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Teaching Academic Writing in English to ESL/EFL Learners in Higher Education: A Systematic Review of Strategies and Challenges

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About Article

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ABSTRACT

This synthesis details the difficulties and teaching techniques used for academic writing in English among ESL/EFL learners in higher education. Studies conducted from 2010 to 2024 were identified from comprehensive collections in databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest, EBSCOhost, and Google Scholar) and grey literature resources, such as institutional repositories. Adhering to the PRISMA framework, 27 studies were assessed qualitatively. Data were extracted on participant demographics, contexts, research designs, main outcomes, and proposed interventions within each of the linguistic, cognitive, affective, institutional, and technological categories. The findings indicate similar challenges related to vocabulary size, lexical issues, and negative L1 transfers. There are also difficulties in argument formation and source integration. Additionally, the pressure to write independently contributes to writing anxiety, low motivation, and other institutional barriers. Identifying key methods revealed that strategies such as genre-based instruction, collaborative learning, technology integration, and iterative feedback processes are particularly effective. The findings offer valuable insights for educators aiming to develop module-based and multi-method instructional support to enhance ESL/EFL students' academic writing abilities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a fundamental skill in every educational and career setting, especially for those learners who are studying English as their second or Foreign Language. It is a heavily structured style of writing that supports students in presenting their ideas clearly and critically engaging with scholarly work, all within the parameters acceptable to academia. At this higher level, academic writing mastery is fundamental for students to succeed in academia by learning to communicate effectively with other members of the global academic community. With English being the main language of tertiary education and scholarly publishing, academic writing skills are essential for publication, career development, and knowledge exchange, given that research communication has become so internationalized (Hyland, 2018).

In addition to linguistics, academic writing cultivates critical thinking and intercultural communication, the same skills that act both as a gateway and an obstacle in international education (Akhtar *et al.*, 2019). Educational endeavors prioritize teaching these important skills, considering them essential for learners to excel academically and develop new knowledge (Morrison & Evans, 2018).

This literature review synthesizes existing empirical and theoretical studies on the challenges ESL/EFL learners face in academic writing, as well as potential teaching strategies to overcome these difficulties. While numerous individual studies and reviews have addressed specific aspects of academic writing instruction or learner difficulties, there remains a lack of comprehensive, systematic integration of research spanning linguistic, cognitive, affective, institutional, and technological domains, especially one that reflects recent developments from 2010 to 2024. Moreover, prior reviews have often centered on isolated contexts or pedagogical approaches without encompassing the broad diversity of ESL/EFL higher education environments worldwide. By employing a systematic review methodology adhering to the PRISMA framework, this study fills these gaps by holistically examining a wide range of challenges and evidence-based interventions across various settings and learner populations. The synthesis aims to offer educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers an inclusive and up-to-date foundation for informing more effective, context-sensitive academic writing instruction. The paper proceeds with a review of the existing literature, followed by the methodology, results, and discussion, and concludes with implications and recommendations for future research and practice.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Contexts and populations in ESL/EFL academic writing

Academic writing in English is a critical skill for ESL/EFL learners in higher education, enabling their successful participation in global scholarly communities (Hyland, 2018). Despite its importance, learners frequently encounter significant difficulties stemming from linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors, often compounded by varying institutional support and technological readiness (Akhtar *et al.*, 2019; Fareed *et al.*, 2016).

Although numerous empirical studies have examined specific challenges or pedagogical strategies, the extant literature lacks a comprehensive, integrative synthesis that systematically consolidates multidimensional evidence across diverse contexts and educational levels. Prior reviews tend to focus narrowly on either linguistic aspects or isolated teaching methods without considering the interplay among learner characteristics, institutional factors, and technology.

This gap necessitates a systematic review that aggregates findings from a broad range of methodologically rigorous studies conducted from 2010 to 2024, spanning the linguistic, cognitive, affective, institutional, and technological domains. By doing so, this review intends to provide a more holistic understanding that can inform effective academic writing instruction tailored to the increasingly complex needs of ESL/EFL learners in higher education.

2.2. Challenges in academic writing for ESL/EFL learners

2.2.1. linguistic challenges: vocabulary, grammar, and syntax

One of the most persistent barriers to proficient academic writing for ESL/EFL learners is limited linguistic proficiency, which primarily extends to vocabulary knowledge and grammatical mastery. Learners often have a restricted vocabulary and are unfamiliar with complex grammatical rules, making it difficult for them to write coherent argumentative essays (Mustafa *et al.*, 2022). Additional issues, such as synthesizing research to support a thesis statement and organizing arguments in an ordered manner, support the idea that the misattribution of sources can spill over into papers (Aldhabii & Almansouri, 2022). Errors in sentence structure and word choice often stem from negative transfer from a learner's first language (L1), contributing to weaker academic writing skills and making comprehension challenging. For example, students may transfer L1 organizational patterns that are incongruous with English academic conventions or misuse idiomatic expressions, affecting the overall tone and formal style (Fareed *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, these issues are often exacerbated by a dearth of practical writing exercises and inadequate direct instruction on the grammatical structures necessary for academic writing (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2015). Learners' academic writing tends to be fragmented and incoherent, with inadequate support for deep syntax and rich vocabulary.

2.2.2. Cognitive and textual challenges: content development and coherence

Besides language challenges, ESL/EFL students also face significant cognitive load simply trying to generate ideas, develop content, and maintain coherent discourse. First, academic writing requires not only language proficiency (in grammar, syntax, and vocabulary) but also the ability to organize ideas logically, argue coherently, incorporate sources responsibly, and conform to disciplinary genres such as summarizing, paraphrasing, and documenting sources accurately. Integrating all these elements might seem like a tall order, and it is: students must combine information from several places, identify the relevant parts, exercise judgement as to its reliability, and build consistent narratives (Nenotek *et al.*, 2022). Academic writing is also inherently difficult in the



sense that it demands a high level of metacognitive and critical thinking skills, which students are not explicitly taught (Jomaa & Bidin, 2017). The emergence challenge is simply the fact that careers, thematic links, and transitional devices are used less in business homework. Inexperience with academic writing conventions can also prevent students from identifying the evidence needed and deploying the necessary rhetorical moves (Corcoran & Englander, 2016). Addressing these issues requires pedagogical strategies that stress not only acquiring knowledge about the subject matter, but also the specific procedures and practices central to good academic writing.

2.2.3. Affective and institutional challenges: motivation, attitude, and resource availability

Emotional factors and institutional constraints may greatly impair the writing of second/foreign-language academic students. For instance, some researchers express a certain degree of uneasiness while writing in English because they feel that their diction can be misinterpreted or because they have less confidence compared to their fluency with other subjects (Fareed *et al.*, 2016). When combined with previous negative experiences and the perception of writing as an inherently difficult skill to master, motivation declines, and sustained practice becomes unlikely to occur. The attitudinal difficulty is aggravated with the lack of institutional support, like there being no writing centers, restrictions on personalized feedback or materials relevant to different learning requirements (Akhtar *et al.*, 2019). A typical barrier most educators face at some point in their career is large class sizes, which sometimes makes providing personalized instruction and targeted formative feedback quite challenging. Moreover, the shortage of teaching resources, limited integration of writing support into the curriculum, and inadequate teacher training are all compounding problems. (Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020). Both issues call for resources that are genuinely student-centered, along with targeted yet effective approaches to sustain learner persistence and enhance writing skills.

2.3. Pedagogical strategies for improving academic writing

2.3.1. Active and collaborative learning approaches

Active learning approaches provide an effective means of motivating ESL/EFL students to participate in academic writing tasks that resemble real-world problems. Unfortunately, TBL can be demanding for students, particularly when they face urgent and complex academic writing needs (Akhtar *et al.*, 2019) that are not accurately attained because they have misconceptions about the approach. Collaborative cognitive strategies foster peer interaction and scaffolding, enabling students to co-construct meaning through joint writing tasks, share drafts and peer feedback, and negotiate shared understandings—processes that significantly enhance the quality of written work while deepening critical thinking skills (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2015). Blended and flipped classroom models complement these by combining in-person instruction with online learning, helping to provide a more personalized experience for the learner, allowing them to learn at their own pace while benefiting from personalized instructional help (Tuomainen, 2016). All of

these approaches share the ability to support knowledge-rich, community-based learning environments, the motivational aspects of learners, and a broad range of feedback essential for continued writing development.

2.3.2. Use of digital tools and technology-enhanced learning

Amid the rapid development of digital technologies, many of these approaches for teaching academic writing have been revised to embrace a variety of tools that can assist learners in confronting longstanding issues. Artificial intelligence tools, such as GPT-3.5, have proven effective in providing prompt, context-aware feedback, generating ideas, and helping students organize their writing logically (Tseng & Lin, 2024). By actively working with AI, students can improve their writing and other critical thinking skills in a supportive environment. Engin (2014) observed that student-generated digital videos serve as multimodal learning resources, enhancing comprehension and promoting reflective practice that integrates both cognitive and affective dimensions in writing instruction. Google Classroom and other learning management systems can also promote ongoing interaction, enhance instruction to provide direct communication between instructor(s) and learner(s), and create writing-task records in an organized manner, which enhances not only motivation but also formative assessment (Nabhan, 2021). However, this means that digital literacy and access must be prioritized to enable the successful integration of these technologies. When utilized intelligently, these digital tools enhance, rather than degrade, traditional pedagogies and improve academic writing instruction.

2.3.3. Teacher feedback and formative assessment

Teacher feedback is important for the development of students writing skills. Its importance is shown through comments that are timely, specific, and address details about aspects of writing and its elements, ensuring that corrections lead to meaningful improvement. Learners seek feedback not only on their English language use but also on higher-level aspects, such as content development and organizational structure (Mustafa *et al.*, 2022). True formative assessment-style methods benefit from opportunities for revision, as providing the option of multiple drafts helps students establish iterative relationships with their texts, which can be supportive of metacognitive practices conducive to higher-quality writing. Automated feedback systems are effective in providing instant responses to surface-level issues, but they cannot match the depth and contextual understanding that experienced instructors bring (Taşkıran & Gökselt, 2022). Evidence suggests that hybrid feedback models combining automated tools with human input are the most effective, harnessing the efficiency of technology while preserving the essential judgment of experienced instructors (Salamonson *et al.*, 2010). Personalized student support with sufficient resources and feedback mechanisms can make formative assessments effective.

2.4. Genre-based and language-focused teaching approaches

2.4.1. Systemic functional genre-based instruction

Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and genre-based



pedagogies both understand academic writing as a social practice, and on the ideological level, they stress the necessity of students consciously seeing context, purpose, and audience. This vision promotes a transition from strict compliance with grammar norms to the construction of other, more dynamic, academic enculturation language functions, such as those noted by Correa and Echeverri (2017). The instructional learning cycles of genre pedagogy—modeling, joint construction, and independent writing—offer continual practice with multiple text forms that help students slowly develop their skills (Kakan-dee & Kaur, 2015).

2.4.2. Teaching academic conventions and citation practices

Academic writing is tough, and citation rules can be a real headache for ESL/EFL learners. Figuring out which sources are good, finding the right academic voice, and keeping track of all field-specific citation styles can feel like a lot to handle (Jomaa & Bidin, 2017). Showing students how to weave citations into literature reviews and proposals encourages them to think about the sources they are using while upholding academic honesty (Corcoran & Englander, 2016). In addition, workshops focused on writing styles in specific subjects can help students meet expectations and engage in scholarly discussions with confidence. In due course, giving instructions for the proper use of citations is more than just a technical aspect; ethical use must be considered. Finally, cultivating sharp critical thinking skills is essential for success in advanced academic endeavors.

2.4.3. Reflective and metacognitive writing practices

Writing reflective tasks using journals or diaries can significantly contribute to students' active engagement in their own learning. Writing in this manner helps them to retain information more effectively, making it a natural part of their process. Later, when they revisit their work, they can clearly recognize elements that are successful as well as those that pose challenges, and that reflective awareness is precisely the intended outcome. Klimova (2015) mentions that this type of self-tracking trains students to observe how they are doing. Ryan (2011) regards reflection as extending beyond personal growth, proposing that social semiotics challenges mere interpretation and positions linguistic pedagogy as an ideological lens, one that fosters awareness of how individuals conduct themselves within broader cultural and social contexts. By engaging in these practices, students come to perceive writing as an object they can manipulate and refine, thereby making literacy instruction more powerful and providing students with tools that may eventually allow them to work independently. Best of all, as students figure out how to write reflections, it promotes a positive spiral, increasing their confidence, reducing stress, and helping them regain control of their learning.

2.5. Influence of language proficiency and attitude on writing performance

2.5.1. Role of english language proficiency

The ability of our students to write good English has a direct correlation with where they land in the quality of academic achievement. Writing well is easier for those who have a

good grasp of grammar, vocabulary, and syntax and can generate more complex, higher-quality academic texts (Akhtar *et al.*, 2019). This is an area in which increased proficiency enables more complex academic reading, leading to content development and, eventually, critical writing. Conversely, poor language skills contribute to self-efficacy while discouraging students from engaging in more involved academic activities, thereby compromising both their performance and involvement (Mustafa *et al.*, 2022). Thus, Fareed *et al.* (2016) argued that language development must be integrated with academic writing instruction for learners to develop both linguistic and rhetorical competence.

2.5.2. Attitudinal factors toward english academic writing

Students' motivation, confidence, and perceptions of the difficulties in academic writing greatly influence their progress in producing written work. Low motivation and repeated failure in English writing cause negative attitudes (Akhtar *et al.*, 2019), which leads to unremitting practice efforts and discourages responses to feedback. For others, academic writing is considered to be grueling and less related to their area of interest, resulting in a lack of engagement (Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020). This approach can address the affective dimension of writing by creating a more positive, less stressful environment and showing students the purpose and value of developing their writing skills. Tailored reminders also optimized self-efficacy and fostered ongoing efforts to improve writing (Bahous *et al.*, 2011).

2.5.3. Cultural and contextual attitudes toward academic writing

Cultural context is a key factor in shaping approaches to writing tasks, as perceptions of what constitutes an ideal text can vary greatly depending on learners' prior educational experiences. For example, some students might be coming from contexts where the dominant culture supports (or even requires) very formulaic or rote ways of learning, a contrast to Western styles, which tend to emphasize originality and critical analysis (Gardner & Nesi, 2013). In addition, societal and institutional attitudes toward English as the medium of instruction influence students' investment in writing and shape how they express their identity through it (Pineteh, 2013). Embedding local cultural references in the teaching of academic writing can ensure relevance and overcome alienation, which may enable students to better engage with their identities as academic writers (Morrison & Evans, 2018). It is critical to recognize these cultural influences, as there are implications in curriculum design for inclusivity and responsive pedagogy.

2.6. Role of institutional and curriculum support

2.6.1. Embedding writing support in disciplinary curricula

Integrating writing instruction directly into academic courses enhances its relevance and immediate usefulness, which in turn boosts students' confidence in applying these skills across various contexts (Pineteh, 2013). Collaboration between language experts and subject instructors fosters a cohesive learning environment where writing support aligns closely with



course content and expectations, thereby improving students' learning outcomes. Broadening teaching and evaluation methods to encompass formats beyond traditional essays accommodates diverse learning preferences and helps maintain student engagement (Salamonson *et al.*, 2010). Successfully implementing these approaches depends heavily on strong institutional commitment, including careful curriculum design and effective teamwork among faculty members.

2.6.2. Teacher training and professional development

A key challenge in providing high-quality academic writing instruction is the shortage of qualified teachers who possess effective strategies to support ESL/EFL learners (Fareed *et al.*, 2016). Research-based professional development in these cognitive strategies and teaching practices can equip teachers to more effectively provide high quality writing instruction (Olson *et al.*, 2017). This continuous learning aids them in becoming agile and adjusting to changing student requirements as well as emerging technologies. Efforts to change writing outcomes will likely be insufficient without investment in staff development by institutions.

2.6.3. Resource allocation and material development

Effective academic writing instruction depends greatly on the availability of high-quality teaching materials that are meaningful and relevant to students. Educational institutions should focus on creating and distributing resources that address critical aspects such as digital literacy, proficient use of technology, and accommodating the diverse needs of learners (Nabhan, 2021). Proper investment in these resources can foster innovative teaching methods, including the integration of AI and blended learning models, while also ensuring the presence of essential support services like writing centers and digital platforms (Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020). Implementing policies that secure the consistent provision of such resources is essential for achieving sustainable advancements in writing education (Akhtar *et al.*, 2019).

2.7. Technology and AI integration in teaching academic writing

2.7.1. AI-Assisted writing tools and their pedagogical impact

Advanced AI-driven writing tools, including large language models (LLMs) like GPT-3 and sophisticated lesson-delivery systems such as Level 5 essay scoring, have significantly impacted education. These tools offer personalized, real-time feedback that assists students in generating ideas and improving the organization of their writing; essentially, they function like summarization aids that help produce work more efficiently and quickly (Tseng & Lin, 2024). Acting as virtual collaborators, these technologies prompt learners to critically review their drafts similarly to peer feedback. However, educators caution against overreliance on AI, highlighting potential inaccuracies and the risk of undermining genuine learning experiences (Borger *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, integrating AI into writing instruction should be accompanied by training that enhances students' critical thinking skills, enabling them to discern misinformation and cultivate their individual writing voices.

2.7.2. Digital literacy competences in academic writing

When examining how future teachers perceive digital literacy in writing, it becomes evident that proficiency with tools alone is insufficient. Digital literacy also involves critically evaluating online sources, protecting oneself against misinformation, and discovering innovative ways to collaborate and create (Nabhan, 2021). These elements demonstrate that integrating technology effectively into academic writing is a complex task. Developing digital literacy requires helping individuals grasp both the potential risks and benefits of using digital tools responsibly and ethically, while also unlocking new avenues for self-expression. Incorporating these competencies into teacher education programs equips future instructors to support their students in using technology thoughtfully and skillfully in academic writing.

2.7.3. Blended and flipped learning models enhanced by technology

Online and face-to-face blended learning models appear to offer optimal instructional conditions by allowing flexible and autonomous use of students' time and choice in writing tasks. This approach supports personalized learning that adapts to various schedules and learning preferences, fostering more reflective and self-directed study habits (Tuomainen, 2016). Similarly, flipped classrooms encourage active engagement during in-person sessions, focusing on discussions, feedback, and collaborative activities, while content delivery takes place outside class time (Engin, 2014). Students value the convenience and adaptability of these methods; however, challenges remain, including limited access to technology, disparities in digital skills, and some learners' preference for conventional teaching styles. It is also recognized that excessive cognitive load can hinder information retention, much like the distracting effect of a light drizzle of ice. Nonetheless, when cognitive demands are balanced, integrating diverse learning approaches can significantly improve comprehension and learning outcomes.

2.8. Specific genre challenges and teaching argumentative writing

2.8.1. Difficulties in producing clear thesis statements and organized arguments

Many ESL/EFL learners find it challenging to formulate clear and focused thesis statements, a fundamental skill for successful academic writing. The task of organizing arguments and integrating supporting evidence often becomes disorganized because these students are unfamiliar with the conventions of academic genres or lack the necessary language skills (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2015). As a result, their argumentative essays, a common requirement in university writing courses—tend to be unclear and less persuasive. Addressing these challenges calls for explicit instruction, which involves breaking down genre-specific structures and functions and offering targeted practice to help students build both confidence and competence (Aldabbus & Almansouri, 2022).

2.8.2. Teaching strategies for argumentative and analytical writing

Incorporating model texts, facilitating peer discussion groups,



and encouraging active student participation can significantly improve the teaching of argumentative writing. Model texts showcase genre-specific conventions and rhetorical techniques, providing a valuable framework that helps students grasp the nature of academic argumentation (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2015). Collaborative group activities promote diverse expression, fostering critical thinking and greater engagement (Olson *et al.*, 2017). These strategies are enhanced by targeted instruction that addresses grammatical and vocabulary shortcomings, enabling students to better articulate their ideas. This comprehensive approach supports the gradual development of essential analytic writing skills crucial for academic success.

2.8.3. Move analysis and rhetorical structure awareness

Analyzing research article abstracts and their rhetorical structures aids students in grasping the conventional patterns used by academic writers across various disciplines and linguistic backgrounds. This analysis highlights different rhetorical moves, purposes, methodologies, and outcomes, which can inform curriculum design and instructional planning (Kaya & Yağiz, 2020). Recognizing these rhetorical moves equips learners with the necessary tools to organize information effectively and meet genre-specific expectations. Incorporating such analysis into academic writing courses enhances students' understanding of how experts in the field communicate, thereby supporting more targeted and effective writing interventions (Corcoran & Englander, 2016).

2.9. Assessment practices and academic integrity in academic writing

2.9.1. Formative vs. Summative assessment in writing

Formative assessment plays a crucial role in developing academic writing by offering continuous feedback and multiple opportunities for revision, enabling learners to progressively enhance their skills. Unlike summative assessments that focus on evaluating final products with limited instructional value, formative assessments provide ongoing guidance that supports deeper learning. However, delivering personalized feedback in large classes poses significant challenges. To address this, innovative hybrid approaches combining automated feedback tools with human assessment have been implemented to balance scalability and individualized support (Taşkıran & Göksel, 2022). This blended method has demonstrated empirical benefits for learning outcomes by accommodating skill development while being feasible for implementation (Salamonson *et al.*, 2010). Despite some limitations such as occasional low interrater reliability inherent to the task, systematically integrating formative assessment across academic programs fosters continuous improvement in students' writing abilities over time.

2.9.2. Detecting and addressing contract cheating and plagiarism

Academic integrity is a contentious issue in academic writing, often challenged by peer pressure and the risk of plagiarism. The detection of this type of misconduct is largely reliant on assessor experience and the knowledge they have about the students' writing profiles, which highlights disparities in the quality and style of writing (Rogerson, 2017). The nature of

the task is also important in how assessments are susceptible to cheating, with particular types of tasks making it easier or harder for students to cheat. Educational institutions should utilize both preventative and responsive strategies in addressing plagiarism, such as raising the awareness of students on what we count as academically dishonest practices (sometimes referred to as ethical writing), coupled with enforcing sanctions through well-defined policies and procedures. There is a strong need to create a culture of learning to achieve the academic standards in order to maintain the integrity and quality of the work (Rogerson, 2017).

2.10. Feedback and revision cycles in academic writing development

Effective academic writing instruction relies on iterative cycles of feedback and revision. As noted by Mustafa *et al.* (2022), when teachers guide students through multiple drafts, it fosters deeper engagement and continuous improvement in their work. Encouraging students to seek feedback on their own writing and revise it through peer reviews and possibly some instructor input can help them develop self-regulatory skills. This, in turn, serves as a catalyst for ongoing enhancement of their writing abilities (Klimova, 2015). These iterative processes enable learners to internalize feedback and gradually refine their writing voice and technique. Therefore, designing courses that emphasize these revision opportunities is crucial for promoting long-term writing proficiency.

2.11. Research gaps and areas needing further investigation

While research on academic writing for ESL/EFL learners has expanded, notable gaps remain. There are relatively few long-term studies assessing the sustained impact of teaching methods on students, which restricts our understanding of their effectiveness over time. Moreover, research focusing on academic writing within specific disciplines especially in non-Western contexts is limited, making it difficult to directly apply findings to diverse educational settings. Considering the cultural and contextual factors that influence how students perceive and engage with their learning experiences is essential. By gaining insight into these influences, educators can design teaching approaches that better address the needs of diverse learners. Tackling these gaps is vital for improving academic writing instruction and fostering more inclusive and responsive educational practices (Akhtar *et al.*, 2019; Fareed *et al.*, 2016).

3. METHODOLOGY

In this study, a systematic approach was used to gather, evaluate, and summarize existing literature on the challenges and teaching strategies related to English academic writing. The procedure was conducted adherent to the PRISMA framework (PRISMA, 2020), ensuring transparency and accessibility of replication.

3.1. Search strategy

Relevant literature was found through multiple academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost (Academic Search, Education Source, Humanities Source),



ProQuest (ABI/INFORM, Education Database, Dissertations & Theses Global), ScienceDirect, PubMed, Cambridge Core, Wiley Online Library, SpringerLink, SciELO, and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). Google Scholar and selected institutional repositories were also searched to capture grey literature. Search terms combined keywords and Boolean operators, such as “academic writing” AND “EFL”, “ESL writing challenges”, “higher education”, “pedagogy”, and “assessment”. Searches were limited to works published from 2000 onwards to capture recent developments in pedagogy and technology-enhanced learning.

3.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Studies were included if they:

- Focused on academic writing in English within ESL/EFL or higher education contexts.
- Provided empirical data, case studies, or reviews relevant to teaching strategies, challenges, or assessment practices.
- Were published in peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, or reputable academic sources.

Publications were excluded if they:

- Addressed general English language learning without specific reference to academic writing.
- Were non-academic, opinion-based, or lacked sufficient methodological detail.
- Focused solely on primary or secondary education.

3.3. Selection process

A preliminary pool of 80 records was selected from database searches. Duplicates and irrelevant works were excluded by screening titles and abstracts. All studies remaining after the title and abstract review underwent full-text review for quality appraisal as well as relevance of these methods to the study objective. This evaluation led to 27 publications that met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final analysis.

3.4. Data extraction and analysis

For each included study, data were extracted on the first author, publication year, country or region, participant characteristics (including context), study design, key findings, and reported barriers or facilitators. These studies were then thematically coded across linguistic issues, cognitive and textual demands, affective factors, institutional restraints, and technological concerns. To this end, a comparative review analysis was performed to identify prevalent themes and pedagogical trends amidst also acknowledging gaps in the literature.

3.5. Quality assurance

To ensure the methodological rigor and credibility of the included studies, quality appraisal was conducted using established critical appraisal tools appropriate for the diverse research designs encountered. For qualitative studies, the CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme) qualitative checklist was applied, assessing criteria such as clarity of aims, appropriateness of methodology, rigor in data collection and analysis, and reflexivity. Quantitative studies were appraised using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), allowing heterogeneous study designs to be evaluated consistently.

Two independent reviewers conducted the quality assessments for each study. In cases of disagreement regarding study quality or eligibility, discussions were held to reach consensus. If consensus could not be reached, a third reviewer adjudicated the decision. This process ensured a balanced and transparent evaluation of the evidence base.

Studies that did not meet minimum quality thresholds, such as insufficient methodological detail or lack of data reliability, were excluded from further analysis. The comprehensive quality appraisal underpinned the robustness of the synthesis, supporting confident integration of findings from methodologically sound studies.

3.6. PRISMA flow diagram

The PRISMA flow diagram illustrates the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages of the review. From 80 records identified, duplicates and irrelevant studies were removed during the screening phase. Full-text eligibility assessment reduced the pool to 27 studies, which were included in the final synthesis.

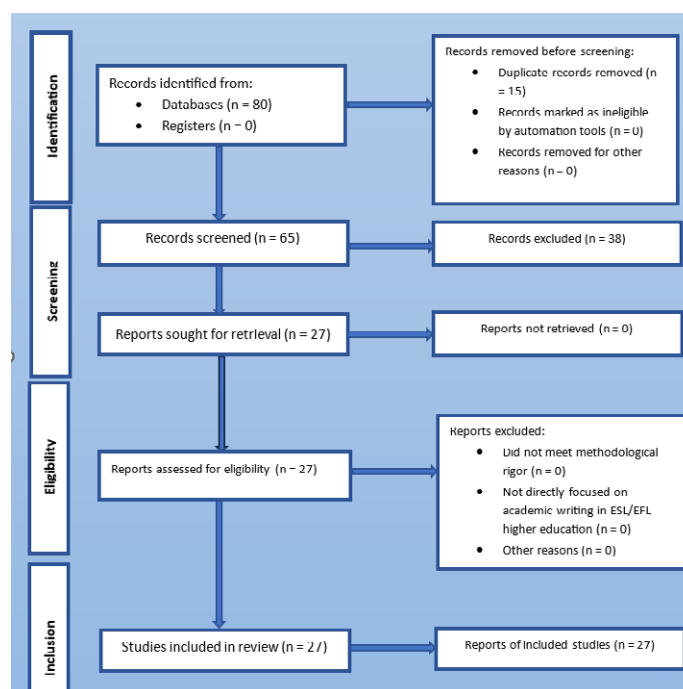


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process

Source: Author's Own Construction

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A synthesis of the reviewed studies showed a generally consistent pattern of associated ESL/EFL academic writing problems, dividing them in linguistic, cognitive, learner-centered and institutional domains. In turn, there were a range of pedagogical strategies that if implemented with a commitment to the subtleties of context could engage with more than one challenge at once. Core findings are summarized in Table 1, followed by the results-driven discussion which integrates these study outcomes with previously published literature.



Table 1. Summary of challenges and corresponding pedagogical responses in ESL/EFL academic writing

Category of Challenge	Key Issues Identified	Effective Pedagogical Responses
Linguistic	Limited vocabulary; weak grammar and syntax; negative L1 transfer	Explicit language-focused instruction; targeted grammar and vocabulary workshops; genre-based approaches (Mustafa <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Fareed <i>et al.</i> , 2016)
Cognitive/Textual	Weak thesis formulation; poor argument organization; difficulties in source integration	Model text analysis; peer collaboration; scaffolded argumentative writing tasks (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2015; Nenotek <i>et al.</i> , 2022)
Affective	Writing anxiety; low motivation; fear of evaluation	Supportive feedback culture; reflective writing tasks; relevance-driven assignments (Bahous <i>et al.</i> , 2011; Klimova, 2015)
Institutional	Large class sizes; lack of writing centers; inadequate teacher training	Embedded writing support in curricula; teacher professional development; improved resource allocation (Pineteh, 2013; Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020)
Technological	Underutilization of digital tools; limited digital literacy	AI-assisted writing platforms; blended/flipped learning; digital literacy training (Tseng & Lin, 2024; Nabhan, 2021)

4.1. Linguistic and cognitive findings

Most respondents were concerned about linguistic limitations specifically vocabulary measure, grammatically precision and sentence structure. These deficits would frequently exacerbate cognitive difficulties such as lack of argument sophistication and textual structure. According to (Mustafa *et al.*, 2022), learners with weak text control failed to integrate sources successfully so their interaction with academic content was only surface. A possible synthesis of both rhetorical and grammatical competence in L2 writing development could rely on genre-based instruction with explicit support for language, as proposed by (Grabe, 2009; Yoon & Badger, 2011), because research shows that when these approaches are combined learners resolved simultaneously language and text problems levels (Correa & Echeverri, 2017).

4.2. Affective and motivational dimensions

Studies have shown that writing anxiety and low self-confidence notably decrease learner engagement, with fear of negative evaluation discouraging students from taking risks in their language use (Fareed *et al.*, 2016). Creating positive learning environments, encouraging reflective writing practices, and providing personalized feedback have been consistently effective strategies for reducing anxiety and maintaining students' motivation to improve their academic writing skills (Bahous *et al.*, 2011).

4.3. Institutional and pedagogical gaps

Institutional challenges like large class sizes and lack of adequate writing support facilities restrict the chances for personalized instruction. Additionally, insufficient teacher training diminishes the effectiveness of writing interventions (Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020). Research indicates that integrating writing support into disciplinary courses and investing in professional development for teachers enhance both the relevance and sustainability of academic writing outcomes (Pineteh, 2013).

4.4. Technology and AI integration

Digital tools, such as AI-assisted writing platforms, offer

immediate feedback, help generate ideas, and assist in organizing texts effectively. However, to use these technologies effectively, students need digital literacy training to prevent overdependence and to critically evaluate AI-generated suggestions (Tseng & Lin, 2024). Blended and flipped learning models further support learners by providing more opportunities for independent practice and collaborative feedback, which align well with the preferences of today's students (Tuomainen, 2016).

4.5. Implications

The findings underscore the need for multi-dimensional interventions that address linguistic proficiency, cognitive structuring, affective resilience, and institutional capacity simultaneously. Standalone solutions were less effective than integrated approaches that combined technology, pedagogy, and contextual sensitivity.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings consistently emphasize a complex nexus of linguistic, cognitive, affective, and institutional factors that create difficulties for ESL/EFL writers in developing academic writing. Linguistic challenges in vocabulary and grammar are compounded by cognitive difficulties in content development and the maintenance of textual coherence. These barriers are compounded by affective and cognitive factors such as writing anxiety, lack of motivation, and inadequate support systems from their institutions. Responses need to include active and collaborative learning as well as the use of technology-enhanced tools, in some cases AI, and explicit genre- and language-focused instruction. To navigate through these challenges, faculty must design instruction that adapts to learner needs in context and formulate curriculum and institutional reforms that can facilitate more integrated support (Akhtar *et al.*, 2019; Tseng & Lin, 2024). To improve academic writing education, it should be systematically included across curricula and as part of the regular functions of institutions. To enhance academic writing education, institutions should embed writing support comprehensively across curricula and disciplines to ensure



alignment with content learning outcomes. Educators must be given top-notch professional development to ensure that they are adept at applying research-aligned strategies and are skilled in technology. AI and digital tools offer innovative potential, but this requires the right policies to exploit them fully in a responsible way that complements what we learn from humans. These programs are supported by institutional investments in resource development and infrastructure. Creating environments that provide opportunities for ESL/EFL writers to excel in academic writing through the collaboration of administrators, teachers, and students is essential (Tseng & Lin, 2024; Pineteh, 2013; Fareed *et al.*, 2016).

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