



Challenges Encountered by EAP Students in Writing Research Projects

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ABSTRACT

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is a prerequisite course for all first-year students at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). This course prepares students to meet academic writing expectations, culminating in the completion of a research project as part of their course assessment. Throughout this course, students are taught essential skills including library research, literature review writing, skimming, scanning, quoting, citing, paraphrasing, summarising, and referencing. However, many students encounter significant challenges in the process of writing their research projects. This study explores the challenges faced by EAP students at USIM in completing their research projects. Drawing on quantitative data collected from structured student surveys, this study identifies key difficulties related to academic language proficiency, research skills, and citation practices. The findings reveal that limited vocabulary, insufficient research knowledge, poor time management, difficulties with academic writing formats (APA/USIM style), lack of guidance, teamwork difficulties, and limited access to internet and digital resources significantly hinder students' ability to produce effective academic writing. The results suggest a need for more targeted support in EAP programs to help students achieve academic writing success.

Keywords: EAP, research project, academic writing, challenges

INTRODUCTION

Writing a research project is a demanding task for many university students, particularly those enrolled in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs. The EAP course at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) is designed to help students improve their English language proficiency while equipping them with the academic skills required for success in higher education. EAP courses typically cover academic writing, reading comprehension, listening skills, and oral presentation, tailored to meet the demands of academic study.

EAP students, many of whom are non-native English speakers, must navigate complex academic writing conventions while simultaneously improving their language proficiency. This includes mastering grammar and vocabulary, structuring arguments, engaging with scholarly sources, and adhering to strict formatting guidelines. As Hairul (2023) and Kaur and Singh (2023) note, tertiary students often face significant challenges in writing academic essays in English, highlighting the need for effective strategies to overcome these barriers. These difficulties can hinder students' ability to express ideas clearly and meet academic standards.

This study explores the specific challenges encountered by EAP students at USIM in writing their research projects and suggests strategies for improving academic writing support in EAP programs.

BACKGROUND

Academic writing is widely recognized as one of the most demanding aspects of higher education, particularly for students enrolled in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. Globally, research has shown that EAP students face multiple challenges related to language proficiency, academic discourse, and research conventions. Limited academic vocabulary and insufficient mastery of grammar are among the most frequently reported issues, often resulting in vague expression, incoherent arguments, and lack of precision in academic writing (Zare-ee & Rezazadeh, 2020; Smith, 2022). These linguistic barriers make it difficult for students to critically engage with scholarly texts and to communicate ideas effectively. Hyland (2019) further emphasizes that academic writing requires students to synthesize sources, evaluate arguments, and apply critical thinking—skills that are particularly demanding for learners still developing proficiency in English.

Beyond linguistic concerns, time management and workload distribution present significant obstacles. Studies have shown that students often struggle to balance academic research projects with other coursework and personal responsibilities, leading to rushed submissions and incomplete work (Green, 2019; Chen, 2023). The

increasing influence of digital distractions, such as social media, compounds this issue by reducing students' productive engagement with research and writing tasks. Another persistent challenge is the correct application of referencing and formatting conventions. Thompson, Brown, and Garcia (2023) note that insufficient training in citation practices often results in unintentional plagiarism, highlighting the need for explicit instruction on academic integrity in EAP programs. These findings illustrate that academic writing challenges are complex and interconnected, spanning linguistic, organizational, and ethical domains.

In the Malaysian context, similar trends have been observed, though they are often shaped by the country's multilingual and multicultural learning environment. Heng and Tan (2022) found that Malaysian undergraduates frequently face difficulties in applying academic conventions due to insufficient pre-university exposure to research writing. Kaur and Singh (2023) further identified limited vocabulary and weak grammatical competence as major obstacles for students attempting to construct coherent arguments in English. Time management challenges also feature prominently in local studies. Ong and Choo (2022) reported that students often struggle to complete writing tasks within limited time frames while balancing multiple academic commitments. Cultural diversity adds another layer of complexity, as students must adapt to English-medium instruction while negotiating varying expectations across disciplines and teaching practices (Nurul Huda & Ismail, 2023). In addition, infrastructural challenges persist, with Ali and Hassan (2023) pointing out that unequal access to reliable internet and technological devices continues to disadvantage some students, particularly those from rural backgrounds.

Taken together, both global and local studies confirm that EAP learners encounter a wide spectrum of academic writing challenges. While international research highlights recurring problems such as vocabulary limitations, time management, and referencing difficulties, Malaysian studies emphasize the added pressures of linguistic diversity, curriculum design, and the digital divide. However, there remains a lack of focused empirical research on the challenges Malaysian undergraduates face in writing research projects specifically, as opposed to general academic essays or coursework. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the experiences of EAP students at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), with the aim of identifying key barriers to effective research project writing and providing insights for more targeted academic support.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design to identify and analyse the challenges faced by EAP students at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) in writing research projects. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed by the researchers, drawing on themes and constructs

highlighted in recent literature on EAP writing challenges. Specifically, the questionnaire was grounded in studies on linguistic barriers (Zare-ee & Rezazadeh, 2020; Smith, 2022), time management issues (Green, 2019; Chen, 2023), difficulties with academic writing conventions (Thompson et al., 2023), the role of lecturer feedback (Latif & Aziz, 2022; Nguyen, 2023), teamwork dynamics (Patel & Wang, 2022), and the digital divide (Ali & Hassan, 2023). These studies provided the theoretical foundation for identifying key constructs relevant to the local EAP context at USIM.

Development of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to capture students' perceptions of challenges across four main constructs:

1. Language Proficiency – measuring students' difficulties with vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension.
2. Understanding of Research Writing Conventions – assessing students' ability to apply academic writing styles, formatting, and referencing systems.
3. Time and Resource Management – exploring how students managed competing academic and non-academic responsibilities, including access to technological tools.
4. Learning Environment and Support – focusing on lecturer guidance, teamwork, and access to institutional resources.

Each construct was operationalized into specific items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The items were carefully worded to ensure clarity and cultural appropriateness for Malaysian undergraduate students.

Pilot Study and Validation

To establish content validity, the draft questionnaire was reviewed by two experienced EAP instructors at USIM, who provided feedback on item clarity, scope, and alignment with the research objectives. Following revisions, a pilot test was conducted with 10 students who were not part of the main study sample. Feedback from the pilot suggested that certain items needed rephrasing to avoid ambiguity—for example, simplifying technical terms and adjusting wording to reflect students' academic experiences. Based on these insights, minor modifications were made to ensure that the items were both comprehensible and contextually relevant.

The reliability of the instrument was confirmed through internal consistency analysis, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 for the final questionnaire, indicating strong reliability.

Sampling and Participants

The main study sample consisted of 70 undergraduate students enrolled in the EAP course at USIM during the semester of data collection. Purposive sampling was employed to include only students who had completed the research project component of the course, ensuring that all participants could provide relevant insights. The sample included both male and female students (approximately 60% female and 40% male), all of whom were in their first year of study and had completed the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) as their prior English qualification.

The sample size of 70 was considered appropriate for a small-scale exploratory study, consistent with methodological recommendations for descriptive research in educational contexts.

DISCUSSION AND FINDING

The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics (percentages) to identify the most common challenges reported by students. Table 1 summarizes the key challenges and their reported frequency.

Challenges	Item Description	% of Students
Linguistic Challenges & Vocabulary	Unable to understand reference materials	20%
	Research topic too complex / lacks literature	8.5%
Time Management	Unable to cope with multiple course assignments	14.3%
	Difficulty scheduling group discussions	20%
	Excessive social media use	25.7%
	Part-time jobs or social commitments delaying research	28.6%
	Insufficient time for research project (6–7 weeks)	22.9%
Understanding Academic Writing Format	Difficulty applying academic writing formats and APA style	14.2%
Lack of Guidance from Lecturers	Lecturer lacks expertise on topic	4.3%
	Inadequate guidance/resources provided	15.7%
	Limited supervision sessions	30%
Teamwork Difficulties	Uncooperative or unhelpful group members	13.2%

	Team conflicts or differing opinions	11.4%
Limited Internet/Facilities	Poor internet access	5.8%
	Limited access to laptop/computer	18.5%

Table 1 : Challenges EAP students faced in writing research project.

The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics (percentages) to identify the most common challenges reported by students. Responses from 70 EAP students at USIM revealed several key difficulties encountered during the research writing process:

1. Linguistic Challenges and Academic Vocabulary

Twenty percent (20%) of students indicated difficulty in understanding the content of reference materials, which limited their ability to use sources effectively during the literature review stage. Additionally, 8.5% reported that their approved research project topic was too complex or lacked sufficient supporting literature, a challenge that may also reflect limitations in language proficiency.

2. Time Management

Time management emerged as a significant issue. Fourteen-point-three percent (14.3%) of students reported being unable to manage multiple course assignments effectively. Twenty percent (20%) faced challenges scheduling group discussions, often opting for virtual meetings due to conflicting commitments. A further 25.7% indicated that excessive use of social media reduced the time available for academic work. Commitments to part-time employment or extracurricular activities delayed project progress for 28.6% of students. Additionally, 22.9% expressed that the time frame allocated for completing the research project (6–7 weeks) was insufficient.

3. Understanding Academic Writing Format

Fourteen-point-two percent (14.2%) of respondents reported difficulties in applying academic writing conventions and citation styles (APA). Although the EAP course includes instruction on referencing tools and provides a writing guide, many students continued to struggle with correct application.

4. Lack of Guidance from Lecturers

A small proportion (4.3%) of students perceived that their lecturers lacked sufficient expertise in their chosen research topic. Fifteen-point-seven percent (15.7%) indicated that they had not received adequate guidance or supporting materials. Additionally, 30% reported that the number of supervision sessions provided was too limited to meet their needs.

5. Teamwork Difficulties

Thirteen-point-two percent (13.2%) of students reported teamwork difficulties. Eleven-point-four percent (11.4%) experienced difficulties related to differences of opinion within teams, which in some cases disrupted group cohesion and progress.

6. Limited Internet Access and Other Facilities

Limited access to digital resources also presented barriers. Five-point-eight percent (5.8%) of students reported poor internet connectivity, while 18.5% indicated they lacked access to a laptop or computer, relying instead on smartphones—an arrangement that constrained their ability to complete academic writing tasks effectively.

DISCUSSION

This study identified several key challenges faced by EAP students at USIM in completing their research projects: linguistic barriers, time management issues, difficulties with academic writing conventions, limited lecturer guidance, teamwork challenges, and restricted access to technology. These findings are consistent with both global and local research on academic writing challenges, while also highlighting context-specific issues relevant to Malaysian EAP learners.

Linguistic Barriers

Linguistic barriers remain one of the most pressing issues, with 20% of students reporting difficulty in understanding reference materials. This finding aligns with Smith (2022) and Zare-ee and Rezazadeh (2020), who observed that limited vocabulary and weak reading comprehension often hinder EAP students' ability to engage with scholarly sources. The persistence of these challenges suggests that while EAP programs introduce vocabulary and grammar instruction, the pace and depth of language development may be insufficient for students expected to undertake research writing within a single semester. This highlights the need for sustained, scaffolded language support across multiple courses rather than treating academic writing as a one-off skill.

Time Management and Workload

Time management emerged as a widespread issue, with 28.6% of students citing part-time work and social commitments as barriers and 25.7% reporting social media distractions. These findings are consistent with Chen (2023) and Ong and Choo (2022), who emphasize that EAP learners often lack structured training in balancing academic and personal responsibilities. The tight timeline allocated for completing research projects (6–7 weeks) exacerbates this difficulty. As Green (2019) noted, insufficient time allocation not only reduces the quality of research output but also increases student stress and anxiety. Institutions should therefore consider adjusting project timelines or providing training in project planning and workload management.

Academic Writing Conventions

Difficulties with applying academic writing conventions, particularly citation styles such as APA, were reported by 14.2% of students. Despite receiving instruction in class, many students continued to make referencing errors. This finding echoes Thompson, Brown, and Garcia (2023), who argue that explicit and repeated training in citation and academic integrity is essential to prevent unintentional plagiarism. One explanation may be that students view referencing as a technical requirement rather than as part of the broader academic practice of engaging with sources. Thus, instructors need to frame referencing as a critical thinking skill that demonstrates accountability and intellectual honesty.

Lecturer Guidance and Feedback

The role of lecturers also emerged as a significant factor, with 30% of students reporting insufficient supervision opportunities and 15.7% citing inadequate resources or guidance. Similar results have been found in other contexts (Nguyen, 2023; Latif & Aziz, 2022), where students expressed frustration with limited feedback and support. These findings suggest that heavy teaching loads or a lack of structured supervisory training may hinder lecturers' ability to provide meaningful feedback. As Adams, Smith, and Patel (2023) argue, developing faculty capacity in supervisory roles is critical for supporting EAP learners. Institutions could provide professional development opportunities focused on mentoring, feedback strategies, and research supervision.

Teamwork and Collaboration

More than 24% of students reported challenges with teamwork, including uncooperative peers and conflicts within groups. This aligns with Patel and Wang (2022), who found that unequal participation and cultural differences often complicate group work among EAP learners. Collaborative learning remains an essential component of higher education, but students may lack formal training in teamwork and conflict resolution. Embedding soft-skill development into EAP curricula could help students manage group dynamics more effectively.

Digital Divide and Technological Barriers

Finally, limited access to technology was reported by nearly 19% of students, with an additional 5.8% citing poor internet connectivity. These findings mirror those of Ali and Hassan (2023) and Brown (2023), who highlight the persistent digital divide affecting students' ability to conduct research effectively. In Malaysia, this issue disproportionately affects students from rural areas, who may lack access to laptops or high-speed internet. Universities should therefore prioritize digital inclusivity by expanding access to campus facilities, offering loaner devices, and ensuring reliable Wi-Fi connectivity.

Implications for EAP Practice

Overall, the challenges identified in this study demonstrate the need for a more comprehensive approach to supporting EAP students. Three main implications arise:

1. Curriculum Design – Language and writing support should be scaffolded across multiple semesters, with explicit integration of research writing skills rather than concentrating them within a single course.
2. Lecturer Training – Faculty should be equipped with strategies for effective feedback, mentoring, and supervision, ensuring that students receive timely and constructive guidance.
3. Institutional Support – Universities must address infrastructural challenges by providing access to reliable digital tools and resources while also offering workshops on teamwork, time management, and research ethics.

By addressing these issues holistically, EAP programs can create more equitable learning environments and better prepare students for the demands of academic research writing.

CONCLUSION

The challenges faced by EAP students in writing research projects are complex and interconnected. Addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive approach that includes enhanced language support, explicit instruction on academic writing conventions, structured training in time management, and improved mentorship from faculty.

Additional measures should include developing students' collaborative skills for group work and ensuring access to reliable internet and computing facilities. By recognizing and addressing these barriers, educational institutions can create a more supportive environment that enables EAP students to thrive in their academic pursuits. Implementing additional writing workshops, enhancing digital access, and fostering stronger mentorship practices are recommended steps forward.

This study is limited by its use of descriptive statistics only. Future research could employ inferential analyses to explore relationships between student characteristics and writing challenges. It is suggested that future research should focus on the development and evaluation of targeted interventions to support EAP learners in overcoming these challenges, thereby contributing to improved academic outcomes and student well-being.

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AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

Zarina Ashikin Zakaria (Conceptualization; Methodology; Data Collection; Formal Analysis; Writing – Original Draft; Supervision)

Norhaili Massari (Literature Review; Validation; Writing – Review & Editing)

Normazla Ahmad Mahir (Data Analysis; Resources; Writing – Review & Editing)

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study involved voluntary participation from undergraduate students enrolled in the EAP course at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and all responses were collected anonymously and used solely for academic research purposes.

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