A Student-Centered Framework for Understanding EFL Thesis Writing Difficulties in Vietnam

Le Truong An
Ho Chi Minh City Open University
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Trinh Ngoc Thanh[*]
Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and Education
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Abstract. This study examines the challenges encountered by Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language undergraduate students in thesis writing by developing and applying a novel conceptual framework. Drawing on existing literature, the framework integrates three interrelated domains: writing proficiency (grammar, vocabulary, paraphrasing, and academic tone), emotion and motivation (burnout, low motivation, and isolation), and support systems (supervisory guidance, peer and family support, institutional services, and AI tools). Using a qualitative research design, data were collected from six students at a university in Ho Chi Minh City through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed that all participants encountered difficulties with language use and maintaining academic tone, as well as emotional strain due to deadlines and lack of confidence. Support systems, especially timely feedback from supervisors, peer collaboration, and the ethical use of AI tools, played a crucial role in managing these difficulties. The study highlights the need for enhanced academic writing support, supervisor training, and institutional policies on AI integration. By offering a comprehensive framework and student-centered insights, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of thesis writing in English as a Foreign Language context. It provides practical implications for educators and policymakers in higher education.

Keywords: academic writing; artificial intelligence tools; supervisor feedback; Vietnam

[*]Corresponding author: Trinh Ngoc Thanh; *thanhtn@hcmute.edu.vn*

1. Introduction

Thesis writing is a significant milestone for undergraduate students, marking the culmination of their academic journey. It requires students to examine and present research findings in a specialized written form that constructs new knowledge and demonstrates logical argumentation (Badreddine, 2019). Beyond fulfilling graduation requirements, thesis writing enhances academic writing competence, fosters critical thinking and research skills, and builds students' confidence, self-regulation, and sustained motivation (Choemue & Bram, 2021; Mbato & Cendra, 2019; Rahayu & Moesarofah, 2023).

In the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the thesis writing process is reported to be demanding due to specific challenges. First, writing proficiency entails articulating complex ideas in a second language, a task often complicated by cultural differences and varying levels of academic preparedness (Kuyyogsuy, 2019). Other factors that cause barriers for this group of learners include linguistic barriers, such as grammatical accuracy, appropriate vocabulary use, effective paraphrasing, and maintaining a formal academic tone (Bowen & Thomas, 2020; Keck, 2006).

Another source of difficulties comes from emotional and motivational factors. The solitary nature of the task, combined with high academic expectations and tight deadlines, can lead to emotional burnout, fluctuating motivation, and feelings of isolation (Chan & Hu, 2023; Salmela-Aro et al., 2022). In addition, difficulties arise from support systems involving academic supervision, peer collaboration, and family encouragement (García-Crespo et al., 2021), considering their wide variations in availability and quality, as well as their influence on learners' ability to succeed (Turner, 2023).

Undergraduate students at universities represent a distinct group of EFL students, particularly when it comes to the complex and demanding process of thesis writing. However, research on EFL undergraduate thesis writing remains limited, with most studies focusing on postgraduate students, leaving undergraduates underrepresented (Starfield & Paltridge, 2019; Wu & Buripakdi, 2022). Although difficulties such as limited vocabulary, grammar issues, and low motivation are well-documented (Bowen & Thomas, 2020; MacIntyre et al., 2020; Solmaz, 2021), they are rarely examined in the specific context of undergraduate thesis writing.

Similarly, while feedback and supervision are recognized as necessary (Waheed et al., 2021), their impact on EFL undergraduates remains unclear. Moreover, few studies explore how students themselves address these obstacles, highlighting a need for research focused on learner-driven solutions (Nurkamto & Prihandoko, 2022; Sa'diah et al., 2023). More importantly, previous studies have investigated factors that impact undergraduates' thesis writing, but there is a scarcity of a comprehensive conceptual framework that systematically combines all these factors.

Given the importance of bridging the mentioned gaps, this study aims to (1) develop a conceptual framework for examining undergraduate students' difficulties in thesis writing, and (2) apply the framework to further understand the difficulties encountered by a particular group of EFL students in the Vietnamese context. Our guiding question for the present study is: What difficulties do Vietnamese EFL undergraduate students encounter when writing their thesis? To provide a more precise focus, the study further explores the following sub-questions:

- What linguistic challenges (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, paraphrasing, academic tone) do students face in the thesis writing process?

- What emotional and motivational challenges (e.g., burnout, low confidence, isolation) emerge during thesis writing?

- What forms of support (e.g., supervisory feedback, peer/family support, institutional services, AI tools) are used or needed by students to address these challenges?

2. Literature Review
2.1 Difficulties Encountered by EFL Students in Thesis Writing
Recent research initially highlights the complex interplay between writing proficiency, emotional well-being, and motivation in the thesis writing process. Carless and Boud (2018) found that learners often experience motivational setbacks when they perceive their language proficiency as inadequate for academic writing. This perception can trigger a cycle of anxiety and diminished confidence, ultimately impairing their ability to produce high-quality work.

In parallel, studies have increasingly emphasized the prevalence and impact of academic burnout. For instance, Wei (2023) reported that the prolonged and demanding nature of thesis writing intensifies feelings of burnout, leading to reduced motivation and engagement. Similarly, Usán Supervía and Salavera Bordás (2020) observed that students experiencing high levels of academic burnout tend to report lower educational achievement and satisfaction.

In terms of writing proficiency, Indonesian EFL students reported two primary types of writing struggles: problems with writing mechanics and with thesis structure. Weaknesses in writing mechanics stemmed from a lack of linguistic and academic writing knowledge (Abrar et al., 2023), including the limited use of academic vocabulary (Mali, 2023) and issues with clarity and conciseness (Kawengian & Subekti, 2024). Structural problems were attributed to students' limited experience with key thesis components, such as writing proposals and revising drafts (Rahayu & Moesarofah, 2023) and organizing sections cohesively (Wijayanti, 2024). Writing the literature review was identified as particularly difficult (Mali, 2023), often due to constraints in sourcing relevant information and selecting appropriate research methods (Al Farrosi, 2023).

The second major challenge involved dimensions of emotion and motivation. Psychological issues have influenced the mental states and behaviors of Indonesian EFL students (Abrar et al., 2023). While some were motivated by internal satisfaction or external goals, such as employment or early graduation (Utami & Kuswandono, 2023), others struggled with procrastination and disengagement, often linked to irregular attendance (Wijayanti, 2024). Motivation issues may also stem from problems with unresponsive supervisors (Abrar et al., 2023), conflicting feedback from co-supervisors (Al Farrosi, 2023), or supervisors' harsh evaluations and revision demands (Kawengian & Subekti, 2024).

In response to these issues, scholars have underscored the importance of robust support systems. Kurniawati and Atmojo (2022) emphasized the value of peer support groups and mentorship programs in sustaining motivation among EFL students. Their findings suggest that students who regularly engage with peers and mentors experience lower stress levels and greater motivation. Building on this, Solmaz (2021) advocated structured opportunities for social interaction, such as writing retreats and collaborative workshops, to foster academic support and a sense of community.

In addition, McCray and Joseph-Richard (2020) highlighted the role of psychological counseling, peer support, and time management workshops in helping students build resilience and maintain a positive outlook. Collectively, these studies highlight the need for integrated, student-centered interventions that address both the academic and emotional aspects of thesis writing. Feedback practice and interaction are additional sources of crucial support for EFL undergraduates in their thesis writing process. Luo (2023) found that the motivation and English proficiency of Chinese EFL undergraduate students significantly influenced their engagement with feedback.

Similarly, Rahmadhani and Hapsari (2023) reported that Philippine EFL undergraduates generally perceived written corrective feedback positively, associating it with improved writing quality and increased confidence. Supervisory feedback plays a pivotal role in shaping students' thesis writing experiences. Therefore, social connectedness with supervisors was crucial, as supportive academic exchanges help boost students' confidence (Rahayu & Moesarofah, 2023).

Last but not least, the use of AI tools represents a modern and self-initiated solution to hindrances in thesis writing. For instance, Indonesian EFL students emphasized the need for clear ethical guidelines and institutional support to use such tools responsibly. Indonesian students used AI for grammar checking to enhance language accuracy (Kawengian & Subekti, 2024), and some explored AI tools for broader writing support. However, they expressed mixed feelings about reliability, highlighting the need for critical evaluation and manual verification (Pasenta & Chakim, 2024). These findings suggest a growing awareness of digital tools as supplementary aids, as well as new challenges in maintaining academic integrity.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

Although thesis writing among EFL undergraduate learners has been widely studied, research focusing on Vietnamese undergraduates remains scarce. While Vietnamese students share many challenges with peers in neighboring countries, such as exam-oriented education and resource constraints, context-specific investigations are needed to reflect local institutional realities. Most existing studies are situated in other Asian contexts, such as Indonesia, China, or the Philippines, which may not fully reflect the linguistic, cultural, and institutional realities of Vietnamese students.

This gap highlights the need for context-specific investigations. Moreover, prior research tends to examine thesis writing impediments in isolation, focusing on either linguistic challenges, emotional and motivational struggles, or support systems. Few studies have attempted to integrate these dimensions into a unified framework, limiting our understanding of how these factors interact and influence students' writing outcomes.

To bridge these gaps, this study introduces a comprehensive conceptual framework that integrates three interconnected domains: (1) writing proficiency, (2) emotional and motivational dynamics, and (3) multifaceted support systems, including supervisory, peer, familial, institutional, and AI-driven assistance. This framework serves as a theoretical lens for examining the challenges encountered by Vietnamese EFL undergraduate students during the thesis writing process and for uncovering learner-driven strategies to address them. By applying this framework to empirical data, the study aims to generate nuanced insights and practical implications for improving thesis writing instruction and support in the Vietnamese EFL context.

This framework was intentionally designed as an empirically grounded and student-centered model, rather than one heavily embedded in multiple theoretical constructs. The rationale is to capture the lived realities of Vietnamese EFL undergraduates in a manner that is both comprehensive and directly applicable to pedagogy and institutional policy. While theories such as self-regulation, feedback literacy, or socio-cognitive models of writing offer valuable lenses, we deliberately foregrounded the domains most frequently highlighted in both existing research and student narratives. This approach ensures that the framework remains accessible, context-sensitive, and adaptable for practical use in Vietnamese higher education, while also leaving space for future studies to extend and refine its theoretical underpinnings.
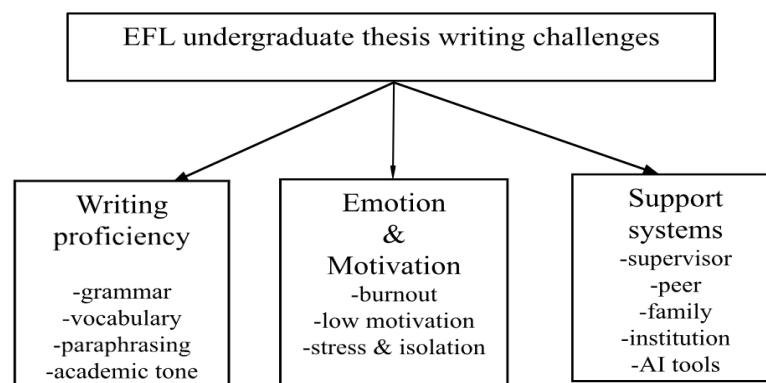
Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the study

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the challenges faced by Vietnamese EFL undergraduate students during the writing of their graduation theses. The natural setting was a university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, where a bachelor's degree in English Language Studies has been taught since 1990. Participants of this study were six EFL undergraduate students coming from the study majors of Business English, English Teaching, and Translation & Interpretation, organized by the Faculty of Foreign Languages at a university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Notably, all students were selected based on their eligibility to write a graduation thesis, having achieved a Grade Point Average of 2.7 or higher on a 4.0 scale in the academic year 2023. In contrast, other students had to choose alternative courses. The participants, referred to by pseudonyms (Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, Participant 4, Participant 5, and Participant 6), provided diverse perspectives on the struggles encountered during their thesis writing process. Informed consent was obtained from participants, who were assured of confidentiality, the right to voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage.

The data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews with participants 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6. The other interview was conducted online via Google Meet with Participant 2, as he was a doctoral student in a field other than English Language Studies and had chosen to pursue a bachelor's degree in English Language Studies as a second degree. However, because the course structure and thesis graduation requirements were the same for all students, his inclusion did not represent any significant difference from the rest of the participants.

The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, while some technical terms were still expressed in English. Each interview lasted roughly 60–90 minutes, followed by informal conversations via a mobile app called Zalo to clarify the data. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, with recurring patterns indicating that no substantially new themes emerged. After transcribing, the interview transcripts were sent to the participants for member checks. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, with recurring

patterns indicating that no substantially new themes emerged. After transcription, the interview transcripts were sent back to the participants for member checks. One researcher conducted the interviews, carried out the initial coding and analysis, and the other researcher cross-checked the transcripts and engaged in debriefing sessions, thereby enhancing the reflexivity and reliability of the research. To further ensure rigor and transparency, we maintained an audit trail. We engaged in reflexive practice, critically examining how our professional roles as lecturers and prior supervision experience might shape interpretation.

The following questions served as guiding prompts for the interviews; however, they were not used as closed or rigid items. Instead, we employed various follow-up and probing techniques (e.g., clarification, elaboration, and reflective prompts) to encourage participants to provide detailed, narrative accounts of their experiences:

1. Can you describe your experiences writing your thesis in English? What challenges, if any, have you faced?
2. Do you sometimes feel burned out when writing your thesis? Can you tell me more about it?
3. What kinds of support have you received in writing your thesis? Please provide examples.
4. When do you have difficulty writing a thesis in English? Do you manage the problems on your own? If yes, how do you overcome your challenges?
5. Do you sometimes ask for help from others to solve difficulties? If yes, who helps you, and what kind of help do you get?
6. How vital has feedback been in shaping your thesis writing? How did your supervisor give feedback to you? Online or offline? What do you think about their feedback?
7. In your writing process, have you used any AI tools? If so, how did you use them, and what was your experience?

We applied thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke (2006), to analyze the data, including familiarizing ourselves with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. In the familiarization phase, interview transcripts were read multiple times to become immersed in the data. During the coding phase, initial codes were generated to identify significant features of the data. These codes were then collated into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined during the theme development phase.

The reviewing themes phase involved ensuring coherence and consistency between the themes and the coded data, as well as the entire data set. In the defining and naming themes phase, themes were defined and named to capture the essence of the participants' experiences. Finally, the reporting phase involved producing the final report, which presented a detailed narrative of the themes, supported by verbatim quotes from the participants.

Furthermore, to ensure the study's trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. Member checking was conducted by sharing the transcripts and preliminary findings with the participants to verify the accuracy of the data and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, an audit trail was maintained, documenting all decisions made during the research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

4. Findings
The following themes emerged from the findings: Writing proficiency, Emotion and motivation and Support systems.

4.1 Writing Proficiency
4.1.1 Grammar and vocabulary
All six participants reported obstacles with grammar and vocabulary, underscoring the framework's first domain of writing proficiency. These difficulties were prevalent regardless of the students' sub-majors, reflecting a common struggle among EFL learners writing in English. Participants frequently mentioned issues related to vocabulary and grammar. For instance, Participant 1 noted the challenge of transitioning from daily vocabulary to formal writing, highlighting problems with word choice. She revealed:

> *"The shift between speaking and writing styles in English can be tricky for me. My daily vocabulary isn't always a perfect fit for formal writing. Hence, I found it challenging to make effective word choices when I wrote my thesis."*

Sharing the same difficulty, Participant 2 emphasized struggles with grammar and vocabulary:

> *"I find it challenging to write my thesis in English as it is not my first language. The primary hurdles I face include grammar and vocabulary. I often struggle with using the correct grammatical structures and choosing the right words that precisely convey my thoughts."*

Participant 5 echoed similar sentiments, indicating that both vocabulary and grammar posed significant hurdles*: "Yes, writing my thesis in English is quite challenging. I struggle with vocabulary and grammar, which can lead to issues in paraphrasing."* While these experiences consistently highlight the centrality of linguistic barriers in EFL thesis writing, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Because they are based on self-reported reflections from a small sample, they may not capture the full variation of grammar and vocabulary struggles across different institutions or student groups.

4.1.2 Paraphrasing challenges
Paraphrasing emerged as a critical challenge, intertwined with vocabulary issues, as Participant 4 stated: *"I encountered difficulty in terms of vocabulary and paraphrasing."* The reason behind the paraphrasing difficulty was the lack of academic vocabulary. Participant 3 also struggled with paraphrasing, particularly

when unfamiliar with the vocabulary used in the source material: *"Paraphrasing is difficult when I'm unfamiliar with some of the vocabulary used in the source material."*

These accounts confirm earlier studies that highlight paraphrasing as a demanding task for EFL writers. At the same time, they reflect a cross-sectional view of participants' challenges; further longitudinal work is needed to see whether these paraphrasing difficulties persist, diminish, or shift as students gain more exposure to academic writing.

4.1.3 Technical writing and academic tone

Technical writing, requiring clarity, precision, and academic tone, was another area of difficulty. Participant 3 explained, *"It's complicated to convey theories, methodologies, and results in a way that is easy to understand in a formal style. And the consistency is difficult, too."* Participant 5 added, *"Technical writing requires the writer to maintain an academic tone, demanding clarity and precision, which can be hard to achieve."*

Other technical aspects, such as spelling and tense usage, were significant shortcomings for some participants. Participant 6, who determined himself to be an auditory learner, found spelling accuracy particularly challenging. He confessed:

> *"The biggest challenge I constantly faced when writing an English thesis was ensuring accuracy in spelling. As an auditory learner, many words come to me in sound form - that is, I only remember vividly how to pronounce them, but not how to write them."*

Although these accounts highlight everyday struggles in technical writing, they do not represent all EFL undergraduates. The limited number of participants and reliance on retrospective accounts have amplified the voices of specific individuals more than others. Nevertheless, the convergence of perspectives across participants suggests that technical writing remains a widespread and persistent issue.

4.2 Emotion and Motivation

4.2.1 Burnout and feeling overwhelmed

Five of the six participants reported experiencing emotional strain, reflecting the framework's second domain of emotion and motivation. Participants frequently mentioned feeling overwhelmed and burned out due to various factors. Participant 1 noted, *"Of course, especially when searching for references, as my thesis topic requires lots of knowledge related to different fields."* This indicates that the broad scope of research topics adds to the emotional strain.

Participant 2, in contrast, highlighted a unique demotivational factor: the burden of pursuing two degrees simultaneously, which compounded their academic fatigue. Only Participant 6 reported relatively stable motivation, though they still acknowledged moments of stress. While this finding highlights how thesis requirements contribute to student stress, it is essential to acknowledge that the

evidence comes from a small group of participants whose experiences may not fully capture the range of emotional challenges faced by EFL undergraduates. Broader studies are needed to confirm whether burnout patterns are similar in other contexts.

4.2.2 Motivation and academic responsibilities
Participant 2 highlighted the lack of motivation exacerbated by additional academic responsibilities: *"I sometimes feel burned out when writing my thesis for this major (Bachelor of Arts in English language studies)."* As described, this participant is seeking his second degree in the English language and is pursuing his doctoral degree in another field overseas. This may add another layer of demotivation to his academic burden. He shared, *"The lack of motivation is a significant factor, particularly during this period when I am pursuing PhD training overseas"* (Participant 2).

Participant 4 experienced a decline in motivation during the literature review phase. The participant emphasized the enormous number of online resources:

> *"I was overwhelmed by the vast amount of available online resources. Despite my efforts, I rewrote my literature review chapter at least three times."*

Meanwhile, Participant 5 described burnout due to the constant pressure of deadlines and extensive revisions, stating that: *"The constant pressure to meet deadlines as well as extensive research and revision sometimes burns me out. I find it difficult to stay energized and maintain motivation in my thesis writing journey."* When asked to elaborate more on the scenario, Participant 5 shared that he set the deadlines to submit his writing to the supervisor on time for feedback. Then, he revised the report immediately, based on the supervisor's comments, within two months following his own deadlines.

These accounts collectively illustrate how thesis-related workload, competing responsibilities, and feedback cycles can diminish motivation. However, since the data are based on retrospective self-reports, participants' descriptions may be influenced by memory or personal interpretation. Future longitudinal research could examine how motivation and burnout fluctuate throughout the thesis-writing process to capture a more dynamic picture.

4.3 Support Systems
4.3.1 Supervisor's support and feedback practice
All six participants emphasized the importance of supervisory support, aligning with the framework's third domain of support systems. Constructive feedback was consistently viewed as a motivating factor that guided revisions and improved thesis quality. Participant 1 appreciated their supervisor's suggestions and advice, which served as a significant motivational factor. She noted, *"My supervisor's invaluable suggestions and guidance served as a source of motivation."* Participant 4 similarly emphasized the supervisor's role in guiding the thesis's structure and providing detailed feedback, fostering a supportive academic

environment. Divergently, Participant 2, who was studying abroad, relied heavily on online communication, noting both its convenience and occasional lack of clarity. These varied experiences illustrate how the mode and tone of feedback significantly shaped students' engagement and persistence.

Participants agreed that receiving feedback from supervisors was essential for enhancing the quality of the thesis. They valued constructive criticism that helped them refine their work, and the method of feedback delivery—whether online or offline—also played a significant role. Participant 2 emphasized the importance of feedback: "*Feedback is crucial because it provides direction and critical insights that improve the quality of the work.*" This sentiment was echoed by Participant 4, who noted, "*Feedback identified the weaknesses, faults, or ambiguous points in my thesis, allowing me to correct and enhance my paper.*" Both participants emphasized the importance of feedback as a crucial tool for guiding their research and writing processes.

Both online and offline feedback methods were used, with some participants preferring one over the other based on convenience and clarity of expression. Participant 3, who found the dual approach beneficial as it provided clear, specific guidance through written comments and face-to-face discussions, appreciated the combination of online and offline feedback: "*The feedback from my supervisor is clear and detailed, pointing out my faults specifically. Both online and offline are effective.*"

Participant 1 also acknowledged the effectiveness of online feedback, stating: "*My supervisor typically provided feedback online through comments in Google Docs. She consistently highlighted areas that require correction and offered directions for improvement.*" According to this participant, the use of Google Docs in feedback practice allowed for timely and accessible feedback, which was crucial for making necessary revisions.

Participant 6 emphasized the importance of providing detailed and constructive feedback. This participant perceived a positive view of receiving feedback, highlighting its benefits of maintaining his motivation and confidence in writing the graduation thesis. He noted, "*Feedback was so important that I needed it to proceed on the right track. My supervisor's feedback was delicate and gentle, properly showing room for improvement without repudiating my efforts.*"

Although these accounts highlight the critical role of supervisors, the findings should be understood within the study's limitations. Participants' positive or negative views of supervision may have been influenced by individual relationships with their advisors, which vary widely across institutions. Furthermore, the sample size was small, and all participants were from the same university, which may not represent the broader diversity of supervisory practices in other Vietnamese or regional contexts. These factors suggest caution in generalizing the findings, though the consistency of themes across participants indicates the centrality of supervisory support in EFL thesis writing.

4.3.2 Peer, family, and institutional support

Peers and friends also contributed significantly, particularly in providing emotional support and practical assistance. Four participants highlighted the importance of peer support, primarily through collaboration in surveys, translation tasks, and emotional encouragement. Participants 1 and 3 noted that their friends' engagement in surveys and emotional support was invaluable. They positively mentioned:

> *"My friends who are willing to participate in my survey and send it to others. Some of them offer emotional support and academic collaboration."* *(Participant 3)*

> *"Also, my friends encouraged me a lot by enthusiastically engaging in my thesis survey, which led to effective data collection."* *(Participant 1)*

Participant 6 mentioned peer collaboration as a method for resolving methodological issues, highlighting the benefits of shared experiences among students facing similar difficulties. He revealed: *"From March to May, I had to write both my Graduation Thesis and my Internship Report. My colleagues would help me with my translation tasks in the company where I worked as an intern."*

Family support varied among participants but generally provided emotional stability and encouragement. Participant 3 noted that their family was empathetic about their academic efforts, while Participant 4 received consistent encouragement from family members, helping to mitigate feelings of exhaustion and demotivation. He proudly shared, *"Fortunately, I was fully supported by my supervisor, family, and peers."* Access to university resources was another critical factor. Notably, one participant, Participant 5, highlighted the benefits of using the university's e-library, which provided comprehensive academic resources necessary for thorough research. He shared:

> *"Additionally, I have access to the E-library of the Open University, which is well-equipped with comprehensive academic resources."*

While these findings highlight the importance of peer, family, and institutional support, they are shaped by the specific networks available to the participants. Students from other institutions or with weaker support systems may report very different experiences. Therefore, these results should not be assumed to represent all EFL undergraduates but rather illustrate how access to supportive relationships and resources can make a significant difference in their academic outcomes.

4.3.3 Use of AI tools

Five of the six participants reported using AI tools, primarily for grammar checking, paraphrasing, and plagiarism detection, which aligns with the support systems domain of the framework. The use of AI tools was commonplace among participants, who found them helpful in various aspects of thesis writing, such as grammar checks, paraphrasing, and plagiarism detection. ChatGPT, in particular, was highlighted for its multiple functionalities. Participant 1 used AI-based tools

to assist with reference research and paraphrasing, finding these tools particularly helpful when overwhelmed by the vast number of resources available. She added:

> *"The most effective way is to keep persevering in writing. Moreover, I could utilize the assistance of a variety of AI-based tools, such as Gemini and Copilot, when I faced difficulty with reference research or paraphrasing."*

However, some participants preferred to manage struggles independently. Participant 5 highlighted the practical benefits of AI tools in improving the technical accuracy of academic writing. He used Grammarly for grammar checks and Turnitin for plagiarism detection, stating, *"These AI tools help me to enhance the quality of my thesis writing significantly and overcome problems more easily."*

Meanwhile, Participant 6 noted, *"I usually described to AI chatbots with great clarity what I was doing and what I was aiming at so that they could provide me with fitting advice."* This participant frequently highlighted ChatGPT for its versatility in interpreting authors' ideas and checking the coherence of the writing. Participant 2, who is pursuing his doctoral program overseas, also used ChatGPT to correct vocabulary and grammar in terms of contextual appropriateness and to understand complex concepts. He mentioned: *"I use ChatGPT to correct my vocabulary and grammar in terms of contextual appropriateness and to help understand complex concepts."*

Despite the benefits, participants expressed concerns about the ethical implications of relying too heavily on AI-generated content. P6 emphasized the importance of personal effort in academic writing, underscoring the need for ethical use of AI tools, ensuring they complement rather than substitute personal academic efforts. Conversely, Participants 5 and 3 viewed AI tools as beneficial supplements to their writing process, emphasizing their role in enhancing writing quality rather than replacing personal effort. Participant 3 noted:

> *"As mentioned, I use writing assistants mainly Grammarly and Quillbot. Sometimes, Gemini helps me generate text if I am unsure how to formulate my ideas. They helped me greatly with my research."*

This perspective highlights the balance between leveraging AI tools for their strengths while maintaining the integrity of personal academic contributions. Interestingly, regarding the university's regulations on the use of AI tools in academic learning, some participants hesitantly shared that they had only discussed AI usage with their supervisors. Most participants relied on their prior knowledge to use these AI tools independently.

These findings suggest both the promise and challenges of integrating AI into academic writing support. However, they are limited by the self-reported nature of students' accounts and by the absence of institutional policy data. The insights represent individual practices rather than systematic patterns, and future research should incorporate perspectives from supervisors and administrators to build a more comprehensive understanding of AI's role in EFL thesis writing.

5. Discussion
The findings of this study shed light on the multifaceted obstacles faced by EFL undergraduate students at a university in Vietnam during the process of writing their graduation theses. These barriers encompass writing proficiency, emotion, motivation, and support systems.

Firstly, the shortcomings related to language proficiency included grammar, vocabulary, paraphrasing, and maintaining cohesion, coherence, clarity, consistency, and an academic tone. Similarly, Vietnamese EFL undergraduate students in this study were reported to struggle with vocabulary and grammatical structures when writing in the English language (Solmaz, 2021) and with difficulties in paraphrasing due to limited vocabulary and an inadequate understanding of the source material (Keck, 2006).

Furthermore, participants consistently reported difficulty shifting from informal to academic language, and limited academic vocabulary hindered their ability to paraphrase, which aligns with Mohammad et al. (2024), who emphasized the importance of addressing syntactic and lexical limitations in paraphrasing instruction. This demonstrates how challenges in the writing proficiency domain directly interact with the emotional-motivational domain, as limited language proficiency often intensifies anxiety, lowers confidence, and reinforces feelings of burnout. Based on this finding, we emphasize the need for comprehensive language support programs. Universities should offer workshops, tutorials, and individualized coaching that focus on academic writing, grammar, vocabulary, and paraphrasing skills.

Secondly, emotional burnout and fluctuating motivation levels were prevalent among the participants, consistent with the findings of Salmela-Aro et al. (2022). The pressure to meet deadlines and the solitary nature of thesis writing contributed significantly to burnout among students. Participants' feelings of being overwhelmed mirrored Nur's (2022) findings, which emphasized how broad research demands can trigger anxiety and cognitive fatigue. The diminished motivation resulting from managing multiple academic pursuits is often intensified by external pressures and a lack of enjoyment in learning (Song, 2024), revealing a multifaceted burden common among EFL learners.

Here, the framework highlights how the support systems domain, particularly supervisory guidance and peer collaboration, mediated students' motivational struggles and helped them sustain writing progress, illustrating a dynamic relationship across the three domains. These findings further underscore the importance of supportive academic environments that promote resilience and self-efficacy in EFL thesis writers and the need to refine instructional practices to enhance the intellectual development of EFL learners in their preparation for thesis writing (Saksono et al., 2025).

Thirdly, support systems, including adequate supervision, peer and family support, play a crucial role in students' academic success. This study found that students who received regular, constructive feedback from their supervisors

reported higher levels of confidence and satisfaction with their progress. Interestingly, this study also found that the use of digital platforms for supervision (e.g., regular online meetings) enhanced the supervisory experience. This finding extends the insights from Waheed et al. (2021). Supervisor feedback not only strengthened the support system domain but also mediated emotional resilience (motivation domain), which in turn improved students' ability to persist in writing (proficiency domain). This interaction reinforces the conceptual framework by showing cross-domain linkages.

Therefore, institutions should provide standardized training for thesis supervisors, emphasizing constructive feedback, clear communication, and emotional support. Regular professional development sessions help supervisors better guide students through the thesis process. Moreover, universities should foster strong support networks through peer mentoring programs and family engagement initiatives, which can provide emotional and academic encouragement throughout the thesis journey and minimize academic procrastination among EFL students (Adiyono, 2025). In the Vietnamese higher education context, this could be operationalized through the establishment of academic writing centers, structured peer-support programs embedded in curricula, and national guidelines for feedback literacy training among supervisors.

Finally, the role of AI tools emerged as a new layer of support, with students using Grammarly, Turnitin, and ChatGPT to assist with grammar, vocabulary, and coherence. While participants found these tools beneficial, they also expressed concerns about over-reliance on them. This highlights the need for clear institutional policies in Vietnam that both encourage the effective integration of AI tools in academic writing and regulate their ethical use. Practical policy levers include university-level guidelines on AI-assisted writing, workshops for students and supervisors, and resource allocations for AI subscriptions in academic libraries.

In addition to its practical implications, this study makes a significant theoretical contribution. The proposed student-centered conceptual framework advances scholarship by systematically combining three domains: writing proficiency, emotional-motivational factors, and support systems. This integration offers a more comprehensive perspective for analyzing undergraduate thesis writing in EFL contexts. The framework also shifts perspectives away from deficit-oriented views of EFL students toward recognizing their agency in navigating linguistic, psychological, and social challenges.

By positioning students' voices at the center, the framework contributes to broader theoretical discussions in applied linguistics and higher education research, offering a structured model that future studies can adapt in diverse EFL settings. In addition, longitudinal research could further explore whether these domains influence students' academic performance and professional readiness beyond graduation.

6. Conclusion

This study employed a newly developed student-centered conceptual framework to explore the challenges of thesis writing faced by six Vietnamese EFL undergraduates through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. Findings show three significant difficulties: (1) writing proficiency gaps in grammar, vocabulary, paraphrasing, and academic tone; (2) emotional strain caused by burnout, fluctuating motivation, and isolation; and (3) the critical role of support systems, where supervisor feedback, peer collaboration, and family encouragement sustained progress.

The findings suggest several implications. Following Chan and Hu's (2023) assertion that emotional regulation influences writing outcomes, this study reaffirms the need for psychological support services to help students manage stress and sustain their motivation. Peer support groups were also vital in alleviating burnout, highlighting the value of collaborative approaches. Peer and family support further proved essential. Kuyyogsuy (2019) emphasized the benefits of peer collaboration and familial support in building resilience, consistent with participants' reports that these networks were crucial in coping with thesis demands. The lack of an academic center also underscores the need for institutional infrastructure such as writing centers and teacher training (Ampo et al., 2025a).

Coping strategies should also draw on effective time management to regulate performance. Britton and Tesser (1991) recommended breaking tasks into manageable steps. Similarly, Hapsari and Fatmasari (2022) advised pacing plans, and Fauziah et al. (2023) suggested collaborative problem-solving. Finally, AI tools can add value by supporting accuracy and originality. Grammarly and Turnitin improve writing quality through grammar and plagiarism checks (Dizon & Gayed, 2021; Situmorang et al., 2023). Nevertheless, ethical concerns remain (Selwyn, 2014), highlighting the need for institutional policies that guide responsible use. Policymakers should provide clear guidelines and training for both students and supervisors to ensure quality integration of AI in EFL education (Ampo et al., 2025b).

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations: its small, homogeneous sample reduces generalizability, and reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias. Future research should test hypotheses quantitatively (e.g., the effect of supervisor feedback on reducing burnout) and conduct longitudinal studies on the sustained impact of AI tools and peer networks.

In conclusion, this study presents a student-centered conceptual framework that integrates language proficiency, emotional and motivational factors, and multi-layered support systems to enhance understanding of EFL thesis writing in Vietnam. Its novelty lies in combining domains often studied separately and applying them to an underexplored context, thereby advancing theoretical understanding and offering practical guidance for supervisors, institutions, and policymakers. To translate these insights into action, a short-term priority is to deliver workshops on academic writing and stress management. Medium-term steps include establishing writing centers and training programs for supervisors.

Long-term efforts should integrate writing support and the responsible use of AI into curricula, with longitudinal evaluation to ensure effective implementation. By addressing these areas, universities can strengthen writing support, enhance student well-being, and better prepare graduates for both professional and academic success.

7. Conflicts of Interest
The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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