

# GRAMMATICAL CHALLENGES IN ENGLISH THESIS WRITING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FINAL-YEAR EFL STUDENTS

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Writing an undergraduate thesis in English remains a tough task for many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, especially those in their final year. One of the most common problems during thesis writing is grammatical accuracy, which often leads to repeated revisions and delays in graduation. This study aims to explore the experiences of final-year English Language Education (ELE) students dealing with grammatical difficulties while writing their theses. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research involved final-year students from the English Language Education (ELE) Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Lampung who experienced delays in completing their theses. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and document analysis of thesis drafts and revision notes. The findings show that students face recurring grammatical issues, including tense inconsistency, subject–verb agreement errors, and awkward sentence structures. These challenges cause extensive revisions, longer supervision processes, emotional stress, and extended study periods beyond the typical eight semesters. The study also highlights students' coping strategies, such as self-study, peer assistance, and repeated revisions based on supervisors' feedback. This research concludes that grammatical problems significantly contribute to delaying thesis completion and stresses the importance of better academic writing support for final-year ELE students.

**Keywords: Academic Writing; Delayed Graduation; EFL Students; Grammar Difficulties Thesis Writing**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Timely graduation is widely recognized as an important indicator of academic success in higher education (Mehdi & Nachouki, 2023; Sugitha et al., 2024). Undergraduate programs are generally structured to be completed within a predetermined period, enabling students to progress efficiently to professional careers or further academic pursuits (Ferrão, 2023; Moreno, 2025). However, many students experience difficulties during the final stage of their studies, particularly when completing their undergraduate thesis. This academic requirement demands not only disciplinary knowledge but also a high level of academic writing competence in English (Nurhidayarnis et al., 2024; Syafii et al., 2025). For students in English Language Education (ELE) programs, the expectation to produce an extended academic text in English often becomes a major challenge. Among various writing difficulties encountered during thesis completion, grammatical accuracy frequently emerges as one of the most persistent obstacles affecting students' progress and, consequently, their ability to graduate on time (Akrei, 2021; Alzahrani, 2025; Mustafa et al., 2022).

Grammatical accuracy plays a central role in academic writing because it determines clarity, coherence, and the credibility of scholarly arguments. Writing a thesis requires consistent control of tense usage, sentence structure, and syntactic organization across multiple chapters (Li & Akram, 2024; Prapobratanakul, 2024; Suraprajit, 2024). When grammatical errors occur frequently, the meaning of arguments may become unclear and the academic quality of the thesis may be questioned. As a result, supervisors often emphasize grammar during the revision process, requiring students to repeatedly correct linguistic inaccuracies before the thesis can be approved. This situation makes grammar not only a linguistic concern but also a practical barrier that can slow down the thesis-writing process and prolong students' study duration (Fujimoto-Adamson et al., 2024; Suleimanova &

Lykova, 2023; Zhao & Ting, 2025).

The challenge becomes more complex because thesis writing differs significantly from other academic writing tasks. Unlike short assignments completed during coursework, thesis writing requires sustained engagement over a long period and involves multiple cycles of feedback and revision (Quinto, 2022; Udupa, 2023). Students must independently manage comments from supervisors, revise their drafts, and maintain linguistic consistency throughout the document. In this extended writing process, grammatical difficulties often accumulate and reappear in different sections of the thesis. Even when supervisors provide grammatical corrections, students may struggle to fully understand or internalize the feedback, resulting in repeated errors in subsequent drafts (Goundar et al., 2025; Kojima & Popiel, 2023; Ma, 2021). These recurring challenges indicate that grammatical problems in thesis writing are not merely technical mistakes but part of a broader learning struggle experienced by students during the academic writing process.

Addressing grammatical challenges in thesis writing is particularly important in English Language Education (ELE) programs, where graduates are expected to demonstrate strong written proficiency in English. Persistent grammatical difficulties at the thesis level raise questions about the effectiveness of writing instruction and language development throughout the program. Moreover, prolonged thesis completion can have significant consequences for students, including financial pressure, academic frustration, and declining motivation (An & Thanh, 2025; Lama & Suhodolli, 2024). Delays in graduation may also influence students' career opportunities and institutional performance indicators. Therefore, understanding how grammatical difficulties affect the thesis-writing process is essential not only from a linguistic perspective but also from an academic and practical standpoint (Finamor, 2023).

Previous research on EFL writing has largely focused on identifying grammatical errors and measuring students' writing performance (Aziz et al., 2020; Safitri, 2021). Many studies employ quantitative approaches to analyze the frequency of grammatical mistakes or evaluate improvements after specific instructional interventions (Ishtiaq et al., 2025; Rizvić-Eminović et al., 2025; Song & Song, 2023). While these studies provide valuable insights into linguistic patterns in students' writing, they often concentrate on written products rather than the experiences behind the writing process. As a result, the emotional, cognitive, and experiential dimensions of dealing with repeated grammatical revisions are frequently overlooked.

Research specifically examining undergraduate thesis writing has acknowledged that the process involves more than linguistic competence alone. Students must manage feedback, maintain motivation, and navigate complex academic expectations throughout the writing journey. In many EFL contexts, grammatical feedback becomes a dominant element in thesis supervision. However, existing studies present inconsistent findings regarding how effectively students benefit from such feedback. Some studies report gradual improvement in students' grammatical accuracy, while others reveal persistent difficulties despite repeated corrections (Cheng et al., 2021; Maleki, 2025). These mixed findings suggest that understanding grammatical challenges requires attention not only to the errors themselves but also to how students experience and respond to them during thesis writing.

Despite the growing body of research on EFL writing, there remains a limited number of studies that explore students' lived experiences of grammatical challenges in thesis writing through a phenomenological perspective. Most previous studies emphasize error identification or instructional outcomes, while relatively few investigate how students perceive, interpret, and emotionally respond to grammar-related difficulties during the thesis-writing process. Exploring students' lived experiences is important because grammatical difficulties may influence not only writing performance but also students' confidence, motivation, and persistence in completing their thesis. Understanding these experiences can reveal hidden barriers that are not visible through error analysis alone and provide deeper insights into how grammar becomes a significant obstacle in the final stage of undergraduate study.

In response to this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative phenomenological

approach to explore and interpret the lived experiences of final-year students who encounter grammatical difficulties during English thesis writing. Specifically, this study aims to understand how students experience grammar-related challenges throughout the thesis-writing process, how they interpret and respond to grammatical feedback from supervisors, and how these experiences influence their confidence, motivation, and progress toward thesis completion. By focusing on students' perspectives, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of grammar-related challenges beyond measurable linguistic errors and to highlight the ways in which these challenges shape students' journey toward completing their undergraduate thesis.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of final-year students who encountered grammatical difficulties during the process of writing their English undergraduate theses (Matz, 2024; Tavakol & Sandars, 2025; van Manen & Adams, 2009). A phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand how students experienced and interpreted grammar-related challenges throughout the thesis-writing process. Rather than focusing solely on identifying grammatical errors, phenomenology allows researchers to explore the meanings, perceptions, and emotional responses associated with these challenges. Through this approach, the study sought to capture how students perceived repeated grammatical revisions, how they responded to supervisors' feedback, and how these experiences influenced their motivation and progress toward thesis completion.

The research was conducted in an English Education undergraduate program at a higher education institution where English served as the primary medium for academic writing. The unit of analysis was individual students' experiences related to grammar-focused thesis revisions during the final stage of their academic study. The overall research procedure followed a systematic sequence consisting of research design selection, participant identification, data collection, and data analysis. The stages of the research process are illustrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Research Methodology Flowchart

### Data Collection Tools and Method

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and document analysis to enhance methodological rigor and credibility. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow researchers to maintain consistency across participants while also providing flexibility to explore individual experiences in greater depth (Barrick, 2019; Dejonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

An interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was developed to explore several key aspects of students' experiences, including grammatical difficulties encountered during thesis writing, experiences with revision and supervisor feedback, emotional responses to repeated corrections, and strategies used to cope with grammar-related challenges. Each interview was conducted individually in a quiet setting to ensure participants' comfort and confidentiality.

Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve the accuracy of participants' responses. In addition to interviews, document analysis was conducted on selected thesis drafts and supervisors' written feedback. These documents were examined to identify recurring grammatical issues and revision patterns, thereby providing additional contextual evidence to support the interview findings. The combination of interviews and document analysis enabled data triangulation, which strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

### **Population and Sample**

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, which is commonly used in phenomenological research to identify individuals who have direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025; Campbell et al., 2020; Milicevic et al., 2025). The inclusion criteria for participation were as follows: (1) final-year undergraduate students enrolled in an English Education program, (2) students who had exceeded the standard eight-semester study period due to unfinished thesis requirements, (3) students who were currently undergoing thesis revision processes, and (4) students who had received repeated grammatical feedback from thesis supervisors.

Initially, 20 eligible students were identified through consultation with academic supervisors and program records. Fifteen students agreed to participate voluntarily and met all inclusion criteria, resulting in a final sample of 15 participants. This sample size is considered appropriate for phenomenological research, which prioritizes depth of experience rather than statistical generalization. Data collection continued until sufficient depth of information was obtained and thematic patterns began to repeat across participants, indicating data saturation.

Participants' profiles reflected prolonged enrollment and continuous involvement in thesis supervision processes. All participants had experienced multiple rounds of grammar-related revisions during their thesis-writing process.

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### Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis procedure to identify patterns within participants' experiences. The analysis process consisted of several systematic stages.

First, data familiarization was conducted through repeated reading of interview transcripts and supporting documents in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the data. Second, initial codes were generated manually to capture meaningful units of information related to grammatical challenges, revision processes, emotional reactions, and academic impacts.

Third, similar codes were grouped into broader categories representing shared aspects of participants' experiences. These categories were subsequently refined and organized into overarching themes that reflected common patterns across participants. Finally, the themes were reviewed, refined, and interpreted in relation to the research objectives in order to explain how grammatical difficulties influenced students' thesis-writing experiences.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was applied by comparing insights obtained from interview data with evidence found in thesis drafts and supervisors' written feedback. This analytical process ensured transparency, credibility, and consistency in interpreting participants' experiences.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Research Findings

#### Persistent Core Grammatical Difficulties in Thesis Writing

The analysis revealed that students experienced persistent grammatical difficulties throughout the thesis-writing process. Three core grammatical problems repeatedly appeared in both interview data and thesis draft analysis: tense inconsistency, subject–verb agreement errors, and ineffective academic sentence construction. These difficulties were not isolated mistakes but appeared systematically across chapters and revision stages, indicating that students struggled to maintain grammatical control in extended academic writing tasks. Table 1 summarizes the recurring grammatical indicators identified in students' thesis drafts.

Table 1. Recurrent Grammatical Problems Identified in Students' Thesis Drafts

Grammatical Indicator	Manifestation in Writing	Academic Consequence
Tense inconsistency	Inconsistent use of past, present, and present perfect tenses within the same section	Ambiguity in reporting research procedures
Subject–verb agreement errors	Mismatch between singular or plural subjects and verbs	Reduced grammatical accuracy and frequent corrections
Ineffective sentence structure	Overly long, fragmented, or literal translation-based sentences	Distorted meaning and lack of academic clarity

Interview data revealed that students were often aware that their grammar was problematic; however, they lacked the ability to independently identify and correct specific errors. This finding contrasts with assumptions in previous quantitative studies that grammatical errors primarily stem from insufficient grammatical knowledge.

*“I realize that my grammar is not correct, but I cannot identify exactly which part is wrong. When my supervisor asks me to revise the grammar, I feel uncertain about where to begin.”* (Participant 4)

*“I understand grammar in theory, but applying it consistently in thesis writing feels much more difficult.”*(Participant 9)

This finding extends previous EFL writing research by demonstrating that grammatical difficulty at the thesis level is not merely a technical issue but a contextual challenge related to extended academic writing demands.

### Grammar-Focused Revisions and Prolonged Thesis Completion

Another major theme emerging from the analysis was the dominance of grammar-focused revisions during the thesis supervision process. Participants reported that supervisors' feedback frequently emphasized grammatical accuracy rather than conceptual development, resulting in repeated revision cycles. Table 2 presents the patterns of grammar-related revisions experienced by the participants.

Table 2. Patterns of Grammar-Related Revision Cycles

Revision Indicator	Description	Impact on Thesis Progress
Repeated chapter revision	The same chapter revised multiple times due to grammar issues	Delayed chapter approval
General grammar feedback	Comments such as "improve grammar" without detailed explanation	Student confusion and uncertainty
Recurring similar errors	Previously corrected errors reappearing in later drafts	Extended supervision duration

An unexpected finding was that repeated grammar-focused feedback did not necessarily lead to grammatical improvement. This contradicts previous studies suggesting that continuous corrective feedback gradually enhances writing accuracy.

*"I revised the same chapter several times, but the grammar comments were always similar. It felt like the revision process was not moving forward"* (Participant 7)

*"Sometimes I only change the words without fully understanding the mistake, so the same error appears again."* (Participant 2)

These findings suggest that grammar feedback provided during supervision tended to be corrective rather than instructional, limiting students' ability to internalize grammatical principles.

### Emotional and Academic Consequences of Grammatical Difficulties

Beyond academic delays, grammatical difficulties also had substantial emotional consequences for students. Participants described grammar as a source of persistent stress, anxiety, and declining academic confidence throughout the thesis-writing process.

Table 3 .Emotional and Academic Impacts of Grammatical Difficulties

Emotional Indicator	Student Experience	Academic Effect
Frustration	Feeling stuck despite repeated revisions	Reduced writing efficiency
Anxiety	Fear of negative supervisor feedback	Avoidance of draft submission
Decreased confidence	Doubt in English writing competence	Declining writing motivation

Students often perceived grammatical criticism as a reflection of their academic ability, which intensified emotional pressure.

*"I sometimes feel embarrassed because I am an English major, yet my grammar is still criticized"* (Participant 11)

*"I delay submitting my draft because I am afraid the grammar is still not acceptable"* (Participant 6)

These findings demonstrate that grammatical difficulties do not only affect writing quality but also influence students' psychological experiences during the thesis-writing process. Research on second language writing anxiety also indicates that fear of negative evaluation can significantly influence students' writing behavior and willingness to submit drafts for review.

### Students' Coping Strategies and Their Limited Effectiveness

The findings further reveal that students employed various coping strategies to manage grammatical difficulties; however, these strategies were largely insufficient for long-term improvement.

Table 4 Students' Coping Strategies in Addressing Grammatical Problems

Coping Strategy	Description	Perceived Effectiveness
Self-directed learning	Using grammar books and online resources	Limited and inconsistent improvement
Peer assistance	Asking peers to review grammar	Unreliable due to similar proficiency levels
Supervisor-based correction	Revising based on marked errors	Short-term correction without conceptual understanding

Although these strategies helped students address surface-level errors, they did not foster sustained grammatical development. This finding diverges from studies reporting positive impacts of autonomous grammar learning tools.

*"I only revise the parts that are marked by my supervisor, but I do not really understand the grammatical pattern."* (Participant 13)

*"I often ask my friends, but sometimes they are also unsure about the correct grammar."* (Participant 1)

This finding highlights the absence of structured academic writing support during the thesis stage. Without systematic guidance, students relied primarily on informal strategies that addressed surface-level errors rather than developing long-term grammatical competence. Previous research in academic writing support has also emphasized the importance of structured writing assistance programs to help students navigate linguistic challenges in thesis writing.

### Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the lived experiences of final-year EFL students who encountered grammatical difficulties while writing their English undergraduate theses. By adopting a qualitative phenomenological perspective, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how grammatical challenges influence students' writing processes, revision practices, emotional experiences, and time to graduation. The findings indicate that grammatical difficulties persisted across thesis drafts, dominated supervision feedback, and played a significant role in prolonging thesis completion. In addition, these difficulties were

closely associated with negative emotional responses, including frustration, anxiety, and reduced academic confidence. Although students employed various coping strategies, these efforts were largely insufficient to address the underlying challenges. These findings highlight the importance of examining grammar as a central component of the thesis-writing experience rather than a peripheral technical issue.

The persistence of grammatical difficulties across multiple drafts supports existing research indicating that EFL students often struggle to apply grammatical knowledge in extended academic writing. Previous studies have documented common grammatical problems such as tense inconsistency and subject–verb agreement errors in EFL writing (Arellano-Tamayo, 2019; Mishu & Jaashan, 2025; Yawiloeng, 2025). However, the present findings extend this literature by demonstrating that such difficulties remain prevalent even at the final stage of undergraduate study. This suggests that grammatical knowledge acquired during coursework does not automatically transfer to thesis writing, which requires sustained accuracy, coherence, and independence. Rather than reflecting a lack of basic knowledge, the findings point to challenges in applying grammar within complex academic contexts.

The dominance of grammar-focused feedback during supervision aligns with prior research emphasizing linguistic accuracy as a key criterion in EFL thesis evaluation (Naghdipour & Kadhim, 2021). Supervisors' emphasis on grammar reflects institutional expectations for academic writing quality (Lei & Pramoolsook, 2020). However, the present study reveals that this focus may unintentionally lead to repetitive revision cycles. Unlike studies reporting gradual improvement through corrective feedback, the findings indicate that repeated grammar corrections did not consistently result in improved accuracy. This difference suggests that the nature of feedback is critical. When feedback is primarily corrective and lacks explicit explanation, students may revise mechanically without developing a deeper understanding of grammatical patterns.

The emotional consequences associated with grammatical difficulties further reinforce findings from earlier studies on writing anxiety in EFL contexts. Previous research has shown that repeated correction and fear of negative evaluation can negatively affect students' confidence (Lei & Pramoolsook, 2020; Yue et al., 2022). The present study adds to this literature by demonstrating that grammatical challenges function as a continuous emotional burden throughout the thesis-writing process. Notably, emotional distress was reported not only by students with perceived lower proficiency but also by those with strong academic backgrounds. This finding challenges the assumption that writing-related anxiety is limited to weaker learners and suggests that grammar-related stress is a widespread experience among EFL thesis writers.

The limited effectiveness of students' coping strategies can be explained by the informal and fragmented nature of these approaches. While self-study and peer assistance offered temporary support, they were not systematically aligned with the specific linguistic demands of thesis writing. Previous studies have suggested that autonomous learning strategies can enhance grammatical competence; however, the present findings indicate that such strategies may be insufficient without structured guidance. Similarly, reliance on supervisors' corrections may foster dependency rather than autonomy, as students focus on fixing marked errors instead of understanding underlying grammatical principles. These explanations are grounded in participants' accounts and remain within the scope of the study's findings.

When compared with previous research, the findings both align with and diverge from existing literature. Similar to earlier studies, this research confirms that grammar remains a major challenge in EFL academic writing. However, it differs from studies that report steady improvement through repeated revisions. The present findings suggest that repetition alone does not guarantee grammatical development, particularly in the absence of explicit instructional support. Contextual factors, such as limited academic writing assistance at the thesis stage and the high-stakes nature of undergraduate theses, may account for these differences.

A key contribution of this study lies in its focus on students' lived experiences of grammatical difficulties. Rather than introducing new theoretical constructs, the study

reinterprets existing understandings of grammar through a phenomenological lens. Grammar emerged not only as a linguistic issue but also as a structural and emotional barrier that shaped students' academic trajectories. The novelty of the findings lies in demonstrating how grammatical difficulties interact with supervision practices, emotional responses, and prolonged enrollment. This integrated perspective offers a more comprehensive understanding of grammar-related challenges in EFL thesis writing.

In summary, the discussion demonstrates that grammatical difficulties play a central role in shaping final-year EFL students' thesis-writing experiences. Persistent grammatical problems, grammar-focused supervision, emotional strain, and limited coping strategies collectively contribute to delayed thesis completion. These findings do not suggest that grammar instruction is ineffective; rather, they indicate a misalignment between existing instructional practices and the demands of thesis writing. By grounding the discussion firmly in the study's findings and related literature, this research underscores the importance of sustained academic writing support during the final stage of undergraduate study to facilitate effective writing development and timely graduation.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study investigated the grammatical challenges experienced by final-year EFL students during the process of writing their undergraduate theses. The findings identified three recurring grammatical difficulties that consistently appeared across students' thesis drafts: tense inconsistency, subject–verb agreement errors, and ineffective academic sentence construction. These difficulties frequently reappeared during revision cycles and were often accompanied by general grammar-related feedback, which contributed to prolonged thesis completion. The findings suggest that grammatical difficulties in thesis writing are not merely isolated linguistic errors but reflect challenges in applying grammatical knowledge within extended academic writing tasks.

The study contributes to a better understanding of how grammatical difficulties shape the thesis-writing experience of EFL students in higher education contexts. The findings highlight the need for more structured academic writing support during the thesis stage, particularly in assisting students to apply grammatical knowledge in extended research texts. In addition, supervisory feedback practices may benefit from providing clearer explanations and guidance that help students understand recurring grammatical patterns rather than focusing solely on surface-level corrections. This study is limited to a qualitative exploration within a single institutional context; therefore, future research may expand the investigation across different institutions or disciplines and examine supervisors' perspectives to further understand how grammar-related feedback influences students' academic writing development.

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