

Understanding Writing Difficulty and Writing Process Among Pre-University Students

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ABSTRACT

Numerous research findings reveal that a substantial proportion of pre-university students face challenges in developing proficient writing skills as they encounter difficulties in mastering this capability throughout the writing process. Therefore, this research examined how learners perceived their writing challenges and processes in academic writing in three distinct stages: before writing, during writing and during revising. Specifically, the study focused on the writing process and the challenges students encountered in crafting essays for the Extended Writing section of the Malaysian University English Test. This was to explore the strategies used during the writing process at each stage to highlight effective approaches that educators can use to foster a supportive writing environment. This quantitative study utilised purposive sampling and a survey analysed using SPSS Version 29 for descriptive analysis. The survey, adapted from [Petric and Czarl \(2003\)](#) and [Flower and Hayes \(1981\)](#) and created by [Yunos et al. \(2023\)](#), involved 169 pre-university students from the Centre of Foundation Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA. The study revealed that pre-university students faced challenges in academic writing particularly in the prewriting stage, where difficulties in outlining essays and constructing thesis

statements were prominent. This emphasized the importance of addressing challenges specifically in the prewriting phase. The results of the study can help pinpoint the specific issues that students face when writing essays. This knowledge can help create personalised interventions and support plans to address specific writing obstacles and enhance overall writing proficiency.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature of the writing process within pre-University students. The results can also help educators identify individual students' strengths and weaknesses in their writing process. This knowledge can help create personalized interventions and support plants to address specific writing obstacles and enhance overall writing proficiency.

1. Introduction

Writing is a fundamental aptitude that plays a crucial role in academic success and in fostering personal growth (Graham & Harris, 2005). For pre-university students, the ability to express thoughts coherently and communicate effectively through writing is essential as they transition to higher education (Al-Khazraji, 2019). As outlined by Flower and Hayes (1980) in 1980, the process of writing involves a structured and iterative series of steps that writers go through to produce a written work. These steps include prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. It is crucial for students who are about to start their university studies to possess strong writing skills, as this will help them convey their ideas in a clear and organised manner. However, numerous studies have shown that a considerable number of pre-university students encounter obstacles in acquiring the ability to write proficiently as they face challenges in mastering this skill and experience difficulties in the writing process.

Writing difficulties, also known as writing challenges or struggles, concern the impediments and problems faced when individuals express their thoughts through written language. These challenges can include issues related to language organisation, mechanics, and the effective conveyance of ideas in written form (Graham & Perin, 2007; McCutchen, 2011). The writing process is a complex and multifaceted task that involves various cognitive and linguistic aspects (Graham & Harris, 2005). To fully comprehend the writing challenges faced by students, it is important to investigate both the technical elements like spelling and grammar, as well as the more advanced cognitive processes involved in developing and arranging thoughts. This comprehensive approach is crucial for identifying the specific areas where pre-university students may struggle in the writing process.

The Malaysian Ministry of Education has consistently emphasised the significance of English proficiency through various initiatives and strategies that target pre-university students. As part of this commitment, the ministry introduced the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) to enhance students' overall command of the English language (Voon et al., 2019). Administered by the Malaysian Examinations Council since 1999, MUET had been a key component for university entry since 2014, where minimum band requirements were set by the government based on chosen courses (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2019; New Straits Times, 2016).

Despite these efforts, writing had proven to be challenging for many learners, as highlighted by [Jee and Aziz \(2021\)](#) and [Voon et al. \(2019\)](#). Based on the updated Examination Format ([Malaysian Examinations Council, 2019](#)), in the MUET Paper 4 (800/4), Writing, two tasks are assigned: Guided Writing, focusing on responding to letters or emails with a 30-mark allocation, and Extended Writing, which is a more comprehensive task with a 60-mark allocation. Pre-university students are expected to write an essay of at least 250 words in length, with options to choose between discursive, argumentative, or problem-solving styles of writing. There is no punishment for writing shorter or longer essays, but students must complete the task within 50 minutes ([Malaysian Examinations Council, 2019](#)).

Writing skills hold a distinctive significance among the fundamental language skills for higher education institutions ([Salem, 2013](#); [Bulqiyah, Mahbub & Nugraheni, 2021](#)), particularly as English is commonly used as a means of teaching in universities in Malaysia. This makes it crucial to assess the challenges concerning English language proficiency in said skills. Therefore, this study explored the writing process and difficulties faced by students in essay writing for the Extended Writing section of MUET. In addition, this study explored the strategies that students employed throughout the writing process by recognising practical approaches at each level that could help educators create a supportive writing environment.

1.1. Statement of Problem

In tertiary education, academic writing is an essential skill for students to acquire. Regardless of the major or subject, essay-writing tasks are commonly assigned, where students are required to plan, write, and review their works. By mastering the skill, students can succeed in these assignments and simultaneously improve their overall English proficiency ([Okpe & Onjewu, 2017](#)). Yet, despite its emphasis on the curriculum, achieving a high level of proficiency in academic writing remains challenging.

Previous research ([Huwari & Al-Khasawneh, 2013](#); [Okpe & Onjewu, 2017](#); [Aloairdhi, 2019](#)) had indicated that many pre-university students often faced difficulties in writing due to weaknesses in grammar and vocabulary as well as a lack of motivation. In the context of the Malaysian tertiary education setting, Malaysian pre-university students also faced many difficulties in writing. A number of those undertaking the MUET Paper 4 exam reported challenges in expressing their ideas in words ([Jee & Aziz, 2021](#)) and that they lacked the understanding of the mechanics of writing ([Parnabas et al., 2022](#)).

Although numerous studies had been conducted to investigate the specific writing difficulties that pre-university students faced, the existing literature lacked exploration of the intricate challenges throughout the distinct writing stages of pre-writing, during writing, and after writing. These issues should be identified as they hinder the development of targeted interventions that are crucial for effective pedagogy.

A significant gap also exists in understanding the strategies employed by pre-university students during the writing process. Recognising practical approaches at each stage is vital for educators to establish a supportive writing environment as each student has specific problems that makes it difficult to derive comprehensive insights into the experiences of pre-university students in their essay writing ([Bulqiyah et al., 2021](#)). Furthermore, implementing writing strategies to mitigate these difficulties is beneficial

not only in improving the quality of writing but also in encouraging students to seek out information and knowledge on their own (Osman et al., 2019).

This study addressed these gaps by identifying specific challenges faced by pre-university students at different writing stages and exploring the strategies employed during the writing process. The objective was to facilitate the development of targeted interventions that enhance teaching methods that contribute to the creation of an environment conducive to the comprehensive development of writing skills among pre-university students. Ultimately, this research sought to offer practical recommendations for educators to enable them to tailor their approaches and foster an atmosphere that nurtures proficient writing skills.

1.2. Objective of the Study and Research Questions

This study was conducted to explore the perception of learners on their use of learning strategies. Specifically, this study was done to answer the following questions;

- i. How do learners perceive their writing difficulties in academic writing?
- ii. How do learners perceive their writing process in academic writing?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Writing Difficulties

Students at the tertiary level need assistance in advancing their English language skills from the secondary level. Students often face difficulty communicating ideas in essays and motor skills application (Abdullah et al., 2022). According to Parnabas et al. (2022), students also face challenges in transforming ideas into written form due to their low English proficiency and often struggle with coherence, cohesion, grammar, vocabulary, and overall essay structure. In addition, most students also find writing assessments to be part of the challenge (Jee & Aziz, 2021; Voon et al., 2019). Writing assessment is one of the most essential components in university as pre-university students must develop their writing skills for academic performance and future job prospects (Parnabas et al., 2022).

2.2. Writing Process

The writing process is vital as it helps students formulate ideas and effectively convey them to paper. Parnabas et al. (2022) described writing as a process of constructing ideas and conveying them to the reader through paragraphs and statements. The authors also highlighted that the writing process includes organising ideas coherently, maintaining proper grammar and vocabulary usage, and following the overall essay structure. A different study from Hasnawati et al. (2023) added that the writing process involves pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading stages, which provides a systematic approach to the writing process. Progressing through the writing process can help students organise their thoughts, develop coherent paragraphs, and structure essays logically.

2.3. Past Studies on Writing Difficulties

Transitioning from secondary school to university signifies a noteworthy academic leap for students. Students at the pre-university level often face challenges in English language subjects, with the most challenging component being writing. Writing is one of the most

challenging areas to master, especially for second-language learners (Fareed et al., 2016). Recent studies revealed that many pre-university students still face difficulties in writing. Among the significant challenges in writing include writing thesis statements, developing ideas and coherency, comparison-contrast, cause-effect, and citation (Nenotek et al., 2022). Extended writing is a significant challenge faced by pre-university students, especially for MUET. Students typically exhibit a lack of proficiency in organising their essays and articulating arguments; prevalent challenges are also associated with thesis statement formulation, incorporating evidence, and maintaining coherence (Jee & Aziz, 2021).

A study conducted by Ariyanti and Fitriana (2017) investigated student's needs and difficulties in writing essays, which revealed that students face challenges in writing due to their limited vocabulary, a lack of enthusiasm for composing, foundational gaps in sentence structure and grammar knowledge, and limited skill in expressing ideas within essays. The research revealed significant struggles in grammatical precision, cohesion, and coherence. Furthermore, time constraints to properly produce the essay are one of the factors affecting the quality of the student's essays, besides the vast number of students in a class, which makes it hard for lecturers to give proper comments to students' essays. Students' writing difficulty is marked by inadequate linguistic proficiency that encompass grammar, syntax, and vocabulary challenges (Fareed et al., 2016). Factors such as writing anxiety, lack of ideas, dependence on the first language (L1), and a lack of organisational structure also contribute to these shortcomings.

2.4. Past Studies on Writing Process

Composing a well-crafted English composition is challenging and needs a specific methodology to succeed. Developing writing skills, especially in academic contexts, requires consistent effort, practice, and a good grasp of organisational techniques, language use, and writing mechanics (Younes & Albalawi, 2015). On the other hand, crafting a good essay requires evaluating grammar effectively, exercising creativity and critical thinking, composing main and supporting ideas, integrating them cohesively, and conducting revisions followed by final editing (Abdul-Kareem, 2014). In addition, the process involves four crucial stages, which are pre-writing, drafting, revising and editing, as stated by Gebhard (2006, cited in Abdul-Kareem, 2014).

Achieving proficiency in each stage is essential for students to generate high-quality essays. However, for students, problems often occur during the drafting stage as students need help in choosing appropriate words, utilising punctuation marks, spelling, and capitalisation, managing verb tenses, and structuring sentences (ELbashir, 2023). It has also been highlighted that identifying a specific stage as problematic is not a primary concern, as students also encounter challenges in effectively conveying their ideas in writing, which is primarily attributable to a need for higher proficiency in the English language. In contrast, the study by Baharudin et al. (2023) which investigated 179 ESL learners in the centre of foundation study found that students do not encounter issues in the writing process, and that the primary obstacle for students in achieving successful writing lies in their inability to meet the objectives in the writing task given by the lecturer.

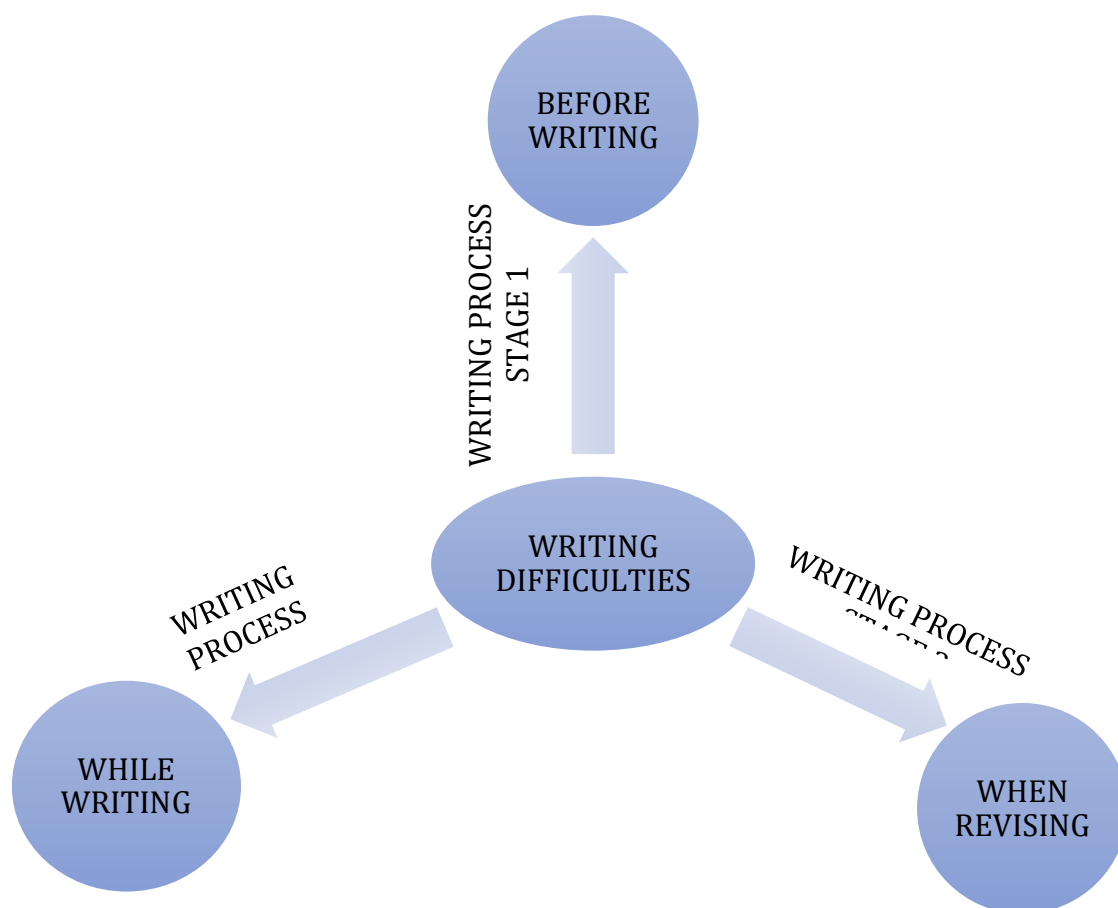
Next, the study by Uba and Souidi (2020) explored the challenges experienced by students in English for business courses during the writing process, which emphasized on difficulties especially in the drafting stage. The research found that students wrestled with

formulating thesis statements and constructing topic sentences. Additionally, it revealed that approximately 90 per cent of the respondents needed more comprehension of thesis statements, and most students encountered issues in generating and organising ideas. Nineteen out of twenty-one respondents also demonstrated a limited vocabulary range.

2.5. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of the study. According to Rahmat (2021), academic writers face difficulties in problem analysis (how they attend to difficulties in writing) and content and discourse knowledge. This study explored writing difficulties (Petric & Czalr, 2003) faced by academic writers. It also examined how writers perceived their writing process. According to Flower and Hayes (1981), the writing process involves the stages of (a) before writing, (b) while writing and (c) when revising.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study-The Influence in Writing Difficulties and Writing Process.



Source: Petric and Czalr (2003) and Flower and Hayes (1981)

3. Research Methods

This quantitative study intended to understand the writing difficulties and processes among pre-university students. A total of 169 respondents were selected from the Centre of Foundation Studies, Selangor Branch, Dengkil Campus. The sampling technique employed was purposive random sampling. The student population came from three distinct courses: Law, Engineering, and Science. Specifically, the respondents were drawn from those enrolled in the English for Foundation Studies 1 (ELC080) course.

Simulation studies conducted by [Anderson and Gerbing \(1984\)](#) in 1984 suggested that a minimum sample size of 100 is advisable, as their research revealed that a significant number of models failed to converge when the sample size was 50, but with a sample size of 100 or greater, the number of failed models reduced to 5% or less, which was considered an acceptable level. This approach ensured that the sample was representative of the diverse subject preferences within the Centre of Foundation Studies, allowing for meaningful insights into the experiences and perspectives of students from different academic disciplines. The instrument used was a 5 Likert-scale. This survey template, adapted from [Petric and Czalr \(2003\)](#) and [Flower and Hayes \(1981\)](#) was created by [Yunos et al. \(2023\)](#) and permission to use the survey was given to be adapted and used on pre-university students. The variables are as given in [Table 1](#). The survey had three sections: Section A had items on the demographic profile. Section B had six items on writing difficulties. Section C had 38 items on writing processes.

Table 1: Distribution of Items in the Survey

Section	Category	Sub-Category	No. of Items	Cronbach Alpha
B	Writing Difficulties (Petric & Czalr, 2003)		6	0.757
C	Writing Processes (Flower & Hayes, 1981)	Before Writing	8	
		While Writing	10	
		When Revising	10	
			44	0.775

[Table 1](#) also shows the reliability of the survey. The overall report of the analysis showed a Cronbach's alpha of 0.775. This translates into good reliability of the instrument applied. Further analysis using SPSS was done to present the findings to answer the research questions.

4. Results

4.1. Findings for Demographic Profile

[Table 2](#) shows the percentages of the demographic profile for this investigation, which involved 30.8% males and 69.2% females.

Table 2: Percentages for the Demographic Profile

Q1	Gender	Male	Female
		30.8%	69.2%

4.2. Findings for Course, Proficiency and SPM English Grades

[Table 3](#) shows the percentages for Course, Proficiency and SPM English Grades, where 37.9% were Foundation in Science students, 24.9% were Foundation in Engineering students, and 37.3% were Foundation in Law students. In terms of their English proficiency levels, 1.8% considered themselves weak English users, 73.4% considered

themselves as average users of English, and 24.9% considered themselves as good English users. With regards to their SPM grades, 99.4% achieved either A or B for English, only 0.6% achieved either C or D, and none achieved either E or F.

Table 3: Percentages for Course, Proficiency and SPM English Grades

Q2	Course	Science	Engineering	Law
		37.9%	24.9%	37.3%
Q3	Proficiency	Weak	Average	Good
		1.8%	73.4%	24.9%
Q4	SPM	A-B	C-D	E-F
		99.4%	0.6%	0%

4.3. Findings for Writing Difficulties

This section presents data to answer research question 1: ‘How do learners perceive their writing difficulties in academic writing?’

Given the findings in [Table 4](#), the overall mean of how learners perceived their difficulties in writing was low. This shows that the learners tended to struggle in constructing written texts in academic writing. The mean score of the data reflected this ($\bar{x}$ = 2.4). However, Item 5 received the highest score ($\bar{x}$ = 3.0), which showed that content or topic familiarity did play a role in constructing written texts proficiently. In other words, more relevant topics were deemed as less difficult to write about among the learners. This was followed by Item 2 and Item 6 which shared the same mean value ($\bar{x}$ = 2.8). This reflected their difficulty in achieving the goals set for writing academic essays (Item 2). These goals may be perceived as being out of reach, and their lack of prior knowledge on specific points to be written about in each body paragraph could relate to the role of content familiarity in writing. Aside from that, familiarity of various essays or text structures, namely Argumentative, Discursive or Problem-Solution essays played an equal role in writing, as shown by the mean score of Item 1 ($\bar{x}$ = 2.6), which held the third highest mean score of the data. Items 3 and 4 shared the same mean score ($\bar{x}$ = 1.6), which were the lowest mean, reflecting the importance of clarity and comprehensiveness in both the instructions and explanations given by lecturers when it comes to writing essays; otherwise, the learners would experience obstructions in writing proficiently. The findings of this survey reflect how the majority of the learners tended to face difficulties in writing academic essays.

Table 4: Mean for Writing Difficulties ([Flower & Hayes, 1981](#))

No	Item	Mean
1	Rhetorical situation WDQ1 I find writing difficult because I am not familiar with different types of writing: Argumentative, Discursive and Problem-Solution essays	2.6
2	Goal setting WDQ2 I find writing difficult because the goal for the essay writing is sometimes hard to achieve	2.8
3	Teaching instruction WDQ3 The ELC080 lecturer’s instruction on what to do is sometimes not clear and that makes the essay writing difficult	1.6

4	Teacher explanation WDQ4 Sometimes the ELC080 lecturer's explanation makes me feel that writing is difficult	1.6
5	Long term memory WDQ5 Writing essays are difficult because I do not have the background knowledge of the topic given	3.0
6	Individual paragraph WDQ6 Writing essays are difficult because I have to know the points for each body paragraph	2.8
	Total	2.4

4.4. Findings for Writing Process

This section presents data to answer research question 2- "How do learners perceive their writing process?"

The current study found several intriguing outcomes, where the research findings were categorised and issues were identified with prior studies on how learners perceived their writing process. The findings of the questionnaire survey regarding how learners perceived the writing process before writing are shown in [Table 5](#).

Table 5: Mean for -BEFORE WRITING (BW)

NO	ITEM	MEAN
1	BWQ1 I make a timetable/schedule for the writing process	2.6
2	BWQ2 Before I start writing, I revise the requirements of the assignment	4.0
3	BWQ3 I look at a model/sample written by a proficient writer	4.1
4	BWQ4 I start writing without a written or mental plan	2.3
5	BWQ5 I think about what I want to write and have a plan in my mind, but not on paper	3.0
6	BWQ6 I brainstorm ideas and note down short notes related to the topic	4.0
7	BWQ 7 I write an outline of my paper	3.5
8	BWQ 8 I write notes or an outline in my native (Bahasa Melayu) language	2.3
	Total	3.225

Considering the findings in [Table 5](#), the overall mean of how learners perceived their writing process before writing was moderate. This shows that learners did not have a high awareness of what to write before they began writing. The data's mean score can serve as proof ($\bar{x}=3.225$). Item 3 received the highest score ($\bar{x}=4.0$), which showed that learners tried to perceive their writing process before writing by looking at a model/sample written by a proficient writer. This was followed by Item 6, which shared the same mean value ($\bar{x}=4.0$) and was ranked second. This showed that learners brainstormed ideas and took short notes related to their topic before they started writing. Besides that, the learners also revised the requirements of the assignment before they started writing. The third rank was given to Item 7 with a mean value ($\bar{x}=3.5$), which was considered high. Learners wrote an outline for their paper before they started writing. Next, the fourth rank was given to Item 5 with a mean value ($\bar{x}=3.0$). This was considered moderate and showed that learners thought about what they wanted to write and planned in their minds but not on paper. Item 1 ranked second last with the mean value ($\bar{x}=2.6$). This was also considered low, which showed that learners did not make a timetable or schedule before the writing process. Next, the mean scores for Items 4 and 8 ($\bar{x}=2.3$) were considered low. Based on [Table 4](#), which showed the mean score of these two items, students seemed to not perceive their writing process before they started writing. The

findings of this survey showed that the majority of learners did not start writing with a written or mental plan. Furthermore, most wrote their notes or an outline using their native language, which is Malay.

Based on the findings in Table 6, the overall mean of learners perceiving their writing process when writing was moderate. This shows that only some learners perceived their writing skills when writing. The data's mean score served as proof of this ($\bar{x}=3.29$). Even though the data mean score was considered moderate, Item 1 received the highest level and held the first rank. The mean ($\bar{x}=4.7$) indicated that learners began writing with the introduction. It also suggests that even though the overall mean score was low, learners did understand the fundamentals of the writing process. The second rank was given to Item 3. The mean score of Item 3 was ($\bar{x}=4.3$), which was high and reflected the understanding of some learners regarding the writing process that they needed to perceive when writing. This item showed that learners reread what they had written to get ideas to continue. Next, Item 9, "If I don't know a word in English, I find a similar English word that I know", held the third rank. The score ($\bar{x}=4.0$) indicated that the students did understand the writing process that should be practised when writing. Items 2, 4, 7, and 10 shared the same mean value ($\bar{x}=3.5$) which was considered high and ranked fourth. This shows that learners stopped after a few sentences or a whole paragraph, covered one idea, went back to the outline, made changes in it, simplified what they wanted to write if they did not know how to express their thoughts in English, and asked somebody to help out when they had problems while writing. Item 8, "If I don't know a word in English, I write it in my native language and later try to find an appropriate English word," held the fifth position. The mean score of Item 8 was moderate ($\bar{x}=3.2$) which proved that some learners used their native language when they did not know the English word. Besides that, Items 5 and 6 had the lowest ranking, where the mean value was at ($\bar{x}=2.7$) and can be considered moderate. This demonstrates that some learners wrote bits of the text in their native language and then translated them into English, and some learners were very confident with their grammar and vocabulary.

Table 6: Mean for - WHEN WRITING (WW)

NO	ITEM	MEAN
1	WWQ1 I start with the introduction	4.7
2	WWQ2 I stop after a few sentences or a whole paragraph, covering one idea	3.5
3	WWQ3 I reread what I have written to get ideas to continue	4.3
4	WWQ4 I I go back to my outline and make changes in it	3.5
5	WWQ 5 I write bits of the text in my native language and then translate them in English	2.7
6	WWQ 6 I am very confident with my grammar and vocabulary	2.7
7	WWQ 7 I simply what I want to write if I don't know how to express my thoughts in English	3.5
8	WWQ 8 If I don't know a word in English, I write it in my native language and later try to find an appropriate English word	3.2
9	WWQ 9 If I don't know a word in English, I find similar English word that I know	4.0
10	WWQ10 I ask somebody to help out when I have problems while writing	3.5
	Total	4.7

Based on the findings in Table 7, the overall mean of learners perception' of their writing process when revising their writing was moderate. This shows that some learners perceived their writing skills when revising their writing. The data's mean score can serve

as proof of this ($\bar{x}=2.96$). Item 9 received the highest level and held the first rank. The mean ($\bar{x}=4.2$) indicated that learners checked whether their essay matched the requirements when revising their writing. The second rank was given to Items 4 and 7. The mean score for both items was ($\bar{x}=3.2$), which was moderate and showed that learners made changes in vocabulary when they revised their writing and focused on one thing at a time when revising, for example, by looking at content and structure separately. Next, Item 5, "I make changes in sentence structure", held the third rank. The score ($\bar{x}=3.2$) indicated that some students made changes in sentence structure when revising their writing. Items 2 and 6 shared the same mean value ($\bar{x}=3.0$) which was considered moderate and ranked fourth. This shows that some learners only read what they had written when they had finished the whole paper to revise their writing. Besides that, some learners made changes in the content or ideas when they revise. Items 1 and 8 also shared the same value ($\bar{x}=2.6$) and held the fifth position. The mean scores of both items were low, which denoted that only a small number of learners read their essays aloud when revising their writing, as they would then leave their first draft and start writing again. Next, Item 10 held the second last position, where the mean value was at ($\bar{x}=2.5$) and can be considered low. This demonstrates that only a small number of learners leave the text aside for a couple of days to then view it from a new perspective. Besides that, Item 3 had the lowest ranking, where the mean value was at ($\bar{x}=1.7$) and can be considered very low. This demonstrates that only a few learners had written their paper and handed it in without reading it. This suggests that most of the students revised their writing.

Table 7: Mean for - WHEN REVISING (WR)

NO	ITEM	MEAN
1	WRQ1 I read my essay aloud	2.6
2	WRQ2 I only read what I have written when I have finished the whole paper	3.0
3	WRQ3 When I have written my paper, I hand it in without reading it	1.7
4	WRQ4 I make changes in vocabulary	3.4
5	WRQ5 I make changes in sentence structure	3.2
6	WRQ6 I make changes in the content or ideas	3.0
7	WRQ7 I focus on one thing at a time when revising (eg. content, structure)	3.4
8	WRQ8 I leave my first draft and start writing again	2.6
9	WRQ9 I check if my essay matches the requirements	4.2
10	WRQ10 I leave the text aside for a couple of days and then I can see it in a new perspective	2.5
	Total	2.96

5. Conclusion

The findings of the study reflect how learners perceived their writing difficulties in academic writing and their writing process. In terms of writing difficulties, it was found that learners often struggled when it came to constructing written texts in academic writing. Writing became difficult when students needed to write about topics that they were not familiar with. In contrast, if the topics given were more relevant to their own personal experiences, they found it less difficult to write about. Moreover, it was found that learners faced difficulty in achieving the goals set for academic essays. Linking back to the concept of topic familiarity, they indicated that the goals set by their instructors seemed to be out of reach due to the lack of prior knowledge on specific points to be written in the body paragraphs. Furthermore, the level of knowledge and awareness towards the three different MUET text structures also contributed to the writing difficulties that pre-university students perceived. Argumentative, Discursive and

Problem-Solution essays each have their own structure and format that students must be able to distinguish and follow. A lack of clarity and comprehensiveness in the instructions given by the lecturers, or a lack of understanding and practice in writing such essays would contribute to the overall writing difficulties.

These findings are similar to the study by [Fareed et al. \(2016\)](#) who mentioned how lack of ideas, writing anxiety, influence of mother tongue, and lack of organisational structure contributed to writing difficulties faced by the students. Students are not only expected to master the three text structures, namely Argumentative, Discursive and Problem Solution essays for MUET Writing papers, which are similar in their general organisational pattern (introduction, body paragraph and conclusion) but also have different and specific organisational patterns to follow. For example, each essay requires a different method in forming the thesis statement. Additionally, there are two different models for the students to choose from for a problem-solution essay, which contributes to the challenge of memorizing these different formats before their exam. This was supported by [Nenotek et al. \(2022\)](#) who stated that students faced great challenges in writing thesis statements, developing coherency, and comparing of ideas, which caused 97% of errors. Lack of proficiency in organising text structure, expressing ideas and arguments, struggles in constructing comprehensive thesis statements with sounding supporting details, and maintaining coherence were also considered challenges faced by pre-university students ([Jee & Aziz, 2021](#)). Moreover, a limited timeframe could also be a factor in writing difficulties as students are expected to write an extended essay in about 50 minutes which could cause writing anxiety, struggles in brainstorming ideas and supporting details, and reducing the quality of the essay. Furthermore, lecturers teaching the ELC080 code that caters for MUET preparation need to also take into account reading, listening and speaking skills in preparing lessons. The number of classes and students on top of the different skills that should be covered during the class make it difficult for lecturers to give extensive comments and feedback towards students' writing. [Ariyanti and Fitriana \(2017\)](#) also stated that the time limit to write the essays is a contributing aspect in determining the quality of writing and that the vast number of students in a class is proven to be a cause of difficulty for lecturers to comment on students' essays.

The writing process, in contrast, is perceived by students in three different stages: before writing, while writing and when revising. During the prewriting stage, the study demonstrated that most learners did not start writing unless a plan had been established, whether mentally or in written words. For them, the planning process involved brainstorming ideas to write about that are related to the topics given, revising the requirements of the assignment or essay, and referring to model writing samples by proficient writers. This further reinforced the findings by [Younes and Albalawi \(2015\)](#), where acquiring proficiency in academic writing, demands students' continuous dedication, regular practice, and a solid understanding of organisational strategies, language usage, and writing mechanics. It is uncommon for students to immediately start writing without a plan in mind, meaning that thoughtful consideration is given in their process during the prewriting stage. Meanwhile, the study also found that learners often begin by writing the introduction first. This corroborates the study by [Baharudin et al. \(2023\)](#), which identified that the hurdles students face in writing were not caused by the writing process itself; rather, the main challenge to achieve good writing was their struggle to fulfil the objectives outlined in the writing tasks assigned by instructors. This explains why students start their essays by focusing on the outline of the introduction as it incorporates the thesis statement. The thesis statement in the introductory paragraph captures the main ideas of all the body paragraphs, therefore, by writing it out first,

learners would be establishing a clear and cohesive structure of the components during the prewriting stages. This also indicates that students who had weaker proficiency in the language most probably encountered the most challenges in the drafting stage of writing as they found it difficult to formulate thesis statements and compose topic sentences while crafting and structuring ideas, as also found by [Uba and Soudi \(2020\)](#).

Furthermore, whenever students finish writing out a few sentences or a paragraph, they would make changes in their vocabulary or sentence structure. This could include simplifying sentences that they did not know how to write in the English language or replacing the Malay language vocabulary they had added initially with its English counterpart. This demonstrates that even in the middle of the writing process, students were constantly reviewing and making changes to their work. This was also similarly reflected in the stage after writing, known as the revising stage. Once the entire essay was completed, students would often check whether their essay matched the requirements of the assignment or the exam question. This entailed rereading their work thoroughly after they finished writing the whole paper. This was supported by [ELbashir \(2023\)](#) who hypothesised that attaining competence in every stage of writing is crucial for students to compose high-quality writings. One aspect to take note of is to focus on one writing component at a time when revising their work. For instance, if grammar is the main focus, students should focus solely on looking for grammatical errors in their sentences when revising. Then, if they would like to focus on the structure of the essay, they should reread the essay again and make sure that the structure of the sentences or the paragraphs are clear and cohesive. Very few learners submitted their works without reading or revising what they had written, which suggested that the revising stage was an important part of their writing process. This validated the findings of [Abdul-Kareem \(2014\)](#), where constructing a quality essay demands assessing grammar with precision, formulating primary and supporting ideas, employing creative and critical thinking, seamlessly integrating them, and engaging in a meticulous revision process followed by final editing. [Boonyarattanasoontorn's \(2017\)](#) study illustrated that students' writing skills were greatly below expectation as they mostly had poor grammar, which was different to this study as the majority of the students are proficient in English. Hence, it is crucial to acknowledge the strategies students use in the writing process to indicate and predict the writing difficulty they might encounter in writing.

5.1 Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Overall, the findings of this investigation have provided valuable insights for future research as well as pedagogical implications for policymakers and educators to consider. This study suggests that students seem to struggle more during the pre-planning stages of writing. Educators should provide extra support and guidance so that students are able to effectively plan their ideas before putting them onto paper. Furthermore, it is also suggested for policymakers and classroom instructors to implement and advise strategies for learners when facing difficulties in any of the writing stages. For instance, [Fareed et al. \(2016\)](#) highlighted the importance of constructive feedback given by teachers and that they must be careful to not only highlight mistakes in their students' writing but to also provide positive comments.

Moreover, as the participants of this study were pre-university students who had scored generally well in their SPM English exam and were either average or highly proficient in the English language, it would be a fruitful endeavor to further investigate the writing difficulties faced by EFL students or students with poor proficiency in English. The current

study's participants had general knowledge of the writing processes and essay-writing formats as the Malaysian school curriculum had emphasised on these components in the English subject. It would be essential for future researchers to investigate EFL students who did not have knowledge of these processes as the writing difficulties that they would face would be, potentially, far greater at all the three stages. The results could be beneficial for educators and policymakers to come up with the best strategies to aid students who are struggling in writing much more than their peers. Overall, this study had provided valuable insights into how students perceived their writing process and their difficulties in academic writing.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by UiTM Research Ethics Committee. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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