

Understanding EFL Students' Cognitive and Linguistic Challenges and Their Coping Strategies in Thesis Proposal Writing

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to identify the cognitive and linguistic challenges EFL undergraduate students face in writing thesis proposals and to explore the coping strategies they employ. **Method:** A mixed-methods approach with a dominant descriptive quantitative design was utilized. Data were collected from 32 EFL students via a Likert-scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with five purposively selected students based on their proposal stages (pre- or post-seminar). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages), and qualitative data were analyzed through content analysis. **Results:** The findings revealed cognitive challenges in topic selection (37.5% neutral), literature review (50.1% struggled to find sources), and research methodology (53.1% faced difficulties). Linguistic difficulties included grammar accuracy (56.3% struggled), vocabulary choice (46.9% found challenging), and coherence (56.3% neutral on logical flow). Coping strategies included peer discussions (59.4% effective), supervisor consultations (68.8% helpful), extensive reading (62.5% useful), and time management (50% planned effectively). A significant portion of neutral responses (up to 56.3%) indicated uncertainty in self-assessment. **Novelty:** This research highlights neutral responses as indicators of cognitive hesitation, offering insights through mixed-methods integration. It recommends structured academic support, such as methodological workshops and language training, to improve thesis proposal writing in Indonesian higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is widely recognized as one of the most demanding skills for university students, as it requires not only mastery of language but also the ability to organize ideas logically and present arguments coherently. Unlike creative or journalistic writing, academic writing is characterized by a formal tone, a systematic structure, and an evidence-based approach (Bailey, 2015; Oshima & Hogue, 2007). It serves as a cornerstone of higher education, enabling students to demonstrate critical thinking, disciplinary knowledge, and scholarly rigor. Academic writing, therefore, is not merely a tool for communication but also a means of advancing knowledge (Murray & Moore, 2006).

However, the transition from understanding these formal requirements to successfully executing them is often difficult. Despite its importance, many students continue to struggle with academic writing. The process is complex and involves multiple stages, such as brainstorming, drafting, revising, and finalizing, which can feel overwhelming for learners who lack sufficient preparation (Rahmatunisa, 2014). Previous studies have shown that three key problems with cohesion and coherence (Alisha et al., 2019). Cognitive difficulties include organizing ideas, maintaining logical flow, and constructing arguments (Kasiri & Fazilatfar, 2016). On the psychological side, issues such as writing anxiety, low motivation, and lack of confidence are reported to significantly hinder students' performance (Jat et al., 2020; Nadjette, 2016).

These universal hurdles become even more pronounced when the writing must be produced in a non-native language. In Indonesia, where English is a foreign language, the challenges are even more pronounced. Students in English Education programs are expected to produce their final writing task (Skripsi) in English, yet their linguistic proficiency often falls short of the required standards (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017). At one of the Islamic-based private universities in Purwokerto, as in many other universities, final-year students must complete a thesis as a graduation requirement. While this process is essential for developing research and academic skills, students frequently describe it as the most time-consuming, stressful, and exhausting stage of their undergraduate journey (Oktaviani et al., 2024). Beyond linguistic struggles, students also face non-academic barriers, including insufficient feedback from supervisors, limited access to resources, and a lack of exposure to scholarly writing conventions.

Given these challenges. It becomes necessary to investigate in more detail the cognitive and linguistic factors students encounter and the strategies they find effective in overcoming these obstacles. Therefore, this study was guided by three research questions:

1. What are the key challenges students encounter in thesis proposal writing?
2. What factors most significantly contribute to students' difficulties in thesis proposal writing?
3. What strategies do students find most effective in overcoming their obstacles?

Previous research offers valuable insights into these questions. For instance, Fauzan et al. (2022) found that undergraduate students in Samarinda frequently struggled with awkward sentence structure, redundancy, and incorrect grammar. Hayati (2024), in her qualitative case study, emphasized that a lack of understanding of the systematic structure and topic selection often hinders students from developing a strong proposal. Other studies have examined the relative weight of contributing factors. Diad et al. (2023) concluded that psychological factors, such as low self-esteem and anxiety, play the dominant role, while Rastri et al. (2023) identified linguistic factors as the primary barrier, followed by socio-cultural and psychological factors.

In addition to these challenges, research on strategies to overcome difficulties has also been discussed. Kumar and Stracke (2007) emphasized the importance of supervisory feedback as a critical tool for guiding students toward improvement. Reading scholarly journals extensively has been shown to familiarize students with academic conventions, enhancing their writing competence (Listyani, 2018). Additionally, the rise of technology-assisted learning has led students to increasingly rely on digital tools such as Quillbot, DeepL Translator, and ChatGPT to assist with paraphrasing, translation, and content generation, helping them refine their writing more efficiently (Perkins, 2023; Chen, 2023).

Taken together, the literature reveals that the challenges of thesis proposal writing are multifaceted, emerging from a combination of linguistic barriers, cognitive processes, and psychological factors. These challenges cannot be attributed to a single cause; rather, they result from the intersection of these various domains. This variation across studies underscores the need for further exploration, especially in local contexts where students face the dual challenge of producing scholarly work in a foreign language. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the difficulties students face and identify the strategies they use to overcome them.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a mixed-methods approach that combines both quantitative and qualitative methods. Mixed methods are particularly valuable because they balance the limitations of either approach alone while maximizing their strengths (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Cresswell & Creswell, 2018). By integrating these methods, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges students face in writing thesis proposals, the factors influencing these difficulties, and the strategies students adopt to overcome them. *Figure 1* below presents the timeline series of this research, outlining the key stages of data collection and analysis.

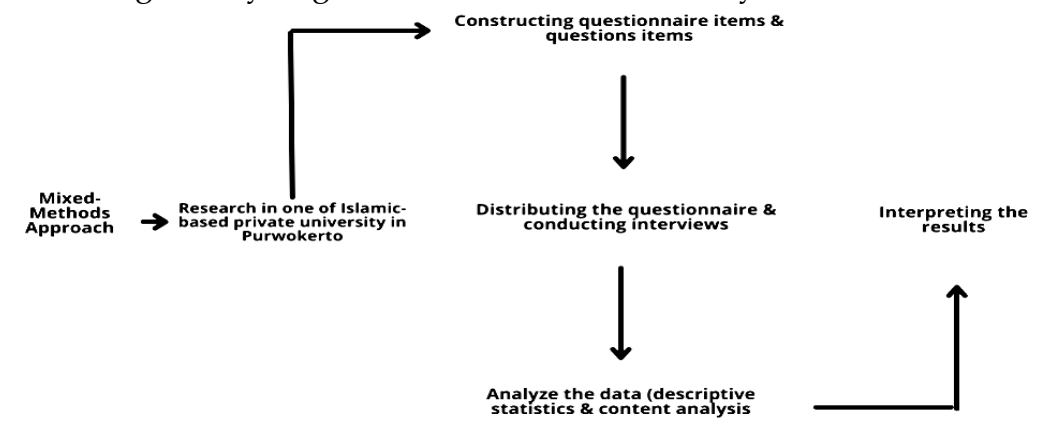


Figure 1. Research Procedures

The participants of this study were 32 eighth-semester students from the English Education Study Program at an Islamic-based private university in Purwokerto, Indonesia, during the 2024/2025 academic year. A total sampling method was used for the quantitative phase, while purposive sampling was employed for the qualitative phase to ensure relevant experiences were represented. For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide rich, relevant information related to the research objectives. Specifically, five students were selected for the semi-structured interviews based on the following criteria: (1) their current stage of thesis proposal writing (pre-seminar and post-seminar) to capture varied academic experiences; (2) their willingness and availability to participate in in-depth interviews; and (3) their questionnaire responses, particularly those indicating notable levels of cognitive or linguistic challenges. These criteria were applied to ensure that the interview participants represented diverse experiences and perspectives relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. The sample included students from diverse demographic backgrounds, and their participation was essential to capturing a wide range of experiences during the thesis proposal writing process.

Data were collected using two instruments: a closed-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire, consisting of 32 Likert-scale items adapted from Rastri (2023), was distributed online via Google Forms to identify students' cognitive and linguistic challenges and the strategies they employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five purposively selected students, based on their thesis proposal stage (pre- or post-seminar), to gain deeper insights into their personal experiences and coping strategies.

The data analysis followed a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics, with percentages calculated for

each item. Qualitative data were analyzed through content analysis, where interview responses were transcribed, and recurring themes related to cognitive and linguistic challenges and coping strategies were identified and categorized. The integration of both methods provided a comprehensive understanding of the challenges students face and the strategies they employ to overcome them.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study explored the challenges students face in writing thesis proposals and the strategies they use to overcome them. Data were obtained from 32 students via questionnaires and from 5 students via semi-structured interviews. The findings are presented in three broad areas: cognitive challenges, linguistic challenges, and coping strategies.

Cognitive Challenges

Topic Selection and Problem Formulation

The study found that many students struggle to select and formulate research topics. While 43.7% of respondents were confident in their ability to choose a topic, 37.5% were uncertain or neutral, indicating that a large segment of the student population does not feel they have failed the task but lacks the decisive self-efficacy to navigate it independently, and 18.8% struggled with this task. This suggests that while some students are confident, many struggle to narrow down a researchable topic. Additionally, organizing the background of the problem proved to be confusing for over 62% of students. Only 3.1% disagreed with this statement, indicating that a substantial number of students find this aspect challenging. The Neutral responses remained high at 34.4% and 56.3%, respectively. These neutral figures are arguably the most critical data points, as they represent a gray zone of competence. They suggest that students may understand the theory of academic structure but struggle to internalize it in practice. This reflects a state of cognitive hovering, where students are neither completely lost nor fully proficient. Table 1.1 presents the data on students' challenges in writing the topic and background of the research

Table 1. Students 'Challenges in Writing the Topic and Background of the Research

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I can easily determine the topic for my thesis proposal	3.1%	40.6%	37.5%	18.8%	0%
I find it confusing to organize the background of the problem	6.3%	56.3%	34.4%	3.1%	0%
I understand my research topic very well	3.1%	65.6%	28.1%	3.	0%
My writing flows logically and is well-connected	0%	31.3%	56.3%	12.5%	0%

Qualitative data from interviews further illuminate this neutral stance. Participant 02's experience of changing topics multiple times illustrates this lack of clarity, a practical manifestation of the uncertainty in the survey response. Similarly, Participant 01's difficulty with paragraph transitions aligns with the 56.3% who were unsure of the logical flow of their writing. Rather than outright disagreement with the statements,

these students occupy a space of ambiguous competence. As noted by Jiang and Kalyuga (2022), the high cognitive load of L2 academic writing often leaves students in a state of flux, where the mental energy required to manage both language and complex structure prevents them from reaching a level of certainty or confidence.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Handling literature also posed a challenge for many students. Half of the respondents (50.1%) reported struggling to find sources that matched their topics, while 59% felt confident in locating up-to-date sources. However, over a third (34.4%) had trouble accessing journals. Identifying research gaps was equally challenging, with only 43.7% of students confident in doing so. Selecting appropriate theories was the most difficult task, with only 25.1% of students expressing confidence in their ability to choose the correct theory (see Table 1.2). This finding highlights a significant challenge in the thesis proposal process, suggesting that academic writing training should include more guidance on literature selection and the application of theory.

Table 2. Students' Challenges with Literature and Theory

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I struggle to find references matching my topic.	6.3%	43.8%	18.8%	28.1%	3.1%
I am confident in finding up-to-date literature	6.3%	53.1%	25.%	15.6%	0
I have difficulty accessing journals/articles	3.1%	31.3%	34.3%	28.1%	3.1%
I can easily identify the research gap.	3.1%	40.6%	25%	28.1%	3.1%
I have no trouble selecting the correct theory	6.3%	18.8%	31.3%	40.6%	3.1%

Interview data revealed that some students relied on resources without filtering credible sources, while others admitted challenges in understanding and applying theoretical concepts. These results align with Dina (2023), who found that EFL undergraduates struggle to select appropriate references and theories, and with Teng & Qin (2024), who argued that limited metacognitive strategies hinder the application of theories.

Research Methodology

Methodology is another cognitive challenge. Over half of the students (53.1%) expressed difficulty in designing an appropriate methodology. A nearly identical proportion (50.1%) found it difficult to choose a research design that matched their objectives. Confidence was slightly higher in selecting data collection techniques, with 53.1% agreeing, but analyzing data remained problematic. When analyzing data, 56.3% reported confusion, while 53.1% were neutral about using SPSS, indicating a lack of training in quantitative tools.

Interview data confirmed these challenges: some students relied heavily on templates rather than understanding methodological choices, and others were uncertain about the alignment between objectives, design, and analysis. Afiah et al. (2023) likewise reported that undergraduates often experience difficulty in methodological design and statistical analysis.

Table 3. Students' Challenges with Methodology

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I find it challenging to design a methodology	12.5%	40.6%	37.5%	9.4%	0%
I find it hard to choose a design fitting my objectives	6.3%	43.8%	21.9%	28.1%	0%
I am confident in selecting data collection techniques	3.1%	50%	28.1%	18.8%	0%
I feel confused analyzing my research data	9.4%	46.9%	37.5%	6.3%	0%
I am comfortable using SPSS	3.1%	34.4%	53.1%	6.3%	3.1%

LINGUISTIC CHALLENGES

A significant number of students (68.8%) found it difficult to write in an academic style. Paraphrasing was also a challenge: 43.7% said they could paraphrase effectively, while 34.4% were unsure. Vocabulary selection emerged as the most critical challenge, with 75.1% of students reporting difficulty choosing appropriate words. Similarly, 56.3% reported struggling to translate ideas from Bahasa Indonesia into English, highlighting the linguistic challenges EFL students face.

Table 4. Students' Challenges in language-related

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I find it challenging to write in an academic style	6.3%	62.5%	28.1%	3.1%	0%
I can paraphrase a sentence with ease.	3.1%	40.6%	34.4%	18.8%	3.1%
I often struggle with vocabulary	18.8%	56.3%	18.8%	3.1%	3.1%
I find it difficult to translate my ideas into English	9.4%	46.9%	25%	18.8%	0%

Interview data confirmed these findings. One student explained that even with digital tools like Grammarly, it was still hard to convey complex ideas clearly. Others admitted that their limited academic vocabulary restricted their ability to paraphrase or maintain an academic tone. These challenges are consistent with Li (2024), who noted that non-native English speakers often struggle with academic style, lexical choice, and paraphrasing, which significantly affects the quality of their writing. University students also encounter vast writing difficulties ranging from micro to macro levels (Faisal et al.). 2023)

COPING STRATEGIE

Despite cognitive and linguistic challenges, students employed several strategies to cope, though with varying effectiveness.

Time management

Time management emerged as the least effective strategy. Only 28.1% of students reported having a structured writing schedule, while over 84% admitted struggling with distractions and inconsistency. Fadhillah et al. (2025) similarly identified poor time management as a major factor in thesis completion delays. Interviews further revealed that procrastination, social media, and lack of self-discipline contributed to delays in writing.

Workshops

Workshops were found to be less effective than expected. While 34.4% attended academic writing workshops, many students were neutral about their effectiveness in improving thesis structure. A large proportion (56.3%) found the guidance unclear, suggesting that workshops should be more practical and interactive.

Reading Practices

Reading academic references was an effective coping strategy for many students. A majority (62.5%) actively engaged with references to strengthen their understanding of the topic, and 84.4% made an effort to use the most recent literature. This practice helped students improve both their vocabulary and coherence in academic writing. Linuwih (2021) emphasized that extensive reading improved both vocabulary and coherence in academic writing.

Peer Support

Peer discussions were highly valued, with 75% of students reporting that peer discussions helped refine their research ideas. While 50% admitted to rarely discussing their topics with peers, most recognized the importance of peer feedback in refining their work. These findings align with Herwiana (2021), who found that peer feedback in EFL contexts enhances accuracy and self-confidence in writing.

Table 5. Students' Response to Peer Support

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I make a structured daily or weekly schedule for my thesis writing.	3.1	25	28.1	34.4	9.4
I often get distracted and struggle to stick to a writing schedule.	18.8	65.6	12.5	3.1	0
I attend academic writing workshops to improve my skills.	3.1	31.3	31.3	34.4	0
Writing workshops don't significantly help me with the thesis structure.	3.1	18.8	50	28.1	0
I participate in workshops that help me develop logical, structured arguments.	0	34.4	37.5	28.1	0
I find that most workshops provide unclear guidance.	0	15.6	56.3	28.1	0
I actively read more references to deepen my understanding of the topic.	12.5	50.0	31.3	6.3	0
I often feel that reading more references does not help clarify my ideas.	0	34.4	25.0	37.5	3.1
I try to read the most recent literature related to my research.	6.3	78.1	9.4	6.3	0
I rarely discuss my thesis topic with my peers.	12.5	37.5	25	18.8	6.3
Peer discussions help me refine my research ideas.	28.1	46.9	25.0	0	0
I gain fresh insights from discussions with friends.	31.3	53.1	15.6	0	0
I feel less productive when my meetings with my supervisor are not scheduled.	25.0	34.4	34.4	3.1	3.1
Encouragement from family and friends boosts my motivation to finish my thesis.	37.5	43.8	18.8	0	0

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that students face significant challenges in writing thesis proposals, particularly in the cognitive, linguistic, and strategic dimensions.

Cognitive Challenges

Students experienced difficulties selecting a research topic, organizing the problem background, reviewing the literature, building theoretical frameworks, and designing methodologies. While many students understood their topics, over half struggled to organize their ideas logically and identify research gaps. For instance, more than 62% of students found organizing the background of the problem confusing. Similarly, a significant proportion was uncertain about the logical flow of their writing. These difficulties align with the cognitive load theory described by Jiang and Kalyuga (2022), which posits that students face challenges when balancing language proficiency with the structural demands of academic writing (Afiah et al., 2023). Language-related obstacles represent a primary hurdle for EFL learners when drafting academic reports. Specifically, mastery of grammatical structures and lexical precision are often cited as the most prevalent difficulties in scholarly writing. These elements are foundational to establishing effective academic communication; a deficit in linguistic commands, specifically in syntax and vocabulary, directly impedes a student's capacity to construct sophisticated sentences and articulate nuanced arguments (Amrullah et al., 2023). Recent evidence from Zakila and Bambang (2025) underscores that these linguistic barriers are pervasive, as many students struggle not only with mechanical errors but also with maintaining academic tone and cohesion throughout their research drafts. Furthermore, these linguistic limitations are frequently compounded by psychological factors. The apprehension of committing errors and a lack of confidence in their writing abilities often lead to heightened writing anxiety, particularly during autonomous writing tasks (Saputra et al., 2021). From a cognitive perspective, this anxiety functions as an affective filter that increases the extraneous cognitive load, further depleting the mental energy required for high-level academic synthesis and structural organization.

The amount of mental work used in working memory is known as cognitive load. needed to execute a learning activity (Kirschner et.al., 2018). It takes for granted that human memory can be split into two. The information is kept in basic forms, working memory, and long-term memory. Long-term memory operates via schemas, which are structured approaches to comprehending and storing information, thereby aiding the efficient processing of new information. If you do something that requires mental effort, your working memory will be strained, slowing your learning speed.

Linguistic Challenges

Linguistically, students reported struggles with academic writing style, paraphrasing, vocabulary choice, and translation. A large proportion found it difficult to write in an academic style and select appropriate vocabulary. This aligns with Li's (2024) findings, which noted that EFL students often lack metacognitive awareness of their language skills. Additionally, the high number of neutral responses to paraphrasing indicates students' uncertainty about their ability to apply these linguistic skills effectively, underscoring the need for targeted language support.

Strategic Challenges

In terms of coping strategies, time management emerged as the weakest. Most students admitted to being easily distracted and struggling with procrastination. The difficulty in managing time may reflect broader challenges with cognitive organization and task management, suggesting that students need more structured support in planning and managing their writing tasks. Workshops, while attended by some students, received mixed evaluations, indicating that their design and content may need to be more practical and focused on tangible outcomes. In contrast, reading academic references and peer discussions were viewed as the most beneficial coping strategies, as students who engaged in these activities reported clearer ideas and improved confidence. In contrast, reading and peer support were considered the most beneficial: students who actively engaged with recent literature or peer discussions reported gaining clearer ideas and improved confidence (Linuwih, 2021; Herwiana, 2021).

Across these domains, a recurring feature is the high proportion of neutral responses. In the cognitive section, many students were neutral about topic formulation, logical flow, and methodology. In line with this, Kulas et al. (2008) note that respondents often select neutral options when they are uncertain or prefer to avoid making a clear judgment. Therefore, the tendency to choose neutral responses may indicate students' uncertainty or limited exposure to academic literature, rather than a lack of effort. In linguistic items, neutrality appeared in paraphrasing and translation. Kankaraš and Capecci (2024) state that the "neither agree nor disagree" option in Likert-type scales is often selected when respondents experience conceptual ambiguity or hesitate to take a clear position. In this sense, choosing a neutral response can reflect deeper challenges that extend beyond language proficiency to include self-assessment and academic self-efficacy. In strategies, neutrality was the highest in evaluating the effectiveness of workshops and reading practices. As Tourangeau et al. (2000) note, respondents often select neutral options when they are uncertain about the usefulness or clarity of an intervention, especially in surveys concerning coping strategies. Thus, in this context, neutral responses may stem from inconsistent workshop quality, ambiguous results, or insufficient ongoing support, making it challenging for students to determine whether these strategies are truly beneficial.

The challenges faced by students are not only technical but also psychological, rooted in limited self-efficacy and reflection. Future research should investigate neutral responses more closely through qualitative follow-ups, such as interviews or focus groups, to clarify whether students' uncertainty arises from lack of skill, lack of awareness, or variability in learning experiences. In addition, interventions that combine skill training with strategies to build academic self-confidence are recommended, as they could help students reduce hesitation and engage more confidently with the task of writing the thesis proposal.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental findings: This study revealed that EFL students face significant cognitive challenges (topic selection, background writing, literature use, theory application, methodology design) and linguistic challenges (academic style, paraphrasing, vocabulary, translation). A recurring pattern of neutral responses highlights students' hesitation and limited confidence in evaluating their abilities. While reading practices and peer discussions were effective coping strategies, time management was identified

as the weakest, and workshops were reviewed with ambivalence. **Implication:** The implications of this study extend beyond the classroom, highlighting a pressing need for systemic institutional reforms. Higher education institutions should transition from generic writing instruction toward discipline-specific seminars that prioritize the early development of research arguments and the mastery of the thesis statement. Furthermore, universities should establish standardized guidelines for supervisory feedback to ensure that guidance is not only academically rigorous but also scaffolded to improve student self-efficacy. **Limitation:** While this study provides valuable insights, it has some limitations. First, the small sample size from only one institution means the results may not apply to all students. Second, the quantitative data did not allow for a deep look into why many students gave neutral responses to certain writing challenges. To address this, future researchers should aim to unpack the meaning of these neutral responses through qualitative methods, such as interviews. These methods could clarify if a neutral answer means the student was unaware of the problem, had mixed experiences, or simply preferred not to give a strong opinion. By combining survey data with these personal insights, future studies can offer a much clearer picture of the difficulties students face when writing thesis proposals. **Future research:** Should involve larger, more diverse samples, employ qualitative approaches to unpack the meaning of neutral responses, and test targeted interventions to enhance both writing skills and confidence in thesis proposal writing.

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