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Article

ESP Academic Writing Hurdles: A Case Study of Technological Institute Freshmen

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A B S T R A C T

This study explores ESP academic writing hurdles and coping strategies among freshmen at a technological institute. While previous research focuses on general EFL writing, studies specifically addressing the technical demands of engineering freshmen are limited. Using a qualitative case study, three students were interviewed for in-depth data. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to categorize both writing hurdles and coping mechanisms. Results indicate that students face significant difficulties in lexical choices, grammar, text structure, and plagiarism, primarily due to limited academic vocabulary and the gap between high school and university standards. To cope, students combine course modules with peer discussions and digital resources. Findings suggest that lecturers should provide flexible feedback and support independent learning strategies. Ultimately, understanding these specific hurdles is crucial to help freshmen adapt to the demanding professional standards of technical academic writing.

Keywords: *ESP Academic Writing, Freshmen, Writing Hurdles*

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INTRODUCTION

ESP academic writing is a specialized genre that requires high formal language within technical contexts, such as laboratory reports and research papers. In a technological institute, its primary goal is to meet the rigorous standards of scientific communication and professional publications (Poudel, 2018). Unlike general English, ESP demands deep linguistic formality and strict adherence to specific field conventions. According to Oshima and Hogue (in Poudel, 2018) academic writing is a formal style essential for higher education because it utilizes specific technical expressions. In this realm, freshmen often encounter significant hurdles in articulating their scientific ideas. As non-native speakers, these first-year students face complex situations when they must present arguments logically and clearly (Celik, 2020).

However, the challenge is not only linguistic; the ease of internet access often hinders students from developing their own original thoughts, as they tend to rely too much on existing online information rather than their own critical thinking (Cholifah et al., 2022). Consequently, freshmen must exercise greater effort to ensure their work is original and accurately cited to maintain scientific integrity. Mastering ESP writing is a process that requires specialized technical competencies. Trzeciak & Mackay (1994) identified several essential skills, such as summarizing complex data, adhering to ethical standards to avoid plagiarism, and mastering citation formats. Because of these demands, students at technological institutes struggle with basic mechanics like technical vocabulary and sentence construction (Nurfidoh & Kareviaty, 2021). According to Shokirjonovna (2020) academic

writing is a complex process that requires students to not only master linguistic rules but also to synthesize critical thinking with formal academic conventions. However, many students still face various hurdles when producing academic texts.

These difficulties often arise from a lack of familiarity with academic discourse and the rigorous standards of university-level writing. This is supported by Wati et al (2024), who found that undergraduate students consistently struggle with lexical choices and the ability to structure their arguments effectively in an academic context. Furthermore, Cholifah et al (2022) previously noted that a structured approach is vital in teaching writing to ensure students understand the formal patterns of a text. Therefore, understanding these hurdles is crucial, especially for freshmen who are just transitioning from high school to the more demanding environment of a technological institute. While numerous studies have investigated EFL writing difficulties in general academic settings, there is a lack of research specifically focusing on the complex technical demands faced by first-year engineering students in a technological institute context. Following the qualitative framework suggested by Yin (2018), this study aims to explore the specific hurdles faced by freshmen in mastering ESP academic writing and the strategies they use to navigate these academic complexities

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive research design with a phenomenological case study approach. According to Yin (2018), a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. This research uses a qualitative method with a case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by students. The research was conducted at Institut Teknologi Sumatera, which is a public technological university in Lampung, Indonesia, specializing in engineering and applied sciences.

Participants

The participants of this research are freshmen from an ESP academic writing class at Institut Teknologi Sumatera. Out of 42 students in the class, three participants (two males and one female) were selected using purposive sampling. The criteria for selection included: (1) students actively enrolled in the ESP course, (2) those who have completed writing assignments, and (3) willingness to be research informants based on their writing performance scores. To ensure ethical standards, all participants provided informed consent before the interviews. Their identities were kept anonymous, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty**.**

The data collection technique used in this study is the Interview. Data analysis in this study follows the five-step interactive framework proposed by Yin (2018) integrated with the thematic analysis approach by Braun & Clarke (2006). First, the researcher compiled the data by organizing all interview transcripts. Second, the data was disassembled by breaking down the information into smaller codes. Third, the researcher reassembled these codes into specific themes to identify both the writing hurdles and the strategies used by students. Fourth, the findings were interpreted by creating a narrative that explains the meaning of the themes. Finally, the researcher concluded the study by drawing final results to answer the research questions. The validity of the data is guaranteed through triangulation of sources and member checking. The researcher confirmed the interview results with the participants to ensure that the interpretation matches their actual experiences and perspectives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This research explored the ESP academic writing hurdles of freshmen and their strategies for overcoming them at Institut Teknologi Sumatera. The data were gathered through offline interviews with first-year engineering students. The researcher focused the investigation on specific hurdles, including technical vocabulary (lexical), grammar, text structure, and plagiarism avoidance.

Freshmen's hurdles in writing the ESP academic text

Lexical Hurdles

In ESP academic writing, choosing the right words is very important. It refers to selecting vocabulary that is appropriate for technical and academic texts. Additionally, students must use correct linking words to make their sentences coherent **(Shokirjonovna, 2020).** Based on the interview data from the freshmen, the specific lexical hurdles they faced are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Freshmen's Lexical Hurdles in Writing ESP Academic Texts

Participant	Theme of Hurdle	Key Interview Excerpts (Direct Quotes)
P1	Gap Between High School English and ESP	"My vocabulary is limited when it comes to engineering. In high school, we only focused on general English. Now, I often get stuck because I don't know the specific English terms for the technical tools or processes, I need to write about in my essay."
P2	Academic vs. Common Vocabulary	"When I read technical journals, the words are very different from daily English. I struggle to find formal equivalents; for example, I know the word 'use,' but I am not sure if I should use 'utilize' to make my technical essay sound more professional."
P3	Formal Transitions & Jargon Shock	"I'm not used to formal linking words like 'furthermore' or 'consequently' because I only used 'and' or 'but' in high school. Also, using technical jargon is a hurdle; I understand it in journals, but I'm afraid of using it wrongly in my own writing."
P1	Lack of Technical Synonyms & Repetition	"I often repeat the same technical terms over and over. I don't know enough synonyms to explain engineering concepts in a more varied way, so my writing feels very repetitive and not academic enough compared to the journals I read."

Based on the data in Table 1, it can be concluded that the participants' lexical hurdles are characterized by a significant gap between their high school English background and the requirements of ESP writing. The participants face specific difficulties in moving beyond common vocabulary to academic synonyms, as well as a lack of confidence in utilizing formal transitions and technical jargon. These limitations, as shown in the table, result in repetitive word choices and a struggle to articulate engineering concepts effectively in their academic essays.

Grammar Hurdles

Aside from lexical choices, the second significant challenge faced by freshmen in ESP writing relates to grammar. In academic writing, correct grammatical structures are essential to ensure that technical ideas and engineering processes are conveyed accurately and logically. However, many students still struggle to apply the complex grammar rules required for formal essays. Based on the interview results, the specific grammar hurdles experienced by the participants are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Freshmen's Grammar Hurdles in ESP Writing

Participant	Theme of Hurdle	Key Interview Excerpts (Direct Quotes)
P1	Passive Voice Construction	"In engineering writing, we must use passive voice to stay objective. I struggle to change active sentences like 'we measured the voltage' into 'the voltage was measured.' It feels complicated to get the structure right."
P2	Tense Inconsistency in Technical Flow	"I get confused about when to use Present Tense for scientific facts and Past Tense for the results of an experiment. My tenses are often inconsistent when I try to explain how a machine works in my essay."
P3	Punctuation in Technical Data & Units	"I find it difficult to use punctuation correctly when listing technical specifications or decimal units. I often misplace colons when introducing a list of engineering components or data results."
P3	Subject-Verb Agreement in Complex Sentences	"When I write long sentences about technical processes, I often lose track of the subject-verb agreement. It's hard to keep the grammar correct when the sentence involves many technical terms and variables."

The findings presented in the second table highlight that the participants' grammatical and punctuation struggles are specifically tied to the formal demands of engineering discourse. A significant portion of these hurdles stems from the difficulty of maintaining objectivity through passive voice and the confusion of alternating between tenses for scientific

theories versus experimental observations. Furthermore, the lack of precision in punctuation when documenting technical data suggests that freshmen still find it challenging to adapt their general language skills into the highly structured and data-heavy environment of ESP writing.

Text Structure

The third challenge involves organizing ideas into a coherent academic format. Engineering writing requires a systematic flow that differs significantly from high school standards, often demanding a more logical and technical progression of thoughts. The participants' specific difficulties in managing this text structure are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Freshmen's Hurdles in Terms of Essay Structure

Participant	Theme of Hurdle	Key Interview Excerpts (Direct Quotes)
P1	Argument Development & Flow	"In writing an argumentative essay, I find it difficult to develop my main points. I struggle to connect my ideas from the introduction to the conclusion, and I often feel confused about how to elaborate on my arguments so they don't sound repetitive."
P2	Forced Idea Generation under Pressure	"The biggest difficulty is just getting started and finding the right ideas for the topic. I often feel stuck and don't know how to think critically. Usually, I have to force myself to come up with any ideas only when the deadline is very close, because I find it so hard to structure my thoughts otherwise."
P3	Cohesion & Supporting Evidence	"I often lack ideas on how to provide a detailed explanation for my claims. It's hard to find the right balance between the introduction and the body paragraphs. I also struggle to make sure my final conclusion really answers the prompt or the argument I started with."

To summarize the findings from Table 3, it is evident that freshmen encounter significant cognitive barriers when organizing an academic essay. Their primary struggle lies in the logical progression of arguments and the difficulty of elaborating on ideas without being repetitive. Furthermore, the tendency to force idea generation only under the pressure of a deadline indicates a lack of confidence in critical thinking and structural cohesion. Ultimately, while students understand the basic essay format, they find it challenging to build a persuasive and well-connected academic narrative.

Avoiding Plagiarism

Beyond linguistic, grammatical accuracy, and text structure, academic writing demands a high level of integrity through the prevention of plagiarism. For engineering students, avoiding plagiarism is not just about following rules, but about acknowledging the intellectual property of others when referencing technical theories and data. This section explores how freshmen navigate the complexities of citation and paraphrasing to maintain academic honesty. The specific hurdles encountered by the participants in avoiding plagiarism are detailed in Table 4.

Table 4. Freshmen's Hurdles in Avoiding Plagiarism

Participant	Theme of Hurdle	Key Interview Excerpts (Direct Quotes)
P1	Paraphrasing Complex Expert Sentences	"I understand that we must create original sentences based on our own ideas to avoid plagiarism. However, I find it very difficult to paraphrase sentences from experts because their language is so complex. I have to think a lot just to rewrite a few sentences into my own words."
P2	Limited Vocabulary for Paraphrasing	"I know that copying a theory without paraphrasing is plagiarism. I understand the need to paraphrase, but I struggle to find alternative words because I am not familiar with them. I feel that I still lack the vocabulary to explain the same concept differently."
P3	Institutional Consequences & Translation Hurdles	"Avoiding plagiarism is crucial, especially here in ITERA, because if we are caught plagiarizing, our exam grade will be zero (0). This rule really pressures us to avoid it. However, when I find an English journal, I have to translate it first, and I often lack the ideas to rewrite it without sounding like the original."

The evidence from Table 4 suggests that while freshmen are acutely aware of the ethical and institutional stakes of plagiarism, particularly the zero-grade policy at Itera, they remain hindered by practical linguistic barriers. Their struggle is not a lack of intent to maintain integrity, but rather a lexical deficit that makes finding alternative expressions nearly impossible. Consequently, the pressure to avoid plagiarism, combined with the difficulty of

translating and paraphrasing complex expert language, creates a high-stress writing environment for students who are still acclimating to ESP standards.

Students' Strategies for Overcoming Writing Hurdles

To understand how students manage their writing hurdles, the researcher categorized their coping mechanisms into lexical, grammatical, ethical (plagiarism), and structural domains. The data gathered from participants reveals a variety of practical approaches used to overcome these four primary difficulties.

Lexical Hurdles

Regarding lexical challenges, the participants adopted various techniques to reduce mistakes while writing. These methods function as essential tools for students to navigate vocabulary-related obstacles more effectively. A summary of these coping mechanisms, based on the interview data, is outlined in Table 5.

Table 5. Strategies for Overcoming Academic Writing Hurdles

Participant	Theme of Strategy	Key Interview Excerpts (Direct Quotes)
P1	Module-Based Vocabulary Learning	"To bridge the gap between high school English and ESP, I study the examples provided in our English module. I look for technical terms and linking words like 'hence' or 'therefore' in the module's texts and try to apply them to the essays I am writing."
P2	AI-Assisted Vocabulary Refinement	"To find formal equivalents and avoid common words, I use Gemini. I ask the AI to suggest more professional or technical synonyms for my sentences. It helps me change words like 'use' into 'utilize' so my engineering essay sounds more academic."
P3	Social media-Based Academic Immersion	"I overcome the shock of technical jargon by watching TikTok content that breaks down TOEFL articles or academic texts. It's very helpful because the explanations are easy to follow, and it helps me become more familiar with formal terms in a way that isn't boring."
P1	Peer Discussion & Synonym Reference	"To avoid repeating the same technical terms, I sometimes ask my friends for other words or look them up in references. I try to find synonyms so that my engineering essay doesn't feel boring and has a more varied academic vocabulary."

In conclusion, the strategies employed by freshmen to overcome lexical hurdles reflect a blend of traditional academic resources and modern digital tools. By leveraging the provided English modules alongside AI assistance like Gemini and educational content on TikTok, students are actively seeking ways to bridge the gap between general English and technical ESP requirements. These proactive coping mechanisms indicate that while students face significant vocabulary limitations, they are resourceful in utilizing available technology to enhance their academic writing and linguistic precision.

Grammar Hurdles

To mitigate errors in sentence structure and mechanics, students employ various practical strategies. The specific ways participants navigate their grammatical and punctuation difficulties to ensure their essays meet the required academic standards are detailed in Table 6.

Table 6. Students' Strategies to Overcome Grammar Hurdles

Participant	Theme of Strategy	Key Interview Excerpts (Direct Quotes)
P1	Sentence Simplification & Pattern Practice	"To avoid mistakes in passive voice construction, I prefer to use simpler tenses that I am already comfortable with. I often practice changing active sentences into simple passive forms step-by-step to stay objective in my engineering essays without making the structure too complicated."
P2	Tense Mapping & AI Verification	"To fix my tense inconsistency, I try to understand the rules for scientific facts versus experimental results more deeply. I also use Gemini or other digital tools to check if my flow between Present Tense and Past Tense is correct when I am explaining how a machine works."
P3	Digital Punctuation Checkers	"When I am confused about placing colons or commas in technical lists and decimal units, I use Google or automated checkers to verify the rules. It helps me ensure that the technical specifications and engineering components are punctuated correctly according to academic standards."

P3	Sentence Break-down & Self-Correction	"To handle subject-verb agreement, I have to do a lot of practice in breaking down complex sentences into smaller, manageable parts. I realized that reading more and forcing myself to practice these 'sentence break-downs' helps me keep track of the grammar in long technical sentences."

To summarize Table 6, students overcome grammatical hurdles by combining manual simplification with digital verification. Beyond using AI tools like Gemini for accuracy, they actively engage in intensive practice and extensive reading to master complex structures. By consistently practicing sentence break-downs and reviewing academic examples, students are able to improve their consistency in passive voice and subject-verb agreement.

Text Structure

Regarding the organization of ideas and logical flow, students utilize various systematic approaches to ensure their essays are well-structured. The participants' methods for navigating the complexities of text organization and maintaining argumentative coherence are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Students' Strategies to Overcome Text Structure Hurdles

Participant	Theme of Strategy	Key Interview Excerpts (Direct Quotes)
P1	Module-Based Structural Reading	"To improve my argument flow, I focus on reading many examples provided in our English module. It is impossible to write well if I rarely read, so I study how the module arranges the text. After reading, I do the exercises to practice connecting my ideas from the introduction to the conclusion."
P2	Reference-Based Idea Mapping	"When I feel stuck or pressured by deadlines, I find several references on the internet to spark ideas. I often use Indonesian journals to help arrange my thoughts in my first language first, then I translate and adapt them into English to help me structure my thoughts better."
P3	Critical Reading & Structural Practice	"I overcome the lack of ideas by reading a lot of journals and practicing how to structure the introduction and the body paragraphs. I realized that if I don't read enough, I can't find the right balance for my explanation. So, I focus on reading and practicing so my conclusion really answers the prompt."

In essence, students bridge their structural gaps through continuous reading and structural exercises. Focusing on the layout of introductions and body paragraphs allows them to overcome the pressure of deadlines and produce more cohesive technical writing.

Avoiding Plagiarism

Regarding the difficulties in avoiding plagiarism, paraphrasing was mostly considered a complicated activity requiring certain techniques. Furthermore, the participants presented several ways to cope with the difficulties of avoiding plagiarism. The interview data of participants related to the ways participants cope with the difficulties revealed in table 8.

Table 8. Students' Strategies to Overcome Plagiarism Hurdles

Participant	Theme of Strategy	Key Interview Excerpts (Direct Quotes)
P1	Curriculum-Based Paraphrase Practice	"To cope with complex expert sentences, I rely on my English class materials because there is a specific module for paraphrasing. I do many exercises from there to learn how to change word order without losing meaning. Practicing those exercises really helps me create original sentences for my essay."
P2	AI-Driven Rewriting (Gemini)	"Since I lack the vocabulary to explain concepts differently, I use Gemini as a solution. I ask the AI to help me rewrite or rephrase sentences while keeping the technical context. This helps me find alternative words and structures that I wouldn't have thought of on my own."
P3	Plagiarism Percentage Verification	"After finishing my writing, I always use an anti-plagiarism application to check it. I need to make sure and see the exact percentage of the plagiarism level. If the percentage is still high, I will rewrite the sentences until it is low enough to be safe."

To summarize Table 8, students overcome plagiarism difficulties by combining classroom-based learning with digital verification. They utilize paraphrasing exercises from their English modules and leverage Gemini for rephrasing complex ideas. Additionally, the habit of monitoring plagiarism percentages reflects their proactive effort to ensure their work meets strict institutional standards.

Discussion

Regarding lexical difficulties, the students in this study found it challenging to select appropriate vocabulary for their technical assignments. They often struggle to find the right words that fit the scientific context of ESP writing. This is consistent with Wati et al (2024), who found that undergraduate students face significant hurdles in lexical choices, particularly in using academic and technical terms correctly. These difficulties often prevent students from expressing their ideas clearly, as they lack the specific vocabulary needed for engineering topics.

To mitigate lexical difficulties, students employ a proactive blend of institutional resources and modern digital tools. Based on the data in Table 5, these strategies involve module-based learning to master formal transitions and the utilization of AI assistance to refine vocabulary into a professional tone. Additionally, students leverage educational social media content to familiarize themselves with technical jargon and engage in peer discussions to find varied synonyms and avoid repetitive phrasing. This shift toward digital and collaborative learning aligns with Kohnke (2023), who emphasizes that generative AI and social media provide essential scaffolding for students to navigate technical vocabulary. Furthermore, the initiative to discuss with peers and seek external references reflects the "socially shared regulation" within academic writing, as highlighted by Hadwin et al (2018), which enables students to collectively overcome linguistic gaps and meet professional engineering standards.

The next challenge faced by students relates to grammar and punctuation, which are essential for professional engineering discourse. As shown in Table 2, students struggle with constructing passive voice to maintain objectivity and often face tense inconsistency when switching between scientific facts and experimental results. Moreover, they have difficulty placing correct punctuation in technical data and managing subject-verb agreement in long, complex sentences. These grammatical hurdles align with Chaisiri (2010), who explains that students often find it hard to balance technical accuracy with complex language rules in ESP writing. This is further supported by Nurfidoh & Kareviaty (2021), who argue that even when students understand basic grammar, applying the correct structures in an academic context remains a significant struggle that can affect the clarity of their work.

To solve grammar and punctuation problems, students use practical ways like simplifying their sentences and using digital tools. Based on Table 6, they prefer to use simpler tenses and practice making passive sentences step-by-step to keep their writing objective but easy to understand. For technical accuracy, they use AI tools like Gemini or other automated checkers to verify punctuation and tense rules. Additionally, they manage long technical sentences by breaking them down into smaller parts. This use of technology aligns with O'Neill (2019), who states that automated tools help students learn and fix their own grammatical mistakes. Furthermore, the way students simplify their sentences is supported by Chaisiri (2010), who explains that in technical writing, students often choose simpler structures to make sure their information is clear and professional.

The third challenge involves organizing ideas into a coherent academic format. Based on Table 3, students face significant cognitive barriers in managing the logical progression of their arguments and connecting ideas from the introduction to the conclusion. They often struggle to elaborate on their claims without being repetitive and find it difficult to generate ideas unless they are under the pressure of a deadline. This lack of structural cohesion and critical thinking aligns with Shokirjonovna (2020), who argues that problems in structuring text are caused by an inability to connect each part of the essay into a unified whole. Consequently, as suggested by the findings, students need more exposure to academic references to help them develop their ideas and build a well-connected narrative that meets engineering standards.

To overcome difficulties in text structure, students rely on extensive reading and systematic structural exercises. Based on Table 7, they study English modules to understand how to connect ideas from the introduction to the conclusion and use academic journals as references to spark new ideas when feeling stuck. Additionally, students engage in critical reading to find the right balance between body paragraphs and to ensure their final conclusion

properly answers the writing prompt. This approach is consistent with Bailey (2015), who explains that reading academic models is a key strategy for students to learn the organizational patterns of successful essays. Furthermore, the initiative to use journals and modules for "idea mapping" reflects the self-regulated learning strategies discussed by Zimmerman (2002), which help students manage the cognitive pressure of structuring a professional academic narrative.

Another significant hurdle for students is avoiding plagiarism, especially given the strict academic policies they face. According to Table 4, although students are aware of the importance of original writing, they find it very difficult to paraphrase complex sentences from experts. This struggle is largely due to their limited vocabulary, which makes it hard to find different words to explain the same technical ideas. Additionally, the fear of receiving a zero grade at Itera adds to their stress, especially when they have to translate and rewrite difficult journal articles. This situation aligns with Mohammed & Perun (2015), who argue that students often understand the rules of integrity but struggle to apply them in their own words. Furthermore, as noted by Shokirjonovna (2020), the lack of academic vocabulary remains a major barrier that prevents students from successfully rearranging formal sentences and creating original paraphrases.

To address plagiarism concerns, students combine their course materials with various digital tools. Based on Table 8, they use exercises from their English modules to learn how to change sentence structures without losing the original meaning. Since they often struggle to find the right words, they also use AI like Gemini to help rewrite difficult ideas more professionally. Finally, they use anti-plagiarism applications to check their work and ensure the similarity percentage is safe. This proactive approach matches the findings of Hu & Sun (2017), who argue that many students struggle with integrity not because they want to cheat, but because they lack the language skills to paraphrase complex ideas. Additionally, the habit of using digital checkers to verify their writing reflects what Walker (2010) describes as using technology for "formative feedback," where students learn to improve their honesty and writing skills at the same time.

CONCLUSIONS

This research explores the challenges freshmen face in ESP academic writing, focusing on lexical choices, grammar, text structure, and avoiding plagiarism. The results indicate that even within the same class, each student encounters unique difficulties and develops individual coping mechanisms. These struggles primarily stem from a lack of academic vocabulary, the difficulty of generating ideas, and the significant gap between high school English and university standards. To address these issues, students proactively bridge their knowledge gaps by combining course modules and peer discussions with various digital resources and online verification tools. Given these findings, it is imperative for lecturers to facilitate students' needs by providing flexible feedback and alternative learning methods that recognize these independent strategies. By supporting such diverse approaches, lecturers can help freshmen effectively adapt to the professional demands of ESP writing.

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