

Student Challenges with Writing in the Age of AI: A Case Study of Indonesian Communications Undergraduates

Anggit Mulianing Pambudi¹, Felicia Dewi Harjono², Alan Robert White^{3*}

¹ University of International Cement Indonesia,

² University of Pakuan,

³ Rajamangala University of Technology Krungthep

* Corresponding author. E-mail address: alan.w@mail.rmutk.ac.th

Received: July 2026; Revised: August 2026; Accepted: August 2026

Abstract

This study examines academic writing difficulties experienced by nine Indonesian undergraduate students enrolled in an international programme in Thailand. Through in-depth interviews, the research identifies recurring issues in grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and the organisation of ideas. Psychological aspects such as anxiety, fear of error, and low confidence further affect the students' ability to write clearly in English. These findings are considered alongside existing literature, which reports similar patterns among Indonesian EFL learners in both domestic and international contexts. Although AI-based writing tools offer limited support and can reduce anxiety, these technologies do not resolve deeper concerns related to coherence, argumentation, and personal expression. The study proposes that academic writing instruction should take a more comprehensive and pedagogically informed approach. This includes attention to technical skills, emotional support, cultural awareness, and the considered use of AI. Such a model supports the development of both competence and confidence in English academic writing among Indonesian

Keywords: English academic writing, Indonesian students, AI in education, writing challenges, second language writing, ChatGPT, Grammarly, linguistic competence, higher education, academic integrity

Introduction

In today's global academic context, proficiency in English writing is increasingly important for university students, particularly in non-native English-speaking countries such as Indonesia. Academic writing in English involves more than grammatical accuracy. It also requires structured argumentation, critical thinking, and familiarity with scholarly conventions. For many Indonesian undergraduate students, acquiring these skills is difficult. Writing effectively in English is not only a linguistic task. It also involves cognitive, cultural, and educational elements that are often overlooked in curriculum planning. This is especially the case for students in fields such as Communications, where clarity, coherence, and persuasive writing are expected.

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, including ChatGPT, Grammarly, and QuillBot, has added complexity to the writing process. These tools are often promoted as solutions to language-related problems. They are designed to assist with grammar correction, idea generation, and paraphrasing. These tools can provide support, particularly for surface-

level issues. However, they may also lead to unintended effects. Some students may depend on these tools to avoid the more demanding work of learning how to express ideas clearly in academic English. In certain cases, the use of AI may hide a student's actual writing ability, causing instructors to misjudge proficiency or overlook areas needing attention.

This study examines the English writing problems faced by nine undergraduate students studying Communications at a university in Indonesia, within the context of AI-integrated learning environments. The research does not focus on student attitudes towards AI. Instead, it aims to identify the causes of writing problems and how these may be influenced, concealed, or made worse by the use of AI tools. The study focuses on linguistic elements such as grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, structural elements such as coherence, cohesion, and organisation, and cognitive demands such as critical thinking and idea development. It also considers the need for pedagogical strategies that support the development of independent academic writing skills, even in contexts where technological tools are widely available.

Literature Review

Teaching English writing is a complex task that involves encouraging both linguistic and communicative competence. For EFL teachers, particularly in Indonesia, this task presents a range of issues. A study involving 10 English teachers from various regions of East Java sought to identify these problems and explore potential solutions. The participants, who taught in both public and private junior and senior high schools, were interviewed using a structured format, and the data were analyzed descriptively. The findings revealed that teachers face both internal and external challenges. Internal factors include students' limited linguistic competence, interference from the native language, low motivation, and poor reading habits. External factors relate to classroom conditions, limited teaching resources, and time constraints. These issues collectively hinder the effective teaching of writing. Understanding these challenges is essential for improving English language teaching (ELT). The study highlights the need for targeted support for teachers and more effective institutional strategies to enhance writing instruction in Indonesian schools (Hidayati, 2018).

Academic writing remains a significant concern for Indonesian students writing in English as a foreign language. Asnas (2022) found that students at the University of Islam Malang often experienced problems in grammar, vocabulary, idea development, and structure. Most students reported issues across all areas of writing. Many adopted strategies such as brainstorming, reading academic texts, using dictionaries and online tools, and revising their own work. Mardalis and Pratolo (2023), in a study of third-year English Department students at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, noted limited vocabulary and insufficient writing practice. Although digital tools and AI applications are widely available, basic writing skills remained weak, and students often relied on additional strategies to manage their work.

A study conducted at IAIN Samarinda investigated Indonesian EFL students' writing ability, the problems they face, and the underlying causes, with a focus on comparison and contrast essays. Using a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, the research involved 52 students enrolled in an academic essay writing course. Data were collected through an essay writing test, open-ended questionnaires, and interviews. The results showed that students' overall writing ability was considered good, with an average score of 77.83. Nevertheless, many students experienced difficulties in key writing components such as content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. These problems stemmed from both linguistic and affective factors. Students cited limited knowledge of essay structure and comparison-contrast writing, as well as personal challenges including lack of writing

practice, low motivation, writing anxiety, and negative attitudes toward writing. External factors such as limited time during writing tasks and inadequate instruction were also identified. The study emphasizes the need for a more integrated approach to writing instruction that involves both students and lecturers in addressing these challenges. Improving the teaching of writing processes may help alleviate common problems and support the development of stronger academic writing skills among EFL learners (Toba & Noor, 2019).

These problems are also present among Indonesian students pursuing postgraduate study abroad. Ningrum et al. (2023) found that in countries such as Australia, the UK, and the Netherlands, students often had difficulty with paraphrasing, coherence, cohesion, and expressing an academic voice. These problems were linked to limited training in academic writing, restricted vocabulary, and unfamiliarity with academic writing norms. Cultural factors also shaped how students approached writing. The findings suggest that the issue involves both language and sociocultural factors.

Understanding the writing process and the problems faced by EFL learners is essential for improving writing instruction. One study focused on undergraduate students in an international class, aiming to explore their English writing process, identify common writing problems, and determine both inhibiting and motivating factors. The study involved six female students and employed a descriptive qualitative approach using student writing samples, open-ended questionnaires, and interviews. The findings revealed that all participants followed a four-stage writing process: planning, drafting, editing, and revising. Major writing difficulties included issues with content development, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. Inhibiting factors were identified as low confidence, limited grammar and vocabulary knowledge, and insufficient writing practice. Conversely, motivation to write was driven by academic expectations, exposure to English media (such as movies, books, and music), and personal goals like obtaining scholarships abroad. These insights highlight the importance of addressing both linguistic competence and affective factors in supporting EFL students' writing development (Muamaroh, Mukti, & Haryanti, 2020).

Writing anxiety is a common issue among EFL students, often affecting their performance and confidence. A study involving 38 Indonesian undergraduate students in an Essay Writing course at a university in Semarang, Central Java, investigated the level of English writing anxiety and its causes. The course used portfolio-based assessment, and data were collected through two questionnaires—one measuring writing anxiety and the other identifying writing-related problems. Results showed that students experienced a high level of writing anxiety, with cognitive anxiety being the most dominant. Neither gender nor perceptions of writing difficulty significantly influenced anxiety levels. Grammar was identified as the main cause of anxiety, followed by vocabulary issues and limited writing practice. The study suggests that to reduce anxiety, instructors should focus on strengthening students' grammar and vocabulary skills and provide more opportunities for writing practice (Hartono & Maharani, 2020, March).

The integration of electronic devices equipped with artificial intelligence (AI) has increasingly transformed teaching and learning processes in higher education. AI applications have been recognized for their potential to enhance instructional delivery by supporting personalized learning, automating feedback, and improving student engagement. In the context of English language instruction, particularly writing, the use of AI in both reading activities and feedback provision has gained attention. AI-assisted reading can support learners in building vocabulary and comprehension—skills that are foundational to effective writing. Similarly, AI-generated feedback offers timely, detailed, and individualized responses to student work, which can positively impact writing development.

A recent study conducted in higher education institutions in Makassar City examined the influence of AI integration on students' writing skills. The study focused on two independent variables: the use of AI in reading instruction and the use of AI in providing feedback. Students' attitudes toward AI-assisted instruction were considered an intervening variable. Data were collected through a questionnaire administered to 100 students, of which 83 valid responses were analyzed using path analysis. The findings indicated that teaching reading with AI applications had no direct effect on students' writing skills but had an indirect effect mediated by students' attitudes. In contrast, lecturer feedback delivered through AI demonstrated both direct and indirect effects on writing performance. Overall, the combined influence of AI-assisted reading and feedback, mediated by student attitude, accounted for 34.8% of the improvement in students' writing skills. These results highlight the importance of student perception in determining the effectiveness of AI tools in the classroom and underscore the potential of AI applications to support writing instruction when implemented thoughtfully (Kaharuddin, 2021).

The use of AI tools such as Grammarly, QuillBot, and ChatGPT has introduced new forms of support in the writing process. Several studies have examined these tools in the Indonesian context. Utami and Winarni (2023), in a mixed-methods study in three Central Java high schools, reported that students found AI tools helpful during the planning and drafting stages. Students valued the flexibility and accessibility of these tools and noted increased engagement. However, the tools did not improve overall writing performance across academic measures. Limitations included weak support for Indonesian texts and low student competence in using the tools effectively.

Herda et al. (2024), in a study involving students in Indonesia and the Philippines, found generally positive attitudes towards ChatGPT. Students reported improved confidence, less anxiety, and greater clarity in their writing. The study did not assess whether such perceptions matched actual writing performance. Although interest in AI was strong, many students still showed weak underlying skills. The literature suggests that AI tools support surface-level aspects of writing, such as grammar and initial idea formation. However, deeper aspects such as argumentation, coherence, and originality remain unresolved. Utami and Winarni (2023) recommend that AI tools be modified to better support language structures, including diction and sentence construction. They also propose improving student competence in using these tools. In addition, the use of AI in writing classes should be paired with instruction in academic ethics and reasoning. Mardalis and Pratolo (2023) observed that students often used digital tools reactively, mainly to cover gaps rather than to develop skill. Effective instruction should treat AI tools as support rather than replacement. Instruction should focus on authentic writing practice and consistent feedback.

Writing remains a major issue for Indonesian EFL students and teachers, despite growing access to digital and AI-based tools. Multiple studies have identified persistent problems in grammar, vocabulary, organization, and content development across different educational levels. Teachers face both internal and external challenges in teaching writing, such as limited student competence, poor reading habits, classroom constraints, and time limitations. These barriers impact the effectiveness of writing instruction and require targeted institutional support and teacher development.

Students themselves report various writing difficulties rooted in both linguistic gaps and personal factors like low confidence, writing anxiety, and a lack of motivation. Even among those studying in international or postgraduate programs, academic writing issues such as paraphrasing, cohesion, and academic tone remain significant. While AI tools like Grammarly, QuillBot, and ChatGPT are perceived as helpful, particularly for reducing anxiety and improving surface-level language accuracy, they do not fully address deeper aspects of writing such as critical thinking, coherence, and originality.

Overall, the literature emphasizes the importance of improving foundational writing instruction, enhancing student motivation, and using AI as a complement rather than a substitute. A balanced approach that combines explicit teaching, student-centered strategies, and responsible use of AI is necessary to improve writing skills in the EFL context. The reviewed studies present a complex view of academic writing in Indonesia. Although students now have wider access to AI tools, basic writing problems remain, often linked to vocabulary, limited practice, and unfamiliarity with academic writing. AI may assist with writing development, but only when used with care and clear educational purpose. Further research should examine how AI can be adapted to local needs and how it can support meaningful improvements in academic writing.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore Indonesian undergraduate students' experiences and perceptions of academic writing in an AI-enhanced learning environment. Nine students enrolled in a Communications degree program at an Indonesian university participated while undertaking an exchange program at a public university in Bangkok, Thailand. Participants were purposively selected based on their self-reported engagement with AI tools in academic writing tasks, ensuring relevance to the research focus.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, which provided the flexibility to explore participants' individual experiences in depth while allowing for consistent coverage of key topics. The interview protocol included questions about their use of AI writing tools, perceived benefits and problems, writing difficulties, and attitudes toward writing in general.

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and insights related to the integration of AI in writing, writing skill challenges, and emotional and cognitive factors affecting writing performance. The qualitative approach was appropriate for capturing the complex and nuanced perspectives of students as they navigate the intersection of traditional writing skills and emerging technological tools.

Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent from all participants, assuring confidentiality, and allowing withdrawal at any stage. This methodological approach enabled a detailed understanding of the participants' writing experiences within a technologically evolving academic context.

Results and Discussion

In the rapidly evolving digital era, artificial intelligence (AI) has become an integral part of modern education, transforming the way students access, process, and produce information. Although AI-powered tools such as grammar checkers, content generators, and translation applications offer considerable support in academic tasks, they also raise questions about the future of foundational skills, particularly writing. To explore this issue, interviews were conducted with nine Indonesian undergraduate students currently studying in Thailand. These students shared their experiences and perceptions of writing in an AI-enhanced learning environment.

The interviews revealed a shared recognition of the growing reliance on AI tools in academic writing, yet students consistently emphasized the continued importance of developing strong writing skills. Many expressed concern that excessive dependence on AI may negatively affect their ability to think critically, articulate original ideas, and

communicate effectively without digital assistance. Students noted that university assessments, research projects, and job-related communication still require a solid command of grammar, organization, and academic tone.

Furthermore, the students highlighted that strong writing skills remain essential for credibility, academic integrity, and long-term professional success. Their reflections underline a growing awareness that in the age of intelligent machines, the ability to write clearly, thoughtfully, and authentically remains a vital asset for any learner seeking to succeed in both academic and real-world contexts.

In regard to English writing issues, the data revealed a consistent set of problems. All participants mentioned grammar as a major concern. Students reported difficulty with verb tenses, prepositions, articles, and subject–verb agreement. These elements, often different from those in their first language, caused uncertainty and hesitation. Several students explained that, even when their ideas were clear, fear of grammatical mistakes reduced their confidence.

Vocabulary was another common issue. Many students stated that a limited word bank led to repetition and restricted expression. Although some understood advanced vocabulary, they lacked confidence in using it in the correct context. This uncertainty made their writing sound basic or unnatural and discouraged experimentation with language.

Students also noted difficulty in organising ideas and structuring essays. Several participants found it hard to write coherent and logically connected paragraphs. Transitions were often missing, and introductions or conclusions were weak. Some said that translating directly from Indonesian caused awkward sentence structures in English.

Emotional and psychological factors further affected writing performance. Some students described anxiety linked to perfectionism and fear of judgment. This often led to hesitation or "perfection paralysis", where students spent too much time revising language and lost fluency. One participant described feeling like a less expressive version of herself when writing in English, which made the process feel artificial and uncomfortable.

Technical concerns such as spelling and punctuation added to the difficulty. Irregular spelling patterns, silent letters, and homophones caused confusion. Others admitted to neglecting punctuation, especially under time pressure or when focusing on grammar and vocabulary.

Some students expressed dissatisfaction with writing instruction. They criticised teaching methods that focused only on correctness, with little attention to creativity or guidance. One participant said that knowing grammar rules was not enough. A more involved and supportive approach was needed.

All participants expressed motivation to improve. They engaged in activities such as reading English texts, keeping journals, using grammar tools, and asking for feedback. Each believed that with consistent effort, progress was possible. This attitude reflected a strong commitment to becoming more effective and confident writers for academic, personal, and professional reasons.

The interview data align with previous research on academic writing among Indonesian EFL learners. The same issues appear in existing literature, including grammar, vocabulary, structure, and confidence. These are shaped not only by language but also by cultural, educational, and psychological factors.

As reported by Asnas (2022), grammar and vocabulary were the most persistent problems. Participants referred to English tenses, prepositions, and articles, echoing patterns found in earlier studies. As Mardalis and Pratolo (2023) noted, limited vocabulary often caused repetitive or basic writing. This made it difficult to express complex ideas and reduced confidence. Several students avoided advanced words due to fear of misuse, which further limited language development.

Ningrum et al. (2023) observed that Indonesian students, even in immersive English environments, often failed to meet academic writing expectations. Although the students in this study were based in Thailand rather than native English-speaking countries, many still felt disconnected from academic writing norms. One participant said that writing in English felt like using someone else's voice. This reflected the idea that writing problems are shaped by both language and cultural experience. There was a clear tension between accurate writing and authentic self-expression.

Anxiety and emotional concerns were also consistent with earlier research. Participant 7 described "perfection paralysis", where fear of error delayed writing. Herda et al. (2024) found that AI tools such as ChatGPT could reduce anxiety and raise confidence, even though this did not always improve writing quality. The student accounts suggested that emotional support was helpful but not sufficient. Structured instruction was also necessary.

Although none of the students mentioned using AI tools directly, this absence may reflect Utami and Winarni's (2023) conclusion that many students are not yet skilled in using AI for writing. The tools can help with grammar and planning but do not support deeper writing needs, such as argument structure or original thought. The students' concerns appeared to be linked to teaching methods rather than limited access to digital tools.

The data also show that teaching practices require improvement. Participant 8 described an ineffective writing tutor, echoing the findings of Utami and Winarni, who recommended better integration of AI and teaching. Without proper instruction, students may not know how to use available tools. Participant 5 criticised writing classes for focusing only on grammar and ignoring creativity and critical thinking.

The interview data support the view in the literature that academic writing problems among Indonesian EFL students are complex and interrelated. Grammar, vocabulary, and structure remain central concerns, connected to emotional, cultural, and instructional factors. AI tools offer useful support but must be combined with informed teaching, clear feedback, and real writing practice. A more balanced approach is needed, one that includes linguistic skill, cultural awareness, technological knowledge, and emotional support. This approach can help students write more effectively and with greater confidence.

Conclusion

The interview findings, when considered alongside current literature, show that Indonesian students in international settings continue to experience persistent difficulties in academic writing. These include grammar, vocabulary, structural organisation, and psychological factors. The problems reflect both linguistic limitations and sociocultural factors. Digital tools such as AI writing assistants can help reduce anxiety and support surface-level corrections, but they do not resolve more complex aspects such as argument development, coherence, or original expression.

The data suggest a need for writing instruction that supports both technical accuracy and broader academic skills. Teaching should encourage critical thinking, personal expression, and awareness of cultural context. Error correction alone is not enough. Instruction should build confidence and competence through guided practice and meaningful feedback. AI tools may be useful if used within a wider system of support. Students benefit most when digital aids are combined with structured teaching that helps them gain the core skills required for academic writing across languages and contexts.

This study offers valuable insights into Indonesian undergraduate students' perceptions of English writing in an AI-enhanced learning environment. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the small sample size of nine students limits the generalizability of the findings. The participants were also all studying in Thailand, which

may differ culturally and educationally from students in Indonesia or other contexts, potentially affecting the transferability of results. Second, the study relied on self-reported data from interviews, which may be subject to biases such as social desirability or selective memory. The absence of direct observation of students' writing processes and AI tool usage limits the ability to triangulate data and fully understand how AI impacts their writing skills in practice. Third, while students discussed their experiences with AI tools indirectly, none reported explicit use of AI writing assistants during their academic tasks. This limits understanding of how AI integration currently affects writing beyond perceptions, and highlights the need to investigate students' actual usage patterns and competencies with AI tools.

For future research, larger-scale studies involving diverse populations across different countries and academic settings would improve the generalizability of findings. Mixed-methods approaches combining interviews, writing samples, and direct analysis of AI tool interactions could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the benefits and challenges of AI in writing instruction.

Additionally, longitudinal studies could explore how students' writing skills and attitudes evolve with increasing AI use and how instructional strategies might best integrate these technologies. Research focusing on training programs that enhance students' critical and ethical use of AI writing tools is also needed to ensure that AI supports rather than hinders the development of foundational writing competencies. In summary, further investigation is necessary to balance technological support with linguistic, cultural, and emotional factors, ultimately improving EFL students' writing outcomes in the age of AI.

References

- Asnas, S. A. M. (2022). The academic writing challenges faced by Indonesian undergraduate EFL learners at University of Islam Malang. *Jurnal Penelitian, Pendidikan, dan Pembelajaran*, 17(11).
- Hartono, H., & Maharani, M. M. (2020, March). English writing anxiety and the writing problems of Indonesia EFL learners. In *2nd Social and Humaniora Research Symposium (SoRes 2019)* (pp. 513-517). Atlantis Press.
- Herda, R. K., Traverro, A. S., Kafabih, A., Koeswoyo, A. W., Sari, R. N., Hakiki, F. I., & Wahidah, N. (2024). Opportunities of using ChatGPT in academic writing: Perceptions of the Philippines and Indonesian students. *Jurnal Wahana Pendidikan*, 11(2), 205–214.
- Hidayati, K. H. (2018). Teaching writing to EFL learners: An investigation of challenges confronted by Indonesian teachers. *LANGKAWI: Journal of the Association for Arabic and English*, 4(1), 21-31.
- Kaharuddin, K. (2021). Assessing the effect of using artificial intelligence on the writing skill of Indonesian learners of English. *Linguistics and Culture Review*, 5(1), 288-304.
- Mardalis, W. R., & Pratolo, B. W. (2023). Unraveling challenges and solutions in academic paper: A case study of 3rd year English Department students at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan. *Madah: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra*, 15(2), 150–162.
- Muamaroh, M., Mukti, V. C., & Haryanti, D. (2020). The process and problems of EFL learners in English writing. *Ethical Lingua: Journal of Language Teaching and Literature*, 7(2), 405-418.
- Ningrum, R. W., Hamamah, H., Sahiruddin, S., & Rohmah, Z. (2023). Academic writing difficulties for Indonesian students in pursuing postgraduate studies abroad. *Premise: Journal of English Education*, 12(1), 93–109.

- Toba, R., & Noor, W. N. (2019). The current issues of Indonesian EFL students' writing skills: Ability, problem, and reason in writing comparison and contrast essay. *Dinamika Ilmu*, 19(1), 57-73.
- Utami, S. P. T., & Winarni, R. (2023). Utilization of artificial intelligence technology in an academic writing class: How do Indonesian students perceive? *Contemporary Educational Technology*, 15(4).