


Exploring English Education Students' Challenges in Writing an Introduction for a Journal Article

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A B S T R A C T

Academic writing competence is a crucial skill for English education students, particularly in producing research articles for publication. Among article sections, the introduction is often the most challenging because it requires writers to establish a research territory, identify a niche, and occupy that niche convincingly. To analyze these challenges, this study employs Swales' (1990) CARS Model as the theoretical framework. A qualitative case study design was used, involving semi-structured interviews with five seventh-semester students at Universitas Negeri Semarang. The findings reveal multidimensional difficulties across the three rhetorical moves. In Move 1, students showed varied confidence levels in establishing the territory, with some struggling due to grammar and structural issues. In Move 2, identifying and articulating research gaps proved most difficult, as students often confused background information with gaps and failed to synthesize literature critically. In Move 3, students relied on adaptive strategies such as imitating journal patterns, using AI tools, and seeking peer feedback, yet these remained insufficient without deeper rhetorical mastery. This study highlights the need for pedagogical interventions that combine explicit instruction, scaffolding, and structured peer review to strengthen students' rhetorical awareness and confidence.

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INTRODUCTION

Academic writing has long been recognized as a fundamental skill in higher education. For students in English language education programs, academic writing is not only a technical exercise for producing grammatically correct sentences, but also a process of constructing meaning, negotiating ideas, and positioning oneself within the academic community (Hyland, 2019). Through academic writing, students develop a professional identity, seeing themselves as contributors to knowledge rather than passive recipients. This perspective is crucial, as it enables students to actively participate in academic conversations and build confidence as developing scholars.

In Indonesia, the importance of academic writing as a skill has grown significantly in the last few years. Universities are increasingly requiring students to publish articles as part of their graduation requirements, and this expectation has made writing skills a key aspect of academic success (Sari, 2024). For English education students, the ability to write and publish articles is not only a technical skill—it is also an indicator of their readiness to enter the professional world and participate in global academic discourse. Publishing articles also demonstrates students' ability to meet institutional expectations and contribute to the advancement of science.

Among the different sections of an academic article, the *introduction* plays a particularly strategic role. It sets the research context, reviews prior studies, identifies gaps, and guides readers to the research's objectives and contributions. Swales' (1990) influential CARS (*Create*

A Research Space) model remains the most widely used framework, describing three rhetorical moves: (1) establishing the territory, (2) establishing the niche, and (3) occupying the niche. These moves, taken together, enable writers to justify their research and persuade readers of its significance.

However, recent studies show that students often fail to master these rhetorical steps. Riphasa (2024) found that although students can establish the domain, they struggle to articulate the niche, leading to introductions that lack persuasive justification. Aminah et al. (2025) confirmed that students often produce descriptive rather than argumentative introductions, thereby limiting the scientific value of their work. Gerald & Joseph (2025) further observed that students' introductions are often incoherent and fail to clearly identify research gaps, while Ariyati & Silva (2025) emphasized that even graduate students struggle to balance descriptive and argumentative elements. Sitompul & Anditasari (2022) noted that difficulties are not only linguistic but also rhetorical. Internationally, similar findings have been reported: Ningrum et al. (2023) highlighted that postgraduate EFL learners in Asia also face challenges in synthesizing literature and articulating research gaps, while Kartika-Ningsih & Gunawan (2019) demonstrated that genre-based pedagogy can scaffold rhetorical awareness but requires sustained practice to avoid formulaic imitation. More recently, Fadhly et al. (2025) proposed integrating genre-based pedagogy with AI-assisted platforms and peer review to strengthen students' rhetorical awareness, showing that pedagogy must evolve alongside technological developments.

In Indonesia, challenges are multidimensional. Riphasa (2024) reported difficulties in grammar, vocabulary, paraphrasing, and coherence. Ekasari (2020) found problems in organizing ideas logically. Bram & Angelina (2022) highlighted obstacles in integrating references effectively. Pasaribu et al. (2024) observed that students often lack confidence in presenting arguments, while Hamdani & Abid (2025) concluded that difficulties involve linguistic, cognitive, and affective aspects. Nadhifah et al. (2023) added that strategies such as peer feedback and self-regulated learning have not been fully effective. Batubara & Fithriani (2023) further confirmed that Indonesian undergraduates struggle with coherence, paraphrasing, and critical synthesis in academic writing, echoing global findings that rhetorical moves remain a persistent challenge.

Despite these contributions, the research gap remains clear: most studies analyze academic writing broadly (proposals, theses, or papers in general), but few focus specifically on the introduction section of journal articles. Even fewer adopt a qualitative lens to explore students' perceptions of rhetorical moves in Swales' CARS model within Indonesian EFL contexts. This gap is critical, because the introduction often determines whether an article is accepted for publication. Without adequate mastery of this section, students risk producing work that does not meet academic standards.

Several pedagogical strategies have been proposed to address these challenges. Hyland (2019) advocates genre-based teaching to help students practice rhetorical conventions systematically. Li (2025) highlights digital tools and collaborative peer feedback. Aminah et al. (2025) recommend explicit instruction in citation and critical thinking. More recently, Fadhly et al. (2025) proposed integrating genre-based pedagogy with AI-assisted platforms and peer review to strengthen students' rhetorical awareness. These approaches demonstrate that effective pedagogy must combine linguistic support with authentic practice in academic discourse.

By situating this study within the identified gap, it contributes to the literature by focusing specifically on students' challenges in writing introductions, analyzed through the lens of Swales' CARS model. Practically, the findings are expected to inform teachers and curriculum designers in English education programs, enabling them to design more effective instructional strategies.

Based on the background above, this study seeks to explore the challenges undergraduate English education students face in writing article introductions. The purpose of this study is to identify and describe the challenges students face, and to analyze the factors that influence these difficulties. The contribution of this study lies in its attempt to fill the gap

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in the literature on the problems of writing introductions by English education students in Indonesia. In addition, the results of this study are expected to provide practical input for academic writing teachers in designing more effective learning strategies. This study aims to answer the following questions: (1) What are the challenges faced by English education students in writing introductions for academic articles? (2) What factors influence students' difficulties in writing the introduction section?

METHOD

The research employed a qualitative case study method. This choice was made to investigate the difficulties English education students encounter when composing article introductions. A case study allows the researcher to examine the issue within its real-life context and provides a detailed understanding of the challenges students face (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study participants were undergraduate students in English education who were currently writing articles. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with the criterion of having experience writing introductions for articles. The sample consisted of five undergraduate students enrolled in the English Education study program at Universitas Negeri Semarang, in their seventh semester, and preparing to write research articles or theses. These students were chosen because they had direct experience with introduction writing and were at a critical stage of their academic development. The sample size of five participants was considered appropriate for a qualitative case study. In qualitative research, depth of exploration is prioritized over breadth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A smaller sample allows the researcher to conduct in-depth interviews, capture nuanced experiences, and identify recurring patterns across participants. This aligns with the principle of *information-rich cases* (Patton, 2015), where fewer participants can provide detailed insights into the phenomenon under study.

The research was conducted in the English Education study program at Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia. This setting was chosen because it represents a typical EFL context where students are required to write academic articles in English despite limited exposure to international academic discourse. The program emphasizes both linguistic proficiency and pedagogical competence, making it an ideal site for investigating how students negotiate the demands of academic writing. The institutional context is significant because Indonesian universities often require undergraduate students to produce research articles or theses in English as part of graduation requirements. This expectation places considerable pressure on students, who must navigate linguistic, rhetorical, and cultural challenges simultaneously (Aminah et al., 2025).

The main instrument in this research was the researcher himself as the data collector and analyst, supported by semi-structured interview guidelines. The interview protocol was developed based on Swales' (1990) CARS model, focusing on students' experiences with the three rhetorical moves: establishing the territory, establishing the niche, and occupying the niche. Questions were designed to elicit participants' perceptions of difficulties, strategies, and affective factors.

Interviews were conducted online via Zoom to accommodate participants' schedules and ensure accessibility. Each interview lasted around 30 minutes, giving participants enough time to explain their experiences in detail. All interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Data collection lasted for one month until sufficient data was obtained to achieve saturation, meaning that no new themes emerged from additional interviews.

Ethical principles were strictly applied throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Written consent was obtained before interviews were conducted. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms (S1-S5) were used in reporting findings, and

all personal identities were removed from transcripts. Data were stored securely and were accessible only to researchers, ensuring confidentiality.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The results of this study were derived from interviews carried out in December 2025 with seventh-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Semarang State University who were in the process of writing academic articles. Data collection employed semi-structured interviews, which provided insights into the difficulties students encountered when composing introductions. Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed recurring patterns of challenges that can be interpreted through Swales' (1990) CARS Model. The findings are organized into three major categories: Move 1 (Establishing the Territory), Move 2 (Establishing the Niche), and Move 3 (Occupying the Niche).

Move 1: Establishing the Territory

All participants believed that the introduction was an important part of an academic article. They emphasized its role in providing background, establishing urgency, and directing readers toward the objectives. For example, one participant stated:

"It is crucial because it provides the foundation and justifies the urgency of the research. Without a strong introduction, readers may not understand why the study matters." (S1)

However, their levels of confidence are different:

"I feel burdened when writing the introduction because grammar and formal structure make me anxious. I worry that mistakes will make my writing look unprofessional." (S1)

"I lack confidence because the introduction is usually written in long paragraphs. Sometimes I feel overwhelmed and unsure how to start." (S2)

"Compared to other sections, I feel more confident writing introductions. I think it's easier to explain the background than to write methods or results." (S3)

"My confidence depends on how well I understand the topic. If I know the issue clearly, I can write better. But if not, I hesitate." (S4)

"I feel more confident writing introductions because I already have experience writing articles before. That experience helps me structure my ideas." (S5)

These findings show variations in students' confidence levels. This aligns with Hyland (2019), who emphasizes that academic writing is not just about constructing sentences but also about building an academic identity. S3 and S5 showed high confidence, while S1 and S2 showed low confidence, and S4 showed contextual confidence. This pattern is consistent with Ekasari (2020), who reports that EFL students often struggle to balance adherence to formal rules with the expression of ideas. Study programs need to provide explicit training in writing with a focused background so that students do not just write generally but can demonstrate the relevance of their research from the outset.

Move 2: Establishing the Niche

This stage is the most challenging part. The main difficulties students face are identifying research gaps and writing literature reviews. For example, one participant stated:

"The difficulty I experience in writing an introduction is how to write using academic vocabulary while still being able to attract the reader's attention. In addition, I sometimes provide too much context for the issue being discussed, resulting in the introduction containing too much information." (S5)

Participants reported several challenges in writing introductions:

"I struggle to organize my ideas and choose the right academic vocabulary. Sometimes I know what I want to say, but when I write it down, it becomes unclear." (S1)

"Finding the research gap is very difficult. I feel like I need factual data to prove it, but I don't know how to connect the data with my topic." (S2)

"For me, literature reviews and research gaps are interrelated. I often get confused about which part is background and which part is the actual gap." (S3)

"I struggle to connect my topic to previous studies. I read the articles, but I don't know how to link them logically." (S4)

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"I often end up writing too much context. I want to show that the issue is important, but then the introduction becomes too descriptive and loses focus." (S5)

The most challenging thing for students is finding a research gap. Interviews show that gaps are difficult to identify, literature reviews are often descriptive, and students are confused about the difference between background and research gaps. This study is similar to Hamdani & Abid (2025), who found that EFL students fail to synthesize literature critically. This study adds a new dimension, over-contextualization (S5) and anxiety, as factors that exacerbate the difficulty of finding gaps. These factors are rarely discussed in previous literature, thereby expanding the understanding of the challenges of writing introductions in the EFL context.

Move 3: Occupying the Niche

Students use adaptive strategies to address challenges. The findings show that students actively employ various coping mechanisms such as imitating journal patterns, using AI tools, reading multiple articles, and seeking peer feedback. These adaptive strategies indicate their agency in negotiating academic demands and gradually improving coherence and accuracy in writing introductions. For example, one participant stated:

"I use AI-assisted tools to help organize my ideas and structure the introduction. These tools support me in identifying relevant background information, formulating clear research contexts, and refining the flow of my opening paragraphs." (S2)

These are the strategies students use when writing an article introduction.

"I struggle to organize my ideas and choose the right academic vocabulary. Sometimes I know what I want to say, but when I write it down, it becomes unclear." (S1)

"For me, literature reviews and research gaps are interrelated. I often get confused about which part is background and which part is the actual gap." (S3)

"I struggle to connect my topic to previous studies. I read the articles, but I don't know how to link them logically." (S4)

"I often end up writing too much context. I want to show that the issue is important, but then the introduction becomes too descriptive and loses focus." (S5)

Student strategies show an effort to adapt, but are not yet fully effective. They still rely on external models (journals, AI tools, peer feedback) without a deep mastery of rhetoric. This aligns with Aminah et al. (2025), who report that final-year students often rely on sample articles or technology but still find it difficult to assert their contributions. (S5) adds an important dimension: proofreading and peer review. This strategy shows an awareness that other people's perspectives can help improve the quality of the introduction. Pedagogical support should focus on developing students' rhetorical skills. Lecturers can facilitate peer review and provide detailed feedback so that students not only imitate but also understand the rhetorical logic behind the introduction.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that although students consistently consider introductions to be an important part of academic articles, their confidence levels vary significantly. Some students express high levels of confidence, often tied to prior writing experience, while others report low confidence due to linguistic challenges and structural burdens. This variation supports Hyland's (2019) view that academic writing is not only about sentence construction, but also about the formation of academic identity. This is also in line with Ekasari's (2020) findings, which show that EFL students often struggle to balance adherence to formal rules with the expression of ideas.

Despite recognizing the importance of introductions, students face significant challenges, particularly in synthesizing literature and identifying research gaps. These difficulties are consistent with Swales' (2004) observation that establishing a niche is one of the most challenging aspects of academic writing.

To address these challenges, students employed adaptive strategies such as imitating journal patterns, using AI tools, applying the CARS model, creating frameworks, and seeking peer feedback. Although these strategies demonstrate student independence, they also reveal a dependence on external models rather than a deep mastery of rhetorical conventions. The use of AI tools reflects the growing role of technology in academic writing, helping students

organize ideas and draft introductions. However, extensive reading and peer feedback remain crucial for developing coherence and accuracy.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the challenges faced by undergraduate English education students in writing the introduction section of academic articles, analyzed through Swales' CARS Model (1990). The findings revealed multidimensional difficulties across the three rhetorical moves: variations in confidence when establishing the territory, significant struggles in identifying and articulating research gaps, and reliance on external models when occupying the niche. These results highlight that the challenges are not only linguistic and rhetorical, but also cognitive and affective. However, the study is limited by its small sample size and the focus on a single institution, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the complexity of introduction writing in EFL contexts and underscores the need for pedagogical support that combines explicit instruction, scaffolding, and peer feedback. Future research with larger and more diverse samples will be necessary to strengthen and broaden the applicability of these findings.

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