

Challenges in Using Communicative English Proficiency: A Study on Academic Writing of DEE UMS Students

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to examine the challenges faced by English Education students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta in achieving formal language proficiency, with a particular emphasis on vocabulary development as a crucial component of communicative English proficiency in academic writing. The research seeks to identify how vocabulary limitations hinder students' ability to construct formal, accurate, and contextually appropriate expressions in their essays.

Methodology: This study analyzes ten student essays purposively selected from academic writing tasks. The analysis framework was adapted from Hymes' (1972) and Canale and Swain's (1980) communicative competence model, focusing on clarity, vocabulary use, formal register, and identified challenges.

Results: Findings indicate that students generally demonstrate communicative clarity but struggle with lexical depth and formality. While their ideas are coherently expressed, most rely on basic vocabulary and exhibit inconsistent control over academic register. Occasional attempts at lexical sophistication were observed but were not consistently sustained, reflecting transitional proficiency between informal and academic discourse.

Applications/Originality/Value: This study highlights the essential role of vocabulary enrichment and register awareness in developing communicative proficiency in academic writing. Its originality lies in analysing how vocabulary-related challenges specifically affect students' ability to use English formally in written contexts, offering pedagogical insights for enhancing academic vocabulary instruction and formal writing competence in higher education.

Introduction Section

English proficiency is a fundamental skill for university students (Putra et al., 2023). Particularly in academic contexts where effective written communication is essential for learning, assessment, and knowledge dissemination. In higher education, the ability to produce formal, academically appropriate writing involves not only grammatical accuracy but also a sufficiently rich and precise vocabulary that matches disciplinary and rhetorical expectations (Taye & Teshome, 2025). Recent studies highlight that vocabulary quality, beyond simple vocabulary size, is a decisive factor that shapes the formality, clarity, and persuasiveness of students' writing in EFL contexts (Yoo & Kim, 2025). Given the centrality of linguistic components in shaping academic writing proficiency, it becomes essential to examine how grammar and vocabulary function not only as separate skills but as mutually reinforcing elements in students' academic communication.

Building on the understanding that grammar enrichment supports deeper linguistic competence, previous research has demonstrated how discovery learning and contextualized instruction strengthen students' analytical abilities and language awareness. Previous research on discovery learning indicates that it enhances students' foundational knowledge of grammar; fosters their motivation to learn grammar, sparks their grammar curiosity, nurtures their motivation to learn grammar creativity, facilitates the acquisition of both factual information and an in-depth understanding of grammar analysis, and boosts students' self-confidence to use grammar perfectly (Darussalam, 2023). This suggests that grammar enrichment is not limited to increasing rule knowledge, but also involves developing higher-order reasoning skills that support meaningful language competence (Rijt et al., 2020). Grammatical knowledge serves as a fundamental component of language proficiency since it is inherently connected with phonetics, vocabulary, discourse, and pragmatic competence. This interrelation ensures that learners' mastery of grammar directly enhances the accuracy and appropriateness of their overall language use, emphasizing the necessity of grammar enrichment in fostering comprehensive communicative competence (Ulumiyah & Gozali, 2023). Teaching grammar is most effective when integrated within the context of students' actual writing, rather than treated as an isolated set of rules (Kitila & Ali, 2023). By using students' written work as a medium for exploring grammatical concepts, teachers can directly address authentic language issues while simultaneously fostering accuracy, coherence, and stylistic maturity (Annisa, 2024). This contextualized approach not only

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enriches learners' grammatical awareness but also transforms grammar learning into a meaningful and applied process that supports the overall development of writing competence and communicative proficiency (Ruzmetova et al., n.d.). Therefore, while grammatical competence ensures structural accuracy, vocabulary mastery plays an equally vital role in shaping the fluency and sophistication of students' written communication.

This highlights the need for instructional practices that address both grammatical accuracy and lexical depth to enhance students' writing abilities. Vocabulary is one of the language components crucial for language proficiency (Robiya & Feruzabonu, 2024). Vocabulary plays an important role both in receptive knowledge and productive use. Understanding spoken and written words is known as receptive knowledge, while the capacity to use words correctly in speaking or writing is known as productive knowledge (Hartini, 2024). To help improve writing fluency, explicit vocabulary instruction should include contextual examples. Encountering target vocabulary in meaningful sentences can encourage learners to use a wider range of words in their writing (Takinami, 2020). Explicit vocabulary instruction and regular practice in productive vocabulary use were found to enhance students' writing achievement (Clara, 2021). Integrating vocabulary enrichment with reading activities can strengthen learners' lexical awareness and improve their written expression, supporting a more comprehensive approach to writing achievement in EFL contexts (Lin, 2023).

Writing is widely recognized as one of the most complex and demanding skills in English language learning because it requires the integration of multiple linguistic and cognitive abilities, as noted by (Baharudin et al., 2023). Writing represents the highest form of academic performance since it reflects a learner's conceptual understanding, language competence, and ability to think critically and abstractly (Ariastuti & Wahyudin, 2022). This complexity explains why many ESL learners struggle to attain proficiency in writing. The process involves not only generating and organizing ideas but also selecting appropriate vocabulary and grammatical structures to convey meaning effectively (Numonova, 2024). A limited vocabulary often restricts expression and idea development, causing students to produce simplistic or fragmented writing (Taye & Mengesha, 2024). Therefore, to develop higher levels of writing proficiency, vocabulary enrichment should be treated as a foundational element—empowering learners to express complex ideas, improve textual coherence, and achieve greater accuracy in their written communication (Orazova, 2025). Consequently, equipping students with comprehensive linguistic support spanning grammar, vocabulary, and discourse skills is crucial to help them meet academic writing expectations. Therefore, institutions must provide adequate linguistic support to help students navigate these academic writing demands.

Responding to these linguistic challenges, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS) has introduced several programs designed to enhance students' English proficiency and academic readiness. In line with its commitment to improving students' English proficiency, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS) has implemented a series of strategic programs aimed at enhancing students' communicative competence and academic readiness. These include standardized assessments such as the Test of English Proficiency (TOEP) and the Test of English Communication (TOEC), which is specifically for students from the English Education program. These serve as diagnostic and evaluative instruments to monitor and develop students' linguistic progress. UMS also integrates skill-based courses such as *Academic Writing*, *Public Speaking*, *Argumentative Speaking*, *Lexicon*, *Essay Writing*, etc. These courses collectively strengthen students' grammar, vocabulary mastery, and discourse awareness. Through these curricular and assessment initiatives, UMS demonstrates its institutional dedication to fostering globally competitive graduates equipped with strong English Proficiency.

Despite these institutional efforts, academic writing continues to pose a significant challenge for many EFL learners, particularly within university settings. At the university level, mastering academic writing skills is a significant concern for students. However, in EFL contexts, academic writing is considered a challenging skill (Jambi et al., 2024). Academic writing remains a complex challenge for EFL learners due to limited exposure to English use, lack of grammatical mastery, and minimal engagement with academic discourse (Jaya & Jabri, 2025). Unlike ESL learners, who acquire language competence through continuous interaction in English-speaking environments, EFL students must rely on explicit instruction and conscious learning strategies to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers (Belkhir, 2024). Academic writing competence in EFL settings depends not only on individual effort but also on institutional support, effective teaching, and contextual awareness (Yulandari & Suryadi, 2025). Therefore, a comprehensive pedagogical approach that integrates linguistic development, motivational support, and academic literacy training is essential to bridge the gap between EFL and ESL learners in academic writing proficiency.

This study is framed within the theoretical construct of communicative competence, which emphasizes that language proficiency involves both the mastery of linguistic forms and the ability to use them appropriately within social and institutional contexts. Hymes' original concept highlights that competence extends beyond grammatical accuracy to include sociocultural appropriateness, while the later model proposed by Canale and Swain operationalizes communicative competence into four interrelated components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Each of these components plays a crucial role in shaping students' vocabulary use as well as their ability to produce formal academic writing. Grammatical competence enables learners to select structurally accurate forms that support precise lexical choices; sociolinguistic competence guides students in choosing vocabulary that aligns with expected levels of formality and academic tone; discourse competence helps them organize ideas coherently using cohesive and contextually appropriate lexical items; and strategic competence supports the ability to paraphrase, reformulate, or select more formal alternatives when lexical gaps arise. Together, these components demonstrate that

developing vocabulary for academic writing is not merely about increasing word knowledge but about acquiring the communicative awareness necessary to use formal and context-appropriate expressions effectively.

Empirical work on vocabulary and written proficiency supports this theoretical stance but also reveals important gaps (Yang, 2022). Recent corpus and empirically based studies find that EFL learners often display limited lexical sophistication and uneven lexical diversity in academic writing, even when sentence-level grammar is adequate, learners sometimes use one advanced word but otherwise rely on high-frequency general terms, producing texts that are clear but stylistically underdeveloped (Syafri et al., 2025). Studies focusing on Indonesian and other EFL contexts report similar patterns: measurable differences in lexical richness and academic vocabulary use between learner groups, and a strong relationship between lexical quality (sophistication, precision) and the perceived academic quality of writing. Moreover, diagnostic work on discourse competence shows the value of fine-grained rubrics when assessing written performance and identifying specific lexico-sociolinguistics weaknesses (Yoo & Kim, 2025).

Previous studies have widely explored vocabulary instruction, lexical richness, or grammar teaching. However, few investigations directly examine how vocabulary limitations affect students' ability to produce formal academic register in authentic university essays, especially within Indonesian EFL contexts (Province, 2023). To address this gap, the present study analyses undergraduate essays from Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta to identify recurrent vocabulary-related challenges that hinder formal communicative proficiency in writing, and also to discuss pedagogical implications for targeted vocabulary enrichment and register instruction in higher-education EFL contexts (Raufi et al., 2024).

This paper aims to identify and explain the types of challenges faced by students of the English Education Department at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta in achieving formal language proficiency, with a particular focus on vocabulary development. The findings of this research are anticipated to furnish significant insights for pedagogues and curriculum developers in the conception of efficacious instructional strategies that promote the development of academic vocabulary and the utilisation of formal English among university students.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design focusing on the analysis of students' written works (Mohammadi et al., 2024). The data were collected from ten essays written by undergraduate students of the English Education Department at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta. The essays were selected based on their relevance to academic writing tasks and represented varying levels of writing proficiency. Although the essays varied in length, all submissions followed the standard academic writing format commonly used in the English Education Department. The tasks required students to respond to an argumentative writing prompt relevant to their course module, ensuring comparable rhetorical expectations across essays. Writing proficiency levels were determined based on instructor evaluation in the course, which grouped students into basic, intermediate, and advanced levels for analytic purposes. Each essay was examined to identify linguistic patterns related to communicative English proficiency, particularly in the aspects of vocabulary use and formal register.

The data were analysed through document analysis using an adapted framework derived from Dell Hymes' (1972) theory of Communicative Competence, as developed further by Canale and Swain (1980). Four analytical categories were used: communicative clarity, vocabulary use, formal register, and identified challenges. Each category was operationally defined and coded through a descriptive coding process.

Communicative clarity referred to the logical and coherent expression of ideas. A sentence was coded as "clear" (CC1) when the main idea was explicitly stated, logically sequenced, and adequately supported within the sentence. For example, "Many students protested because they disagreed with government actions" was categorized as CC1 because the cause-and-effect relation is clearly expressed.

Vocabulary use measured the degree of lexical sophistication. Basic or high-frequency words (e.g., "important," "good," "popular") were coded as VS1, while more advanced academic expressions (e.g., "demonstrates improvement," "significantly contributes") were coded as VS2. Attempts at complex vocabulary that were not sustained throughout the sentence were marked as partial lexical sophistication.

Formal register captured the appropriateness of academic tone. Informal phrasing such as "a lot of people like" or "many individuals prefer" was coded as FR0 (non-academic), whereas formal phrasing aligned with academic conventions was coded as FR1. This category assessed whether students used syntactically appropriate, objective, and formal constructions.

Kinds of challenges captured recurring issues across the essays, including grammatical inaccuracy, unnatural phrasing, limited lexical range, or unclear sentence flow. Utterances such as "care necessary" or sentences with incomplete logical development were coded as IC (identified challenge), indicating areas where students demonstrated partial mastery of academic language. To illustrate the findings, five representative examples were presented in Table 1, providing insight into students' strengths and difficulties in achieving formal communicative proficiency in academic writing.

To ensure data credibility, peer debriefing was conducted with two writing instructors to verify the consistency of coding and interpretation.

Finding

The challenges encountered by students in producing formal academic writing are presented in the following findings. These include issues related to communicative clarity, vocabulary accuracy and sophistication, the consistency of formal register, and specific forms of linguistic difficulty. The table below illustrates representative examples from the students' essays to highlight these patterns.

Table 1. Identification of Students' Challenges in Academic Writing.

Essay Code	Kinds of Challenge Form	Communicative Clarity	Vocabulary Use	Formal Register	Sentence Example Quotation
S1	Limited lexical depth, students rely on basic vocabulary despite maintaining a formal tone.	The sentence clearly expresses a cause-and-effect idea with logical coherence.	Vocabulary is accurate but simple, relying on basic verbs such as <i>protested</i> and <i>disagreed</i> .	The tone is formal and objective, but it remains too basic for an academic context.	Citizens protested the new laws in front of the parliament building.
S2	Partial lexical sophistication — inconsistent academic tone.	Clear and coherent; conveys technological and social impact effectively.	Attempts lexical sophistication with <i>revolutionized</i> , but other verbs (<i>connect</i> , <i>communicate</i> , <i>express</i>) are basic.	Formal tone attempted; sentence structure appropriate.	Social media has changed how people connect and communicate.
S3	Limited vocabulary range, overly descriptive, not analytic.	Meaning is clear and cohesive; well-connected sentences.	Uses correct but basic vocabulary (<i>enjoyable</i> , <i>spend leisure time</i>).	Acceptable but too basic; lacks academic tone.	Movies offer enjoyable leisure time and evoke various emotions.
S4	Limited lexical depth — overuse of generic academic phrases.	Clear, coherent, and logically connected.	Clear, coherent, and logically connected.	Formal tone attempted, but too simple for academic register.	Effective time management influences students' success and well-being.
S5	Limited lexical sophistication and grammatical unnaturalness.	Clear and logically structured; smooth idea flow.	Vocabulary is descriptive but lacks precision (<i>care is necessary</i> , incomplete).	Acceptable but unnatural; phrase structure not fully grammatical.	Pets provide companionship and require specific types of care.

Discussion

Based on the analysis of ten student essays, five representative examples were selected to illustrate students' performance in applying communicative English proficiency in academic writing. The findings show that most students were able to express ideas clearly and coherently, demonstrating strong communicative clarity. However, challenges emerged in their vocabulary use and control of the formal register. Many students relied on basic or descriptive vocabulary and produced sentences that were grammatically correct but stylistically simple (Alshumrani, 2024).

The limited vocabulary range observed in the essays indicates that students are still developing their lexical resources for formal academic contexts. Attempts at using more advanced vocabulary appeared occasionally but were not sustained, suggesting transitional proficiency. Some sentences also showed grammatical unnaturalness, reflecting incomplete mastery of formal phrase construction. Overall, the combination of basic vocabulary, inconsistent register, and isolated attempts at lexical sophistication points to a need for more focused vocabulary and register-based instruction.

These patterns align with previous findings showing that lexical sophistication strongly influences the quality of EFL academic writing. Prior research has similarly reported that learners may achieve communicative clarity yet struggle to maintain academic tone due to limited lexical depth (Budiarta, 2020). The results also support theoretical perspectives that emphasize the importance of both grammatical and sociolinguistic competence in achieving effective communication. Together, the findings reinforce the view that vocabulary enrichment and register awareness are essential components of communicative English proficiency in academic writing (Raufi et al., 2024) (Idayani et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This study examined the challenges faced by English Education students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta in achieving formal communicative proficiency in academic writing, with a particular focus on vocabulary use and formal register. The analysis of ten undergraduate essays demonstrates that while students were generally able to express ideas clearly and coherently, their writing was limited by insufficient lexical depth and inconsistent control of academic tone. Students relied heavily on basic and high-frequency vocabulary, which constrained the precision and sophistication expected in academic English.

Beyond summarizing the observable linguistic difficulties, this study contributes theoretically to the understanding of communicative competence in EFL writing by showing that lexical competence is not merely an accessory component but a core determinant underlying the successful performance of both grammatical and sociolinguistic competence. The findings extend Hymes' (1972) and Canale & Swain's (1980) frameworks by demonstrating that vocabulary sophistication directly mediates a learner's ability to perform appropriate formal register choices—indicating that lexical competence and sociolinguistic competence function in a more interdependent manner than previously emphasized in existing EFL writing research. In other words, this study provides empirical evidence that vocabulary enrichment is not only tied to better word choice but also shapes how learners construct academic tone, align with discourse norms, and meet contextual expectations in university-level writing.

Practically, the study offers pedagogical insights by highlighting the need for more targeted and explicit academic vocabulary instruction in EFL university settings. The results suggest that instruction should go beyond general vocabulary exposure and place greater emphasis on register-sensitive lexical development, genre-based writing practice, and continuous engagement with academic texts. Such approaches may support learners in transitioning from basic lexical control toward more advanced and discipline-appropriate written communication. Future research may further refine the theoretical connection between vocabulary sophistication and formal communicative competence by examining how instructional interventions influence learners' lexical development, register awareness, and long-term writing performance across different academic genres.

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