

STUDENTS' PROBLEMS OF ACADEMIC WRITING COMPETENCIES, CHALLENGES IN ONLINE THESIS SUPERVISION, AND THE SOLUTIONS: THESIS SUPERVISORS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: The COVID-19 outbreak has brought about the offline-to-online transformation of EFL undergraduate thesis supervision along with its challenging complexities. Anchored in a combination of realistic and constructivist epistemologies, this explanatory sequential design of mixed-method research aimed to investigate students' problems of academic writing competencies, challenges in online thesis supervision, and solutions to the problems and challenges according to thesis supervisors' perspectives. Data was first gathered using a closed-ended questionnaire involving fifty thesis supervisors from Central Java and Papua universities as the respondents. Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted to process this data. Twenty-three of the respondents were then purposively selected for interviews and focus group discussions, the data of which was analyzed using interactive model-driven analyses. This study revealed students' problems of academic writing competencies covering the dimensions of thesis elements and writing performances. Subsequently, multiple challenges were unraveled pertaining to the issues of technological competencies, time management, complexities of students' field research, and students' unstable motivation. The supervisors proposed contextual solutions and those demonstrating their interventions for improving students' metacognition, self-efficacy, and growth mindsets in academic writing. Further studies are expected to work on more in-depth mixed-method investigations that examine the interactions of motivational and strategic constructs predicting academic writing competencies to dive more deeply into the problems, challenges, and solutions concerning the online thesis supervision.

Keywords: academic writing competencies, online thesis supervision, writing metacognition, writing self-efficacy, writing growth mindsets

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The global phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about rapid changes for both lecturers and students in a way that educational activities have to be carried out online (Osman, 2020). Such an offline-to-online transformation posed challenges particularly in terms of technological competence and facilities, which potentially hinder the sustainability of online educational activities. For instance, in terms of online learning implementation in Indonesian universities, Pramana et al. (2020) highlighted that the most preferred platform is WhatsApp application as it is the simplest social media application and that weak internet signals most often hamper learning effectiveness. Their study exposed that technological competence and facilities become the cores of online learning problems; similar problems were also found in Efriana's (2021) study.

Regardless of the COVID-19 issue, there have been many studies across different levels of educational institutions in various countries which addressed the foci related to the problems of online learning, e-learning, distant learning, and the like, but no studies worked on the issue of online thesis supervision. For instance, a study conducted by Huang et al. (2019) depicted online learning problems in terms of teachers' roles. Teachers' cognitive, affective, and managerial positions were not perceived as expected by students. A study conducted by Gómez-Rey et al. (2016) portrayed online learning problems regarding conflicting expectations between teachers and students. A study undertaken by Martin et al. (2018) echoed the importance of teachers' active responses to help solve online learning problems. Also, Barclay et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of technological facilities and technological competence as the determinants to cope with online learning problems.

In the context of universities, prior studies regarding problems and challenges in online educational activities missed to address those concerning online thesis supervision. The existing studies on the issues of thesis supervision have thus far been done in the context of offline mode. For example, Ortiz-Catalan et al.'s (2019) study revealed that the insufficient availability of supervision time and the structural efficiency of supervision become the challenges in thesis supervision. Furthermore, Agricola et al. (2020) emphasized that unclear interventions and complete control of thesis supervisors lead to students' negative perceptions of thesis supervision. Similarly, Almeatani et al.'s (2019) study indicated that the distance between thesis supervisors and students affects the effectiveness of interactions during thesis supervision.

Our study was driven by the global and national phenomenon of the COVID-19 impacting on the offline-to-online transformation and was aimed to fill the gaps in the literature concerning studies on online thesis supervision. To

specify, it seeks to address the challenges of online EFL undergraduate thesis supervision and the solutions offered by EFL lecturer supervisors. Since EFL undergraduate thesis writing is complex, we also replicate previous studies' investigations into students' problems of academic writing competencies and the related solutions according to the supervisors' perspectives to initiate our inquiry into the problems of online thesis supervision and the solutions. We limit the scope of our investigation to the context of EFL undergraduate theses. The following are our research questions, which were investigated from thesis supervisors' perspectives.

1. What are the problems faced by EFL undergraduate students in terms of academic writing competencies?
2. What are the challenges faced during online thesis supervision?
3. What solutions are offered to help students cope with problems related to academic writing competencies?
4. What solutions are offered to deal with the challenges in online thesis supervision?

EFL Undergraduate Thesis Supervision

EFL undergraduate thesis is a part of the academic writing genre in which the work should be research-based. It addresses issues or variables in the discourses of EFL education and linguistics. As a part of the academic writing genre, a thesis represents interactive communication between the writer and readers. The writer discusses a problem in detail based on data to provide valid information to the readers (Çandarlı et al., 2015). The academic writing genre is challenging to master because the stages necessitate intellectual activities and writing competencies, such as brainstorming ideas, planning, sketching conceptual frameworks, writing drafts, correcting, and revising (Kiriakos & Tienari, 2018).

To complete their thesis as expected, students need to be committed and enthusiastic about their fields of studies and they must receive effective thesis supervision (Teklesellassie, 2019). Thesis supervision is a collaborative, interactive, and complex relationship between supervisors and students, which involves emotional and cognitive dimensions to guide students to complete their theses (Zhang & Hyland, 2021). According to Strebel et al. (2021), the relationship between students and supervisors has two dimensions: the first is concerned with providing instructions and writing guidelines, and the second focuses on research content.

Challenges and Coping Strategies in Thesis Supervision

Different aspects, such as supervision processes, lecturers, and students, all contribute to challenges or problems in thesis supervision. In terms of the processes, challenges are usually related to insufficient time of supervision, the poorly-managed supervision system, the supervision processes which do not match students' expectations, and the inadequate facilities of interactions between supervisors and students (Agricola et al., 2020; Almeatani et al., 2019; Ortiz-Catalan et al., 2019). In the aspect of supervisors, challenges or problems are usually associated with the inappropriateness of supervisors' roles and supervising styles (Agricola et al., 2020; Casado-Lumbreras & Colomo-Palacios, 2014). Finally, in the aspect of students, thesis supervision challenges are generally connected with the low level of students' foreign language skills as a tool to access international sources, weak academic writing knowledge and skills, and low self-efficacy in academic writing skills (Casado-Lumbreras & Colomo-Palacios, 2014; Malaga-Toboła et al., 2019).

These challenges, by nature, call for supervisors' coping strategies. According to Casado-Lumbreras and Colomo-Palacios (2014), the supervisors' role in changing students' negative attitudes toward thesis supervision processes into positive ones is critical to the successful continuity of supervision. Also, supervisors must be skilled at implementing various academic and non-academic strategies to assist students in thesis supervision. Casado-Lumbreras and Colomo-Palacios (2014) further described several methods that supervisors use to facilitate and assist students in thesis supervision. Among these strategies are fostering students' active attitudes towards thesis supervision, such as decision making, responsibility, and autonomy; managing supervision time and planning the execution of thesis supervision effectively; stimulating students' motivation and mental block management; reducing students' negative emotions; guiding students in the selection of research topics; and assisting students who have difficulty identifying and developing their theses. Subsequently, the issues such as limited supervision time and the incompatibility of schedules between supervisors and students prompted researchers, such as Almeatani et al. (2019), to create information systems for managing the thesis supervision processes.

METHOD

The present study applied mixed-method research, specifically the explanatory sequential design to answer the formulated research questions. This design guided the researchers to scientifically work from quantitative to

qualitative natures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, a survey was carried out to answer the first research question addressing the problems faced by EFL undergraduate students in terms of academic writing competencies according to the supervisors' perspectives. Subsequently, the first research question was also investigated qualitatively. Concerning the second, third, and fourth research questions oriented towards the challenges in online thesis supervision, the solutions to cope with students' problems of academic writing competencies, and the challenges in online thesis supervision, we considered investigating the complexities and the depth of data in a qualitative way.

Participants

Fifty EFL lecturers from various universities located in Central Java and Papua Provinces were recruited using a convenience sampling technique. The demographic information of the survey's samples is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic information of the survey's samples

Indicators	Criteria	Number	%
Gender	Male	19	38
	Female	31	62
Educational Institutions	UIN	2	4
	UMS	2	4
	UNCEN	5	10
	UNDIP	4	8
	UNMUS	13	26
	UNNES	4	8
	UNS	16	32
	UPGRIS	4	8
Disciplines	EFL Literature	25	50
	EFL Education	25	50
Supervising experiences	< 5 years	5	10
	> 5-10 years	8	16
	> 10-15 years	5	10
	> 15 years	32	64
Academic Rank	Lecturer	18	36
	Senior Lecturer	25	50
	Assoc. Professor	7	14

We adopted a purposive sampling technique to select the participants for the qualitative investigations. To this end, we assigned some criteria of purposive sampling. First, the participants were lecturers with adequate experience in thesis supervision for EFL undergraduate students. Second, the participants were easily accessed via online communication. Third, the participants were voluntarily willing to take part in this study. Out of the 50 EFL lecturers, 23 lecturers met the aforementioned purposive sampling criteria. Thus, the qualitative investigations involved 23 lecturers as the participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

The survey on EFL undergraduate students' problems of academic writing competencies deployed questionnaires adopted from the valid and reliable instruments used in the previous studies conducted by Razi (2015), Roberts and Seaman (2018), and Cennetkuşu (2017). The questionnaires negotiated two components of academic writing problems, which comprised competencies related to the elements of thesis and scholarly writing performances. Subsequently, the qualitative investigations involved in-depth interviews to pursue detailed and contextual data concerning the thesis supervisors' perspectives on the problems of students' academic writing competencies and the challenges in online thesis supervision. Finally, we conducted focused group discussions (FGDs) with the participants to reveal the data regarding the solutions to the aforementioned problems and challenges.

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The qualitative data were analyzed using an interactive model as Miles et al. (2014) recommended. Drawing upon this model, we carried out four elements of analysis which entailed data collection, data condensation, data display, and drawing a conclusion. As already explained, the qualitative data collection was conducted using in-depth interviews and FGDs, whereas the data condensation in this present study refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and abstracting the data that appear in the corpus of interview transcript dan FGD. Regarding data display, the data were presented systematically based on their themes, which was followed by data discussion and our scientific interpretations to make meaning of the data. Concerning data conclusion, the data findings, discussions, and interpretations were resumed comprehensively to generate a representative conclusion.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Quantitative Findings

The first stage we took in this study was to conduct a survey by engaging 50 thesis supervisors of EFL education and literature concerning their perspectives on the problems of students' academic writing competencies during thesis supervision, with this survey's data answering the first research question. See Table 2 for the survey results.

Table 2. Survey results concerning supervisors' perspectives on students' problems related to academic writing competencies

Aspects	Indicators	Percentage	Numbers of supervisors
Competencies related to thesis elements	Difficulties in writing the research introduction	32%	16
	Difficulties in writing the literature review	18%	9
	Difficulties in writing the research method	18%	9
	Difficulties in writing research results or findings	10%	5
	Difficulties in writing the data discussion	10%	5
	Difficulties in writing conclusion and suggestions	8%	4
	Difficulties in writing references	4%	2
	Total	100%	50
Writing Performances	Difficulties in writing organizations	40%	20
	Difficulties related to English use in a written mode	28%	14
	Difficulties related to citations	18%	9

Aspects	Indicators	Percentage	Numbers of supervisors
	Difficulties related to mechanics	14%	7
	Total	100%	50

Table 2 showcases that EFL undergraduate students faced all problems negotiated according to the supervisors' perspectives. Concerning the competencies related to thesis elements, all indicators negotiated were agreed upon by the supervisors in different percentages. In descending order, the problems ranged from writing the research introduction (32%), literature review (18%), research method (18%), research results or findings (10%), discussion (10%), conclusion (8%), and references (4%). Regarding writing performances, students' problems, according to the supervisors, encompassed difficulties in writing organizations (40%), English use (28%), citing references (18%), and using mechanics (14%).

Qualitative Findings

We continued our study to qualitatively answer all four research questions addressing supervisors' perspectives on students' problems of academic writing competencies, the challenges in online thesis supervision, and the solutions to the problems and difficulties. The qualitative answer to the first research question can triangulate or confirm the quantitative answer to the research question.

Supervisors' Perspectives on the Problems of Students' Academic Writing Competencies

Regarding the first research question, associated with the supervisors' perspectives on the problems of students' academic writing competencies, the interview data were aligned with the survey's data. As a result, there were several themes coded to represent students' problems of academic writing competencies according to the supervisors' perspectives. The emerging themes in the interview data can be viewed in Table 3. Following Table 3, comprehensive elaborations are given alongside some selected interview transcripts to represent others that addressed similar data.

Table 3. Coded data of interviews concerning supervisors' perspectives on students' problems in academic writing competencies

Aspects	Indicators	Coded themes of the problems
EFL undergraduate thesis elements	Introduction	Difficulty in positioning the research foci
	Literature review	Less proficient in arguing previous theories or findings related to research variables or issues
		Insufficient efforts to read references
	Method	Ineffective organizations of thoughts in explaining the research method
	Research results or findings	Lack of understanding related to data presentation based on the adopted techniques of data analyses
	Data discussion	Just re-explaining the data presentation
		Misdirection in comparing the current findings with previous findings
		Less proficient in explaining the meanings of research findings
Conclusion and suggestions	No significant problems were identified because students sufficiently understood how to summarize conclusions and to propose research suggestions	
References	No significant problems were identified due to the availability of tools for citing references	
Writing performances	Writing organization	Low abilities to organize written ideas
		Not making an outline before writing
		Lack of abilities to construct written ideas
		Lack of knowledge about academic writing
	English use	Difficulties in using academic English words

Aspects	Indicators	Coded themes of the problems
		Difficulties in using collocations related to academic English words
		Few uses of complex grammatical constructions
	Citations	No significant problems were detected because students were aided by citing tools
	Mechanics	No significant problems were detected because students were aided by spelling and grammar check tools

As displayed in Table 3, related to the introduction section, most of the supervisors perceived that their students had difficulties positioning the research foci. This condition is depicted in the following interview transcript.

According to what I perceived, my students do not systematically convey the flow of ideas in the introduction, do not explain why the object needs to be studied, and do not explain the research novelty, gaps, and differences from previous research. Similarly, preliminary research is frequently not documented because the proposed research is still based on mere assumptions (Supervisor 15).

The section of the literature review also posed challenges for students. As codified, the supervisors demonstrated that their students were less proficient in arguing previous theories or findings related to their research variables or issues. This condition is portrayed in the following interview transcript.

My students are prone to making mistakes when referring to theories about variables. For example, I frequently meet students who raise scientific approach issues in their research, but they use the theories of communicative approaches in their arguments. In such a way, their theoretical arguments do not conform to the actual intentions. Instead, they should argue the scientific approach issues using theories related to constructivism and socio-culturalism (Supervisor 13).

According to the supervisors' perspectives, the other problem on writing literature reviews was that their students made insufficient efforts to read references as indicated in the following interview transcript.

My students' theoretical argumentations in the literature review are severely limited due to a lack of reading references. Also, reading vague references can lead them to adopt incorrect theories to argue in the literature review (Supervisor 7).

Regarding the research method section, the supervisors found that their students provided ineffective organizations of thoughts in explaining the research method as shown in the following interview transcript.

My students frequently write down general research methods without regard for consistency with the research problems or objectives, whether they are related to the research design, research objects, data sources, data collection techniques, or data analysis methods. On average, my students lack sufficient knowledge (Supervisor 18).

Concerning the section of results or findings, the supervisors perceived that their students frequently lacked understanding of presenting research data based on the adopted techniques of data analyses. This condition is illustrated in the following interview transcript.

When viewed through the lens of the analysis techniques they use, I frequently find that my students mistakenly organize their data presentation. For example, interactive model analysis is usually used in qualitative research methods, with one element known as reduction, condensation, codification, or data mapping. However, I frequently see my students present raw data in their research reports without mapping representative themes to ensure that the data presented is properly structured (Supervisor 11).

Concerning the elements of conclusion, suggestion and references, the supervisors did not perceive any significant problems with their students' writings because they felt the students had sufficiently understood how to summarize the findings and propose research suggestions. Also, their students already got help due to the available tools for citing references. The following interview transcripts represent this.

Most of my students already understand how to draw conclusions correctly and propose recommendations for further studies (Supervisor 11). Likewise, my students have no trouble writing references because they already have tools like *Mendeley*, *Zotero*, and the like (Supervisor 1).

We negotiated four indicators with the supervisors in terms of academic writing performance that include writing organization, English use, citations, and mechanics. Regarding the writing organizations, the supervisors perceived that some of their students had low abilities to organize written ideas as illustrated in the following interview transcript.

Some of my students struggle to develop a coherent and cohesive writing organization. For example, the logic of thoughts outlined in sentences or paragraphs

was not coherent. Similarly, their use of cohesive devices to support coherent sentences or paragraphs is not appropriate (Supervisor 20).

The supervisors also demonstrated that some of their students did not make an outline for their writing, so they found it challenging to organize ideas for the essay. This point is depicted in the following interview transcript.

Some of my students frequently fail to create an outline in their writing organization, resulting in an unorganized flow of ideas and information (jumping up and down). For example, a single paragraph may contain more than one topic or only one sentence (Supervisor 10).

According to the supervisors, some of their students also had low abilities to construct written ideas with the following interview transcript portraying the case.

My students frequently merely quote references without paraphrasing or simply copying the rhetorical forms of original sources. Thus, they do not demonstrate their abilities to reconstruct their written ideas using their own English (Supervisor 6).

Another case perceived by the supervisors was that some of their students lacked knowledge about academic writing. The aforesaid condition is depicted in the following interview transcript.

Some of my students appear to lack knowledge about academic writing; grammar is regarded as unimportant; and there is a lack of practice, a lack of reading, and a lack of guidance (Supervisor 8).

In association with the English use in academic writing, the supervisors emphasized that their students had difficulties using academic English words, collocations related to academic English terms, and complex grammatical constructions. These cases are demonstrated in the following interview transcripts.

I frequently discover that my students still struggle with using academic vocabulary, so their writing styles are likely to be neutral and sometimes informal (Supervisor 4)

Many of my students are still unable to use academic English vocabularies or phrases based on the correct collocations, for example, in the case of word pairs such as *pertinent to*, *in light of*, *in association with*, *with respect to*, *take account of*, *grounded in*, and so on (Supervisor 19)

Some students appear to avoid sentences with a high level of grammatical complexity. It is demonstrated by their writing style, which employs simple sentences to avoid grammatical errors (Supervisor 16).

Regarding the citations and mechanics, the supervisors perceived no significant problems faced by students because the students were aided by citing tools and spelling and grammar check tools. These cases are demonstrated in the following interview transcripts.

In writing citations of references, my students usually use applications, such as *Mendeley* and *Zotero*, to ensure that they do not have formatting issues (Supervisor 21).

My students have no problems with mechanics because the computer tools they use make spelling and formatting easier. In addition, the template for the proposal format used in the institution has aided them (Supervisor 12).

The above interview data had a great extent of similar discourses to the previous survey's data, providing more details of all points revealed in the survey's data. We therefore could confirm that the data of the interviews verified the survey's data.

The Challenges Faced during Online Thesis Supervision

The interviews we conducted proceeded to answer the second research question oriented towards the challenges perceived by supervisors during online thesis supervision. A couple of themes were coded from the interview data regarding this issue (see Table 4).

Table 4. Challenges faced during online thesis supervision

No	Challenges
1	Still in the process of getting used to the transformation of thesis supervision from an offline mode to an online mode
2	Somewhat ineffective communication between the supervisors and students
3	Lack of time available to always access online media
4	Getting hampered in the process of collecting field data
5	Decrease in students' motivation
6	Trouble in internet signal

Table 4 presents six challenges perceived by EFL lecturer supervisors during online thesis supervision. The first challenge was that some of the

supervisors were still in the process of getting used to the offline-to-online transformation of thesis supervision as maintained by Supervisor 14 below.

I often forget to open emails from the students under my thesis supervision (Supervisor 14).

The second challenge encountered was that the communication between the supervisors and students during online thesis supervision was somewhat ineffective. For example, Supervisor 17 said as follows.

My students and I frequently struggle with the mode of communication. My students did not contact me right away to discuss their issues. There are two possible explanations. First, this could be due to students' decreased enthusiasm and seriousness. Second, this may be due to the limitations of online communication systems (Supervisor 17).

The third challenge codified from the supervisors' perspectives was that the supervisors sometimes lacked time to access online media for conducting online thesis supervision as illustrated below.

I don't always have time to be active in front of my laptop to guide or correct my students' thesis online, especially when it comes to the time outside of campus activities, which are, of course, packed with other agendas (Supervisor 2).

The fourth challenge perceived by supervisors was that some of their students got hampered in the process of collecting data in the field as informed by Supervisor 5 in the following.

According to what I perceived, the challenge among my students is that they have already set to conduct studies in the field, particularly at schools, before the COVID-19 attack. The continuation of the data collection processes was further hampered after the COVID-19 outbreak hit Indonesia because the access to schools was very limited, and the mode of learning in schools was also transformed to an online mode (Supervisor 5).

For the fifth challenge, the supervisors felt that some of their students experienced a decrease in motivation. For example, Supervisor 23 said the following.

The main challenge is that my students' motivation and persistence in completing their thesis seem to have decreased since the thesis supervision mode was conducted online (Supervisor 23).

Concerning the sixth challenge, the supervisors felt that the trouble in internet signals hindered the continuity of online thesis supervision as expected. To represent others, Supervisor 15 said the following.

Sometimes, students are hampered by the internet network, causing the processes of online thesis supervision to be problematic (Supervisor 15).

The six challenges of online thesis supervision as presented above represent the supervisors' perspectives. These challenges showcased the challenges on the part of both supervisors and students in terms of online thesis supervision.

Supervisors' Solutions to Help Students Cope with Problems Related to Academic Writing Competencies

To investigate issues appertaining to the solutions offered by the lecturer supervisors to help solve students' academic writing-related problems, we engaged the supervisors in focused group discussions (FGDs) conducted online via Zoom meeting. A couple of themes were coded from the FGDs' data regarding this issue (see Table 5).

Table 5. Solutions Offered by the Supervisors to Help Students Cope with Problems Related to Academic Writing Competencies

No	Solutions Offered
1	Suggesting students read a lot of references to find research gaps
2	Creating research matrixes
3	Providing references and examples
4	Guiding students in detail

As displayed in Table 5, the first solution offered by the supervisors to help students deal with their problems of academic writing competencies was to suggest students read a lot of references to find research gaps, which is demonstrated by Supervisor 6 as follows.

To overcome problems with academic writing competencies, I encourage students to read as many of the most recent research journals as possible to discover the most recent ideas and issues. Reading research journals can also assist students in identifying research gaps (Supervisor 6).

The second solution offered by supervisors was to create research matrixes as illustrated in the following.

I asked students to create a matrix of the article review results. As a result, they will be able to identify the differences and similarities between the topics they are currently discussing and similar topics that have previously been studied. Students will find it easier to map out the related theories they require when writing a thesis if they create a matrix (Supervisor 21).

The third solution was to provide references and examples as informed by Supervisor 12 below.

During the thesis supervision processes, I usually provide students with similar research references or relevant examples (supervisor 12).

The fourth solution was to guide students in detail as maintained by Supervisor 18 as follows.

In order for my students to have materials to explore, I direct and guide them to read journal articles on specific topics or issues related to their research topic. This way is constructive, and the students can write well after being guided (Supervisor 18).

The four solutions offered by supervisors above depicted their active responses and serious engagement in making efforts to help students cope with their problems related to academic writing competencies.

The Solutions Offered by the Supervisors to the Challenges in Online Thesis Supervision

FGDs were continuously undertaken to answer the fourth research question in respect of the solutions offered by supervisors towards the challenges in online thesis supervision. There were a couple of themes coded from the raw data, as displayed in Table 6.

Table 6. Solutions to challenges in online thesis supervision

No.	Solutions Offered by Supervisors
1	Asking students to remind the supervisors of the online supervision schedule
2	Making active use of communication technology
3	Helping students to interact with the authorized parties of students' research objects
4	Shifting the orientation of students' research data collection

As displayed in Table 6, the first solution was to ask students to remind the supervisors of the online supervision schedule as maintained by Supervisor 19 as follows.

I frequently ask the students under my thesis supervision to remind me of the online supervision schedule because I often forget the schedule due to the instant transition of thesis supervision from a face-to-face mode to an online mode (Supervisor 19).

The second solution was to make active use of communication technology as offered by Supervisors 6, 8, and 1 in the following.

I try to take advantage of ICT resources that I can use as a communication medium for online thesis supervision, such as making video calls using the Zoom application, Google Meet, or WA (Supervisor 6).

To address this, I gather all of my students on a regular basis (usually once a month) to meet classically via Zoom. During the meeting, I inquire to find out what they have accomplished thus far in this month and what their goals are for the coming month. In this way, they can learn from one another and eventually develop motivation to complete their thesis as soon as possible (Supervisor 8).

I record my suggestions and comments on my students' theses and then send my voice records to them. Corrections to students' thesis drafts using track changes in Microsoft Word do not satisfy me, so I have to send additional information and comments to students' theses via recording (Supervisor 1).

The third solution offered by supervisors was to help students interact with the authorized parties around the students' research objects. Supervisor 22 said as follows.

I instructed my students from the start to find data sources that would not be difficult for them to access. In addition, for those who have already been unable to change the subjects of their research, I assist students in communicating with the schools where the students are going to conduct their research, both personally and institutionally, so that the schools can facilitate my students in the processes of collecting research data (Supervisor 22).

The fourth solution offered was to shift the orientation of students' research data collection. It is shown in the information shared by Supervisor 17 as follows.

I tell my students to collect data that are not too difficult for them. Typically, I offer them the opportunity to collect data in my classes. Alternatively, I suggest that they collect data from schools whose teachers I know so that I can assist students in informing those teachers that my students will be collecting research data in their classrooms (supervisor 17).

The solutions offered by the supervisors above appear to conform to the existing online thesis supervision challenges already investigated in the second section of research findings.

Discussion

The present study was oriented towards revealing EFL undergraduate students' problems of academic writing competencies, the challenges of online thesis supervision, and the solutions to the aforementioned problems and challenges. The findings are further discussed as follows.

The first set of the current study's findings depicted that the thesis supervisors (50 respondents) showed their perceived agreement on their students' problems of academic writing competencies according to the negotiated indicators. These indicators represented the students' problems in thesis elements and writing performances. The survey results were confirmed by the interview results. Our interviews revealed the perspectives of 23 of the supervisors on their students' problems of academic writing competencies. In terms of competencies related to thesis elements, the supervisors perceived that many of their students had difficulties in positioning the research foci, were less proficient in arguing previous theories or findings related to research variables or issues, made insufficient efforts to read references, made ineffective organizations of thoughts in explaining the research method, lacked understanding of data presentation based on the adopted techniques of data analyses, just re-explained their data presentation, were misdirected in comparing the current findings with previous findings and were less proficient in explaining the meanings of research findings. Concerning the writing performances, the supervisors perceived that many of their students had low abilities to organize written ideas, did not make outlines before writing their theses, lacked abilities to construct written ideas, lacked knowledge about academic writing, had difficulties in using academic English words, had difficulties in using collocations of academic English words, and used only few complex grammatical constructions.

Some of the undergraduate thesis problems encountered in the current study had also been revealed in the previous studies across different levels of education. For example, Peng (2018) investigated common issues in Chinese EFL graduate students' theses and dissertations and revealed that the supervisors identified students' problems, such as incapability to integrate and generalize theories and construct students' conceptual framework in their research reports. Their students lacked adequate English skills as well. In addition, they

discovered numerous English grammar errors or non-standard vocabularies used in students' works. Such findings were echoed in Shahsavari and Kourepaz's (2020) research on students' problems in writing the literature review section. According to their findings, most of their student participants, including those deemed competent, were unable to synthesize, critically argue, or ideally elaborate related literature in their writings. They primarily focused on summarizing and interpreting the prior findings or related theories. In the same line, Sadeghi and Khajepasha (2015) examined 60 theses written by master's students of English Education from three Iranian universities and analyzed students' obstacles associated with academic writing. Their findings revealed that students had a variety of issues with English, writing style, the presentation of content, and research methodology design.

Construing the highlighted studies above, it could be interpreted that the core problems found in the current study as the representation of EFL undergraduate students' context are not significantly different from the core problems revealed in the highlighted studies, whose contexts are associated with EFL postgraduate students. It could be emphasized that the complexities of discourse, genres, ideational organization, and English use in thesis writing (Kiriakos & Tienari, 2018) likely entrap students into various difficulties in both competencies related to thesis elements and writing performances. On the part of students, a couple of studies in the field of writing recommended that students should learn to increase their writing metacognition as a problem-solving strategy (see Briesmaster, 2017; Pitnoee & Modaberi, 2017)). Along with improving students' writing metacognition, other studies also suggested that students find ways to enhance their motivational variables, such as writing growth mindsets (Bai & Wang, 2020) and writing self-efficacy (Vincent et al., 2021). However, to acquire sufficient writing metacognition, self-efficacy, and growth mindsets, students, at some point, require external help from supervisors as empowerment providers.

The second set of the present study's findings addressed the challenges of online thesis supervision according to the supervisors' perspectives. To be noted, this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this discourse, first, this study revealed that some of the supervisors were still in the process of getting used to the offline-to-online transformation of thesis supervision. Second, the communication between the supervisors and students during online thesis supervision was somewhat ineffective. Online thesis supervision, which was technological, brought about its complexities compared to the face-to-face mode the supervisors were already used to. Similar to online learning, the

offline-to-online transformation of thesis supervision could lead to ineffective interactions if technological competencies and facilities were not fulfilled (Barclay et al., 2018). As a result, inefficient interactions could lead to the insufficient fulfillment of students' expectations and raise students' negative perceptions of the supervisors (Agricola et al., 2020). Third, supervisors sometimes lacked time to always access online media for conducting online thesis supervision. This was similar to Ortiz-Catalan's et al.'s (2019) study demonstrating that one of the reasons for poor quality theses is the insufficient time for supervision. Another cause is the lack of efficient patterns underlying the thesis supervision processes. Fourth, the supervisors said that some of their students got hampered in collecting data in the field. The challenge occurred because some of their students had already set to conduct field-based research before the COVID-19 pandemic hit Indonesia. In the midst of students' preparing for data collection, the pandemic suddenly struck affecting the overall students' research plan. Fifth, the supervisors felt that some of their students experienced a decrease in motivation that could be caused by the ineffective establishment of interactions due to offline-to-online transformation of thesis supervision. Such a situation also occurred in the work of Almeatani et al. (2019) in which they further proposed to design a portable mobile application to support effective supervising interactions. Sixth, unstable internet signals hindered the continuity of online thesis supervision as expected. This case has been echoed in Pramana et al. (2020) study on online learning in the Indonesian context, in which the instability of internet signals oftentimes hinders the learning continuity. Learning from the literature, we argue that internet signals seem to also be part of the core problems of online learning and thesis supervision throughout educational institutions in Indonesia.

The third set of the current study's findings was oriented towards the supervisors' solutions to students' problems of academic writing competencies. The supervisors who participated in our study offered a number of solutions, such as, that students should read many relevant references to find research gaps and they should create research matrixes. The supervisors themselves need to provide references and examples, and guide the students during the writing processes. These solutions were relevant to the problems highlighted in the first set of our findings. Also, these solutions echoed previous studies' propositions to help students cope with academic writing problems. For instance, suggesting students to read many references to find research gaps represents the supervisors' effort to improve one constituent of students' metacognitive knowledge that Chen and Hapgood (2021) called declarative knowledge. In addition, creating

research matrixes portrayed supervisors' efforts to improve students' writing metacognitive strategies (Pitenoe & Modaberi, 2017). Finally, providing references and examples depicted the supervisors' effort to provide students with growth mindset input (Truax, 2018). In such a way, once students had adequate growth mindsets, they would likely be confident in applying various writing metacognitive strategies to enhance students' writing self-efficacy which are potential factors to solve students' problems in academic writing (Briesmaster, 2017). Subsequently, providing a detailed guidance also indicated the supervisors' effort to boost students' writing self-efficacy. As delineated by Callinan et al. (2018), detailed care during supervision, for instance, affording to use different approaches to students' written works based on students' diverse levels and needs, might increase the students' writing self-efficacy.

The fourth set of the present study's findings addressed the solutions offered by supervisors to the challenges in online thesis supervision. Resting upon the previous challenges highlighted in the second set of this study's data, the supervisors proposed some solutions, such as, asking students to send a reminder to their supervisors whenever necessary, making active use of communication technology to build up effective interactions, improving students' motivation, helping students overcome the internet issue, generating effective time management during supervision, and lastly, helping them interact with the authorized parties of students' research objects as well as shifting the orientation of students' research data collection whenever needed. The supervisors' solutions are to some extent in line with Casado-Lumbreras and Colomo-Palacios' (2014) study. Their study described several strategies the supervisors used, such as fostering students' active attitudes, managing supervision time and planning the execution of thesis supervision effectively, stimulating students' motivation, stimulating students' mental block management, reducing students' negative emotions, and assisting students who have difficulty identifying and developing their theses. Furthermore, issues such as limited supervision time and the incompatibility of schedules between supervisors and students prompted researchers, such as Almeatani et al. (2019), to create information systems for managing the thesis supervision processes.

This study has successfully portrayed students' problems of academic writing competencies according to the supervisors' perspectives, challenges in online thesis supervision, and the solutions to such problems and challenges. As an implication, information of such problems, challenges, and related solutions could be used as vicarious experiences by other related academicians, educators,

and thesis supervisors in efforts to reflect on, anticipate and solve similar problems and challenges related to thesis supervision (Bandura, 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

Grounded in the application of a mixed-method study, a variety of students' problems of academic writing competencies, challenges in online thesis supervision, and the solutions to the aforesaid problems and challenges were uncovered from the perspectives of thesis supervisors affiliated with universities in Central Java and Papua. Taken together, the findings of our study contribute to the body of literature by highlighting the roles of metacognition, self-efficacy, and growth mindset as the conceivably contributive variables, which thesis supervisors can deliberately embed to boost students' academic writing competencies. Thus, further studies are expected to work on mixed-method investigations with the quantitative data examining the interplay of aforesaid variables as the predictors of academic writing competencies. Meanwhile, the qualitative one should further investigate similar issues but incorporating more participants from various provinces in Indonesia. Such studies are theoretically beneficial for the development of academic writing scholarship, and practically useful in solving the on-going student-supervisor problems pertaining to online thesis supervision in Indonesian contexts. Given that the literature in the Indonesian context is still scarce, this void lies as an opportunity to carry out in-depth scientific inquiries.

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