writing instruction within disciplinary curricula to promote sustained skill development rather than isolated short-term improvement.

Instructional strategies grounded in process-oriented and collaborative learning approaches are consistently reported as effective in improving students' academic writing performance and confidence. A detailed case study conducted in an Australian university demonstrates that the process-genre approach supports international students by helping them understand writing as a staged and purposeful activity rather than a one-time product (Miller & Hulcup, 2025). Through guided practice in planning, drafting, and revising literature reviews, students develop a stronger awareness of audience, genre conventions, and metacognitive strategies. These outcomes are reinforced by evidence from peer-feedback interventions in Ecuador, where structured peer review over an extended period leads to measurable gains in writing structure, fluency, and accuracy (Cañizares & Rossana Ramírez-Ávila, 2023). Although students report challenges in providing constructive feedback, the process enhances awareness of common writing errors and promotes reflective learning. Complementary findings from Malaysian universities show that Chinese ESL students benefit from a combination of instructor-led guidance and peer support, particularly when additional learning materials and handouts are provided to scaffold writing tasks (Jiang et al., 2022). Collectively, these studies suggest that pedagogical effectiveness in academic writing

instruction is strengthened when teaching approaches emphasize process, interaction, and reflection rather than solely focusing on final written products.

At the postgraduate level, academic support structures become increasingly critical as writing demands shift toward advanced research genres and scholarly publication. Research involving international doctoral students and supervisors in Canada reveals that insufficient formal training in academic writing places significant strain on both students and faculty, particularly for learners using English as an additional language (Gupta et al., 2022). The findings highlight a shared perception that discipline-specific writing instruction should be introduced early in doctoral programs, supported by collaboration between subject specialists and language experts. This aligns with undergraduate-focused studies that advocate for continuous institutional support, including feedback-rich environments and access to targeted resources, to sustain writing development over time (Lavado-Puente et al., 2025; Jiang et al., 2022). Across contexts, effective academic support is characterized by alignment between pedagogical strategies, curriculum design, and students' disciplinary needs. Rather than treating writing difficulties as individual deficits, the reviewed literature positions academic writing development as a socially and institutionally mediated process that requires coordinated instructional planning. By integrating structured teaching approaches, collaborative learning practices, and formal support mechanisms, higher education institutions can more effectively address academic writing challenges and enhance students' capacity to engage in scholarly communication.

Theme 4-Context-Specific, Discipline-Specific, and Emerging Perspectives

This theme corresponds to Research Question 4- How do students across different disciplines and institutional settings in higher education (Population) encounter context-specific and discipline-related academic writing difficulties (Interest) within diverse cultural, technological, and educational contexts (Context)? Theme 4 discusses academic writing challenges shaped by specific contexts (tests, disciplines, learner groups, technology, or global events).

Table 8- Articles for Theme 4

PS	Title
PS3	Writing Problems of Thai Candidates for Academic Writing Tasks in IELTS Standardized Test
PS8	From annotation to reflection: how participatory AI training enhances critical thinking
PS9	Discipline-specific language challenges faced by Chinese music student-teachers
PS13	Scholarly Writing Experiences of Doctoral Students as Nonnative Speakers of English
PS15	Writing in the discipline of education: beliefs of future teachers regarding their academic literacy
PS16	Thematic exploration of educational research after the COVID pandemic
PS18	Contributing Factors and Challenges in Mastering Academic Writing Skills of Deaf Students

Table 8 presents the list of articles in theme 4. Academic writing in higher education is increasingly shaped by context-specific demands that arise from assessment systems, disciplinary conventions, and institutional expectations. Research focusing on standardized testing contexts illustrates how writing difficulties are closely tied to the situational pressures imposed by high-stakes assessments. An examination of Thai candidates undertaking the IELTS Academic Writing module shows that persistent challenges in time management, grammatical accuracy, organization, and logical coherence continue to limit writing performance, despite repeated exposure to test preparation practices (Laohasawad & Somphong, 2025). These findings indicate that test-oriented writing requires not only linguistic competence but also strategic awareness of task requirements and genre expectations. Similar context-sensitive challenges are evident in English-medium instruction environments, where doctoral students face difficulties that extend beyond language accuracy to include genre

conventions, publication norms, and journal expectations (Shamsi & Vanci Osam, 2024). In such settings, academic writing is strongly shaped by institutional policies, particularly where scholarly publication is a graduation requirement. Students operating within these environments often encounter fragmented support structures, leading to uneven development of writing competence. At a broader level, post-pandemic analyses of educational research reveal an increased focus on adaptive strategies, digital learning, and evolving academic practices, suggesting that academic writing contexts are becoming more complex and multidimensional (Bala & Mitchell, 2024). Together, these studies demonstrate that academic writing difficulties cannot be fully understood without considering the specific institutional, assessment-related, and temporal contexts in which writing is produced.

Disciplinary specificity further intensifies academic writing challenges, as conventions, genres, and linguistic expectations vary considerably across fields of study. Research involving Chinese music student-teachers enrolled in a UK master's program highlights how discipline-specific terminology and writing norms pose substantial barriers to participation in both theoretical coursework and practical teaching contexts (Li & Haddon, 2025). In this case, limited proficiency in academic writing and subject-specific language affects not only written assignments but also professional identity formation as future educators. Comparable patterns are identified in education-focused degree programs, where future teachers recognize the importance of academic literacy but perceive a disconnect between disciplinary writing demands and the training provided within university curricula (Amo Sánchez-Fortún et al., 2024). These students identify reflective and research-oriented genres as central to professional development, yet report insufficient opportunities to practice such forms systematically. At the doctoral level, disciplinary differences are also evident, as nonnative English-speaking doctoral candidates struggle with genre-specific writing tasks such as journal articles and dissertations, often without structured guidance tailored to disciplinary expectations (Shamsi & Vanci Osam, 2024). Across these studies, academic writing emerges as a socially situated practice embedded within disciplinary cultures, rather than a transferable skill that can be addressed through generic instruction alone. The findings collectively underscore the need for discipline-sensitive pedagogical frameworks that acknowledge variation in writing practices across academic fields.

Emerging perspectives on academic writing further emphasize the importance of inclusivity and innovation in addressing diverse learner needs. Studies conducted in inclusive Indonesian universities reveal that deaf students face compounded challenges in academic writing due to limited access to learning resources, communication barriers during instruction, and structural differences between sign language and written academic discourse (Dianastiti et al., 2024). These constraints affect core writing skills such as sentence construction, paragraph development, paraphrasing, and referencing, highlighting the necessity of accessible materials and multimodal pedagogical support. Technological innovation also features prominently in emerging approaches to academic writing development. Participatory artificial intelligence training initiatives demonstrate that involving students in annotation and reflective practices can enhance critical engagement with academic texts, encouraging deeper awareness of argumentation, assumptions, and disciplinary values (Gholiagha et al., 2025). Rather than diminishing critical thinking, such approaches position technology as a mediating tool that supports reflective learning within specific disciplinary contexts. Insights from large-scale topic modelling of post-COVID educational research further confirm a growing emphasis on technology-enhanced learning, interdisciplinary practices, and socially responsive pedagogy in higher education (Bala & Mitchell, 2024). When considered together, these studies suggest that context-specific, discipline-specific, and emerging perspectives on academic writing converge on a central principle: effective academic writing development requires adaptive, inclusive, and contextually grounded support. Writing challenges are shaped by assessment regimes, disciplinary norms, learner identities, and technological change, indicating that future research and practice must move beyond one-size-fits-all solutions toward nuanced, context-aware approaches.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review set out to examine and synthesize existing research on *academic writing difficulties in higher education* through four interrelated dimensions: linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, and contextual. The review was designed to address fragmentation in prior studies by integrating evidence published within a defined timeframe and retrieved from high-impact databases using explicit inclusion and exclusion

criteria. The guiding research questions focused on identifying the nature of academic writing difficulties experienced by students in higher education, the underlying factors contributing to these difficulties, the pedagogical responses proposed in the literature, and the influence of disciplinary and contextual variations. By systematically analysing and organizing the selected studies, the review responds to gaps in current knowledge by offering a coherent, multidimensional understanding of academic writing difficulties rather than treating them as isolated linguistic or instructional problems. This integrative focus strengthens the explanatory power of the review and highlights the broader significance of academic writing as a complex academic practice shaped by multiple interacting factors.

The synthesis of findings reveals several consistent patterns across the reviewed literature. Linguistic and cognitive challenges remain central, particularly in relation to academic vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, coherence, argument development, and genre awareness, with these difficulties often intensifying at transitional stages of higher education. Psychological factors such as low self-efficacy, writing anxiety, fear of evaluation, and fragile academic identity were repeatedly identified as influencing students' engagement with writing tasks and their ability to meet academic expectations. Pedagogically, the literature points to a growing recognition of the value of process-oriented, genre-based, and scaffolded instructional approaches, alongside feedback-rich and collaborative learning practices, in supporting writing development. Contextual influences further complicate academic writing practices, as disciplinary conventions, assessment regimes, institutional cultures, linguistic backgrounds, inclusive education settings, and emerging digital and technological environments shape both expectations and student experiences. Together, these findings demonstrate that academic writing difficulties are not solely skill-based deficits but reflect the interaction of linguistic demands, emotional experiences, instructional design, and contextual constraints. The review contributes to the field by synthesizing these strands into a unified analytical structure, offering a comprehensive perspective that extends beyond prior single-dimension studies.

The implications of this review are relevant for educational practice, policy, and future research. At the practical level, the findings underscore the need for higher education institutions to adopt integrated and sustained approaches to academic writing development that address linguistic proficiency, psychological support, pedagogical design, and contextual sensitivity simultaneously. Curriculum developers and educators may benefit from embedding discipline-specific writing instruction, formative feedback mechanisms, and supportive learning environments within mainstream programs rather than relying on remedial or optional interventions. At the same time, several limitations must be acknowledged. The review was restricted to studies indexed in selected databases, published in English, and available within a specific timeframe, which may limit the inclusion of relevant research from other sources or linguistic contexts. Future research is encouraged to explore underrepresented regions, disciplines, and learner groups, as well as longitudinal and mixed-methods designs that capture the dynamic nature of academic writing development. In conclusion, this review highlights the importance of systematic and evidence-based synthesis in advancing understanding of academic writing in higher education. By integrating diverse perspectives into a coherent framework, systematic reviews play a crucial role in informing theory, guiding pedagogical innovation, and shaping future empirical inquiry in this increasingly important field.

Funding Statement

This work was supported by funding by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia under the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study

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