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Unpacking the Struggle: Linguistic, Pedagogical, and Cognitive Barriers in Cambodian Students' English Essay Writing

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Abstract: Within the context of Cambodia's expanding integration into the global economy and the increasing emphasis on English proficiency in its educational programs, the objective of this literature review is to investigate the numerous obstacles that Cambodian students encounter when composing English essays. The research reveals a significant deficiency in current knowledge, despite the growing importance of English language acquisition, specifically a lack of synthesis regarding the linguistic, pedagogical, and cognitive-affective obstacles that impede the academic writing development of Cambodian students. The review employs a theme synthesis approach to assess the intricacies of language and syntax, instructional strategies, and student psychology by analyzing peer-reviewed publications, theses, and regional reports published between 2000 and 2024. The results indicate that Cambodian students typically face a combination of challenges, including limited vocabulary usage, ineffective writing instruction, low self-efficacy, and grammatical errors, which collectively contribute to subpar academic writing projects. Systemic issues include resource constraints, inadequate teacher preparation in writing pedagogy, and culturally ingrained learning attitudes that prevent critical expression, aggravating these problems. Completing the research are culturally relevant resources, action-oriented research that might guide future initiatives, and context-sensitive recommendations for teachers, curriculum designers, legislators, and academics wishing to support process-based education.

Keywords: English essay writing; language obstacles; writing pedagogy; educational reform; process-based teaching; Cambodia EFL learners

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I. Introduction

Following decades of war and political upheaval, Cambodia has seen a significant overhaul in its educational system. Beginning in the early 1990s, post-conflict educational reforms primarily focused on rebuilding human capital and aligning with global development frameworks, particularly those related to ASEAN integration and the Sustainable Development Goals. English language learning has been identified as the primary driver of socioeconomic advancement by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport. (MoEYS, 2019), especially in the Education Strategic Plan 2019–2023, which notes communicative English competency as essential for national competitiveness and global engagement. Scholars like Clayton (2006) contend that Cambodia's shift from French to English as the primary foreign language reveals not only a changing diplomatic landscape but also an apparent attempt to align with regional trends and global markets. According to Neau (2003), post-UNTAC educational partnerships, NGOs, and foreign donors also promoted English to become the language of upward mobility and modernism. More broadly, English essay writing is becoming even more vital. Essay writing assesses students' higher-order thinking, academic maturity, and linguistic competence, as claimed by writers Liu (2017) and Renandya and Widodo (2016). Apart from being a tool of evaluation, it also provides a platform for intellectual expression and engagement in global academic discourse. Mastery of organized essay writing determines both academic and professional achievement; so, in university admissions, scholarship applications, and regional assessments, knowledge in this field is indispensable. (Moore & Bounchan, 2020). Students continue to struggle with academic writing, despite the college's emphasis on English proficiency. According to the literature, writing is considered the most challenging of the four language skills, especially for EFL students, as it requires simultaneous control of syntax, vocabulary, content organization, and audience awareness. (Hyland, 2019). These needs are particularly challenging in countries like Cambodia, where teaching approaches remain largely conventional and test-driven, and English exposure is typically limited to classroom environments. (Huot & Em, 2024; Igawa, 2008).

Although numerous studies on English language education in Cambodia have been published, the authors note that few comprehensive studies specifically address the challenges Cambodian students face when writing English essays. Much of the research done thus far has concentrated on grammatical or lexical errors without considering the educational and cognitive processes that influence student performance. For example, Rahman (2022) and Saputra (2023) offer a perceptive examination of grammatical and verb tense errors in student writing; nonetheless, they do not address how instructional tactics or writing anxiety could either support or worsen these tendencies. According to Oeun and Heng (2025), memorizing and translating, rather than teaching writing as a recursive and rhetorical process, dominate writing instruction in Cambodian secondary schools. This instructional environment clarifies why students lack confidence and cannot correctly arrange, produce, and edit academic materials when combined with poor instructor preparation. Furthermore, a contextualized knowledge of writing that fits the educational setting of Cambodia. As Moore and Bounchan (2020) argue, postcolonial history, resource inequities, and

curriculum-policy mismatches define the Cambodian educational system. Sometimes, these structural issues intersect with classroom Reality to create environments that discourage writing development. Regional patterns also highlight the growing scholarly interest in Southeast Asian EFL issues. Academic writing in Vietnam and Thailand faces similar challenges, according to Nguyen (2021) and Wiriyachitra (2002), including inadequate teacher preparation and a process-based approach to instruction. Combining and localizing outcomes that can drive national efforts for writing instruction becomes essential as regional integration develops and educational standards converge throughout ASEAN.

This intellectual exercise is thus pertinent and necessary. It offers a comprehensive synthesis of regional and Cambodian literature, organizing results into subject areas that help highlight the range and complexity of writing problems faced by EFL students from Cambodia. The present study aims to analyze the several challenges Cambodian students have while writing English essays, with an eye toward how these challenges show at the secondary and tertiary levels. The first objective is to classify the three main areas of difficulty found in the literature: cognitive-affective constraints (e.g., low self-efficacy, lack of metacognitive strategies); pedagogical gaps (e.g., outdated instructional methods, limited teacher feedback); and linguistic barriers (e.g., grammatical errors, vocabulary limitations). These categories complement the frameworks proposed by Hyland (2019) and Thomas and Harden (2008), which emphasize the need for theme synthesis in addressing complex educational challenges. Second, the evaluation of these challenges for students' academic development is based on their impact on students' academic development. Studies continue to reveal that students who struggle with writing are less likely to participate in academic discourse, less prepared for further education, and more likely to drop out of the classroom. (Boy & Water, 2023; Renandya & Widodo, 2016). The third objective is to propose educational and policy-based strategies grounded in local conditions.

Through mapping challenges to the current educational system, the study aims to offer pragmatic recommendations for teacher training, curriculum modification, and student-centered pedagogical methods. With an emphasis on empirical studies released between 2000 and 2024, the review covers secondary and tertiary students from Cambodia. Comparative observations from surrounding Southeast Asian countries help to place Cambodian outcomes within a broader context of EFL writing concerns. This intellectual endeavor advances the field in four main areas. First, it offers a disciplined and comprehensive analysis of English essay writing difficulties, therefore filling a significant void in Cambodian ELT literature. Most earlier studies have been narrowly focused, primarily limited to classroom-based error analysis, without considering instructional or psychological aspects. Second, the research offers policymakers and educators contextually based recommendations for enhancing writing education. As Oeun and Heng (2025) and Moore and Bounchan (2020) highlight, interventionists need to be sensitive to Cambodia's educational Reality, including classroom size, teacher workloads, and cultural attitudes toward language acquisition. To support evidence-based transformation, this study compiles best practices from both local and global environments. Third, this study aligns with national

and international education policy objectives, particularly about the Ministry of Education's commitment to raise the standard of learning under SDG 4: Quality Education. The results align particularly with SDG 4.6, which emphasizes literacy and lifelong learning skills, including the capacity to communicate effectively in written form. To improve academic writing results, this work encourages multidisciplinary cooperation among linguistics, education, psychology, and policy research. This helps to further general conversations on inclusive education in the global south, decolonizing pedagogy, and linguistic justice.

II. Study of Literature

Emphasizing three interconnected domains — language boundaries, pedagogical defects, and cognitive-affective constraints — this research study critically assesses the numerous challenges that Cambodian students encounter when writing English essays. Combining ideas from linguistics, education, and applied psychology, this paper positions Cambodia's writing problems within both national and Southeast Asian EFL contexts using empirical investigations and theoretical views.

2.1 Linguistic Challenges for Essay Organization

Particularly in academic writing contexts, Cambodian EFL students often find the structural elements of the English language difficult. Significant mistake analysis data from Rahman (2022) and Saputra (2023) reveal that verb tense inconsistencies, incorrect article use, prepositional misuse, and subject-verb agreement errors are the most frequently occurring mistakes. Usually, the Khmer language's slight inflectional shape and lack of articles affect these errors more than they are haphazard. Students' tendency to apply rules from their native language to their second language output is known as "L1 interference," and, according to Neau (2003) and Clayton (2006), these grammatical errors are particularly pronounced. For instance, students either disregard or use "a, "an," or "the," mistakenly, as the Khmer language lacks the article structure utilized in English. Moreover, as Khmer verbs are not conjugated for tense, many Cambodian students use tense shifts or leave verbs in their natural form across their works. Chhom (2024) argues that syntactic errors suggest broader issues in formal schooling rather than being isolated events. The author discovers that contextualized writing practice is rarely used to teach grammar to Cambodian pupils, therefore creating a discrepancy between grammatical knowledge and its application in traveled discourses. These structural defects undermine the clarity, formality, and coherence of student compositions as well as their ability to meet the academic requirements needed for overseas applications and national assessments. Another major linguistic challenge is the small vocabulary repertoire displayed by many Cambodian students. Language among university-level students is often monotonous, vague, and overly dependent on basic adjectives, such as "good," "bad," or "nice," according to Him et al. (2025), thereby undermining the clarity and expressiveness of academic writing. This vocabulary restriction makes it difficult for students to present the depth of their thinking in analytical writing projects and argue complex points of view. Renandya and Widodo (2016) emphasize the importance of regular exposure to diverse and authentic books, as well as content-based education, for vocabulary development.

However, Igawa (2008) states that in many Cambodian schools, vocabulary is taught using isolated word lists and translation activities, which do not encourage deeper semantic comprehension or collocational awareness. As a result, students often lack domain-specific academic vocabulary, transition words, and hedging devices, all of which are necessary for creating academically convincing writing. Moreover, the absence of contextualized practice leads to the misuse of literal translations from Khmer to English, thereby producing artificial phrases. A restricted reading culture and the lack of English reading resources in underprivileged and rural schools exacerbate this problem, thereby limiting lexical exposure. (Moore & Bounchan, 2020).

Apart from grammatical and lexical correctness, academic writing calls for logical order and rhetorical clarity. Hyland (2019) claims that coherence and cohesiveness are essential elements of reader-oriented writing, as they enable the author to guide the reader through complex issues. Students in Cambodian EFL courses sometimes lack reasonable organization for their work. Boy and Water (2023) suggests that insufficient transitions between words and paragraphs lead to abrupt subject changes and confusing thought processes. Readers often struggle to follow the argument or understand the writer's intention without distinct subject lines, clear closing sentences, or effective transitions. Students seldom use coherent tools such as connectors (e.g., "however," "furthermore," "therefore," which are needed for logical links between concepts), Oeun and Heng (2025). One component of this problem is insufficient instruction in forms of discourse-level writing. According to Moore and Bounchan (2020), many Cambodian schools still teach sentence-level writing without paying attention to paragraph arrangement or argument construction. Students are consequently not given enough opportunities to practice organizing essays as cohesive wholes, a skill required for higher-order writing assignments, such as argumentative or expressive pieces.

Numerous empirical investigations have specifically demonstrated these language challenges in real-world settings. Over 70% of the 120 university students' writings, Saputra's (2023) The analysis contained several grammatical and syntactic errors, many of which matched recognized patterns of Khmer-English transfer. Similarly, Him et al. (2025) conducted an extensive analysis of vocabulary usage. They discovered that academic writing assignments were overwhelmingly dominated by high-frequency phrases, with no evidence of domain-specific or analytical vocabulary. These linguistic constraints not only diminish the formal quality of student essays but also contribute to broader educational inequality, as students in urban schools with greater exposure to English tend to perform better. In contrast, those in rural areas are more likely to struggle with basic writing tasks.

2.2 Writing Instruction Pedagogical Inequalities

Especially in academic writing courses, one of the most regularly recurring causes of poor writing performance is EFL teachers' lack of pedagogical competence. Many secondary and tertiary EFL teachers in Cambodia have not received instruction in process-based writing education. This approach emphasizes writing as a recursive and progressive act, encompassing preparation, drafting, and editing. Oeun and Heng

(2025) find that, instead of assisting students in the writing phases, instructors often adopt a rule-based approach that emphasizes correct language. Renandya and Widodo (2016) contend that this product-oriented approach views writing as an endpoint rather than a learning process. Consequently, pupils are not encouraged to reflect on or modify their writing, which reduces interest and impedes skill development. Nguyen (2021) notes that, more generally, in Southeast Asia, teacher education initiatives often lack training focused on writing pedagogy, thereby leaving new teachers unable to teach challenging writing skills. In Cambodia, this problem is exacerbated by restricted access to professional development opportunities, particularly in rural areas. The predominance of strict, test-driven teaching strategies that stress correctness over expressiveness creates another educational challenge. In many Cambodian schools, Chhom (2024) notes, writing assignments are often limited to fill-in-the-blank exercises or brief descriptive paragraphs, which can stifle originality and critical thinking. Furthermore, problematic are feedback techniques. According to Boy and Water (2023), when instructors provide feedback, it is often corrective rather than formative, focusing on surface-level issues without offering guidance on content, organization, or reasoning. Although it helps with grammatical correctness, this kind of criticism does not help pupils become better writers. Although Hyland and Hyland (2006) emphasize that constructive criticism should be immediate, explicit, and dialogic, these techniques are rarely employed in EFL classes in Cambodia.

Physical limitations further compromise pedagogical quality. Many schools operate under conditions of overcrowded classrooms, limited instructional time, and inadequate teaching supplies, according to Igawa (2008) and Moore and Bounchan (2020). These structural barriers prohibit instructors from providing customized, scaffolded, and feedback-rich writing classes. Furthermore, restricting students' capacity to absorb writing norms and standards is the lack of instructional aids such as rubrics, example essays, and digital writing tools. Rural schools have limited access to power, internet, and teacher support resources, aggravating educational inequalities. The gap between classroom practice and national curricular objectives presents a last educational difficulty. The Ministry of Education encourages student-centred, competency-based education, with writing listed as one of the important literacy outcomes. (MoEYS, 2019). Still, classroom environments are mostly conventional, and the tests are narrowly focused. According to Neau (2003) and Moore and Bounchan (2020), standardized assessments emphasize rote memory, quick responses, and grammatical mastery, discouraging lengthy writing. Faced with inadequate exam performance, teachers may substitute exercises and test preparation for writing lessons—this gap in policy and practice compromises initiatives to encourage writing as a medium for expression and critical thinking.

2.3 Cognitive and Affective Limitations

Academic writing requires strategic preparation, organization, and revision, as well as various forms of metacognitive control. Many Cambodian pupils, however, lack instruction in these techniques. According to Hyland (2019), skilled writers make judgments about tone, structure, and audience throughout the writing process;

however, such metacognitive abilities are not openly taught in EFL schools. Boy and Water (2023) finds that students commonly produce essays in a linear, single-draft style, often without engaging in prewriting or editing processes. Their writing is, therefore, still unorganized and unrefined. Renandya and Widodo (2016) contend that incorporating peer evaluation and self-reflection into writing classes would significantly enhance students' understanding of how their work is perceived. Writing is an emotional as well as a cerebral choreography. Bandura (1997) and Pajares (2003) emphasize the significant role that students' trust in their abilities plays in predicting their writing performance. Oeun and Heng (2025) note significant degrees of writing-related anxiety in Cambodia, especially among rural students who have had little exposure to English outside the classroom. Often driven by a fear of making errors and public instructor criticism, this anxiety is, according to Boy and Water (2023), that school environments foster quiet and obedience rather than encouraging innovation, which inhibits students from becoming risk-averse and uninterested in motivating surroundings.

Fundamentally, writing success depends significantly on motivation. Many Cambodian students view writing as a mechanical chore, often disconnected from actual communication or personal expression. Educational standards that support memorization over originality and discourage challenging authority help to support this mentality (Clayton, 2006). Research by Nguyen (2021) in Vietnam and Heinz (2021) in Laos yields similar results: children who lack a natural inclination to write experience improvement. Many pupils in Cambodia will remain deprived of the involvement required for development unless writing is viewed as a meaningful and communicative act. Regional books confirm Cambodia's predicament. Nguyen (2021) notes that comparable difficulties of teacher-centred education, writing anxiety, and inadequate writing curriculum exist in Vietnam. Based on Oeun and Heng (2025) and Boy and Water (2023), emotive elements such as fear, confidence, and motivation influence student behavior in Cambodia; therefore, they should be included as fundamental components of writing education, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Important Reading on Linguistic, Pedagogical, and Cognitive Obstacles in EFL

No.	Focus Area	Important Observations	References
1.	Grammar and Syntax Check	Regular mistakes in tense, article usage, and prepositions; considerable L2 (Lingua Franca) interference in English sentence construction	(Rahman, 2022; Saputra, 2023)
2.	Vocabulary Use	Limited academic vocabulary; overuse	(Him et al., 2025)

No.	Focus Area	Important Observations	References
		of high-frequency, ambiguous terms; narrow lexical range.	
3.	Error Analysis	Common grammatical mistakes in student essays are often connected to learning gaps and inadequate grammar in longer works.	(Chhom, 2024)
4.	Pedagogical Methods	Teachers often lack training in process-based writing; feedback is primarily corrective rather than formative.	(Oeun & Heng, 2025)
5.	Attitudes and Effective	Factors: High degrees of writing anxiety; lack of passion; students see writing as mechanical; classes stress precision over expression.	(Boy & Water, 2023)
6.	Policy and Curriculum	Although curricula emphasize communicative aims, practice remains rote and exam-oriented; notable resource inequalities exist between rural and urban areas.	(Moore & Bounchan, 2020)
7.	Geographic Comparison	Low teacher readiness and little metacognitive teaching are among the writing difficulties Vietnam faces.	(Nguyen, 2021)

No.	Focus Area	Important Observations	References
8.	Classroom resources	Effective writing education is hindered by crowded classrooms and a lack of teaching resources, problems that are especially common in rural areas.	(Igawa, 2008)
9.	Pedagogical Writing	Advocates of process- and genre-based writing techniques draw attention to the dearth of instructional variety in Southeast Asian EFL classrooms.	(Renandya & Widodo, 2016)
10.	Literary Theory	Often undeveloped among EFL students, writing calls for consistency, forethought, and audience awareness.	(Hyland, 2019)
11.	Self-Efficacy	Theory Writing results are strongly influenced by self-efficacy; poor confidence lowers performance and perseverance in academic writing.	(Bandura, 1997)
12.	Writing Motivation	Teachers must deal with self-concept and writing fear; their performance is directly related to the motivation behind their ideas.	(Pajares, 2003)

III. Methodology

This study employs a systematic and thematic approach to combine empirical and theoretical research on issues related to Cambodian students' English essay writing. The method emphasizes depth through organized qualitative synthesis, as well as breadth through thorough reading and analysis. The technique is consistent with best practices in literature reviews in education and language studies. (Thomas & Harden, 2008), assuring analytical rigour and contextual relevance.

3.1 Literature Search Strategy

To ensure a comprehensive collection of relevant materials, the literature search was conducted across four primary academic databases: ERIC, JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected for their thorough coverage of applied linguistics, English language teaching (ELT), and educational research, including peer-reviewed publications. The search phrases were: "Cambodian EFL students," "English essay writing," "academic writing difficulties," "language education in Cambodia," and "EFL pedagogy."

Boolean operators, such as AND and OR, were used to combine words and enhance the output. For example, searches for "Cambodian EFL students AND essay writing" enabled exact research tackling writing-specific difficulties among Cambodian students to be found. Apart from database searches, other resources were examined to improve the contextual grounding of the assessment. These included Cambodian MA and PhD theses from institutional sources, including the Royal University of Phnom Penh and the Institute of Foreign Languages, as well as policy papers from the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS), particularly the Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023. Reviewing pertinent conference proceedings from regional ELT events also helped gather current insights that had not yet been published in peer-reviewed publications. Citation chaining, which examines the references cited within major papers, was used to identify foundational works often referenced in the discipline, including Hyland (2019) on second language writing and Renandya and Widodo (2016) on writing pedagogy in Southeast Asia. This iterative procedure ensured a diverse and representative collection of local and regional studies, particularly those that combined linguistic, pedagogical, and psychological perspectives on writing.

3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Policies

The inclusion criteria were designed to pick only the most relevant, empirically sound, and culturally acceptable material for synthesis. First, the evaluation encompasses research published between 2000 and 2024, representing both historical and contemporary advancements in Cambodian English language instruction. Considered were only peer-reviewed journal papers, academic theses, and empirical reports, as thesis sources provide the methodological openness and academic rigor required for a consistent interpretation. Studies were considered if they focused on Cambodian secondary or tertiary students who wrote English essays. Priority was given to papers on language barriers, including grammar, vocabulary, syntax, instructional practices (e.g., feedback strategies, curriculum delivery), and psychological factors (e.g., writing anxiety, motivation, self-efficacy). Conversely, studies were excluded if they

lacked academic merit, such as opinion pieces, non-peer-reviewed blog posts, or media commentaries. Research that addressed only general EFL skills (e.g., listening or speaking) or focused on ESL contexts in non-Asian regions was also excluded, unless it provided clear comparative insights.

3.3 Analytical Framework

This research employed Thomas and Harden's (2008) suggested theme synthesis approach to analyze the selected literature. In qualitative research reviews where the objective is not just to report results but also to interpret them within a conceptual framework, this approach is often used. The process consisted of three main steps: basic coding, theme development, and synthesis. The first step included a line-by-line coding of the results sections from every source. Important concepts and conclusions, like "students frequently omit articles" or "teachers give surface-level feedback," were assigned starting categories. These codes were then arranged into more general descriptive topics, such as "limited feedback practices," "grammar and syntax errors," or "writing anxiety." Three main analytical categories were created from these descriptive themes to help direct the framework of the review:

1. Linguistic Obstacles include word constraints, grammatical and syntactical errors, and concerns regarding coherence.

2. Pedagogical Gaps include policy misalignment, teacher readiness, instructional strategies, and resource restrictions.

3. Cognitive and emotional constraints include metacognitive skills, motivation, self-efficacy, and attitudes towards writing.

This analytical approach enables us to identify the connections among these obstacles as well as separate issues. For example, it became clear that inadequate instructor feedback (a pedagogical problem) often exacerbated students' grammatical faults (a linguistic issue) and led to greater writing anxiety (a cognitive-affective issue). Thematic synthesis was beneficial for drawing context-specific conclusions, as it allowed for the inclusion of Cambodian voices and classroom realities that are often missing in global ELT literature. By organizing the review around these three thematic domains, the study ensures a holistic and contextually grounded understanding of why Cambodian students struggle with English essay writing and how future interventions might be most effectively designed, as highlighted in Table 2.

Table 2: Overview of Methodology for Literature Review

No.	Component	Description
1.	Literature Search Databases	ERIC, JSTOR, Scopus, Google Scholar
2.	Keywords Used	"Cambodian EFL students," "English essay writing," "academic writing difficulties," "language education in Cambodia," "EFL pedagogy"

No.	Component	Description
3.	Supplemental Sources	- Cambodian MA/PhD theses (e.g., RUPP, IFL) - MoEYS policy documents (e.g., *Education Strategic Plan 2019–2023*) - Regional ELT conference proceedings
4.	Inclusion Criteria	- Published 2000–2024 - Peer-reviewed or thesis-based studies - Focus on Cambodian secondary/tertiary students - Address linguistic, pedagogical, or psychological aspects of English essay writing
5.	Exclusion Criteria	- Opinion articles, blogs, and non-academic media - Non-writing-related EFL studies - ESL studies outside Asia (unless comparative) - Primary-level or adult literacy-only research
6.	Analytical Method	Thematic synthesis based on Thomas & Harden (2008): - Stage 1: Line-by-line coding of key findings - Stage 2: Clustering into descriptive categories - Stage 3: Formation of three analytical themes
7.	Final Themes Identified	1. Linguistic Barriers (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, cohesion) 2. Pedagogical Gaps (e.g., teaching methods, resources, feedback) 3. Cognitive and Affective Constraints (e.g., writing anxiety, motivation, metacognition)
8.	Number of Sources Reviewed	42 sources (journal articles, theses, policy documents, and regional reports)

IV. Discussion

4.1 Interconnectedness of Challenges

The findings of this review demonstrate that the challenges Cambodian students face in English essay writing are not isolated but mutually reinforcing across linguistic, pedagogical, and cognitive domains. Linguistic weaknesses, such as grammatical inaccuracies, limited vocabulary, and disorganized paragraphing, do not exist in a

vacuum but directly affect students' psychological experiences and learning attitudes. As Hyland (2019) argues, writing is a complex interplay of form, function, and confidence. Students who consistently struggle with basic sentence construction are more likely to internalize a sense of linguistic inadequacy, which diminishes their writing self-efficacy and overall motivation (Oeun & Heng, 2025; Pajares, 2003).

This interrelationship becomes even more pronounced when examined through the lens of pedagogy. The review suggests that inadequate teacher training, reliance on product-based writing models, and limited feedback mechanisms hinder students' development of essential metacognitive strategies, including planning, organizing, and revising. Renandya and Widodo (2016) argue that, in the absence of scaffolded, process-oriented instruction, learners are unlikely to improve over time, regardless of the use of grammar drills or exam preparation routines. Furthermore, the pedagogical gaps identified in Cambodian classrooms, particularly the lack of personalized feedback and formative assessment, act as a barrier to students' cognitive growth and affective development. Writing anxiety, fear of judgment, and low perceived competence are exacerbated when students are neither provided with the tools to improve nor encouraged to view writing as a process of learning and expression. Boy and Water (2023) emphasizes that pedagogy that ignores the emotional dimension of writing fails to build the confidence necessary for language acquisition, particularly in high-stakes educational environments where English proficiency determines access to scholarships and higher education opportunities.

Thus, the review affirms that Cambodian students' writing challenges are best understood as a web of interdependent factors, in which instructional deficiencies and psychological constraints compound structural linguistic difficulties—addressing these issues in isolation, without a holistic understanding of their interplay, risks generating superficial solutions that fail to meet the deeper needs of EFL learners.

4.2 Comparative Perspectives

A comparative lens reveals that Cambodia's writing challenges mirror those found in neighbouring Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos, but are also shaped by Cambodia's unique historical, political, and institutional trajectory. In Vietnam, for instance, Nguyen (2021) reports similar issues of teacher-centred instruction, writing anxiety, and a lack of writing-focused teacher education. Likewise, Heinz (2021) documents in the Lao context that process writing is often misunderstood or poorly implemented, resulting in student disengagement and minimal essay development. However, while the nature of writing challenges may be regionally shared, Cambodia's post-conflict recovery, donor-dependent educational reforms, and unequal infrastructure development set it apart in terms of depth and persistence of barriers. Moore and Bounchan (2020) highlight that Cambodian education has had to rebuild from near-total collapse during the Khmer Rouge era, which has left enduring gaps in institutional capacity, professional development, and equitable access to quality instruction. In addition, the policy–practice divide is particularly stark in Cambodia, where national documents, such as the Education Strategic Plan 2019–2023, advocate for student-centred, competency-based learning;

yet, classroom observations reveal the continued dominance of rote memorization and teacher-led instruction. This gap between aspirational policy and on-the-ground pedagogy is less pronounced in more urbanized or economically advanced ASEAN countries, thus adding a critical contextual layer to the Cambodian experience.

Consequently, while regional comparisons help identify common trends, such as the underdevelopment of writing across EFL curricula, they must be interpreted with caution. Cambodian writing pedagogy must be reimagined within its own socio-cultural and postcolonial frameworks, with a clear recognition of the challenges that stem not just from pedagogical models but from decades of interrupted educational development.

4.3 Gaps in Existing Research

Although the reviewed literature offers valuable insights into the writing difficulties faced by Cambodian students, several notable gaps remain in the existing body of research. First, there is a lack of longitudinal studies tracking students' writing development over time. Most existing research relies on cross-sectional designs, capturing snapshots of students' abilities without examining how writing skills evolve, or fail to evolve, through repeated instruction. As Thomas and Harden (2008) argue, longitudinal analysis is crucial for understanding the cumulative impact of pedagogical interventions and for assessing how self-efficacy and performance interact over the long term. Second, there is an evident lack of focus on rural and marginalized populations, who face compounded disadvantages due to limited access to trained teachers, instructional materials, and English exposure. As Igawa (2008) points out, much of Cambodia's educational development has disproportionately benefited urban centres, leaving rural students with under-resourced schools and overburdened teachers. Very few studies disaggregate their findings by location or socioeconomic background, leaving a gap in understanding how rural-urban disparities shape writing outcomes. Third, gender disparities in writing performance and classroom experiences are largely unexplored. While some studies, such as Boy and Water (2023), mention student anxiety and classroom dynamics, they do not explicitly investigate how these may vary by gender. This is a notable omission, given existing literature in other contexts suggesting that boys and girls may experience language learning differently, with girls sometimes reporting higher anxiety but also demonstrating more substantial writing achievement. (Pajares, 2003).

In summary, future research should move beyond isolated error analysis and embrace longitudinal, inclusive, and intersectional designs. Such approaches would enable a more nuanced understanding of how writing skills develop over time, across different geographical areas, and within various demographic groups, ultimately contributing to more equitable and effective educational strategies, as depicted in Table 3.

Table 3: Key Insights from Discussion of Writing Challenges in Cambodian EFL Contexts

Subsection	Theme	Key Points	Sources
Interconnect edness of Challenges	Multidimens ional Barriers	Linguistic weaknesses reduce writing confidence; pedagogical gaps prevent cognitive and affective development; challenges are interdependent, not isolated.	(Boy & Water, 2023; Oeun & Heng, 2025; Pajares, 2003)
	Impact on Self-Efficacy	Lack of process-oriented instruction contributes to low motivation and ineffective learning strategies.	(Hyland, 2019; Renandya & Widodo, 2016)
Comparative Perspectives	Regional Similarities	Writing difficulties are mirrored in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand (e.g., teacher-centred instruction, writing anxiety).	(Heinz, 2021; Nguyen, 2021)
	Cambodian Specificity	Cambodia's post-conflict legacy and policy-practice gap result in uniquely entrenched pedagogical and resource challenges.	(MoEYS, 2019; Moore & Bounchan, 2020)
Gaps in Existing Research	Longitudinal Gaps	Few studies trace student writing development over time; most are cross-sectional.	(Thomas & Harden, 2008)
	Rural and Marginalized Populations	Limited research disaggregates data by region or socioeconomic background, often overlooking the needs of rural students.	(Igawa, 2008; Moore & Bounchan, 2020)

V. Recommendations and Implications

Based on the thematic synthesis of the reviewed literature, this section presents targeted recommendations for improving English essay writing instruction and outcomes among Cambodian EFL students. These recommendations are grouped into four domains: instructional practice, curriculum design, educational policy, and future

research. Collectively, they offer a strategic framework for addressing the linguistic, pedagogical, and cognitive-affective challenges identified in earlier sections.

5.1 For Teachers and Educators

To improve student engagement and writing proficiency, teachers must adopt pedagogical strategies that treat writing as a recursive and developmental process rather than a fixed product. The literature strongly supports the integration of process-based and genre-based writing instruction in EFL contexts. Hyland (2019) argues that process writing, comprising brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing, helps students internalize writing as a structured and meaningful activity. Genre-based approaches further equip learners with rhetorical tools and text structures appropriate to academic, narrative, or argumentative purposes. Oeun and Heng (2025) and Renandya and Widodo (2016) emphasize that EFL writing instruction must go beyond grammar correction and include opportunities for students to experiment, reflect, and receive formative feedback. To this end, teachers are encouraged to implement strategies such as peer review, which promotes collaborative learning; writing portfolios, which enable students to track their progress over time; and reflective logs, which foster metacognitive awareness and encourage ownership of the writing process. Such pedagogical practices not only improve writing performance but also enhance students' self-efficacy and motivation, two factors closely linked to long-term academic success. Teachers should also receive continuous professional development to strengthen their ability to provide scaffolded instruction and formative feedback, particularly in settings where resources are limited.

5.2 For Curriculum Designers

Curriculum development must reflect local linguistic, cultural, and educational contexts. Moore and Bounchan (2020) argue that imported ELT curricula often overlook students' sociolinguistic realities, leading to disconnects between instruction and student needs. Therefore, it is recommended that curriculum designers embed localized writing models, including culturally relevant texts, community-based narratives, and region-specific topics, into writing syllabi. This approach not only increases student engagement but also affirms learners' identities within the writing process. Additionally, the curriculum should include bilingual glossaries to support students in acquiring academic vocabulary, particularly in schools where English exposure is limited. Glossaries should be accompanied by scaffolded writing guides that provide step-by-step instructions, sample essays, and graphic organizers for planning and structuring texts. Neau (2003) emphasizes that writing development must be systematically integrated into all stages of language education, rather than confined to upper secondary or tertiary levels. Embedding writing instruction into the broader language curriculum ensures that students develop foundational skills from an early stage, reducing the remediation burden in later years.

5.3 For Policymakers and Development Partners

At the policy level, more strategic support is needed to build institutional capacity for effective writing instruction. The MoEYS has recognized writing as a core literacy

skill under its *Education Strategic Plan 2019–2023*, yet implementation remains uneven. Policymakers should invest in specialized training programs for EFL teachers focused specifically on academic writing pedagogy. Such programs should prioritize process writing, genre awareness, feedback literacy, and the integration of digital tools. Moreover, the government and development partners should support small-class writing workshops, particularly in under-resourced schools. These workshops can provide intensive writing practice in low-stress environments and offer individualized feedback, both of which are challenging to implement in overcrowded classrooms. Digital platforms also offer promising avenues for addressing instructional gaps. Online writing labs, peer-reviewed essay forums, and interactive grammar tools can be deployed in schools with adequate infrastructure. Donors and NGOs should prioritize the development of resource hubs that provide open-access materials for students and teachers, especially in rural provinces where printed materials and trained instructors are scarce. The overarching policy implication is that writing instruction should be treated not as a supplementary skill but as a foundational pillar of academic success, essential for critical thinking, civic participation, and educational mobility in a multilingual and digitally connected society.

5.4 For Researchers

Although this review draws from a diverse body of literature, it has also highlighted several gaps in current research that must be addressed to inform policy and pedagogy more effectively. Future studies should employ action research methodologies to test the impact of specific instructional interventions in real classroom settings. For example, pilot programs introducing reflective writing journals, peer editing sessions, or bilingual instructional scaffolds should be systematically evaluated to assess outcomes in writing performance, motivation, and engagement. Additionally, there is a need to explore how cultural attitudes, multilingual realities, and teacher beliefs influence writing instruction in Cambodia. As Clayton (2006) notes, Cambodian classrooms are shaped by traditions of deference to authority, oral-based learning, and examination pressure, all of which affect how writing is taught and received. Understanding these cultural dynamics through ethnographic or qualitative inquiry can provide insights into how teachers and students negotiate writing expectations within their socio-cultural frameworks.

Research should also extend to marginalized populations, including rural students, linguistic minorities, and learners with disabilities, to ensure that writing pedagogy is inclusive and equitable. Longitudinal studies are essential for tracking writing development over time and identifying the sustained effects of various teaching approaches. By doing so, a research agenda that combines classroom experimentation with cultural sensitivity will be essential for building a robust, context-aware foundation to advance writing education in Cambodia.

VI. Conclusion

This review critically examines the complex landscape of English essay writing challenges faced by Cambodian EFL students, drawing on recent empirical literature,

policy documents, and theoretical frameworks. The synthesis of evidence reveals that students encounter intertwined barriers across three primary domains: linguistic limitations, pedagogical inadequacies, and cognitive-affective constraints. These challenges are neither isolated nor incidental; instead, they form a mutually reinforcing web that undermines students' ability to express themselves confidently and competently in academic writing. The central thesis of this review is that Cambodian learners' struggles with essay writing stem from systemic, multilayered issues that go beyond individual language deficits. On the linguistic front, grammatical inconsistencies, restricted vocabulary, and weak coherence mechanisms inhibit textual fluency. Pedagogically, a heavy reliance on product-oriented instruction, limited teacher training in process writing, and scarce classroom resources significantly curtail opportunities for guided and scaffolded learning. Cognitively and affectively, the absence of metacognitive strategy training, pervasive writing anxiety, and culturally inherited attitudes toward passive learning diminish students' self-efficacy and engagement with writing as a purposeful act.

These findings highlight the pressing need for targeted, systemic interventions that operate simultaneously at the instructional, curricular, and policy levels. Pedagogical reforms must prioritize writing as a skill developed through stages of planning, reflection, revision, and feedback. Curricula should incorporate culturally relevant content and provide explicit instruction on genre, purpose, and audience. At the policy level, investing in teacher professional development, digital infrastructure, and small-class writing workshops is essential for translating curriculum objectives into tangible learning outcomes. Furthermore, the conclusion emphasizes that addressing these issues requires interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches. Researchers, educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers must work together to create context-sensitive solutions that reflect Cambodia's linguistic realities, socio-educational history, and development goals. Such collaboration should not only aim to improve test scores or academic output, but also to empower students as critical thinkers and effective communicators in both local and global arenas. The paper advocates for sustained attention to English writing development as a cornerstone of Cambodia's broader educational transformation, in line with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 mandate. Only through coordinated efforts can Cambodian students be supported to write against the grain, and eventually, to write with agency, voice, and academic competence.

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