



**LINGUISTIC AFFECTIVE AND CONTEXTUAL BARRIERS TO ACADEMIC WRITING
AMONG LIBYAN EFL UNDERGRADUATES**

A Mixed-Methods Study at the University of Zawia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the linguistic, affective, and contextual barriers encountered by Libyan undergraduates when completing academic writing tasks in English and explains the factors underlying those barriers from the students' perspective. A mixed-methods triangulation design was employed, Quantitative data were obtained through an online questionnaire completed by 56 fifth- to eighth-semester students, while qualitative data were generated through semi-structured interviews with 10 students, The survey showed strong recognition of the value of writing and a high motivation to improve; nevertheless, the participants reported substantial difficulties, The highest challenge endorsements concerned vocabulary and word choice (76.8%), revision and editing (76.8%), and clear and coherent expression (71.4%), The leading contributing factors were limited exposure to English outside the classroom (71.4%), difficulty organizing and expressing ideas (69.6%), and cultural-linguistic differences (67.9%), Interview findings corroborated the quantitative patterns and revealed an interaction among limited grammatical and lexical knowledge, first-language interference, academic formality, anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, inadequate feedback, restricted resources, and insufficient practice time, The study concludes that EFL writing difficulty is not a single linguistic deficit but a multidimensional system in which language knowledge, self-efficacy, instructional conditions, and opportunities for authentic use reinforce one another, It recommends an integrated process-genre curriculum, explicit language support within meaningful writing, self-regulated learning routines, sustained reading-to-write practice, and staged feedback combining teacher, peer, and carefully supervised automated support.

Keywords: academic writing; EFL undergraduates; writing difficulties; writing anxiety; first-language interference; mixed methods.

المخلص

هدفت الدراسة إلى الكشف عن العوائق اللغوية والوجدانية والسياقية التي تواجه طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية لغةً أجنبية عند إنجاز مهام الكتابة الأكاديمية في جامعة الزاوية، وتفسير العوامل الكامنة وراء هذه العوائق من منظور الطلبة، اعتمدت الدراسة منهجاً مختلطاً قائماً على التثليث المنهجي؛ إذ جُمعت البيانات الكمية بواسطة استبانة إلكترونية وُزعت على 56 طالباً وطالبة من الفصول الخامس والسادس والسابع والثامن، بينما جُمعت البيانات النوعية من خلال مقابلات شبه مقننة مع 10 طلبة، أظهرت الاستبانة مستوى مرتفعاً من إدراك أهمية الكتابة والرغبة في تحسينها، إلا أن هذا الإدراك تزامن مع صعوبات واضحة؛ فقد بلغت نسبة الموافقة على صعوبة المفردات واختيار الكلمات 76.8%، وعلى صعوبة المراجعة والتحرير 76.8%، وعلى صعوبة التعبير الواضح والمتربط 71.4%، كما برزت محدودية التعرض للغة الإنجليزية خارج القاعة الدراسية 71.4%، وصعوبة تنظيم الأفكار والتعبير عنها 69.6%، والفروق الثقافية واللغوية 67.9% بوصفها عوامل رئيسية، دعمت المقابلات هذه النتائج، وكشفت عن تفاعل بين ضعف المعرفة النحوية والمفردات، وتداخل اللغة الأم، والقلق والخوف من التقويم، وقلة التغذية الراجعة والوقت والموارد، وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن مشكلات الكتابة لا ترجع إلى نقص لغوي منفرد، بل إلى منظومة مترابطة من العوامل؛ لذلك توصي بتبني مدخل العملية والنوع، وتنمية التعلم المنظم ذاتياً، وزيادة فرص الكتابة المتكررة، وتقديم تغذية راجعة مرحلية تجمع بين المعلم والأقران والأدوات الرقمية تحت إشراف أكاديمي. الكلمات المفتاحية: الكتابة الأكاديمية، اللغة الإنجليزية لغةً أجنبية، صعوبات الكتابة، القلق الكتابي، تداخل اللغة الأم، المنهج المختلط.

1– Introduction

Academic writing is a central means through which university students demonstrate disciplinary knowledge, construct arguments, interpret evidence, and participate in scholarly communities. For learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), writing is especially demanding because it requires the simultaneous coordination of language knowledge, rhetorical awareness, genre expectations, idea development, and self-regulation. A writer must generate and select ideas, organize them into a coherent structure, choose accurate and appropriately formal language, and revise the text with an imagined reader in mind. These demands make writing more than the transcription of sentences; it is a situated cognitive and social activity shaped by purpose, audience, institutional expectations, and the writer's linguistic repertoire (Hyland, 2022).

The complexity of academic writing is amplified in contexts where English is mainly learned in classrooms and opportunities for sustained exposure are limited. Students may possess declarative knowledge of grammar or vocabulary yet struggle to mobilize that knowledge while planning, drafting, and revising a text. They may also rely on direct translation from Arabic, transfer rhetorical patterns from their first language, or avoid complex expression because they fear error and negative judgment. Consequently, difficulties that appear on the page—such as weak cohesion, restricted vocabulary, inaccurate sentence structure, and limited revision—often reflect a broader interaction among linguistic competence, writing strategies, confidence, instructional experience, and access to feedback.

Recent research continues to document this multidimensional pattern, Taye and Mengesha (2024) found vocabulary and grammar to be leading challenges among Ethiopian

undergraduates, together with insufficient instructional time, Li's (2024) meta-ethnographic synthesis showed that non-native English-speaking students across higher education frequently experience limited linguistic resources, uncertainty about academic conventions, and difficulty translating ideas from the first language into English, Aldayel, Pravitasari, and Fadillah (2026) similarly distinguished linguistic, affective-motivational, and educational-environment factors, arguing that specialized academic-writing support is required rather than general language teaching alone. These recent findings strengthen the need for institution-specific evidence, because the relative weight of each factor varies across curricula, student populations, and educational settings.

The Libyan university context warrants particular attention. Students majoring in English are expected to complete essays, examinations, research projects, and graduation requirements in English, yet many encounter persistent difficulty producing accurate, coherent, and appropriately formal texts. Local evidence remains limited, and much of the available work isolates single error categories or depends on product analysis without combining broad student perceptions with detailed accounts of their experiences. The present study therefore uses survey and interview evidence from University of Zawia students to build a fuller explanation of the challenges they encounter and the conditions that sustain them.

2– Statement of the Problem

EFL undergraduates at the University of Zawia are required to use English writing as both an object of study and a medium of academic performance. Despite completing several writing-related courses, many students continue to report difficulty selecting vocabulary, controlling grammar and sentence structure, developing ideas coherently, revising their work, and maintaining an appropriate academic register. These problems can lower assignment quality, increase anxiety, discourage independent writing, and restrict students' readiness for postgraduate study or English-related employment. The problem is not adequately explained by language errors alone: student confidence, first-language transfer, feedback practices, exposure to English, time, and learning resources may also affect performance. Without an integrated account of these factors, curriculum improvement may rely on fragmented remedies. This study addresses that need by examining the most prominent writing challenges and the internal and external factors associated with them through a mixed-methods analysis.

3– Research Questions

- 1– What are the major academic-writing challenges encountered by EFL undergraduates at the University of Zawia?
- 2– What linguistic, affective, cognitive, and contextual factors contribute to these challenges?

3– How do the interview findings explain and extend the patterns identified in the questionnaire data?

4– Objectives of the Study

- 1– Identify and rank the principal difficulties students report when writing in English.
- 2– Examine the internal and external factors associated with weak academic-writing performance.
- 3– Explore students’ experiences of grammar, vocabulary, organization, academic formality, anxiety, feedback, time, and first-language interference.
- 4– Integrate quantitative and qualitative evidence to formulate pedagogically grounded recommendations for EFL writing instruction.

5– Significance of the Study

Theoretically, the study contributes to the view that second-language writing difficulty is multidimensional. It organizes the evidence into three interacting domains: linguistic barriers, affective-cognitive barriers, and contextual barriers. This organization avoids reducing weak writing to grammar errors and instead locates written performance within the relationship between language resources, writer beliefs and strategies, and instructional opportunity.

Methodologically, the study combines questionnaire frequencies with semi-structured interviews. The survey identifies the prevalence and relative strength of reported problems, while the interviews clarify how those problems are experienced and why they persist. This triangulation is particularly valuable in writing research because self-reported difficulty can be interpreted more accurately when numerical patterns are supported by concrete accounts of the writing process.

Practically, the findings offer evidence for writing instructors, curriculum designers, and university administrators. They indicate where course time and support should be concentrated and provide a basis for developing a process-genre syllabus, structured feedback cycles, reading-to-write activities, vocabulary and grammar support in context, writing workshops, and responsible use of digital feedback tools.

6– Literature Review

6.1 Academic Writing as an Integrated Competence

Academic writing involves the purposeful production of texts that meet disciplinary and institutional expectations. It requires content knowledge, rhetorical organization, lexical and grammatical control, source use, audience awareness, and command of genre conventions. Hyland (2022) emphasizes that writing is situated within communities whose members share expectations about evidence, stance, structure, and acceptable forms of interaction. From this perspective, successful writing cannot be achieved through sentence-level accuracy alone;

students must learn how language choices perform academic functions such as defining, comparing, evaluating, qualifying claims, and connecting evidence to conclusions.

The writing process is recursive rather than strictly linear, Writers move among planning, drafting, reviewing, and editing as new ideas emerge and problems become visible, The process approach foregrounds these stages and encourages multiple drafts, whereas genre-oriented instruction makes the purpose, audience, and rhetorical structure of target texts explicit, The process-genre approach combines these strengths by providing models and guided analysis while preserving opportunities for planning, independent drafting, feedback, and revision (Badger & White, 2000), Recent intervention research indicates that process-genre instruction can enhance writing performance, self-efficacy, autonomy, and metacognitive strategy use (Truong, 2022).

Self-regulation is equally central, Academic writing requires writers to set goals, allocate time, monitor comprehension and progress, evaluate drafts, respond to feedback, and persist through difficulty, Anggraeni et al. (2025) found that self-regulated learning-based instruction improved academic writing across students with different self-efficacy levels, The implication is that effective instruction should teach not only what a good text looks like but also how learners can manage the cognitive and motivational demands of producing it.

6.2 Linguistic Challenges

Vocabulary limitations restrict precision, variety, and the ability to express complex relationships, When students rely on a small general vocabulary, they may repeat words, select imprecise items, avoid elaboration, or translate literally from Arabic, Academic vocabulary is not simply a list of difficult words; it includes recurring phraseology, collocations, stance expressions, and discipline-sensitive choices, Restricted lexical knowledge therefore affects both sentence-level expression and the development of an academic voice.

Grammar and sentence structure also remain persistent obstacles, Students must coordinate tense and aspect, agreement, articles, prepositions, clause relationships, punctuation, and sentence boundaries while simultaneously developing content, Attention to form can overload working memory, especially under time pressure, causing writers to simplify ideas or leave errors uncorrected, Taye and Mengesha (2024) reported that grammar was a major concern for students and instructors, while Li (2024) showed that lexical and grammatical limitations frequently undermine clarity and argument construction across higher-education contexts.

Coherence and cohesion represent a further level of difficulty. A text may contain grammatically acceptable sentences yet remain hard to follow if claims are not sequenced logically, paragraphs lack controlling ideas, or transitions do not accurately represent the

relationship between propositions, Students who plan in Arabic and translate sentence by sentence may also produce locally connected language without a clear global argument, Instruction must therefore connect sentence-level work to paragraph development, rhetorical structure, and reader expectations.

6.3 Affective and Cognitive Challenges

Writing anxiety includes worry about evaluation, physiological tension, avoidance, and reduced willingness to take linguistic risks, Anxiety can consume attentional resources and interrupt idea generation, leading students to postpone writing, overfocus on correctness, or submit underdeveloped drafts, Khosravi et al. (2023) demonstrated that writing anxiety is related to performance in EFL academic writing, while the broader review by Mitchell et al. (2023) identified a consistently negative relationship between writing self-efficacy and apprehension, In practical terms, students who doubt their ability may practice less, avoid revision, and interpret corrective feedback as confirmation of failure rather than as guidance.

Cognitive difficulties include generating relevant ideas, selecting supporting details, organizing information, adapting to academic formality, and revising from the reader's perspective, Novice writers often treat revision as proofreading rather than rethinking meaning and structure, They may also struggle to coordinate multiple goals: accuracy, coherence, argument, citation, and word limits, These challenges suggest the value of explicit planning tools, model analysis, think-aloud demonstrations, and checklists that externalize complex processes until students can manage them independently.

6.4 Contextual and Instructional Factors

Writing development depends on opportunities for meaningful practice and responsive feedback, In contexts where students use English mainly during scheduled classes, limited exposure constrains vocabulary growth, awareness of natural phraseology, and familiarity with diverse genres, Reading-to-write activities can partially address this limitation by connecting language input with purposeful output, but such tasks require carefully selected texts and explicit support for extracting, synthesizing, and transforming information.

Feedback quality and timing are also decisive, Product-focused correction delivered only after a final submission may identify errors but provide little opportunity for learning through revision, By contrast, staged feedback during planning, drafting, and rewriting can direct attention to higher-order concerns before sentence-level editing, Longitudinal research on peer feedback indicates that giving feedback can strengthen students' writing knowledge, self-efficacy, and problem identification when it is repeated and scaffolded (Zhang et al., 2023), Portfolio assessment can similarly support autonomy, reduce anxiety, and improve writing complexity, accuracy, and fluency (Al-Hawamdeh et al., 2023).

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Technology may extend feedback opportunities, but it should be integrated critically, Rahimi, Fathi, and Zou (2025) found that automated written corrective feedback supported writing performance and grammatical accuracy when embedded in interactive writing activities, Such tools can offer immediate diagnostic information, yet they cannot replace teacher judgment concerning argument quality, rhetorical appropriateness, or the learner’s intentions. A balanced model uses automated feedback for selected lower–level issues, peer interaction for reader response, and instructor feedback for disciplinary meaning and development.

7– Previous Studies

Previous research was reviewed from the most recent to the older studies in order to position the present investigation within current EFL writing scholarship, Table 1 summarizes the studies most closely related to its variables, design, and pedagogical implications.

Study and context	Design/sample	Main findings	Relevance
Aldayel et al. (2026), Indonesia	Mixed methods; 65 EFL university students	Linguistic and affective–motivational factors were the strongest sources of academic–writing difficulty; educational–environment factors were also relevant.	Supports a multidimensional model and provides a recent comparison for the present findings.
Anggraeni et al. (2025), Indonesia	Explanatory sequential mixed methods; 80 students	Self-regulated learning–based instruction improved academic writing across high, moderate, and low self-efficacy groups.	Supports explicit instruction in planning, monitoring, and reflection.
Rahimi et al. (2025), EFL context	Mixed–method intervention; 56 learners in two classes	Automated corrective feedback improved task achievement and grammatical accuracy and increased learner engagement.	Informs the recommendation for supervised digital feedback.
Taye & Mengesha (2024), Ethiopia	Descriptive mixed methods; 680 undergraduates plus instructors	Vocabulary and grammar were prominent challenges; students also needed more instructional time and varied practice.	Closely parallels the lexical and grammatical difficulties found at Zawia.
Li (2024), international HE contexts	Meta–ethnographic qualitative synthesis	NNES students experienced linguistic limitations, uncertainty about conventions, L1–to–English translation problems, and uneven institutional support.	Provides cross–context confirmation of the qualitative themes.
Khosravi et al. (2023), Iran	Correlational study; 68 EFL learners	Writing anxiety and perfectionism predicted IELTS writing	Explains the role of fear, anxiety, and negative

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Study and context	Design/sample	Main findings	Relevance
		performance.	evaluation.
Mamad & Vigh (2023), Morocco	University instructors' perceptions and reported practices	Writing instruction often remained product-oriented despite recognition of process-based principles.	Highlights the gap between pedagogical beliefs and classroom implementation.
Truong (2022), Vietnam	Nine-week process-genre intervention; 38 EFL students	The process-genre approach improved writing performance, self-efficacy, and autonomy.	Supports the main instructional recommendation of the current study.
Budjalemba & Listyani (2020), Indonesia	Student-perception study in academic writing classes	Internal factors such as motivation and knowledge interacted with materials, classroom conditions, and teaching style.	Directly supports the internal/external factor classification used here.

8– Research Gap

The literature establishes that EFL writing difficulty commonly involves vocabulary, grammar, organization, anxiety, and instructional conditions. Nevertheless, three gaps remain. First, comparatively little recent research has examined these dimensions together in the Libyan university context. Local studies have often concentrated on isolated errors or specific linguistic forms, leaving the interaction among language knowledge, affect, writing strategy, and classroom conditions underexplored.

Second, many descriptive studies rely on a single instrument. Questionnaire data can indicate how widespread a perception is, but they cannot fully explain how students experience the writing process or why a problem persists. Conversely, interviews provide depth but do not establish the relative prominence of different challenges across a larger group. The present study addresses this limitation by integrating numerical patterns with student narratives.

Third, writing difficulties are frequently reported without being translated into an integrated instructional response. The present analysis connects each major barrier to specific pedagogical mechanisms: process-genre scaffolding for organization and academic formality, contextualized language instruction for grammar and vocabulary, self-regulation for planning and revision, and formative feedback systems for confidence and error awareness.

9– What Distinguishes the Current Study

1– It offers institution-specific evidence from Libyan EFL undergraduates at the University of Zawia.

- 2– It combines questionnaire frequencies with semi–structured interviews rather than relying on one data source.
- 3– It ranks the reported challenges and contributing factors using endorsement percentages and weighted means derived from the original response distributions.
- 4– It integrates linguistic, affective–cognitive, and contextual explanations into one model.
- 5– It incorporates recent evidence on self–regulated learning, process–genre instruction, portfolio and peer feedback, and supervised automated feedback.

10, Methodology

10.1 Research Design

The study employed a mixed–methods triangulation design, Quantitative data identified the frequency and relative strength of students’ perceptions, while qualitative data explored the meanings, experiences, and explanations underlying those responses, Mixed methods were appropriate because academic–writing difficulty includes both observable patterns and subjective experiences, The design follows the principle that combining forms of evidence can produce a more complete explanation than either method alone (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

10.2 Context and Participants

The study was conducted with undergraduate EFL students in the English Department at the Faculty of Education, Abu Issa, University of Zawia, during the 2023/2024 academic year, The target group consisted of students in the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth semesters, stages at which learners had already completed foundational language courses and were expected to produce increasingly academic forms of writing, Fifty–six students voluntarily completed the questionnaire, Ten of those students, aged 21–24 and representing the four semesters, participated in semi–structured interviews selected through snowball sampling.

Table 2, Demographic distribution of questionnaire participants (N = 56)

Variable	Category	n	%
Age	21	18	32.1
Age	22	20	35.7
Age	23	10	17.9
Age	24	3	5.4
Age	Above 24	5	8.9
Semester	Fifth	13	23.2
Semester	Sixth	14	25.0
Semester	Seventh	14	25.0

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Variable	Category	n	%
Semester	Eighth	15	26.8
Years studying English	Two	10	17.9
Years studying English	Three	18	32.1
Years studying English	Four	24	42.9
Years studying English	Five	1	1.8
Years studying English	More than five	3	5.4

10.3 Instruments

The questionnaire comprised three domains: attitudes toward writing, perceived writing problems, and factors contributing to weakness. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The instrument captured students' perceptions of the value and difficulty of writing, confidence, anxiety, vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, coherence, revision, exposure, feedback, time, and first-language influence.

The semi-structured interview explored students' attitudes, specific writing challenges, internal and external causes, and strategies for improvement. Interviews allowed the participants to explain how grammar, vocabulary, organization, formality, anxiety, classroom practices, resources, time, and Arabic-English transfer affected their writing. Participant codes were used to preserve confidentiality.

10.4 Validity and Reliability

The instruments were reviewed and piloted before full administration. Cronbach's alpha was used to examine internal consistency. The overall questionnaire coefficient was .851, indicating strong reliability for the study's descriptive purposes. The subscale coefficients were .684 for attitudes, .845 for problems/challenges, and .674 for contributing factors. The comparatively high coefficient for the challenge domain suggests that its items measured a coherent cluster of perceived writing problems.

Table 3, Reliability coefficients reported for the questionnaire

Scale	Number of statements	Cronbach's alpha
Student attitudes	10	.684
Problems/challenges	10	.845
Contributing factors	10	.674
Whole questionnaire	30	.851

10.5 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection took place from 15 November to 20 December 2024 after permission was obtained and students were informed about the purpose of the study and their rights, The online questionnaire required approximately fifteen minutes, The face-to-face interviews lasted approximately twenty minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, and organized for thematic analysis.

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS Version 27, Weighted means and combined agreement percentages were calculated from the reported response frequencies to rank the items consistently, Mean scores were interpreted on the five-point scale, with higher values indicating stronger endorsement, The qualitative material was analyzed thematically through familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting, following Braun and Clarke's approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021), Integration occurred during interpretation by comparing the survey rankings with the themes and explanations emerging from the interviews.

10.6 Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and students were assured that participation would not affect their academic standing, Identities were protected through participant codes, recordings and transcripts were handled confidentially, and the data were used solely for research purposes, These procedures supported respect, privacy, and responsible data management.

11, Results

11.1 Students' Attitudes toward Writing

The attitude results reveal a productive but tension-filled orientation toward writing, Students strongly believed that improving writing would enhance academic and professional opportunities (96.4%) and that writing assignments deepened their understanding of English (91.1%), Regular practice and motivation to improve each received 89.3% agreement, At the same time, 82.1% regarded writing as challenging and 62.5% reported anxiety or stress, Confidence was the weakest positive indicator: only 58.9% agreed that they could express their thoughts and ideas confidently in English, The pattern suggests that students value writing and want to improve, but perceived importance and motivation have not yet translated into secure performance beliefs.

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Table 4, Ranked attitudes toward English writing

Rank	Item	Mean	Agreement %
1	Academic/professional opportunities	4.64	96.4
2	Regular practice improves English	4.59	89.3
3	Writing assignments deepen learning	4.41	91.1
4	Motivation to improve	4.36	89.3
5	Feedback supports improvement	4.41	87.5
6	Writing is important for communication	4.45	87.5
7	Writing is challenging	4.20	82.1
8	Enjoyment of writing	3.73	71.4
9	Writing anxiety/stress	3.75	62.5
10	Confidence in expressing ideas	3.41	58.9

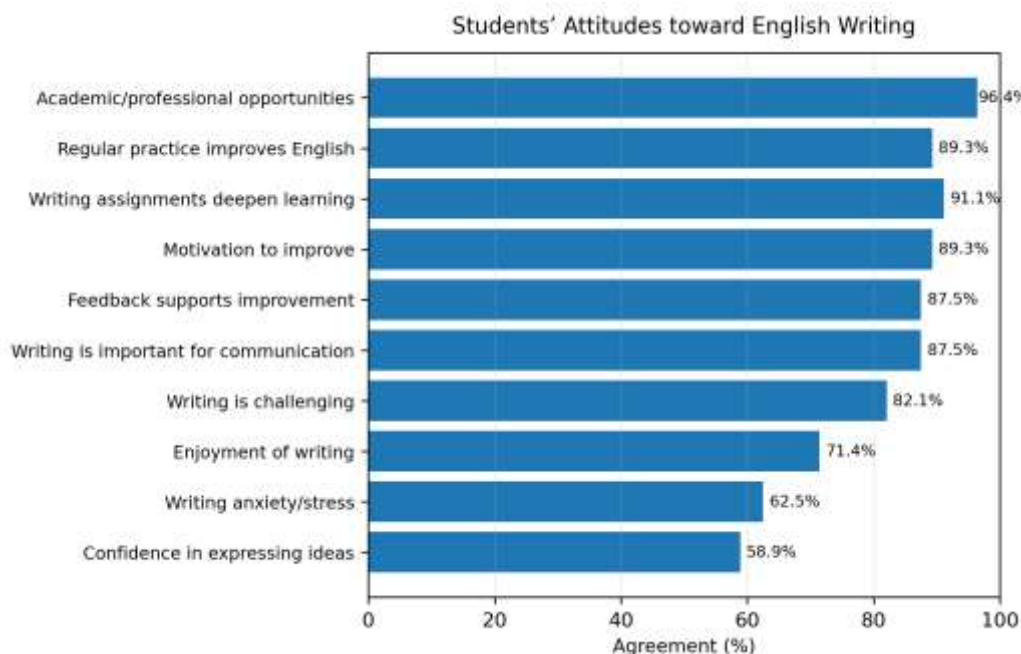


Figure 1, Percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed with attitude statements.

11.2 Major Writing Challenges

Vocabulary and word choice emerged as the most strongly endorsed writing challenge ($M = 4.09$; 76.8% agreement), Revision and editing were endorsed by the same proportion

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(76.8%), indicating that difficulty persists beyond initial drafting, Clear and coherent expression ranked next (71.4%), followed by anxiety, grammar and sentence structure, and idea generation, Punctuation and capitalization were less prominent than the other difficulties, but nearly half of the respondents still reported problems, The results indicate that the students' main concerns span all phases of composing: generating and organizing content, selecting language, drafting accurately, and evaluating a completed text.

Table 5, Ranked writing challenges

Rank	Challenge	Mean	Agreement %
1	Vocabulary and word choice	4.09	76.8
2	Revision and editing	3.98	76.8
3	Clear and coherent expression	3.98	71.4
4	Idea generation	3.73	62.5
5	Writing anxiety	3.71	64.3
6	Grammar and sentence structure	3.66	64.3
7	Punctuation and capitalization	3.18	46.4

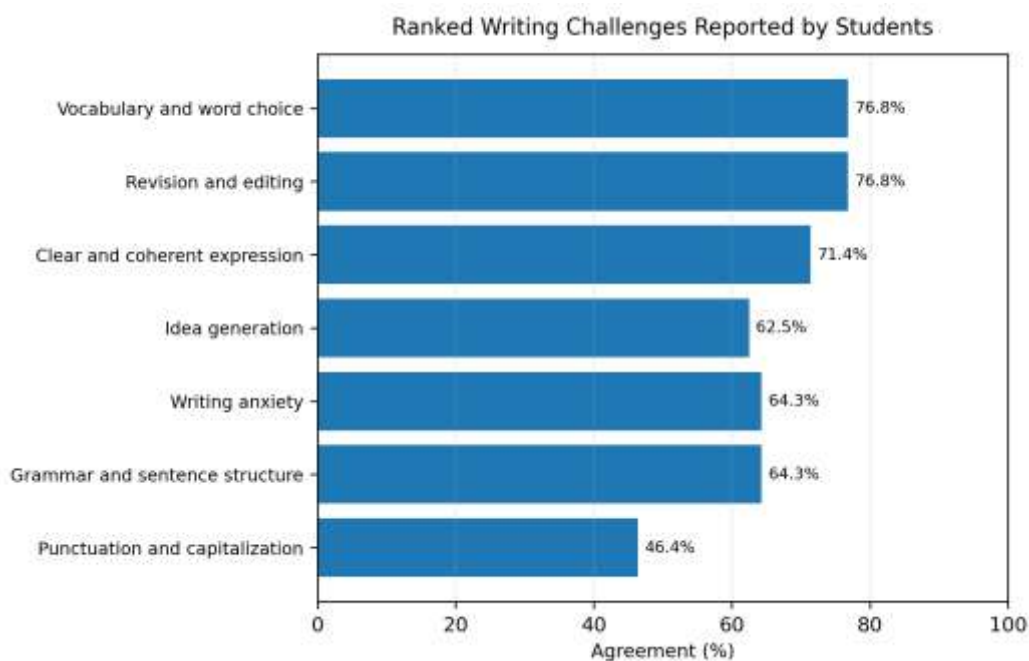


Figure 2, Agreement percentages for reported writing challenges.

11.3 Factors Contributing to Writing Difficulties

Limited exposure to English outside the classroom was the highest-rated contributing factor ($M = 3.98$; 71.4% agreement), Difficulty organizing and expressing ideas followed closely ($M = 3.89$; 69.6%), Cultural and linguistic differences were endorsed by 67.9%, while fear of mistakes and judgment received 64.3%, Limited vocabulary, anxiety/stress, and insufficient teacher feedback each received substantial endorsement, Insufficient time and incomplete understanding of writing stages were comparatively lower, although they remained relevant for sizeable groups, The ordering shows that students viewed writing weakness as the product of both individual resources and the learning environment.

Table 6, Ranked factors contributing to writing difficulties

Rank	Factor	Mean	Agreement %
1	Limited exposure outside class	3.98	71.4
2	Organizing and expressing ideas	3.89	69.6
3	Vocabulary breadth and use	3.80	62.5
4	Anxiety, stress, personal problems	3.77	62.5
5	Cultural and linguistic differences	3.75	67.9
6	Insufficient teacher feedback/guidance	3.64	60.7
7	Fear of mistakes and judgment	3.61	64.3
8	Grammar knowledge and practice	3.34	50.0
9	Insufficient time	3.18	44.6
10	Understanding the writing stages	2.91	33.9

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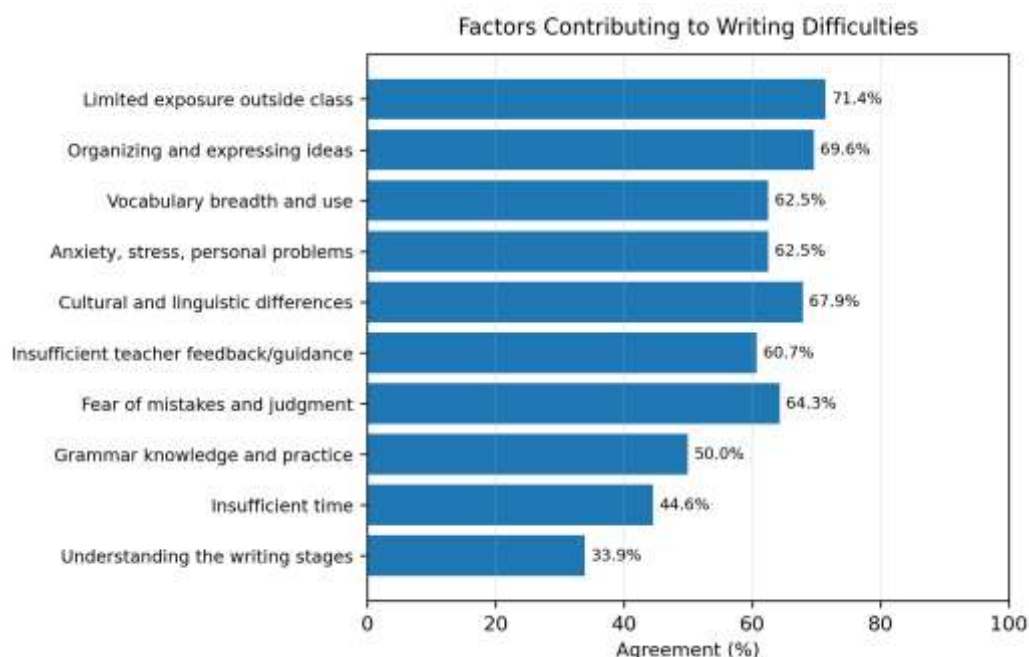


Figure 3, Agreement percentages for factors contributing to writing difficulties.

11.4 Qualitative Themes

Table 7, Themes generated from the student interviews

Theme	Interpretive summary
Attitudes and perceived importance	Writing was viewed as important for education, communication, and future employment, but enjoyment and confidence varied with task complexity.
Language-related challenges	Grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, punctuation, and accuracy constrained students' ability to convey precise meanings.
Cognitive and psychological challenges	Students described difficulty generating and sequencing ideas, maintaining academic formality, revising, and writing under anxiety.
Internal factors	Confidence, motivation, prior knowledge, preparation, grammar knowledge, and lexical resources influenced persistence and performance.
External factors	Teacher strategies, learning materials, time constraints, limited opportunities for practice, and Arabic-English interference shaped the writing experience.
Strategies for improvement	Students emphasized consistent practice, richer learning resources, more creative curriculum implementation, and practical guidance across the writing stages.

The interviews clarified how the quantitative challenges operate in practice. Participants described grammar as demanding because accurate writing requires simultaneous control of tense, sentence structure, prepositions, transition signals, and punctuation. Vocabulary difficulty was not simply lack of word knowledge; students often knew general vocabulary but could not

retrieve the precise or appropriately formal item needed to express a complex idea, Academic formality was therefore experienced as a combined lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical problem.

First-language interference affected sentence structure, word choice, punctuation, and the flow of ideas, Several participants reported thinking in Arabic and translating while writing, This slowed production and sometimes produced expressions that were grammatically possible but rhetorically unnatural in English, Students also linked their difficulties to limited exposure beyond the classroom, which reduced opportunities to internalize common patterns through reading, listening, and authentic communication.

Anxiety and fear of judgment were closely connected to confidence and feedback, Students worried about errors and evaluation by teachers or classmates, and some interpreted limited or mainly corrective feedback as evidence that they were weak writers, Conversely, they believed that specific guidance, acknowledgment of progress, and repeated practice would increase motivation, The interviews therefore support a developmental feedback model in which students use comments to revise and observe improvement rather than receiving correction only after a task is completed.

Integrated Explanatory Model Derived from the Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

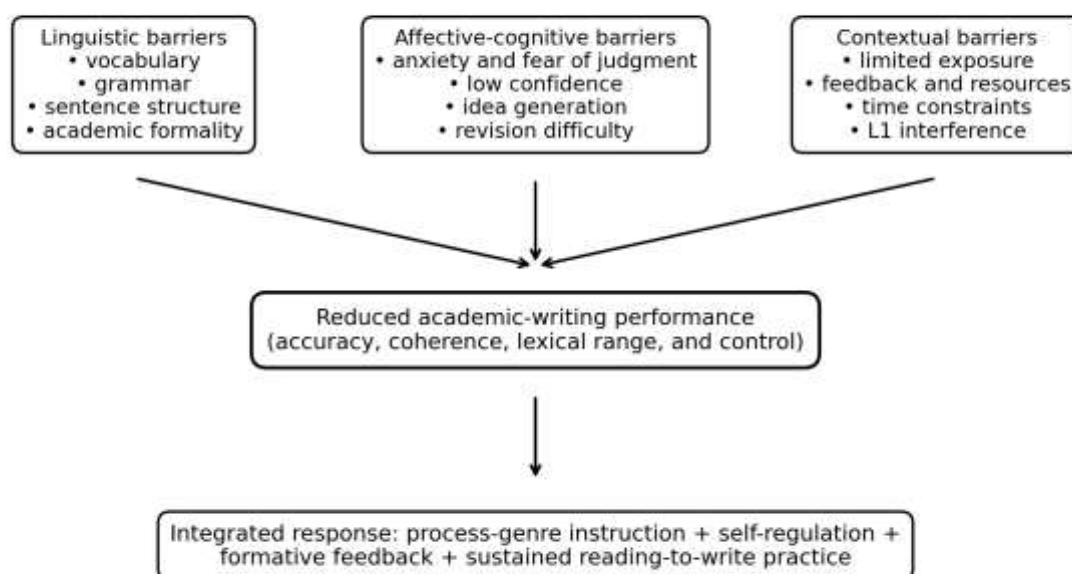


Figure 4, Integrated explanatory model derived from the quantitative and qualitative evidence.

11.5 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The two strands converged strongly, Survey respondents ranked vocabulary, revision, coherence, exposure, organization, cultural-linguistic differences, and fear among the most important issues, Interview participants explained these same patterns through concrete experiences: searching for suitable words, losing control of sentence structure, translating from

Arabic, struggling to maintain formal tone, and avoiding risk because of fear of error, The interviews also extended the survey by showing that the factors are mutually reinforcing, Limited exposure restricts vocabulary and familiarity with genre; weak language control increases anxiety; anxiety discourages practice and revision; and limited feedback prevents students from converting errors into strategies for improvement, This interaction explains why isolated grammar exercises are unlikely to produce sustained gains unless accompanied by meaningful writing, feedback, reading, and confidence–building support.

12, Discussion

12.1 Linguistic Resources and Text Construction

The prominence of vocabulary and word choice is consistent with recent evidence that lexical limitations are a central barrier to undergraduate writing, Taye and Mengesha (2024) similarly identified vocabulary as the most prevalent challenge in their student data, and Li's (2024) synthesis showed that limited vocabulary and grammar reduce writers' ability to construct clear arguments, In the present study, vocabulary difficulty also interacted with academic formality: students did not merely need more words, but greater control of collocation, register, and phraseological patterns used to frame claims and relationships, This supports teaching vocabulary through model texts, lexical bundles, and repeated use in discipline–relevant writing rather than through decontextualized memorization alone.

Grammar and sentence structure were strongly endorsed and repeatedly emphasized in interviews, Students described difficulty applying grammatical knowledge under the cognitive pressure of composing, This distinction is important: knowing a rule in an exercise is not the same as using it while developing an argument, Contextualized grammar instruction should therefore occur during drafting and revision, using students' own texts to connect form with meaning, Focused mini–lessons on sentence boundaries, clause relationships, articles, prepositions, and transition signals can be followed by guided application and self–editing rather than separated from authentic writing.

Revision and editing ranked as highly as vocabulary, This result indicates that students may view writing as a one–draft product or lack strategies for evaluating a text from the reader's perspective, Process–genre instruction offers a relevant response because it separates planning, drafting, content revision, language editing, and final proofreading while maintaining attention to the target genre, Truong (2022) found that such instruction improved performance, self–efficacy, and autonomy, suggesting that explicit routines can gradually convert revision from a teacher–controlled correction stage into a student–managed process.

12.2 Anxiety, Confidence, and Self-Regulation

The findings show a clear motivational paradox: students recognized the importance of writing and reported strong motivation to improve, yet confidence remained comparatively low and anxiety affected a majority. This pattern suggests that motivation alone is insufficient when students lack successful experiences and practical strategies. Khosravi et al. (2023) linked writing anxiety to EFL writing performance, and Aldayel et al. (2026) identified low confidence and motivation as barriers to initiating and sustaining complex academic arguments. The present interviews add that fear of being judged may lead students to choose safer vocabulary, simplify ideas, or avoid sharing drafts.

Writing courses should therefore create structured experiences of progress. Low-stakes tasks, short drafting cycles, transparent rubrics, peer response training, and opportunities to revise after feedback can reduce the finality of error. Feedback should identify strengths and priorities rather than mark every problem simultaneously. Students also need explicit self-regulation routines: setting a writing goal, planning a time schedule, monitoring progress, using a checklist, and recording recurring errors. Anggraeni et al. (2025) provides recent support for this approach, showing improvement across different levels of self-efficacy when self-regulated learning was built into writing instruction.

12.3 Exposure, Feedback, and the Learning Environment

Limited exposure outside the classroom was the highest contributing factor. This finding explains why students may understand taught rules but struggle with automatic and natural use. Regular contact with well-written English gives learners repeated evidence of how vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, stance, and genre operate together. A reading-to-write curriculum can make exposure purposeful: students identify rhetorical moves, collect useful expressions, summarize and compare sources, and then adapt those resources in their own writing. Such activity also provides content for idea generation, another reported difficulty.

The need for stronger teacher feedback and guidance is consistent with research showing that instruction frequently remains product-oriented even when teachers value process principles (Mamad & Vigh, 2023). Effective feedback must be usable. Comments should be selective, clear, linked to criteria, and followed by a required revision. Peer feedback can expand the amount of response available and strengthen the reviewer's own writing knowledge when students are trained to identify problems and propose solutions (Zhang et al., 2023). Portfolios can document successive drafts and make progress visible, supporting autonomy and reducing anxiety (Al-Hawamdeh et al., 2023).

Digital tools can supplement this system by identifying selected language patterns rapidly, but their role should remain pedagogically bounded. Rahimi et al. (2025) found benefits for

grammatical accuracy and task achievement when automated feedback was embedded in interactive activities. At Zawia, such tools could support self-editing between drafts, while teachers retain responsibility for meaning, argument, genre, source integration, and academic integrity. Students should be taught to evaluate automated suggestions rather than accept them mechanically.

12.4 First–Language Interference and Academic Conventions

The reported effect of Arabic–English interference is not evidence that the first language should be excluded from learning. Rather, it indicates a need for conscious contrastive awareness. Students benefit from comparing how Arabic and English organize sentences, use punctuation, express subjects, sequence information, and signal relationships. Planned bilingual brainstorming may help students generate content, but the transition to English drafting should involve reformulation at the level of meaning and rhetorical function rather than word–for–word translation.

Academic conventions also require explicit instruction because they are culturally and institutionally shaped. Students need model–based analysis of introductions, thesis statements, paragraph development, cautious claims, evidence integration, and conclusions. Making these conventions visible reduces the cognitive burden of guessing what counts as acceptable academic writing and enables students to focus their effort strategically.

13, Conclusion

This study examined the academic–writing challenges faced by EFL undergraduates at the University of Zawia and the factors that contribute to those challenges. The quantitative results showed that students value writing, believe it is important for their future, and are motivated to improve. Nevertheless, vocabulary, revision, coherent expression, grammar, idea generation, and anxiety remain substantial difficulties. The principal contributing conditions include limited exposure to English outside the classroom, weak organization of ideas, cultural–linguistic differences, fear of negative evaluation, insufficient feedback, and limited language resources.

The qualitative findings demonstrated that these variables do not operate independently. Language gaps increase anxiety; anxiety restricts risk–taking and practice; limited exposure slows lexical and rhetorical development; and feedback that is late or mainly corrective does not teach students how to manage planning and revision. The most defensible conclusion is therefore that EFL writing difficulty is a system rather than a single deficit. Effective improvement requires coordinated attention to language, composing processes, writer beliefs, and learning conditions.

14, Recommendations

Table 8, Recommended actions for improving EFL academic writing

No.	Recommended action	Implementation focus
1	Adopt a process–genre writing curriculum.	Writing courses should explicitly teach genre purpose and structure while guiding students through planning, drafting, feedback, revision, editing, and reflection.
2	Integrate grammar and vocabulary with authentic writing.	Short, targeted language lessons should arise from model texts and recurring student needs, followed by immediate application in drafts.
3	Establish sustained reading–to–write practice.	Students should read varied academic and professional texts, analyze rhetorical moves, build lexical notebooks, summarize sources, and reuse language appropriately.
4	Teach self–regulated writing routines.	Goal setting, time planning, progress monitoring, error logs, revision checklists, and reflective writing diaries should become regular course practices.
5	Create a multi–stage feedback system.	Teacher feedback, trained peer response, self–assessment, and supervised automated feedback should be distributed across drafts rather than concentrated on the final product.
6	Reduce anxiety through low–stakes practice and revision opportunities.	Instructors should normalize error as part of development, recognize progress, use transparent criteria, and allow resubmission after feedback.
7	Address Arabic–English transfer explicitly.	Contrastive activities should focus on sentence structure, punctuation, cohesion, word choice, and rhetorical organization without treating the first language as a problem in itself.
8	Strengthen institutional writing support.	The university should provide writing workshops, digital resources, staff development, accessible consultation, and sufficient classroom time for practice and feedback.

15, Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study is limited by its small, non–probability sample from one institution, so the findings should not be generalized statistically to all Libyan EFL students. The quantitative evidence is based on self–report rather than direct assessment of student texts, and the analysis is descriptive. Interview accounts provide depth but may be influenced by memory, social desirability, or the translation and transcription process. In addition, the item rankings were calculated from the reported frequency distributions rather than from the raw dataset.

Future research should combine perceptions with a corpus of student essays scored through an analytic rubric for content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and mechanics. Multi-institutional studies could compare regions and program stages. Experimental or quasi-experimental research should test process-genre instruction, self-regulated learning, portfolio assessment, peer feedback, and blended teacher-automated feedback. Longitudinal studies are also needed to determine whether gains in confidence, revision behavior, and writing quality persist beyond one course.

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