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Language problems encountered by undergraduate EFL students in writing scientific papers for publications

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Abstract

College students are currently also required to publish articles in scientific journals. This requirement is beneficial for their research and writing development; however, writing scientific articles is not easy, especially for undergraduate students. This paper investigates the language problems encountered by undergraduate EFL students when writing scientific papers for publication, grouped into 4 areas: grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and spelling. It is a mixed-methods study involving both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The respondents were 25 undergraduate students writing English papers for publication and 3 lecturers supervising them. Selected. They were from an English Education program at a university in Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia, and were selected purposively. The data were collected through a 10-item closed-ended questionnaire and interviews with both students and lecturers. The quantitative data were analysed descriptively, while the qualitative data were analysed thematically. The results indicate that, for grammar, students still struggle with tense and article use; for syntax, they have problems with phrase and sentence structures; and for vocabulary, they struggle to choose appropriate words relevant to the research context. For spelling, they often made mistakes, but the spelling check helped them fix them. Although facing problems, the students reported being able to solve them with guidance from supervisors and AI tools. This implies that incorporating technology into the teaching of writing can be beneficial.

Keywords: Academic writing; language problems; scientific paper; undergraduate EFL students

INTRODUCTION

Currently, many undergraduate study programs in Indonesia require students to publish an academic paper in a journal before graduation. This is in response to the requirement issued by the Directorate General of Higher Education of the Ministry of Education and Culture, No. 152/E/T/2012, regarding scientific publication. If postgraduate students are required to publish in reputable journals like those indexed by Scopus or World of Science (WoS), and graduate students are required to publish in nationally Accredited Journals, grade SINTA 1 or 2 in particular, the undergraduate students are expected to be able to publish in any of the accredited journals (SINTA 1-

6) or, in some cases, even in any scientific journals. This policy is expected to benefit not only students but also universities. Requiring publication encourages students to develop stronger research and publication skills, which are important for their academic careers or future work (Ipanaqué-Zapata et al., 2023). By publishing scientific articles, especially if is in an accredited or reputable journal, students can certainly open up opportunities. Published articles can attract the attention of researchers and academic institutions, opening opportunities for national or international research collaborations, knowledge exchanges, and study-abroad programs. The papers can also serve as portfolios if they want to apply for scholarships or continue their education to a higher level. At the same time, universities can sustain and improve their reputations as research institutions by building stronger research and publication records, which are important indicators in university rankings (Fernández-Gubieda & Gutiérrez-García, 2025). In the knowledge-based economy, research, publication, and citation practices also contribute to a country's performance (Hartono et al., 2019; Torres & Schugurensky, 2002; Wetter, 2011).

Writing skills are certainly among the most important for authoring scientific papers. At the university level, those skills are needed in order to fulfill the requirements for a bachelor's degree, that is, authoring scientific papers and theses. Furthermore, publications require students to share their ideas and opinions during their college years (Sari et al., 2021). Writing is the ability to express feelings, ideas, or thoughts in written words and arrange them into the form of a sentence on paper in order to communicate with others (Huber et al., 2020; Puspita, 2019). In addition, it is an activity that requires the ability to put ideas into words and the skill of presenting them in a way that readers can easily grasp and find engaging (Toba et al., 2019). Their ability to write affects their outcomes. When writing a scientific paper, students will be able to express their ideas more effectively if they have mastered those skills.

For many undergraduate students, however, writing a research paper and publishing it in a journal is not easy. It takes months, even more than a year, from conducting and completing the research, writing a draft, consulting with supervisors, and submitting to the targeted journal. After that, students have to wait for the manuscript to be reviewed and make the necessary revisions when it is accepted. In some cases, after months of waiting, they receive a notification from the journal editor that their manuscript was declined. During this long and exhausting process, many students experience intense academic pressure and serious psychological difficulties such as anxiety, insecurity, and fear (Shinta et al., 2025). The complexity of the research procedure and the supervisor's and editors' expectations have also very often become sources of students' academic stress (Pusparini et al., 2025). Publishing a paper in a journal requires strong research and critical thinking skills, as well as writing skills in academic language (Boufeldja & Bouhania, 2020).

The challenges in academic publishing are more intense for students in English majors, such as those in English Education or English literature departments. In addition to conducting high-quality research, they must write the results in English, which is the language they are still trying to acquire, in a way that adheres to the linguistic and rhetorical standards established by the journals. This has led many English major students to experience a high level of writing anxiety, hesitation to start, academic stress, procrastination, and other negative behaviors (Pravita &

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Kuswandono, 2022; Pusparini et al., 2025; Sujarwati et al., 2025; Yenti & Susanti, 2025). Studies show that, globally, non-native English-speaking students find academic writing in English challenging (Li, 2024) and that it is a significant contributor to writing difficulties and manuscript rejections (Zhang et al., 2025). A study in Hong Kong involving 600 students found that more than half of the respondents perceived language problems as major obstacles to publication (Hyland, 2012). For many non-native English-speaking students and scholars wishing to publish in English-language journals, academic writing has posed them with immense difficulties (Flowerdew, 2007; Lander et al., 2019). Many non-English speaking scholars face problems with grammar, vocabulary, and stylistic conventions (Jiang et al., 2022).

For many college students, including English majors, writing is still perceived as the most difficult skill compared to reading, listening, and speaking (Fitria, 2022). It is a difficult activity that requires cognitive skills and perseverance to master (Shaby & Joy, 2020). They are among the hardest skills to master because they involve a complex combination of affective, cognitive, physical, and neurological abilities (Rahmatunisa, 2014). Writers have to organize their words in proper order and evaluate whether their results are clear and well-written so readers can understand the messages clearly and logically. When authoring an academic paper, writers need to deliberately consider the idea, words, sentences, paragraphs, and overall composition. Moreover, the results need to be correct in spelling, punctuation, word choice, and grammar so that misunderstandings can be minimized. This is why writing is considered the most difficult skill among the language skills.

Previous studies have shown that certain aspects of writing pose problems for EFL students. Writing mechanics, even though they look very simple, are found to be a serious problem. The next are grammar, content, organization, and vocabulary (Toba et al., 2019). The mechanical errors are errors in capitalization, spelling, and punctuation. As for content errors, these include irrelevant ideas regarding the topic, limited or undeveloped ideas, and, on top of that, an unknowledgeable idea. Studies found unorganized sentences and paragraphs, with unclear topic sentences and a lack of supporting details. Lastly, most vocabulary issues stem from word-choice errors.

In addition, studies also found that, in writing, EFL students struggle with correct grammar, cohesion, coherence, paragraph organization, diction, and spelling (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017). Grammar, coherence, and cohesion were the major problems that EFL students faced. Meanwhile, minor difficulties included paragraph organization, diction, and misspellings in vocabulary. Many EFL students still struggle to use appropriate word choices to express their thoughts. Another study conducted in Pakistan also found that Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners still face challenges in English academic writing. They found that mastery of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary hinders their writing (Fareed et al., 2016). In Indonesia, studies have revealed that when writing research articles, many Indonesian university students lack knowledge of the research topic (Azizah & Budiman, 2017) and struggle to write a compelling introduction, research methods, and data processing sections (Sitompul & Anditasari, 2022).

Despite numerous articles discussing the difficulties of writing scientific papers in English, research on the language problems students face in writing remains

limited. Therefore, this research aims to enrich the existing literature by examining the language problems EFL students face when writing scientific papers for publication. In this study, the EFL students are undergraduates in the English education program. Two research questions were proposed: (1). What language problems do undergraduate students of the English education study program face when writing scientific papers for publication? (2). How do the undergraduate students of an English education study program overcome the problems?

This research was important because it could enhance readers' awareness, especially among English lecturers, of the language problems their students may face in writing. Thus, English academic writing lecturers may seek better ways to address the problems. Moreover, English lecturers are expected to be more aware of the struggles their students face with writing and to help them develop their ability.

METHOD

Research Design

To analyze and explore the language problems that EFL university students face, this research adopted a mixed-methods research design. Mixed-method research is an approach that combines both quantitative and qualitative forms (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Researchers suggest that quantitative research cannot capture people's context and does not directly reflect people's voices (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Therefore, qualitative research was used to fill those gaps. Furthermore, using a mixed-method research design provides more evidence for the research problem.

Respondents

The respondents in this study were 25 undergraduate students in their 7th semester of the English education study program at a university in Semarang who were writing academic papers for publication as partial fulfillment of their graduation requirements. In addition, three lecturers who served as their advisors were also recruited as respondents. The researchers decided to include only female respondents because of the population's imbalanced sex ratio, in which the number of male students in the targeted population was fewer than 15%. They were selected purposively, as the researchers wanted to target specific knowledge and experiences of students writing academic papers under the guidance of supervisors.

Instruments

The instruments used in this research were closed-ended questionnaires and interviews. A closed-ended questionnaire is one that requires respondents to answer from a set of fixed responses (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 321). It is the one with "Yes" or "No" options to indicate whether respondents encountered language problems while writing scientific papers for publication. It was a 10-statement questionnaire written in Indonesian relevant to the assigned topics: grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and spelling.

The second instrument was an interview. This method of data collection was chosen because an interview could provide rich qualitative data with different points of view (Bacon-Shone, 2022, p. 54). The interviews were conducted to validate the questionnaire results and explore how they overcame the problems. The questionnaire and interview questions were validated for face and content validity by an expert in English education research. Face validity was used to assess whether the

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instruments are appropriate and relevant to the research (Allen et al., 2023). Meanwhile, the content validity was used to measure the relevance of the instruments' components to the topic (Roebianto et al., 2023).

Data Analysis

All the collected data were analyzed to answer the research questions. The data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel by grouping them into categories and presented in tables. The respondents' responses of "Yes" or "No" were presented as percentages and analyzed descriptively. The collected interview data were analyzed thematically using flow model analysis, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Toba et al., 2019). In the data reduction stage, the data were categorized into a table based on the identified themes. Afterwards, they were reduced by selecting and focusing on the research objectives. And then, in the data display, the researchers present a figure of the reduced data to make it easier to understand. Finally, conclusions were drawn.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Language Problems Faced by Undergraduate Students in Writing Papers for Publications

The researchers used two data sets to explore the language problems faced by undergraduate students in the English education study program. The anticipated problems include: 1) grammar, which covers word classes, subject-verb agreement, tenses, singular and plural nouns, and articles; 2) syntax, which covers phrase and sentence structure; 3) vocabulary; and 4) spelling. The respondents' responses to the questionnaire were presented as "Yes" or "No" and as percentages. The interview data were used to confirm or disconfirm the questionnaire data. The researchers cross-checked the students' claims against the questionnaire data. Data from the interviews with the lecturers were labeled L1, L2, and L3, where L refers to "lecturer."

Grammar Problems

In this section, the grammar problems students face are presented and discussed. The grammar problems included word class usage, subject-verb agreement, tenses, singular/plural nouns, and articles. The discussion is based on the quantitative and qualitative data collected.

Table 1. Grammar problems encountered by undergraduate students in writing English academic papers

No	Statements	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	I still have problems using Word Class.	32	68
2	I still have trouble using the correct subject-verb agreement for the sentences I construct.	16	84
3	I still have trouble using the right tenses for the sentences I construct.	52	48
4	I am still confused about the rules of using singular or plural nouns.	24	76
5	I am still confused about the rules of using articles.	56	44

Table 1 shows that statement 1 received 32% "Yes," suggesting that respondents still had problems with word classes. Meanwhile, "No" received 68%. It means that most respondents do not have problems with the word class. Therefore, it can be concluded that most undergraduate students in the English education study program no longer have difficulty determining word classes when writing their papers. The results of the interviews also show that the students no longer made

errors in the word class category in their writing. In the interviews, L1 and L2 stated that the students rarely made mistakes when using word classes in writing their papers. Even more, L3 conveyed that it was no longer a problem, since nowadays there are some AI (Artificial Intelligence) tools that can help students in writing. Thus, it can be concluded that word class is not a major problem in writing for undergraduate students of the English education study program. Even though some students still found it a little difficult, they could solve it with AI tools or applications, which are popular nowadays.

Statement 2 on the issue of correct subject-verb agreement in writing found that the majority of respondents (84%) chose “No,” while only 16% chose “Yes.” This means most students have already mastered the rule of subject-agreement. In accordance with the questionnaire analysis, L1 suggested that there were no further mistakes in the use of subject-verb agreement among the students under her supervision. L3 also explained that the mistakes could be easily minimized by using AI. On the other hand, L2 claimed it was considered a rare mistake. Therefore, the researchers conclude that subject-verb agreement is no longer a problem for undergraduate students in the English Education Study Program when writing papers.

In contrast to the first and the second issue, in the issue of using the right tenses, more than half of the respondents (52%), stated that they still had trouble using the right tenses in sentences they arranged. Meanwhile, the rest of them (48%), claimed they did not have a problem in choosing the right tenses for the sentences they create. This implied that many undergraduate EFL students still had difficulty choosing the correct tenses for their writing. In accordance with that, both L1 and L2 reported that tense usage remained a problem for students in writing. However, L3 indicated that tenses were no longer a problem. Further, she said that these days there are many AI tools that can help students in writing proper sentences. The researchers, therefore, conclude that undergraduate students in the English education study program may still encounter problems with tenses, but these can be minimized using AI tools.

The next issue shows that 24% of respondents agree that the rules for singular and plural nouns still confuse them. In contrast, 76% of respondents reported no longer being confused about the rules for using singular or plural nouns in the sentences they constructed. This means that the majority of students already understood the rules for using singular and plural nouns. However, in contrast to the students’ assertion, L1 and L2 still very often found mistakes in singular or plural nouns in students’ writing. For example, some students wrote “respondent” instead of “respondents”, “interview” instead of “interviews,” “analysis” instead of “analyses,” and others. The lecturers further mentioned that they had frequently addressed these types of grammatical mistakes, but they remained unresolved.

Finally, regarding the use of articles, 56% of respondents reported they were still confused about the rules for using articles in writing. The remaining 44% of respondents believed that they had no problems with them. This means that many students are still struggling with the use of articles. The interviews found that all the lecturers agreed that students still made mistakes with the use of articles. They further stated that when students were required to write a draft of a research paper

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for publication, confusion on when to use “respondents” or “the respondents,” “data” or “the data,” “interviews” or “the interviews,” etc., it seems that many students were not very sure when to use the definite article “the”. A similar case also happens with the use of “a” or “an” before a singular countable noun.

The findings presented above confirm the findings by Fareed et al. (2016), Ariyanti and Fitriana (2017), Hartono et al. (2019), and Toba et al. (2019), which revealed that in writing academic English, students of the English major still have problems with the grammar aspects, including word class, subject-verb agreement, tenses, singular and plural nouns, and articles.

Syntax Problems

In this section, the students' syntax problems are presented and discussed. The syntax problems concern the structure of phrases and sentences. The discussion is based on the quantitative and qualitative data collected.

Table 2. Syntax problems encountered by undergraduate students in writing English academic papers

No	Statements	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	I still have difficulty in constructing English phrases correctly.	64	36
2	I still have difficulty in constructing English sentences correctly.	56	44

Table 2 shows that the first syntax problems faced by the undergraduate EFL students were correctly constructing sentences according to the rules of English phrase structure. This was acknowledged by 64% of the respondents. Hartono et al. (2019) also found that the respondents had problems with English phrases. This implied that most of the undergraduate EFL students still had difficulty in building sentences correctly in accordance with phrase structure. The lecturers confirmed the findings of the questionnaire data that students sometimes miss “of” when writing a noun phrase. For example, students wrote: “*students English education*” instead of “*students of English education*,” “*higher education Central Java*” instead of “*higher education in Central Java*,” or the following “*Difficulty mastering vocabulary creates*” instead of “*difficulty in mastering vocabulary*.”

The next issue in syntax is the sentence structure. 56% of respondents chose “Yes,” indicating they had difficulty constructing sentences correctly according to the rules of English sentence structure. Many students were still struggling to construct correct sentences. The interviews with the lecturers found that students were confused when writing compound and/or complex sentences. The lecturers often found ungrammatical sentences because students failed to clearly distinguish the main and dependent clauses. Here are some examples found in the students’ draft. One of the lecturers displayed an example as follows: “*To make certain that the implementation of RPL achieves its supposed targets, increasing access to higher education and improving the relevance and quality of education, studies, and devotion to the society of expert practitioners.*” This construction is difficult to understand because of the unclear syntax connecting the words and phrases. This finding is in line with the study of Dewi et al. (2025), which, after analyzing 32 essays written by Indonesian EFL learners, concluded that Indonesian EFL learners still made syntactical errors in their essays. The errors occurred at the word, phrase, clause, and sentence levels.

Furthermore, Dewanto (2025) found that syntactic errors were mostly in the forms of misinformation, omission, and misordering.

Vocabulary Problems

In this section, the vocabulary problems students face are presented and discussed. The discussion is based on the quantitative and qualitative data obtained. The quantitative data are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Vocabulary problems encountered by undergraduate students in writing English academic papers

No	Statements	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	I still have difficulty choosing appropriate academic words relevant to my research topic.	64	36
2	I still struggle to find the right words to express my thoughts when writing.	84	16

The table shows that 64% of respondents reported still having difficulty choosing appropriate academic words to explain the topic. Next, in statement 2, 84% of respondents reported that they still struggle to find the right words to express their thoughts when writing. Meanwhile, the remaining 16% of respondents reported they were not. Those results made the vocabulary problems faced by the EFL undergraduate students the primary concern.

Regarding vocabulary problems, the three lecturers interviewed (L1, L2, and L3) all agreed that they frequently encountered inappropriate or unsuitable vocabulary for the contexts in which they wrote. Besides, redundancy and unnecessary repetitions also occurred very often. It is acknowledged that students have difficulty choosing the appropriate vocabulary and register for the situation and context (Toba et al., 2019). Several previous studies, such as Rahmatunisa (2014) and Asnas and Hidayanti (2024), confirm that Indonesian EFL learners struggle with vocabulary mastery.

Spelling Problem

In this section, the spelling problems faced by the students will be discussed. The discussion will be based on the obtained quantitative and qualitative data. The data is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Spelling problems encountered by undergraduate students in writing English academic papers

No	Statements	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	I often forget the correct spelling of a word.	56	44

As shown in Table 4, 56% of respondents often forget the spelling of the words they use in their writing. That makes 14 out of 25 EFL undergraduate students still facing spelling problems in writing. However, L1 stated that spelling is trivial because the systems of the gadgets or computers we use to write can immediately correct the words we are writing. Moreover, L2 said that spelling errors usually appear only due to mistyping. The study by Ariyanti and Fitriana (2017) confirms the finding that Indonesian EFL learners still make spelling mistakes. The major sources of the errors are interference and inconsistency of English language sounds and letters (Muhassin et al., 2020).

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How the Students Overcome the Language Problems

This section discusses research findings on how undergraduate students in the English education program overcome the challenges they face when writing scientific papers for publication. To determine whether the students could overcome their problems and how they did so, the researchers conducted interviews with them. To discuss the interview results with the students, the codes are as follows: S1 (student 1), S2 (student 2), S3 (student 3), and S4 (student 4).

From the interviews that were conducted, all of the interviewees, S1, S2, S3, and S4, claimed that they were able to overcome all of the language problems they faced while writing their scientific papers. S1 shared that she struggled at first. S1 overcame the problems with the help of her supervisor. S1 mentioned that her supervisor always pointed out her errors and corrected them during consultation. S1 also overcame the difficulties by searching the Internet, including social media. Even more, S1 often asks her supervisor about anything she does not understand. Her mentor helped her a lot. Thus, S1 was able to construct perfect sentences with the help of AI tools, such as DeepL, which can help her with translating sentences and suggesting suitable words for her writing.

Regarding the AI tools, S2 also stated that she used DeepL to translate sentences from Indonesian to English. She also used the AI to choose the words she thought were more suitable for the sentences and topic she had. According to her, this tool offered many vocabulary choices. So, she could always pick the most suitable word for her sentences. Besides using AI tools, S2 also shared her difficulties with her friends. S2 mentioned that she often asks her friends for their opinion about her writing results. S2 asked her friends to check whether the sentences she constructed fit the topic.

As for S3, she stated that when she faced a problem while writing her paper, S3 always studied through videos she found on the internet. In addition, she used some social media such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Nowadays, there are many videos that really help students learn English writing. S3 also mentioned that, for her, the most difficult thing to overcome is grammar problems. So, S3 often learns by searching for examples of the type of sentences she needs to use in her paper.

Finally, S4 shared that the first way he overcomes the difficulties is by using the Internet. Followed by consulting with her supervisor and his friends about whatever he does not understand. She frequently searched the internet for what he needed to know and studied it. Additionally, she also used AI tools like S1 and S2 to help him with his writing.

CONCLUSION

In writing scientific papers, the main problems that most undergraduate students in the English education study program face are vocabulary selection, phrase structure, and the use of articles. They also have significant challenges with using the correct tenses in their writing. The use of singular and plural nouns is still an issue. Sentence structure and spelling were also considerable challenges for the students. As well as word class and subject-verb agreement, though on a smaller scale. All of the students claimed they were able to overcome the problems they

faced while writing their scientific papers. They overcome the problems by using digital applications or tools to learn what they did not understand. The majority of the applications they use are social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, where they can learn from available videos. Besides that, almost all of them use AI tools to help them with their writing. The AI tool that is already mentioned is DeepL. This tool is an AI-powered machine translation service that translates text from one language to another. Furthermore, they seek assistance from their mentors and friends. As mentioned, the students' written comments imply that incorporating technology, such as AI and social media applications, can be beneficial for teaching writing.

This research has some limitations that warrant further investigation. The first is the relatively small sample size, which may not be sufficiently representative to generalize the findings to a larger population. Second, this research was conducted in only one university. Therefore, the results of this research may not represent all of the English education students. The researchers suggested that future research expand the sample to a wider range of populations and locations, so that the study results may be more generalizable. Then, additional research methods may also be needed to provide more thorough insights and reduce bias in self-referral. Moreover, it would be better to conduct the research over a longer period to obtain more reliable results and to analyze the impact of the existing variable. By overcoming those limitations, the researchers hope that future research will make an excellent contribution to this field.

AUTHOR STATEMENTS

Hartono conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, and drafted the manuscript. **Ollyvia Putri Angella** collected and analyzed the data and wrote the draft of the manuscript. **Choiril Anwar** conducted a literature review, data analysis, and proofread the manuscript.

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