

EFL Graduate Students' Scholarly Writing Proficiency and Publication Challenges: Evidence from Some Indonesian State Universities

Eryansyah Eryansyah¹, Rita Inderawati¹, Ismail Petrus¹, Agus Saripudin²

¹ English Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Sriwijaya, Inderalaya, Indonesia

² Indonesian and Literature Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Sriwijaya, Inderalaya, Indonesia

Correspondence: Eryansyah Eryansyah, English Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Sriwijaya, Inderalaya, Indonesia.

Received: January 9, 2026

Accepted: July 11, 2026

Online Published: July 16, 2026

doi:10.5430/wjel.v16n6p230

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v16n6p230>

Abstract

This study investigated the academic writing proficiency and publication-related challenges of EFL graduate students from three state universities in the southern region of Sumatra, Indonesia. The study employed a quantitative descriptive design involving 84 graduate students enrolled in the Master's Program in English Education. Data were collected through an academic writing proficiency test and a Likert-scale questionnaire and were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that the students' academic writing proficiency was generally at a moderate level, with mean scores of 67.51, 77.38, and 77.00 across the three universities. The questionnaire results indicated that students encountered considerable challenges in publication-oriented academic writing, particularly in grammar, paraphrasing, analytical writing, coherence development, citation and referencing practices, and identifying reputable journals for publication. Grammatical difficulties emerged as the most dominant challenge across the three universities. In addition, the students demonstrated weaknesses in applying APA 7th citation conventions, evaluating academic sources, and constructing analytical arguments and developing research novelty. These findings suggest a mismatch between the increasing institutional expectations for scholarly publication and graduate students' actual readiness for publication-oriented writing. The study concludes that success in academic publication requires not only English proficiency but also rhetorical competence, critical thinking skills, and publication literacy. Therefore, universities should strengthen academic writing instruction and provide structured support in paraphrasing, analytical writing, citation management, and scholarly publication practices to better prepare graduate students for academic publishing.

Keywords: academic writing proficiency, EFL graduate students, publication-oriented writing, publication challenges, scholarly writing, academic publication literacy

1. Introduction

In recent years, academic publishing has become a central indicator of scholarly productivity and institutional quality in higher education. In Indonesia, this emphasis is particularly pronounced, as universities increasingly require academics to publish research articles in reputable national or international journals as part of institutional accreditation, academic promotion, and global visibility initiatives (Arsyad, Purwo, Sukanto, & Adnan, 2019; Edi, Djati, I Made, & Tubagus, 2017). Through publication, academics are able to disseminate knowledge, engage in scholarly dialogue, and contribute to the advancement of their disciplines at both national and international levels. Consequently, academics across Indonesian universities are strongly encouraged-and often compelled-to publish in journals indexed by national accreditation systems such as Sinta or international databases such as Scopus.

This publication mandate extends to postgraduate students, especially those enrolled in graduate's and doctoral degree programs. In many Indonesian universities, graduate students are required to provide evidence of article submission or acceptance in nationally accredited or internationally indexed journals before being permitted to sit for their thesis examination. This requirement is generally justified on the grounds that it promotes research dissemination, academic rigor, and early professional socialization into scholarly communities. Moreover, student publications benefit supervisors and institutions by increasing citation counts, h-index scores, and institutional recognition, which are critical indicators in global university ranking and accreditation systems (Fernandes & Singh, 2022; Rana, Verma, Haque, & Ahmed, 2022).

Despite these institutional benefits, the obligation to publish articles presents considerable challenges, particularly for Indonesian students whose mother tongue is not English and who must write in English as a foreign language. In fact, writing research articles for publication requires not only content knowledge but also advanced proficiency in academic English, rhetorical competence, and familiarity with disciplinary conventions. For EFL graduate students, even those majoring in English education, academic writing for publication is often demanding because English functions as a foreign rather than a second language (Naghdipour, 2016; Paltridge & Starfield, 2020). As a

result, preparing manuscripts suitable for submission to reputable journals becomes a complex, cognitively demanding, and time-consuming process.

Previous studies have acknowledged the importance of publishing for EFL graduate students. Publishing facilitates scholarly interaction, enhances research competence, and deepens students' understanding of disciplinary knowledge (Louw, 2017; Munadi, Rohmatika, Susilayati, & Purwono, 2019; Selemani, Chawinga, & Dube, 2018). Through publication, students transition from knowledge consumers to knowledge producers, positioning themselves as novice members of academic discourse communities. Furthermore, published articles contribute to knowledge dissemination and may serve as references for other researchers and practitioners (Phillips & Barker, 2021; Sönmez, 2020).

Nevertheless, these benefits are frequently overshadowed by persistent challenges in academic writing. Research consistently reports that EFL students experience linguistic difficulties related to grammar, vocabulary, cohesion, and clarity, particularly when composing extended academic texts (Ariyanti, 2016; Graham et al., 2020; Rezaei & Seyri, 2019). Beyond language form, students also struggle with rhetorical and discourse-level demands, such as synthesizing literature, establishing research significance, and constructing coherent arguments aligned with journal expectations.

One major source of difficulty lies in mastering the structure of academic journal articles. Most reputable journals adopt the IMRAD format-Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion-which requires writers to articulate research problems clearly, justify the study through literature synthesis, report methods rigorously, and interpret findings critically (Moskovitz, Harmon, & Saha, 2024; Zashikhina & Pechinkina, 2022). Empirical evidence suggests that EFL writers find it particularly challenging to write introductions and discussion sections, integrate previous studies meaningfully, and relate findings to existing literature (Aydin, Yürük, Reisoğlu, & Goktas, 2023). These challenges are often exacerbated by limited proficiency in academic English, increasing the cognitive load required for drafting and revising manuscripts.

In addition to these challenges, the use of AI-mediated writing tools can create new problems. For instance, students may face a higher risk of plagiarism when using AI-generated text without proper checking (Cotton, Cotton, & Shipway, 2024; Yeo, 2023). Furthermore, overreliance on AI can weaken writing skills, such as critical thinking and idea development. In addition, AI tools may produce biased or inaccurate information, which can affect the quality of academic writing (Cheng, Calhoun, & Reedy, 2025; Yeo, 2023). Finally, another concern is authorship accountability, as it can be unclear how much of the work truly belongs to the student (Yeo, 2023).

Similarly, in addition to rhetorical challenges, technical aspects of academic writing-especially citation and referencing-are also difficult. For example, many EFL students struggle with in-text citations, reference lists, and APA style (Jomaa & Bidin, 2017; Walburg, 2018). In particular, small details, such as using "and" versus "&", can also be confusing (Baysen, Hošková-Mayerová Čákmak, & Baysen, 2017; Hartley & Cabanac, 2017). These difficulties may result in citation inconsistencies and, in some cases, unintentional plagiarism (Fazilatfar, Elhambakhsh, & Allami, 2018; Lestari, 2020). Additionally, paraphrasing and summarizing source texts remain problematic for many EFL students, increasing the risk of academic misconduct (Walburg, 2018). Furthermore, AI tools can make these issues more complex, as they may generate incorrect or fake references. Therefore, students need to carefully check and verify all AI-generated content before using it in their writing.

A further issue is the lack of knowledge regarding publication ethics and journal quality. Without sufficient guidance, graduate students may struggle to identify reputable journals and may inadvertently submit their work to predatory or low-quality outlets (Beall, 2017; Dadkhah, Maliszewski, & Jazi, 2016; Phillips & Barker, 2021). This issue highlights that academic writing for publication involves not only linguistic and rhetorical competence but also procedural and ethical literacy.

Although a substantial body of research has examined EFL students' academic writing difficulties, important gaps remain. Most existing studies focus on undergraduate students, novice writers, or doctoral candidates, often emphasizing general academic writing skills rather than writing specifically for publication. Moreover, few studies empirically investigate EFL graduate students in English education, a group commonly assumed to possess adequate academic writing competence due to prolonged formal exposure to English. For instance, a study done by Ardi, Amalia, Widiati, Walker, and Prihandoko (2024) examined the effects of students' writing self-efficacy, research literacy, teacher immediacy, and instructional clarity on the writing enjoyment of Indonesian EFL postgraduate students. Similarly, Subandowo, S árdi, and Thresia (2025) explored the writing strategies employed by Indonesian graduate students when completing academic essay assignments at Hungarian universities. In another study, Cahyono and Rahayu (2020) investigated the relationship between Indonesian EFL students' writing motivation and their writing proficiency. Collectively, these studies have advanced our understanding of graduate students' academic writing; however, in the Indonesian EFL context-where English functions as a foreign language rather than a first or second language-empirical evidence regarding graduate students' publication-oriented writing proficiency remains limited. Furthermore, previous research has relied heavily on self-reported perception of writing ability, with relatively little effort to triangulate these perceptions through objective assessments of writing performance. Consequently, the extent to which Indonesian EFL graduate students possess the writing competence required for international scholarly publication remains insufficiently understood.

To address these gaps, the present study offers two main points of novelty. First, it focuses on EFL graduate students in English education who have completed approximately five years of formal English instruction, a population that has received limited scholarly attention despite strong institutional expectations for publication. Second, it adopts a publication-oriented perspective on academic writing by integrating an assessment of students' academic writing proficiency with an examination of the specific challenges they encounter when

preparing research articles for submission to nationally and internationally accredited journals. Accordingly, this study aimed to assess the academic writing proficiency of Indonesian EFL graduate students in English education and examine the challenges they experience in producing publishable research manuscripts. By simultaneously investigating students' actual writing proficiency and their perceived difficulties, the study provides empirical evidence on whether prolonged exposure to English education translates into readiness for academic publishing, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of the gap between assumed competence and writing performance.

2. Literature Review

This section synthesizes prior studies on (1) the importance of journal publication for EFL graduate students, (2) structural conventions of academic journal articles, and (3) challenges EFL students face in writing for publication. These strands frame publication-oriented academic writing in EFL higher education.

2.1 Importance of Publishing Journal Articles for EFL Graduate Students

Publishing in nationally or internationally recognized journals has become essential for the academic development of EFL graduate students. Prior studies indicate that publication enables participation in global scholarly communication and engagement with academic communities beyond local contexts (Louw, 2017; Munadi et al., 2019; Selemani et al., 2018). In addition, publication aligns with the concept of *publication literacy*, which refers to the knowledge and skills required to navigate the processes, norms, and expectations of academic publishing (Phillips & Barker, 2021). Studies consistently show that publishing enhances professional visibility, fosters collaboration, and supports career advancement (Niez, 2024). More importantly, the process of preparing manuscripts—through drafting, revising, and responding to peer review—promotes higher-order thinking, critical reflection, and research competence (Carmelli et al., 2025).

Despite these benefits, unequal access to publication opportunities remains a concern. EFL students often encounter structural and linguistic barriers that limit their participation in global knowledge production, highlighting issues of equity within academic publishing.

2.2 Structural Conventions of Academic Journal Articles

Successful publication requires familiarity with established structural conventions. Most journals expect articles to include an abstract, introduction, main body, conclusion, and references. The abstract is particularly important, as it is frequently read by editors and readers to assess relevance (Hartley & Cabanac, 2017; Nundy, Kakar, & Bhutta, 2022). The introduction provides research context, identifies gaps, and highlights significance, serving a persuasive function for reviewers (Chamberlen, 2018). The main body presents methods, results, and discussion, where clarity and transparency are crucial for research credibility. In applied linguistics and education, empirical studies commonly follow the IMRAD structure—Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion—which facilitates logical organization and reader navigation. Nevertheless, research shows that EFL writers often struggle to apply these conventions effectively, as they require rhetorical and genre awareness rather than procedural knowledge alone. As an example, a study conducted by Suherdi, Kurniawan, and Lubis (2020) revealed that, although Indonesian undergraduate EFL students were able to demonstrate a relatively high level of linguistic accuracy in their research articles, their writing—particularly in the findings and discussion sections—often lacked clear rhetorical organization and coherence. They tended to present information in a fragmented or unstructured manner, with limited ability to interpret results critically or to establish logical connections between ideas. This finding highlights a notable discrepancy between students' mastery of surface-level writing skills and their ability to construct meaningful academic arguments. It suggests that, while students may have developed adequate procedural writing skills, they still lack strong rhetorical competence, which is essential for producing well-organized and academically persuasive texts.

2.3 Challenges in Writing Academic Journal Articles

EFL graduate students face persistent challenges in writing for publication despite their advanced academic level. The first major difficulty involves mastering the IMRAD structure, particularly in writing introductions, synthesizing literature, and developing discussion sections (Aydin et al., 2023). Second, language proficiency also remains a significant barrier, as academic writing in English demands extensive cognitive effort and prolonged revision (Aldayel, Pravitasari, & Fadillah, 2026; Jo, 2021). Even professionally edited manuscripts may fail to meet journal expectations, indicating that publication success extends beyond grammatical accuracy (Aydin et al., 2023).

Third, intertextual practices, including referencing and citation pose additional challenges. EFL students often struggle with source evaluation, authorial stance, and consistent application of citation styles, particularly APA formatting (Baysen et al., 2017; Jomaa & Bidin, 2017). Although often considered technical, referencing plays a critical rhetorical and ethical role in supporting arguments and preventing plagiarism (Mori, 2017; Rustan, 2024). Difficulties in paraphrasing and summarizing further increase plagiarism risk and reflect limited control over academic discourse conventions (Fazilatfar et al., 2018; Walburg, 2018).

Finally, limited publication literacy—particularly knowledge of journal quality and publication ethics may lead EFL graduate students to submit work to predatory or low-quality journals, potentially undermining their academic credibility (Beall, 2017; Dadkhah et al., 2016; Phillips & Barker, 2021). Overall, existing research highlights linguistic, rhetorical, technical, and ethical challenges in publication-oriented writing. However, little attention has been given to graduate students in English education, who are often assumed to possess advanced academic writing competence. This gap underpins the present study.

3. Method

This study employed a quantitative descriptive design supplemented by qualitative analysis of open-ended questionnaire responses to examine the academic writing proficiency and publication-related challenges of EFL graduate students at three state universities in southern region of Sumatra, Indonesia. The quantitative component involved an academic writing proficiency test to assess students' writing competence and a Likert-scale questionnaire to identify the challenges they encountered when preparing research articles for publication. To complement the quantitative findings, participants' responses to the questionnaire items were analyzed descriptively to provide additional insights into their perceptions, experiences, and explanations of the difficulties they faced during the publication process. These qualitative responses were not intended to constitute an independent qualitative inquiry; rather, they were used to enrich and contextualize the quantitative results, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of EFL graduate students' readiness for academic publishing.

3.1 Research Site and Participants

As stated above, the participants of this study were graduate students in Master Program in English Education from three state universities in the southern region of Sumatra, Indonesia. A total of 84 students participating in this study, consisting of 35 students from University A, 26 students from University B, and 23 students from University C. Criterion purposive sampling was employed because the study focused on a specific group of participants who met predefined criteria relevant to the research objectives. The participants were graduate students enrolled in Master's programs in English Education at three state universities in the southern region of Sumatra, Indonesia, who were required to prepare and submit research articles to SINTA-indexed journals as a prerequisite for their final examination. These criteria ensured that all participants had direct experience with publication-oriented academic writing, making them well suited to provide meaningful data on both their academic writing proficiency and the challenges they encountered during the publication process. Therefore, criterion purposive sampling was considered the most appropriate sampling technique because it enabled the selection of participants whose experiences were directly aligned with the aims of the study.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

To obtain comprehensive data, two research instruments were used, a proficiency test and a Likert-scale questionnaire. The proficiency test was analyzed quantitatively to determine the students' mean scores and identify their level of academic writing proficiency. Meanwhile, the Likert-scale questionnaire was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitatively, the questionnaire data were examined through descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores, to identify general patterns of students' responses. Qualitatively, the questionnaire responses were interpreted descriptively to provide deeper insights into the participants' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences regarding the challenges the students encountered in writing research articles for publication.

To ensure the quality of the instruments, both the proficiency test and questionnaire underwent **content validation** by two experts in academic writing with more than ten years of teaching experience. They evaluated the instruments in terms of relevance, clarity, and representativeness. Based on their feedback, necessary revisions were made to improve the instruments. In addition, **expert agreement** was used to confirm the consistency and reliability of the instruments, indicating that they were appropriate for measuring students' writing proficiency and perceived difficulties.

4. Results

4.1 Students' Proficiency in Writing Articles for Publication

The proficiency test results revealed that the mean scores of the graduate students in English education study programs from the three universities were 67.51, 77.38, and 77.00 (Out the 26 students from University C, only 18 students participated in the proficiency test as seen in Table 1 below). The lowest and highest scores were 23 and 95, respectively. These findings indicate that their academic writing proficiency was in moderate level. The interpretation of students' proficiency level was adapted from standard proficiency classifications in educational assessment and language testing research, wherein score ranges are categorized into levels such as low, moderate/intermediate, and high proficiency to enhance score interpretation (Powers, Schedl, & Papageorgiou, 2017).

The finding also suggests that students across the three universities still require further improvement in several aspects of academic writing, particularly in citation practices, referencing, and evaluation of academic sources.

Table 1. Proficiency test scores

No	Student	University A Score	University B Score	University C Score
1	Student1	70	82	23
2	Student2	68	91	49
3	Student3	67	89	66
4	Student4	39	89	81
5	Student5	46	87	77
6	Student6	53	88	75
7	Student7	58	87	37
8	Student8	66	68	84
9	Student9	53	92	84
10	Student10	72	87	89
11	Student11	53	61	90
12	Student12	55	38	95
13	Student13	78	61	91
14	Student14	57	53	91
15	Student15	62	84	83
16	Student16	73	78	89
17	Student17	69	88	91
18	Student18	86	90	91
19	Student19	88	72	-
20	Student20	68	84	-
21	Student21	63	73	-
22	Student22	75	60	-
23	Student23	78	83	-
24	Student24	65	73	-
25	Student25	64	69	-
26	Student26	88	85	-
27	Student27	81	-	-
28	Student28	60	-	-
29	Student29	91	-	-
30	Student30	88	-	-
31	Student31	79	-	-
32	Student32	86	-	-
33	Student33	41	-	-
34	Student34	64	-	-
35	Student35	59	-	-
M		67.51	77.38	77.00

4.2 Students' Problems in Writing Articles for Publication

Table 2 presents the percentages of students' correct answers from University A, University B, and University C regarding academic writing and publication skills. Overall, the findings indicate that students from the three universities demonstrated varying levels of understanding across different aspects of academic writing, including research article structure, citation and referencing, paraphrasing, plagiarism awareness, and evaluation of good academic sources.

Students from the three universities in general demonstrated an excellent understanding of introductory sections when it came to comprehending the structure of a research article. The majority of them correctly identified the key elements of an introduction and the meaning of an abstract. University B scored 80.8% and 88.5%, respectively, whereas University A recorded 97.1% and 91.4% accurate answers for Items 1 and 2. University C received 83.3% and 94.4%, respectively. Regarding the location of the literature review section, Item 4 likewise showed high percentages: University A and University B obtained 100%, while University C achieved 94.4%.

However, the students found it more challenging to comprehend other sections of research publications, especially the conclusion. Just 45.7% of students from University A correctly answered Item 7 about the content of a conclusion section, compared to 76.9% from University B and 77.8% from University C. The three university students differed in their comprehension of technique and data presentation. The students from university A received 65.7% for Item 5 on methodology, compared to higher percentages of 88.5% and 83.3% for Universities B and C. The percentages for Item 6, which asked if data and discussion data should be kept separated, varied from 65.7% in University A to 80.8% in University B and 72.2% in University C.

The findings also show that different students have different levels of understanding of APA 7th style citation and reference procedures. Students from University A recorded 42.9%, University B 57.7%, and University C 66.7% in Item 9 regarding APA in-text citation, suggesting that many students were still having trouble using the proper citation styles. Regarding the definition of in-text citation, similar trends were seen in Item 16, where those from University A scored 68.6%, University B 84.6%, and University C 83.3%.

Additionally, students' comprehension of reference writing varied by university. Students from University B and University C performed

better, scoring 92.3% and 88.9%, respectively, in Item 13, which deals with annotated bibliography, whereas those from University A scored 60%. All three universities, however, showed weaknesses in their understanding of more in-depth referencing. For instance, only 34.3% of students from University A, 30.8% from University B, and 55.6% from University C properly answered Item 18, which asked for information from a book cover for references. Similarly, moderate percentages (42.9% in University A, 50% in University B, and 72.2% in University C) were shown in Item 45 regarding APA capitalization requirements. These results imply that many students still had trouble with specific APA conventions even though they had a basic comprehension of referencing.

Students showed a generally positive comprehension of paraphrase and plagiarism awareness. The percentages were comparatively high across universities in Item 10, which asked whether paraphrased quotations still needed references: 82.9% in University A, 80.8% in University B, and 77.8% in University C. Universities A and C scored 71.4% and 72.2%, respectively, in Item 34 about the meaning of paraphrase, while University B performed the best at 100%. In a similar vein, all universities-particularly University C, which achieved 100%-produced high percentages for Item 44, which deals with citation during paraphrase. However, students' lower performance in several citation-related items suggests that conceptual understanding may not always correspond with accurate practical application.

The findings further demonstrate variations in students' capacity to evaluate the credibility of scholarly sources. University A scored 60%, University B scored 84.6%, and University C scored 88.9% in Item 25, which deals with the definition of academic sources. Similarly, University A scored 48.6% in Item 27 about trustworthy peer-reviewed articles, compared to 88.5% and 72.2% for Universities B and C. However, when it came to the importance of source recency, Item 35 had one of the lowest percentages among all universities. Just 28.6% of University A students, 11.5% of University B students, and 16.7% of University C students correctly answered. These findings show that students at all universities still did not have enough knowledge to assess the credibility and appropriateness of academic references.

In addition, the findings indicate that students generally did well in recognizing scholarly articles and comprehending plagiarism. For instance, University A and University B scored 97.1% and 100%, respectively, in Item 28 about the definition of journal articles, whereas University C scored 94.4%. Regarding plagiarism awareness, high percentages were also discovered in Item 42, with University A attaining 94.3%, University B 88.5%, and University C 83.3%.

Overall, the findings from Table 2 demonstrate that students from University A, University B, and University C experienced varying degrees of difficulty in writing articles for publication. While students generally showed stronger understanding of basic concepts such as abstracts, journal articles, and plagiarism, difficulties remained in more complex aspects, particularly APA citation and referencing conventions, research article organization, and evaluation of academic sources. These findings suggest the need for more comprehensive instruction and practice related to academic writing and publication skills across the three universities.

Table 2. Percentages of students' correct answers

No	Question	University A		University B		University C	
		Total of Correct Answers	Percentages of Correct Answers (%)	Total of Correct Answers	Percentages of Correct Answers (%)	Total of Correct Answers	Percentages of Correct Answers (%)
1	What is an abstract?	34	97.1	21	80.8	15	83.3
2	What should always be included in an introduction?	32	91.4	23	88.5	17	94.4
3	What is a literature review?	26	74.3	20	76.9	15	83.3
4	Where is a literature review typically found in written-up research?	35	100	26	100.0	17	94.4
5	What would you expect to find in a methodology chapter in a piece of empirical research?	23	65.7	23	88.5	15	83.3
6	Should data and discussion of data be presented as two separate chapters?	23	65.7	21	80.8	13	72.2
7	What should a conclusion chapter contain?	16	45.7	20	76.9	14	77.8
8	Having read the chapter, what do Mukherji and Albon advise in relation to using 'I' when writing up research?	25	71.4	18	69.2	12	66.7
9	If the name of the author is Simon K. Cornwall, how do you cite it in-text based on APA 7 th ?	15	42.9	15	57.7	12	66.7
10	Do I need to reference a quotation if I put it in my own words (paraphrase it)?	29	82.9	21	80.8	14	77.8
11	What is a bibliography?	22	62.9	23	88.5	12	66.7
12	There are a variety of reasons why an author may choose to include a bibliography with their work; all of the following are reasons to write a bibliography except	23	65.7	20	76.9	13	72.2
13	Which of the following BEST	21	60	24	92.3	16	88.9

	describes an annotated bibliography?					
14	Which of the following is a bibliographic entry for a journal article based on APA 7th?	25	71.4	21	80.8	83.3
15	Which of the following is a reason citations and bibliographies are important?	21	60	22	84.6	94.4
16	What is an in-text citation?	24	68.6	22	84.6	83.3
17	Which of the following is NOT a part of a reference for an edited book?	23	65.7	20	76.9	83.3
18	What piece of information can usually be found on the cover of a book that is necessary to know when completing the reference page?	12	34.3	8	30.8	55.6
19	Which edition of a revised book should you put in your reference page?	23	65.7	25	96.2	77.8
20	What does the volume number reference on a journal show?	19	54.3	20	76.9	77.8
21	In APA format, what is the minimum amount of information you need for citing within the text?	29	82.9	22	84.6	83.3
22	Which of the following is NOT required when citing a journal article using APA formatting?	10	28.6	18	69.2	72.2
23	Which of the following is an example of a correct APA citation? (Assume that for all examples, the page numbers are correct)	33	94.3	25	96.2	88.9
24	According to Jones (2011), many dietary supplements are contaminated with wheat, rice, and even illegal drugs _____.	29	82.9	23	88.5	83.3
25	Which of the following BEST defines academic sources?	21	60	22	84.6	88.9
26	All of these are qualities you should expect in an academic source EXCEPT _____.	1	2.9	0	0.0	5.6
27	What should you look for to make sure you have found a reliable peer-reviewed article?	17	48.6	23	88.5	72.2
28	Which of the following best defines what a journal article is?	34	97.1	26	100.0	94.4
29	What does 'peer-reviewed' mean?	25	71.4	21	80.8	83.3
30	What qualities should you look for to determine whether an article is scholarly or not?	29	82.9	25	96.2	88.9
31	Which of the following is NOT a reason why formulating a research question is one of the first steps in a research project?	18	51.4	17	65.4	83.3
32	A student is writing a research question. What should his/her first step be?	6	17.1	16	61.5	38.9
33	What is the most important first step when planning a research paper?	22	62.9	7	26.9	38.9
34	What does it mean to paraphrase?	25	71.4	26	100.0	72.2
35	Why can the recency of sources be an important factor in evaluating an article?	10	28.6	3	11.5	16.7
36	Which of these helps you judge the authority of an article?	30	85.7	26	100.0	88.9
37	Which of these on a website URL might give the source more credibility?	34	97.1	25	96.2	88.9
38	How do statistics and facts help an article?	30	85.7	24	92.3	94.4
39	Jane is writing an essay for her English	32	91.4	22	84.6	88.9

	course. She has a lot of arguments in mind and she is trying to select which sources she should use. Which of the following would be the MOST reputable source?						
40	Subheadings are useful in articles because...	28	80	23	88.5	15	83.3
41	Which of the following is an important step to remember when using the new-found knowledge from your reference material?	24	68.6	17	65.4	16	88.9
42	What does it mean to plagiarize?	33	94.3	23	88.5	15	83.3
43	Which of the following is NOT a question to ask yourself for determining if you need to cite a source?	17	48.6	15	57.7	13	72.2
44	Do you need to cite a source when paraphrasing information using your own words?	28	80	21	80.8	18	100.0
45	Which of the following is an example of proper APA 7th capitalization for the title of an authored book on the reference page?	15	42.9	13	50.0	13	72.2
46	How should references be listed in the APA reference list?	34	97.1	24	92.3	15	83.3
47	Which of the following separates a title and subtitle in APA formatting?	27	77.1	19	73.1	15	83.3
48	Your Reference page should _____.	27	77.1	21	80.8	15	83.3
49	Which of the following is true about including a Works Cited page?	22	62.9	23	88.5	17	94.4
50	When writing a paper, a student finds a really great paragraph in a book he is reading. Since this paragraph would help support the student's thesis statement he incorporates it into his paper, but changes three of the words. Is this plagiarism?	27	77.1	21	80.8	13	72.2

4.3 Students' Challenges in Writing Articles for Publication

The findings from the proficiency test were further supported by students' responses to the questionnaire, which explored the difficulties they encountered in writing articles for publication.

4.3.1 Statistical Findings

The quantitative findings were analyzed using descriptive statistics, particularly mean scores, to identify the major challenges experienced by EFL graduate students in writing research articles for publication. The mean scores were interpreted using the following categories: 4.21–5.00 = very high, 3.41–4.20 = high, 2.61–3.40 = moderate, 1.81–2.60 = low, and 1.00–1.80 = very low.

Table 3. Comparative mean scores of EFL graduate students' writing challenges

No	Item	Univ A	Univ B	Univ C
1	I find it difficult to use good English grammar	3.00	3.46	3.17
2	I still make mistakes in using English grammar.	3.86	3.77	3.57
3	It is difficult to obtain related articles to make citations.	3.14	3.77	3.13
4	I find difficulty in making in-text citations based on APA 7 th .	3.03	3.27	3.00
5	I do not know how to quote direct quotation and indirect quotation correctly.	2.71	3.15	2.65
6	I find difficulty in making references.	2.69	2.42	2.17
7	I find it hard to gain guiding books to make citations and references.	3.20	3.08	3.04
8	I find difficulty in writing my research papers following APA7th style.	2.66	2.69	2.43
9	It is hard to organize my idea/opinion in a paragraph.	2.91	3.23	3.17
10	I find it difficult to relate the idea from one paragraph to another.	2.97	3.38	3.00
11	I find it hard to write clearly and orderly.	2.91	3.38	3.09
12	I find it hard to restate authors' opinion or statements in my own words.	2.74	3.12	3.22
13	It is difficult to change the sentence structure to make it easier to understand.	3.00	3.12	3.09

14	It is difficult to find the correct words to paraphrase	3.37	3.31	2.91
15	I find it hard to paraphrase appropriately due to my English writing deficiency.	3.14	3.42	3.13
16	It is hard to write analytically, such as involving cause-effect, comparison, and pro-contra.	3.00	3.50	3.30
17	I find it difficult to convey the idea to particular people related to my research topic.	3.03	3.27	2.87
18	It is hard to claim my new research results different from other related research.	3.17	3.58	3.13
19	I find problem in way to get authors' message in related journals / guiding books.	2.69	3.35	3.04
20	I find it hard to identify a good reputable journal to publish my manuscript	3.34	3.35	3.00

Table 3 presents the comparative mean scores of graduate students' challenges in writing articles for publication across Universities A, B, and C. Overall, the findings indicate that most challenges experienced by the students were categorized at moderate to high levels. Across the three universities, grammatical difficulties consistently emerged as the most dominant challenge, particularly in item 2, "I still make mistakes in using English grammar," with mean scores of 3.86, 3.77, and 3.57 for Universities A, B, and C respectively. This finding suggests that grammatical accuracy remained a major problem for EFL graduate students in preparing academic articles for publication.

In addition to grammatical problems, students from the three universities also experienced considerable difficulties in paraphrasing, analytical writing, coherence development, and citation practices. Difficulties in finding appropriate words for paraphrasing were reported by students from Universities A ($M = 3.37$) and B ($M = 3.31$), while students from University B also reported relatively high difficulties in paraphrasing appropriately due to English writing deficiency ($M = 3.42$). Analytical writing involving cause-effect, comparison, and pro-contra arguments also showed relatively high mean scores, especially in University B ($M = 3.50$) and University C ($M = 3.30$).

Challenges related to coherence and organization were also evident across universities. Students experienced difficulties in organizing ideas within paragraphs, relating ideas between paragraphs, and writing clearly and orderly. These difficulties were more prominent among students from University B, with mean scores of 3.23, 3.38, and 3.38 respectively. Similarly, students from University C reported moderate challenges in organizing ideas in paragraphs ($M = 3.17$) and writing clearly and orderly ($M = 3.09$).

The findings further revealed that citation and publication literacy remained problematic for many students. Difficulties in making in-text citations based on APA 7th style were reflected in the mean scores from University A ($M = 3.03$), University B ($M = 3.27$), and University C ($M = 3.00$). Students also experienced challenges in obtaining related articles for citations, particularly in University B ($M = 3.77$). In addition, identifying reputable journals for publication was perceived as another important challenge, with mean scores of 3.34, 3.35, and 3.00 in Universities A, B, and C respectively. Since publication in SINTA-indexed journals was required as part of their academic requirements, many students appeared to experience uncertainty and pressure when selecting appropriate journals for publication.

Among the three universities, students from University B generally reported slightly higher levels of difficulty across most questionnaire items compared to students from Universities A and C. Nevertheless, the overall findings demonstrate that EFL graduate students in Southern Sumatra still encountered substantial challenges in publication-oriented academic writing, particularly in grammar usage, paraphrasing, analytical writing, coherence development, citation practices, and publication literacy.

4.3.2 Interpretive Findings

The qualitative interpretation of the questionnaire findings provided deeper insights into the challenges experienced by EFL graduate students in writing research articles for publication. The interpretation was based on the dominant response patterns and mean scores obtained from the questionnaire data across the three universities. Overall, the findings revealed that the students encountered difficulties not only in linguistic competence but also in higher-order academic literacy skills necessary for publication-oriented academic writing. Several major themes emerged from the data, including grammatical difficulties, paraphrasing problems, analytical writing challenges, coherence and organization issues, citation and referencing difficulties, and limited knowledge regarding journal publication practices.

4.3.2.1 Grammatical Difficulties

One of the most dominant problems identified across the three universities was students' difficulties in using English grammar accurately in academic writing. This finding was strongly supported by the consistently high mean scores for item 2, "I still make mistakes in using English grammar," which obtained the highest mean score in all universities: University A ($M = 3.86$), University B ($M = 3.77$), and University C ($M = 3.57$). The relatively high scores indicate that grammatical competence remained one of the greatest challenges experienced by graduate students in publication-oriented writing. Many students appeared to struggle with sentence structure, tense consistency, article usage, and grammatical accuracy while attempting to write academically. In addition, item 1, "I find it difficult to use good English grammar," also showed relatively high mean scores across the universities, namely University A ($M = 3.00$), University B ($M = 3.46$), and University C ($M = 3.17$). These findings suggest that students still lacked confidence in producing grammatically accurate academic texts.

4.3.2.2 Difficulties in Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing emerged as another significant challenge among the respondents. This issue was reflected in several questionnaire items

related to paraphrasing skills. Item 14, “It is difficult to find the correct words for paraphrasing,” obtained moderate-to-high mean scores in University A ($M = 3.37$), University B ($M = 3.31$), and University C ($M = 2.91$). Similarly, item 15, “I find it hard to paraphrase appropriately due to my English writing deficiency,” also showed relatively high scores across the universities: University A ($M = 3.14$), University B ($M = 3.42$), and University C ($M = 3.13$). Furthermore, difficulties in restating authors’ opinions using students’ own words were also evident (See item 12), particularly in University C ($M = 3.22$), followed by University B ($M = 3.12$) and University A ($M = 2.74$). These findings indicate that many students still had limited lexical resources and insufficient mastery of paraphrasing techniques. As a result, they tended to struggle in reconstructing ideas independently while maintaining the original meaning of the source texts.

4.3.2.3 Challenges in Analytical Writing

The findings also revealed that analytical writing was one of the most difficult aspects of publication-oriented academic writing. Item 16 which is related to analytical writing difficulties, obtained relatively high mean scores in all universities: University A ($M = 3.00$), University B ($M = 3.50$), and University C ($M = 3.30$). The high scores indicate that many students experienced difficulties in developing analytical discussions involving comparison, cause-effect relationships, argumentation, and critical analysis. In addition, item 18 which is related to claiming research novelty different from previous studies also showed relatively high scores, namely University A ($M = 3.17$), University B ($M = 3.58$), and University C ($M = 3.13$). These findings suggest that students still struggled to construct original academic arguments and demonstrate the uniqueness of their studies within scholarly discussions.

4.3.2.4 Problems in Coherence and Organization

Another important issue identified from the findings was students’ difficulty in organizing ideas coherently. Item 10, “I find it difficult to relate the idea from one paragraph to another”, obtained moderate-to-high mean scores in University A ($M = 2.97$), University B ($M = 3.38$), and University C ($M = 3.00$). Similarly, difficulties in organizing ideas within paragraphs (item 9) were also reported, with mean scores of 2.91 in University A, 3.23 in University B, and 3.17 in University C. Item 11, “I find it hard to write clearly and orderly”, further supported this finding, with mean scores of 2.91, 3.38, and 3.09 in Universities A, B, and C respectively. These results suggest that many students still faced challenges in maintaining coherence, logical flow, and systematic organization throughout their academic writing.

4.3.2.5 Citation and Referencing Difficulties

Citation and referencing practices also emerged as major challenges among the respondents. Difficulties in obtaining related articles for citation purposes as seen in item 3 were consistently reported across the universities, with mean scores of 3.14 in University A, 3.77 in University B, and 3.13 in University C. In addition, students experienced difficulties in making in-text citations based on APA 7th style, as indicated by the mean score for item 4 across the three universities: University A ($M = 3.03$), University B ($M = 3.27$), and University C ($M = 3.00$). Challenges in understanding quotation techniques were also reported, with mean scores ranging from 2.65 to 3.15 across the universities. The findings further revealed that many students lacked sufficient supporting resources related to citation and referencing, as indicated by item “I find it hard to gain guiding books to make citation and references,” which obtained mean scores of 3.20 in University A, 3.08 in University B, and 3.04 in University C. These findings suggest that students still had limited familiarity with academic citation conventions and scholarly documentation practices required in publication-oriented writing.

4.3.2.6 Difficulties in Identifying Reputable Journals

Another significant challenge identified in the findings was difficulties in identifying reputable journals for publication. Item 20 which is related to journal identification obtained relatively high mean scores across the universities: University A ($M = 3.34$), University B ($M = 3.35$), and University C ($M = 3.00$). These findings indicate that many students still lacked sufficient knowledge regarding journal indexing systems, journal scope, publication standards, and manuscript suitability. Since publication in SINTA-indexed journals was required as part of their academic requirements, many students appeared to experience uncertainty and pressure in selecting appropriate journals for publications.

Across the three universities, similar patterns consistently emerged regarding the major challenges experienced by graduate students in publication-oriented writing. Grammar, paraphrasing, analytical writing, coherence development, citation management, and journal selection were identified as the most dominant challenges. Among the three universities, students from University B generally reported slightly higher mean scores in several questionnaire items, particularly in analytical writing, grammatical difficulties, citation searching, and research novelty development. Nevertheless, the findings overall demonstrate that graduate students from all three universities still faced substantial linguistic and academic literacy challenges in preparing research articles for scholarly publication.

5. Discussion

This study examined the academic writing proficiency of Indonesian EFL graduate students and explored the challenges they encountered in writing research-based articles for publication. The findings of this study demonstrate that EFL graduate students from the three universities in Southern Sumatra still encountered substantial challenges in publication-oriented academic writing despite being enrolled in graduate-level English education programs. The students’ academic writing proficiency was categorized at a moderate level, indicating that although they possessed foundational knowledge of academic writing, many aspects of publication literacy and advanced academic writing skills still required improvement. The moderate proficiency level identified in this study highlights a clear mismatch between institutional demands for publication **and** students’ actual article writing competence. While publication is increasingly positioned as a requirement for academic progression in Indonesian higher education (Arsyad et al., 2019; Fernandes & Singh, 2022), the findings

suggested that many EFL graduate students were not adequately prepared to meet such expectations. The findings seem to be relevant to earlier claims that EFL students continue to face substantial challenges in academic writing despite advanced levels of study (Naghdipour, 2016). As noted by Jiang and Kalyuga (2022), writing in a foreign language involves a high cognitive load, requiring simultaneous control of language, content, and rhetorical organization. The present findings extend this argument by demonstrating that even graduate students in English education experience difficulty integrating these competencies in the context of publication writing.

One of the most dominant findings of this study was the students' difficulty in using English grammar accurately. Across the three universities, grammatical mistakes consistently obtained the highest mean scores among all questionnaire items. This finding confirms previous studies conducted by Ariyanti (2016), Graham et al. (2020), and Rezaei and Seyri (2019), which emphasized that grammatical competence remains one of the major barriers in EFL academic writing. Even at the graduate level, many students still struggled with sentence structure, tense consistency, article usage, and syntactic accuracy while composing academic texts (Singh, 2019).

The study also revealed that paraphrasing and analytical writing were among the major challenges experienced by the students. Many participants reported difficulties in restating authors' ideas using their own words and selecting appropriate vocabulary for paraphrasing. This condition seems to be a critical issue because limited paraphrasing ability reflects insufficient control of academic discourse conventions and may increase the risk of plagiarism. The cause of this issue as stated by Fazilatfar et al. (2018) is students' poor understanding of academic plagiarism and inadequate understanding of paraphrasing. In addition, these limitations may encourage students to rely excessively on AI-based writing tools to assist them in rewriting or generating academic texts. While AI tools can support language development and idea organization, students with limited knowledge of plagiarism and insufficient paraphrasing competence may misuse such technologies without fully understanding the ethical boundaries of academic writing (Cotton et al., 2024; Yeo, 2023). Consequently, the uncritical use of AI-generated content may further increase the potential for unintentional plagiarism and weaken students' development of independent academic writing skills. The students also experienced difficulties in analytical writing involving comparison, cause-effect relationships, argumentation, and critical interpretation. This finding supports the argument proposed by Mulyono and Artarini (2021) that EFL students who fail to build ideas and arguments, demonstrate a lack of rhetorical ability, although having a basic understanding of academic vocabulary. In publication-oriented writing, students are expected not only to report information but also to critically analyze findings, establish arguments, and demonstrate research novelty. The relatively high mean scores related to analytical writing and research novelty indicate that these higher-order academic literacy skills remain problematic for many graduate students.

Another important finding concerns coherence and organization in academic writing. Students reported difficulties in organizing ideas within paragraphs, connecting ideas across paragraphs, and maintaining clarity and logical flow throughout their writing. This finding is consistent with previous studies emphasizing that EFL writers frequently struggle with rhetorical organization and coherence in research articles (Suherdi et al., 2020). The ability to produce coherent academic writing requires not only linguistic competence but also awareness of rhetorical structures and audience expectations. Difficulties in coherence development may explain why many students encounter challenges in composing persuasive discussion and conclusion sections in research articles.

The findings further revealed that citation practices and publication literacy remained significant problems among the participants. Many students experienced difficulties in making in-text citations based on APA 7th style, understanding referencing conventions, and locating appropriate academic sources for citations. These findings support Jomaa and Bidin (2017) and Baysen et al. (2017), who argued that referencing and citation practices are among the most problematic aspects of EFL academic writing. Although students generally demonstrated conceptual understanding of plagiarism and paraphrasing, the proficiency test results suggest that practical application of citation conventions remained weak. This discrepancy indicates that students may understand academic integrity conceptually but still lack procedural mastery in implementing proper citation and referencing techniques (Fazilatfar et al., 2018).

Another noteworthy finding relates to students' limited knowledge regarding journal selection and publication practices. Many participants reported difficulties in identifying reputable journals suitable for publication. This issue is particularly important because publication in SINTA-indexed journals was required as part of their academic requirements. The findings support Phillips and Barker's (2021) concept of publication literacy, which emphasizes the importance of understanding publication systems, journal quality, indexing standards, and publication ethics. The students' uncertainty in selecting journals suggests that many of them still lacked sufficient exposure to scholarly publishing practices. This condition may increase vulnerability to predatory journals or inappropriate publication choices, as highlighted by Beall (2017) and Dadkhah et al. (2016).

Overall, the findings in this study indicate that publication-oriented academic writing requires linguistic competence, critical thinking, rhetorical awareness, and publication literacy. Although the students demonstrated moderate writing proficiency, they still faced difficulties in grammar, analytical writing, paraphrasing, coherence, citation management, and publication knowledge. Therefore, more intensive academic writing instruction and structured publication support are needed to better prepare graduate students for scholarly publication.

6. Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the participants were drawn from only three state universities in southern region of Sumatra, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Second, the study relied mainly on proficiency tests and self-reported questionnaire data, which may not fully reflect students' actual writing performance. Moreover, the absence of semi-structured interviews limited the depth of the findings, as students' underlying reasons for experiencing publication-related writing challenges could not be explored in greater detail. Next, the study did not conduct an in-depth textual analysis of students' writing

samples, making it difficult to identify specific linguistic and rhetorical weaknesses. Finally, the study employed descriptive analysis without examining the relationships among variables such as academic background, publication experience, English proficiency, and access to academic resources. Future research is therefore recommended to involve a larger and more diverse samples, incorporate semi-structured interviews and textual analysis to obtain richer qualitative insights and employ more comprehensive analytical approaches to better understand the factors influencing graduate students' academic writing proficiency and publication readiness.

7. Conclusions

This study investigated the academic writing proficiency and publication-related challenges experienced by EFL graduate students from three state-owned universities in Southern Sumatra, Indonesia. The findings revealed that the students' academic writing proficiency was generally at a moderate level, indicating that although they possessed basic knowledge of academic writing and publication conventions, many important aspects of publication-oriented writing still required improvement. The major challenges identified included grammatical difficulties, paraphrasing, analytical writing, coherence development, citation and referencing practices, and selecting reputable journals for publication. In addition, although students demonstrated basic awareness of plagiarism and journal articles, they still encountered difficulties in applying APA citation styles, critically evaluating academic sources, and constructing analytical arguments.

Overall, the findings suggest that publication-oriented academic writing requires not only general English proficiency but also rhetorical competence, critical thinking skills, publication literacy, and familiarity with scholarly communication practices. Therefore, universities are encouraged to strengthen academic writing instruction through more intensive training in paraphrasing, citation management, analytical writing, and journal publication practices. This study contributes to the growing body of research on EFL academic writing and is expected to provide useful insights for lecturers, curriculum developers, and higher education institutions in developing more effective academic writing support for graduate students.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the graduate students from the Master's Programs in English Education at the participating universities for their valuable participation in this study. The authors also gratefully acknowledge to the colleagues in English Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Sriwijaya University, for their constructive comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript. Finally, the authors appreciate the assistance of colleagues who provided valuable feedback, proofread the manuscript, and supported its preparation for submission.

Author Contributions

Eryansyah, S.Pd., M.A., Ph.D., Dr. Rita Inderawati, M.Pd., Dr. Ismail Petrus, M.A., and Dr. Agus Saparudin, M.Ed. contributed equally to the conception and design of the study, the development of the research instruments, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, manuscript drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Funding

This study was funded by the 2023 DIPA Budget of the Public Service Agency (BLU) of FKIP Universitas Sriwijaya under SP DIPA-023.17.2.677515/2023 dated November 30, 2022, in accordance with the Dean's Decree Number: 1454/UN9.FKIP/TU.SK/2023 dated June 16, 2023.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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AI-assisted tools, including ChatGPT and QuillBot, were utilized exclusively for language improvement and enhancing textual clarity. These tools were not involved in the study's conceptualization, research design, data analysis, interpretation of findings, or the creation of scientific content and references. The authors confirm that this article is their original work and that they take full responsibility for all content presented in the manuscript. This statement is made in accordance with the recommendations and ethical guidelines established by the Committee on Publication Ethics.

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