A Case Study of Challenges Faced by Undergraduate Students in Writing Thesis

Mazdan Jaohar Maknun

Department of English Education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Perjuangan Tasikmalaya, Tasikmalaya, West Java, Indonesia

mazdan.jaoharmaknun@gmail.com

Abstract

Thesis writing represents one of the most demanding academic requirements for undergraduate students, especially those studying in English as a foreign language context. Despite its importance, many students struggle with limited academic writing skills, lack of supervision effectiveness, and emotional instability, creating a gap between expected and actual performance. This study aims to explore the major challenges faced by undergraduate students in writing their theses, focusing on basic knowledge, supervision processes, and psychological factors. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and documentation from undergraduate students at a private university in Tasikmalaya. The findings reveal that students experience difficulties in understanding theoretical concepts, accessing reliable references, and maintaining motivation due to inconsistent supervision and psychological pressure. The study concludes that thesis-writing challenges are multidimensional, requiring integrated academic, institutional, and emotional support. These results provide valuable insights for improving thesis supervision systems and academic writing guidance in higher education.

Keywords: thesis writing, supervision, academic challenges, motivation, EFL students

INTRODUCTION

Writing a thesis is one of the most significant academic challenges faced by undergraduate students. Many students experience various difficulties during the process, often resulting in delayed completion or unfinished theses. This situation is quite common among students due to multiple factors influencing their writing process. Based on observations at one of the private universities in Tasikmalaya, many students struggle to determine where to begin their thesis writing. This condition encouraged the researcher to investigate the causes behind students' struggles in completing their theses. In line with this, Paltridge (2007) stated that writing a thesis is challenging for all students; however, for those who write in English as a second language, the challenges are even greater. Undoubtedly, thesis writing is not an easy task and is considered one of the most demanding academic writing projects for students.

Writing a thesis is generally one of the academic requirements for undergraduate students to obtain their degree. Most students are required to conduct research and produce a thesis as their final project to complete their studies. Therefore, students must prepare themselves to write a thesis, because there are many problems that will be found in writing the thesis (Dwihandini 2013). These difficulties may include constructing the background of the study, finding reliable references, and maintaining coherence in writing. It is worth noting that thesis writing is a complex process that requires proper supervision and academic guidance to ensure quality work. Furthermore, thesis guidance process is also a factor that makes students uneasy to write the thesis, as there may be a misunderstanding in the process of receiving from the supervisor or difficulties in arranging a meeting with the supervisor to do the guidance (Tiwari 2019).

Several previous studies have examined this issue from different perspectives. Lestari (2020) investigated that to find out the undergraduate student difficulties in writing thesis, the writers used descriptive quantitative, while this research will use a case study method. Moreover, Puspita (2019) explored further the factors causing students' difficulties in writing a thesis. The researcher utilized a mixed-method design. In the other research, Phan Nguyen (2022) this study used survey design investigated difficulties in writing essays of English-sophomores at Tay Do University. Moreover, Shahsavar (2020) set out to identify postgraduates' problems in writing thesis, the researcher used the exploratory sequential mixed method design. Furthermore Aldabbus (2022) contained employed a quantitative approach to discover the factors that hinder their academic writing skills students majoring in English at the faculty of education, University of Benghazi.

Considering the background above, this study aims to explore the challenges faced by undergraduate students in writing a thesis. By identifying these difficulties, it is expected that the research will contribute to improving the understanding of academic writing challenges and providing insights for students, lecturers, and departments to enhance the thesis writing and supervision process.

Literature Review

Thesis Writing

A thesis is a study on a certain issue that has been undertaker through original research and written to prove or disprove something, so adding to or producing new knowledge (Clewes 1996). It generally follows a formal structure consisting of an introduction, literature review, methods,

results, discussion, and conclusion (Paltridge 2002). As Hardling (2004) explains, thesis writing is an activity done by a researcher to carry out the findings of their research finding in the form of writing. At the university level, especially in Indonesia, a thesis is required to finish their studies (Lestari 2020).

Despite its academic importance, students often face numerous challenges during the thesis-writing process. These include difficulty in determining a topic, constructing the background of the study, and finding adequate references (Thahirah 2023). The growing dependence on translation tools also indicates concerns regarding students' English proficiency and their ability to produce coherent academic texts. While digital tools can enhance students' writing skills by facilitating constructive feedback and peer review (Lim et al 2019), overreliance on them may hinder authentic language development and critical thinking. Furthermore, grammatical accuracy remains a persistent challenge, as students often spend substantial time revising sentence structures and grammar (Lasi 2019)

Given these challenges, thesis writing requires strong preparation, guidance, and self-discipline. Students need to develop both linguistic competence and academic writing skills to express their ideas clearly and confidently. As emphasized by Permana (2023), in order to disregard the issue with writing a thesis, students should be aware of the variables that affect their thesis-writing challenges.

Difficulties Factors in Writing Thesis

Undergraduate students often face various challenges when writing their theses, particularly in organizing ideas, developing concepts, organization, lack of vocabulary, and rewriting or paraphrasing their thesis (Nabu 2022). Writing a thesis in English is a complex process that requires topic selection, source evaluation, and methodological understanding (Susanti 2022). Since writing is considered the most difficult skill to master (Emilia 2016; Paltridge 2007), students often struggle to meet academic writing standards, especially in English as a foreign language contexts.

Oktaviani (2024) identifies three major factors influencing students' thesis-writing difficulties: basic knowledge, consultation process, and psychological factors.

1. Students' limited basic knowledge of research and academic writing affects their ability to develop a coherent thesis. They often struggle to locate relevant references and establish connections between their research and previous studies. Completing a thesis also demands

perseverance, discipline, and a thorough understanding of research procedures—from topic selection to thesis defense.

2. The consultation process with supervisors plays a crucial role in determining students' progress. Common obstacles include limited meeting time, supervisors' heavy workload, and ineffective feedback. When students submit well-organized drafts, supervisors can focus more on content and academic guidance rather than language or formatting issues.

3. Psychological factors, such as self-esteem, anxiety, and motivation, strongly influence students' writing performance. Low self-esteem may lead to self-doubt and avoidance behavior, while anxiety often triggers fear of mistakes and academic burnout. Motivation is essential for persistence and timely completion; a lack of intrinsic or extrinsic motivation often results in procrastination and reduced writing quality.

In conclusion, students' difficulties in thesis writing are multidimensional, involving cognitive, relational, and psychological aspects. Addressing these challenges requires a balanced approach that enhances students' academic competence, strengthens supervisor-student communication, and fosters positive learning motivation.

Previous Studies

Several scholars have examined the difficulties students face in writing their theses. Lestari (2020) identified key challenges such as low English proficiency, time management skills, understanding of research methodology, attitudes, personality traits, and levels of motivation. Similarly, Puspita (2019), found that linguistic, sociocultural, and personal factors significantly hindered students' writing performance, with linguistic difficulties (particularly paraphrasing and grammar) being the most dominant.

Phan Nguyen (2022) reported that English majors struggled with background knowledge, vocabulary, grammatical structure, concept layout, and spelling. Similarly, Shahsavar (2020) aimed to identify postgraduates' challenges in thesis writing by employing an exploratory sequential mixed-method design. In the quantitative phase, the researcher conducted a descriptive analysis of 40 completed master's theses based on Akindele's (2008) guideline. In the qualitative phase, 10 postgraduate students voluntarily participated in semi-structured interviews. The findings indicated that even proficient students struggled to generate, critique, and elaborate on the content they developed.

Furthermore, Aldabbus (2022) adopted a quantitative approach to examine the factors that hinder the academic writing skills of English-major students at the Faculty of Education, University of Benghazi. A total of 10 graduate and 26 undergraduate students participated in the study, and data were collected using a 25-item questionnaire. The results revealed that both graduate and undergraduate students experienced difficulties in academic writing. Other studies by Fauzan et al (2022) explored the writing difficulties of seven eighth-semester students in developing paragraphs and applying writing elements in their thesis proposals. Using a descriptive qualitative method, the study found issues with topic sentences, supporting details, and paragraph coherence, as well as grammar, vocabulary, organization, and mechanics problems caused by native language interference and limited writing knowledge. Similarly, Oktaviani (2024) investigated the thesis writing difficulties of EFL students through questionnaires and interviews. The results indicated internal challenges, such as difficulty selecting a thesis title, low confidence, health issues, and overreliance on translation tools, and external challenges including poor supervision, limited reference access, technical problems, financial constraints, and unsupportive environments.

Across these studies, recurring themes emerge: inadequate academic writing knowledge, ineffective supervisor guidance, psychological challenges, and limited linguistic proficiency. Building on these findings, the present research focuses on three main aspects influencing students' thesis-writing difficulties basic knowledge, consultation process, and psychological factors to provide a deeper understanding of the issue within the EFL context.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the challenges faced by undergraduate students in writing their theses. According to Yin (2003), stated that case study is a technique to research that uses multiple data sources to enable the examination of a phenomenon in its context. Similarly, Creswell (2014) an investigation and comprehension of the interpretations that individuals or groups make of a social or human issue is accomplished through qualitative research.

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The research was conducted at a private university in Tasikmalaya, with participants selected through purposive sampling. Undergraduate students who were in the process of writing their theses were chosen as participants. Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews, and documentation to ensure comprehensive overview of the challenges participants face during thesis writing.

The questionnaire consisted of both close-ended and open-ended questions distributed via Google Form. The close-ended questions used a four-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree–Strongly Disagree), while open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to obtain deeper insights and avoid misinterpretation. Documentation, including activity photos and interview transcripts, served as supplementary data to support and validate participants' responses.

Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) three-step model: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In data reduction, irrelevant data were removed, focusing only on information related to students' challenges. The analyzed data were then presented in tables and bar charts, illustrating the frequency and nature of difficulties such as lack of motivation, time management issues, or limited supervision. Finally, conclusions were drawn and verified to identify the most influential factors affecting students' thesis-writing process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the results of the study based on data collected through questionnaires and interviews. The analysis focuses on three main aspects influencing students' thesis-writing challenges: basic knowledge, consultation process, and psychological factors.

Questionnaire Results

The questionnaire was distributed to seven active undergraduate students who were in the process of completing their theses. The purpose was to identify the main obstacles they faced during thesis

writing. The findings show that one participant reported a low level of difficulty (score 17–21), three participants were in the moderate range (22–25), and three others experienced high difficulty levels (26–30).

Overall, the data indicate that most participants (six out of seven) perceived thesis writing as a challenging task, falling within moderate to high difficulty categories. This suggests that students commonly face significant struggles during the thesis-writing process, reflecting a need for improved academic guidance, writing support, and motivational strategies.

Interview Results

The interview results provide an in-depth understanding of the challenges encountered by undergraduate students during the thesis-writing process. Interviews were conducted with five participants (labeled as P1–P5) to gain detailed insights into their personal experiences and perceptions related to thesis writing. The analysis focuses on four main themes: searching references, identifying phenomena, motivational challenges, and consultation with supervisors.

Table 1.

Participant s' Response

Theme	Supporting Evidence / Observation
Searching References	P1, P2, P4, and P5 expressed difficulties in understanding complex theoretical concepts and organizing their ideas when developing main topics or sentences in their writing. They often struggled to translate theoretical materials into clear arguments or applicable concepts. In contrast, P3 indicated smoother progress and less difficulty due to personal interest and familiarity with the topic, which made understanding and application of the theory easier.
Identifying Phenomena	P1 and P2 experienced difficulties in finding relevant examples and supporting explanations to strengthen their main ideas, resulting in paragraphs that felt less convincing or insufficiently developed. P3 reported encountering access barriers to reliable references due to paywalls but managed to overcome them. Similarly, P4 struggled to identify relevant examples and clearly explain complex ideas. In

	contrast, P5 reported no significant difficulty, as they relied on previously studied materials to formulate their understanding.
Motivational Challenges	P1 and P2 reported fluctuating motivation levels during the thesis-writing process, often feeling mentally exhausted, anxious, or distracted by other concerns. P2 particularly emphasized the impact of revisions, external pressure, and low self-confidence on their enthusiasm. P4 also described feelings of being overwhelmed and struggling to stay motivated. Similarly, P5 experienced demotivation due to work commitments that limited focus on the thesis. In contrast, P3 maintained consistent motivation because of strong mastery and interest in their chosen topic.
Consultation with Supervisors	P2 and P4 experienced difficulties in maintaining consistent progress and organization during the thesis-writing process due to limited consultation time and irregular feedback from supervisors. P2 particularly highlighted uncertainty in assessing personal progress and the need for more frequent guidance. P1 noted that challenges existed but remained manageable, while P5 described self-related barriers stemming from limited understanding of their field of study. In contrast, P3 reported no significant issues in the consultation process.

The interview findings highlight that students' difficulties in thesis writing stem from both academic and non-academic dimensions. Academically, limited understanding of theories and restricted access to scholarly materials hinder students' ability to construct coherent and well-supported arguments. Non-academically, fluctuating motivation and inconsistent supervision contribute to emotional strain and slower writing progress.

Students who selected topics aligned with their interests demonstrated higher confidence and engagement, suggesting that topic familiarity positively influences writing performance. Meanwhile, irregular feedback and limited consultation opportunities weakened students' ability to self-assess their work and sustain motivation. These findings indicate that enhancing academic guidance, access to resources, and continuous motivational support are key to improving students'

thesis-writing experience and outcomes.

Discussion

The findings in this chapter reveal a complex range of challenges faced by undergraduate participants during the thesis-writing process. In line with Paltridge (2002), writing a thesis is a demanding task that presents greater difficulties than other types of academic writing. These challenges are not isolated but reflect systemic issues in academic preparation, supervision practices, and emotional resilience. The results indicate that thesis writing is a multidimensional task requiring not only strong academic skills but also adequate guidance, resources, and emotional support. As stated by Susanti (2022), writing a thesis in English involves many aspects and is a complex process in which participants must consider the topic, sources, and understanding of research methodology.

The data show that one of the most significant academic challenges is finding relevant references. Supported by Thahirah et al (2023), several participants were unsure of what to write about and faced difficulties in developing the background and reference sections. More than half of the participants admitted that locating credible and suitable sources was a major obstacle.

Additionally, participants' reliance on translation applications reflects deeper issues in English language proficiency, particularly in academic writing. While digital tools can support learning, overdependence on them can hinder the development of authentic writing and critical thinking skills. Lim et al (2019) state that participants' writing skills can be enhanced through digital tools, which foster constructive feedback during the learning process. This also raises concerns about participants' comprehension of the academic materials they engage with. Challenges in grammar checking and paraphrasing further indicate broader weaknesses in writing competency. Lasi (2019) highlights that grammatical accuracy ensures the clarity and precision of an author's intent. The ongoing process of revising grammar and sentence structure is time-consuming and demotivating, especially when participants lack adequate instruction or feedback.

Another challenge involves understanding the thesis guidebook, which reveals a gap between institutional resources and student accessibility. Although guidebooks are meant to provide step-by-step guidance on formatting and structure, participants reported difficulty understanding them due to complex language and dense theoretical explanations. This suggests that the materials do not fully serve their intended function.

The supervisory relationship is also a critical factor in successful thesis writing. However, the

data show several barriers in this area. More than half of the participants found it difficult to receive clear and consistent feedback from supervisors, leaving them uncertain about their progress. Some mentioned the use of handwritten notes that were often unclear. According to Azzam (2013), the consultation process is one of the main factors contributing to students' difficulties, particularly in managing consultation time. Moreover, variations in communication styles and lecturer availability were also noted. While 57.1% of participants reported no major issues, a significant minority still struggled to maintain consistent communication with their supervisors.

Beyond academic and supervisory challenges, emotional and psychological factors also emerged as major barriers. Many participants reported anxiety and fear related to the proposal examination, which served as a significant source of stress. the proposal exam, which often served as a major source of stress. According to Serewara (2011) notes that anxiety is common in academic situations where students face uncertainty and pressure. This fear often stems from high expectations and fear of failure, which may lead to reduced motivation or procrastination. Khusumawati et al (2018) further explain that academic burnout manifests through fatigue, loss of enthusiasm, and decreased learning motivation. Despite these negative emotions, some participants also experienced moments of pride, confidence, and motivation. Motivation plays a crucial role in learning, as stated by Yendri (2019). Based on the data, the researcher identified five major sources of challenges experienced by undergraduate participants during thesis writing.

The first challenge concerns finding credible references, often caused by limited access to academic databases and unfamiliarity with evaluating reliable sources. Lestari (2020) found similar issues, noting participants' struggles with English proficiency, time management, research topics, co-advisor relationships, and motivation. Puspita (2019) also identified personality, sociocultural, and linguistic factors as key contributors; particularly lack of confidence, limited understanding of institutional writing culture, and difficulties in paraphrasing. The second factor involves organizing paragraph ideas and constructing coherent sentences. According to Aldabbus (2022, both graduate and undergraduate participants face difficulties in choosing appropriate academic words, developing thesis statements, organizing ideas, and writing coherent paragraphs. These issues are linked to limited resources, low English proficiency, and lack of writing practice. Similarly, Phan et al (2022) found that students struggle with background knowledge, vocabulary, grammar, idea arrangement, and orthography in essay writing.

Another major challenge is related to supervisors' feedback, which is often unclear or difficult

to interpret, especially when handwritten. Shahsavar (2020) reported that many participants, even proficient ones, struggled to synthesize and critique literature, focusing instead on summarizing previous findings. Other problems included lack of sufficient time, knowledge, and supervision quality. Overall, these findings align with studies by Lestari (2020), Aldabbus (2022) and Puspita (2019), confirming that inadequate basic knowledge, unclear supervisory feedback, and difficulties in building coherent paragraph ideas are among the most significant challenges faced by undergraduate thesis writers.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the multidimensional challenges faced by undergraduate students in thesis writing, particularly within the EFL context. By identifying key influencing factors: basic knowledge, supervision process, and psychological aspects. The research advances existing knowledge on how cognitive limitations, inadequate academic support, and emotional instability interact to affect students' writing outcomes. The findings emphasize that improving thesis-writing competence requires not only linguistic and methodological training but also effective supervisory communication and motivational reinforcement. These insights provide a framework for universities to design targeted academic writing programs and mentoring systems that better address students' real needs. Future research should involve larger participant samples across institutions, integrate longitudinal observation of thesis progress, and explore the impact of digital learning tools on students' academic writing development.

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