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THE IMPACT OF LINGUISTIC, STRUCTURAL, AND AFFECTIVE PROFICIENCY ON ACADEMIC WRITING CHALLENGES AMONG TERTIARY STUDENTS

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Abstract:
This study investigates the impact of academic writing proficiency (AWP) on its associated challenges (AWD) from the perspectives of tertiary English majors. A cross-sectional correlational design was employed, using a survey questionnaire to collect data from 325 final-year English majors at a private university. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multi-linear regression to examine the relationships between students' linguistic, structural and affective proficiency (LP, SP and AP) in AWP and AWD. The results revealed that students had a moderate level of AWP and faced medium-level challenges in writing. All three sub-elements of AWP (LP, SP, and AP) demonstrated significant negative correlations with AWD, with LP showing the strongest negative correlation. Multiple linear regression analysis indicated that LP, SP, and AP collectively explained 37% of the variance in AWD. The higher the level all three predictors were, the lower the level of AWD was, confirming the negative predictive effect of LP, SP, and AP on AWD. These findings highlight the importance of linguistic, structural, and affective proficiency in mitigating challenges in academic writing for tertiary English majors.

Keywords: academic writing proficiency, challenges, university

1. Introduction

Academic writing (AW) is an essential skill for students pursuing higher education, which remains a complex and often challenging task. However, many students face significant challenges when engaging with AW. The process of writing academically requires students to consider various linguistic, structural, and affective elements to

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produce coherent, formal, and well-argued essays. While linguistic knowledge, such as lexica and grammar, is crucial, other factors such as interpersonal, textual elements and context meaning, also significantly impact students' ability to successfully complete AW tasks (Halliday, 1985). In addition, Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) suggests that emotional states such as motivation and anxiety can either facilitate or hinder language acquisition and writing performance. A high affective filter, marked by anxiety or stress, can create barriers to AW, while a low affective filter, fostered through supportive feedback and positive motivation, can enhance students' engagement with the tasks.

Research conducted in Vietnam highlights several key issues. For instance, studies at Tay Do University and other institutions have identified common difficulties such as limited vocabulary, inadequate grammar knowledge, and challenges in organizing ideas coherently (Phan *et al.*, 2023; Nguyen *et al.*, 2022). These challenges not only hinder students' academic performance but also impact their confidence in writing. The Affective Filter Hypothesis (AFH) by Krashen (1982) suggests that emotional states like anxiety can significantly impede language acquisition and, by extension, academic writing proficiency. This is particularly relevant in the Vietnamese context, where students often face high levels of stress and anxiety when writing academically.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides a framework for understanding the complexities of academic writing. It emphasizes the importance of linguistic elements, interpersonal aspects, and textual coherence in creating effective academic texts (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). In Vietnam, where academic writing is increasingly emphasized, understanding these components is essential for improving students' proficiency.

This study aims to explore the impact of linguistic, structural, and affective proficiency on the challenges faced by Vietnamese tertiary English majors in academic writing. By examining these relationships, it seeks to provide insights into how enhancing these proficiencies can alleviate the difficulties encountered by students, ultimately contributing to better academic outcomes.

2. Literature review

2.1 Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) is the theory of language introduced by Halliday and Hasan (1985), which perceives language as a tool for creating meaning dynamically and socially. It revolves around:

- Linguistic elements of meaning conveyance (e.g., vocabulary, grammatical structures, discourse markers)
- Interpersonal aspects (e.g., attitudes, emotions, social relationships between speakers and listeners)
- Textual elements (e.g., coherent and cohesive text)

- Context and meaning (e.g., connection between meaning and social, cultural environment)

When writing an academic essay, it is of great importance to pay due attention to these mentioned aspects (e.g., Nawal, 2018; Silva *et al.*, 2024). The writers should flexibly employ their knowledge of lexica, grammar to maintain the flow of ideas while considering the necessity of socio-cultural aspects (e.g., academic tone, readership). It is a combination of different cognitive functions for producing an effective text.

2.2 Affective Filter Hypothesis (AFH)

The hypothesis is put forward by Krashen (1982) in his Monitor Model, highlighting the impact of emotional and psychological factors on second language acquisition. Particularly, the process of absorbing language is monitored by such emotional states as motivation, apprehension, and self-efficacy. Core components that need attention are: the filter concept and the factors that control the filter.

Regarding the 'filter' concept, it is divided into 'high' and 'low' affective filters. While the former refers to a positive mental state which boosts language acquisition, the latter is regarded as a barrier in mastering a language. As such, emotional states like motivation (low filter) or anxiety (high filter) affect students' academic writing performance. For example, if students feel stressed when writing academically, their affective filter might surge, preventing them from wholeheartedly engaging in the tasks. In contrast, if they are provided with supportive instruction and constructive feedback, this can help lower the negative filter (Bedford, 2023).

2.3 Academic writing proficiency (AWP) and its associated difficulties (AWD)

Academic writing (AW) is a subject taught at both university and high school levels, and most learners consider it quite complex, mainly because it involves the process of language formation. Unlike procedural, descriptive, or non-fiction texts—such as novels, short stories belonging to creative genres, and personal essays that are not formal—AW has distinct characteristics (Hyland, 2003; Hyland, 2007).

Hyland (2003) divided the organization of AW into various focal points, such as: language structure, the function of texts, themes, ways to express creativity, the process of synthesis, content, genre, and the writing context. When considering these aspects, learners need to be mindful of fully adhering to the rules during the writing process. Hyland (2007) further argued that, particularly in the context of university-level writing, the ability to sustain arguments and synthesize ideas in order to write in English for academic purposes is indispensable for achieving academic success.

Proficiency is a concept that has evolved over time and can be understood as one's competence in performing a task. In the case of AW, it refers to linguistic and structural competencies, alongside the affective component, in writing a scholarly paper (AWP). While linguistic proficiency refers to a learner's ability to use correct grammatical structures and appropriate vocabulary, the structural one alludes to the capability of maintaining coherent and cohesive discourse. Affective proficiency is defined as a

learner's effective emotional management, responses and positive attitudes (e.g., self-efficacy, motivation). The description and discussion of the concept are derived from Bachman and Palmer's (1996) work on language proficiency frameworks and testing.

Due to the distinctive characteristics of the AW process, the related difficulties (AWD) seem almost inevitable for students. The first challenge is adhering to AW conventions, including formality, logical structure, and evidence-based arguments (Sitompul & Anditasari, 2022). This is also highlighted through textual and socio-cultural elements in SFL. This is because students might not only struggle to meet the expectations and conventions from academic communities (socio-cultural) but also ensure grammatical complexities and rhetorical patterns (textual). The second difficulty that students might encounter is related to their linguistic knowledge (Taye & Mengesha, 2024). Findings from these studies revealed that tertiary students made mistakes in grammatical structures, word choice. The facets are reflected in SFL, where linguistic components for expressing ideas are emphasized.

Research has also shown that affective factors monitored by teachers' instruction and feedback are connected to how students struggle with AW (Ene & Yao, 2021). It was demonstrated that overwhelming corrections without constructive guidance specifically increased university students' anxiety, thus reducing their self-efficacy in writing. This aligns with the core principles of AFH. In this case, students' affective filter is likely to rise.

In the context of Vietnam, several studies investigated the issue, too. Specifically, a study conducted at Tay Do University (in the Mekong Delta region) highlighted issues such as a lack of grammar and vocabulary, insufficient foundational knowledge, poor idea organization, and problems with coherence. These difficulties are believed to stem from a limited vocabulary, inadequate grammar knowledge, and challenges in arranging ideas coherently (Phan *et al.*, 2023).

Similarly, the article by Nguyen *et al.* (2022) also identified major problems, including a lack of motivation, limited vocabulary, grammatical errors (e.g., verb tense and subject-verb agreement), as well as difficulties in organizing ideas coherently. These challenges negatively impact students' confidence and academic performance. Nghi and Truong (2023), in their study, also found that limited grammatical ability, insufficient vocabulary for academic contexts, and difficulties in following essay structures are common setbacks faced by students.

Noticeably, the common ground among these three pieces of research is that they primarily revolve around challenges in linguistic and structural proficiency (LP and SP), but not the affective one (AP). As such, the current paper is conducted, investigating the relationships between LP, SP and AP (in AWP) and the corresponding AWD.

3. Present study

For the current paper, it is hypothesized that if the linguistic, structural and affective components of AWP are under-developed, challenges in AW (AWD) will increase;

conversely, if these components are well-developed, challenges will decrease. Figure 1 below illustrates the conceptual framework of the connections between the discussed variables.

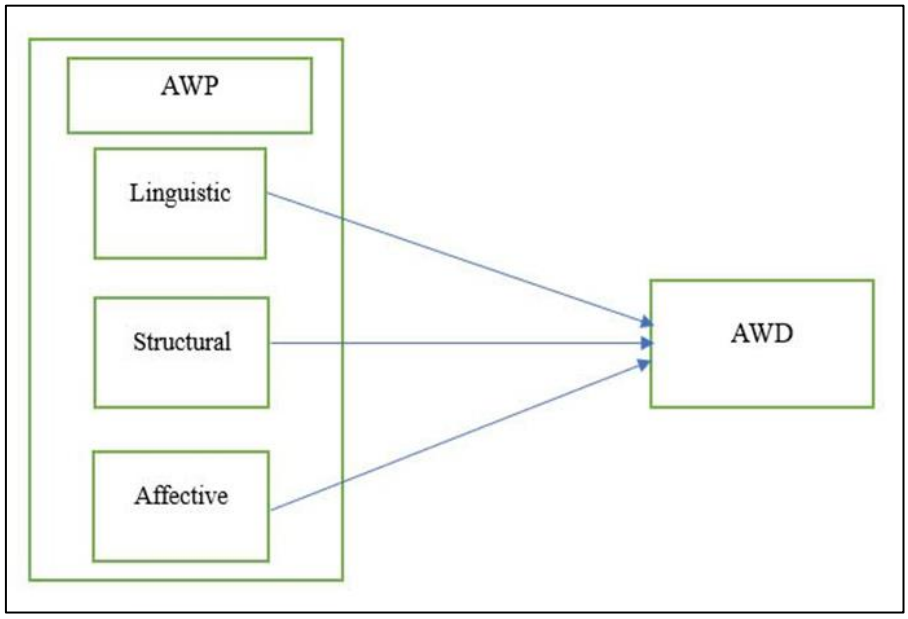

Figure 1: The conceptual framework

In the present study, the research questions are:

1) Does linguistic proficiency (LP) have an impact on AWD?
2) Does structural proficiency (SP) have an impact on AWD?
3) Does affective proficiency (AP) have an impact on AWD?

The corresponding hypotheses are:

1) Linguistic proficiency (LP) negatively predicts AWD.
2) Structural proficiency (SP) negatively predicts AWD.
3) Affective proficiency (AP) negatively predicts AWD.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

The present paper used a cross-sectional correlational design using a survey questionnaire for collecting data. This enables the exploration of the connections between different variables with data collected at a specific point in time (Mann, 2003). The relationships between university students' LP, SP, AP and AWD were examined.

4.2 Participants

A total of 325 participants, including 211 females and 114 males, were recruited to self-evaluate their AWP and the potential AWD they might face. They were final-year English majors at a private university who had completed the course of AW in the previous

semester. Their age range was from 22 to 24. The demographic information is presented in table 1 as below:

Table 1: Participants' demographics

	Categories	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Gender	Male	114	35.1
	Female	211	64.9
Age	22 – 24	325	100
Type of school	Private	325	100
Academic year	Fourth year	325	100
Field of study	English studies	325	100

4.3 Materials

As mentioned above, the questionnaire was employed to gather data from the students' self-reports. For the final version, it has two measures - AWP and AWD - which are constructed by eighteen items.

The AWP scale was created using the three core dimensions of AW (LP, SP and AP). In particular, the LP dimension initially contained four items, whereas for SP and AP, each contained three items. One example item is *'I can choose appropriate vocabulary that ensures the clarity and rigor of my academic writing'*. These items are rated based on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 refers to 'strongly disagree' and 5 expresses 'strongly agree'. After the pilot process with fifty participants and two experts, one item from the LP dimension was removed as its corrected item-total correlation was below 0.3.

As a result, this dimension has three items in the end. The Cronbach alphas for LP, SP and AP are 0.72, 0.71 and 0.74, respectively.

The AWD scale was developed based on the associated AW core characteristics. At first, it consisted of ten items, with one sample being *'I struggle to find appropriate vocabulary to ensure the clarity and rigor of my academic writing'*. The items are also evaluated using a five-point Likert scale, in which 1 means 'completely untrue to me' and 5 denotes 'completely true to me'. Similar to the case of the AWP scale, this measure was piloted with one item being removed due to the issue of corrected item-total correlation (< 0.3). Consequently, the last version encompasses nine items in total (α = 0.75).

4.4 Data collection procedure

Using convenience sampling, the data were collected over three weeks. Particularly, the researchers sent an online survey link to 337 participants via Zalo, a Vietnam-based social platform. Before the completion of the questionnaire, participants were assured that their responses would remain completely confidential. However, due to the invalidation in rating of some respondents, only 325 were considered valid for data analyses.

4.5 Data analyses

To begin with, Skewness and Kurtosis tests were employed for testing data distribution. After the distribution was confirmed to be normal, the descriptive statistics test was run to assess students' levels of AWP and associated AWD using the mean scores. Next, the

Pearson correlation was executed to examine whether the variables were correlated. Lastly, multi-linear regression was used to investigate how differently each dimension of AWP predicts the relevant AWD. All of the tests were run using the SPSS software.

5. Results

5.1 Data distribution

In the current study, the observed Skewness and Kurtosis values confirmed data normal distribution (Hair *et al.*, 2022). All of the Skewness values of the variables were within ±2.0 (e.g., AWP = 0.11, LP = 0.27). Similarly, all of the Kurtosis values of the variables were within ±2.0 (e.g., AWP = -0.27; LP = -1.10) (Table 2).

5.2 AWP and its associated AWD

The current research found that students had a moderate level of AWP (M = 3.15, SD = 0.41). This is because the mean score, falling between 2.61 and 3.40 in the five-point Likert scale, denotes 'moderate'. More specifically, LP, SP and AP had the mean scores of 3.31 (SD = 0.37), 3.11 (SD = 0.45) and 3.03 (SD = 0.50). Although modest, the students' LP was more positive than the others. Regarding AWD, the recorded mean score was 3.34 (SD = 0.38), indicating a moderate level of difficulty (2.61 < 3.34 < 3.40). This suggests that students face medium-level challenges in their writing. It should be noted that in the AWD scale, a higher number indicates a higher degree of difficulty. The information is summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness		Kurtosis	
						Stat.	SE	Stat.	SE
AWP	325	2.0	4.0	3.15	0.41	0.11	0.14	-0.27	0.27
LP	325	2.0	4.0	3.31	0.37	0.27	0.14	-1.10	0.27
SP	325	2.0	4.0	3.11	0.45	0.16	0.14	0.95	0.27
AP	325	2.0	4.0	3.03	0.50	0.20	0.14	-0.87	0.27
AWD	325	3.0	5.0	3.34	0.38	0.15	0.14	0.31	0.27

5.3 The correlation between AWP and its associated AWD

The results from the correlation test revealed the connections between LP, SP, AP and relevant AWD students encountered. The information is presented in table 3 as follows:

Table 3: Pearson-correlation test

		LP	SP	AP	AWD
LP	Correlation	1	0.60**	0.47**	-0.52**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.00	0.00	0.00
	N	325	325	325	325
SP	Correlation	0.60**	1	0.35**	-0.43**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00		0.00	0.00
	N	325	325	325	325
AP	Correlation	0.47**	0.35**	1	-0.31**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00	0.00		0.00
	N	325	325	325	325
AWD	Correlation	-0.52**	-0.43**	-0.31**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00	0.00	0.00	
	N	325	325	325	325

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As can be seen from the table, all three sub-elements of AWP (LP, SP and AP) demonstrated significant negative correlations with AWD. In addition, the strongest negative correlation is observed for LP ($r = -0.52$, $p = 0.00$), followed by SP ($r = -0.43$, $p = 0.00$) and AP ($r = -0.31$, $p = 0.00$). Besides, the sub-elements themselves were moderately to strongly correlated with each other. For example, LP and SP shared a correlation of 0.60, while LP and AP correlated at 0.47.

5.4 Predictive power of LP, SP and AP on AWD

The multiple linear regression model was statistically significant based on the ANOVA results ($F = 83.1$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that at least one predictor significantly contributes to explaining variance in AWD (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

In addition, other values also ensure the model fit:

- $R = 0.61$ indicates a moderately strong positive relationship between LP, SP, AP and AWD.
- $R^2 = 0.37$ suggests that 37% of the variance in AWD is explained by LP, SP and AP. Adjusted $R^2 = 0.36$ suggests that, after accounting for the number of predictors, the model still explains approximately 36% of the variance in AWD, reducing the risk of overfitting. In the educational field, this explanation is reasonable since other factors might have an impact on AWD, too.
- Durbin-Watson value = 1.92 indicates no significant autocorrelation in residuals (Field, 2018).

To ensure that the residuals follow a normal distribution, the histogram and Q-Q plot of residual distribution were employed. Specifically, the histogram bars of the residual values were distributed in a bell shape (Figure 2). In addition, the mean was 6.83E-15 (i.e., $6.83*10^{-15}$), which was approximately 0.000, and the standard deviation was 0.995, which was close to 1. Regarding the Q-Q plot, it was demonstrated that the residuals aligned very well with the diagonal reference line (Figure 3). Therefore, it is

concluded that the residual distribution is approximately normal and the assumption of normality for the residuals is not violated.

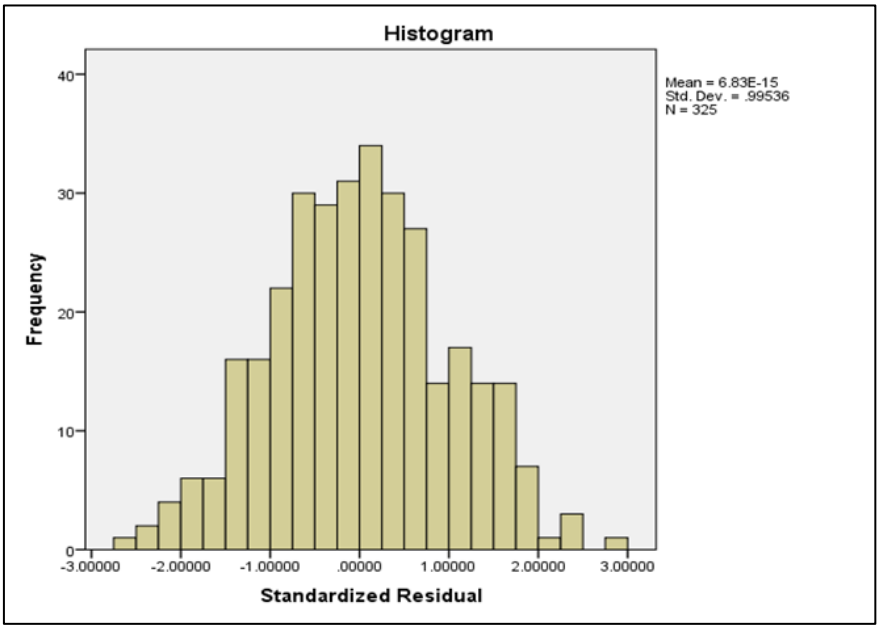

Figure 2: Histogram of residual distribution

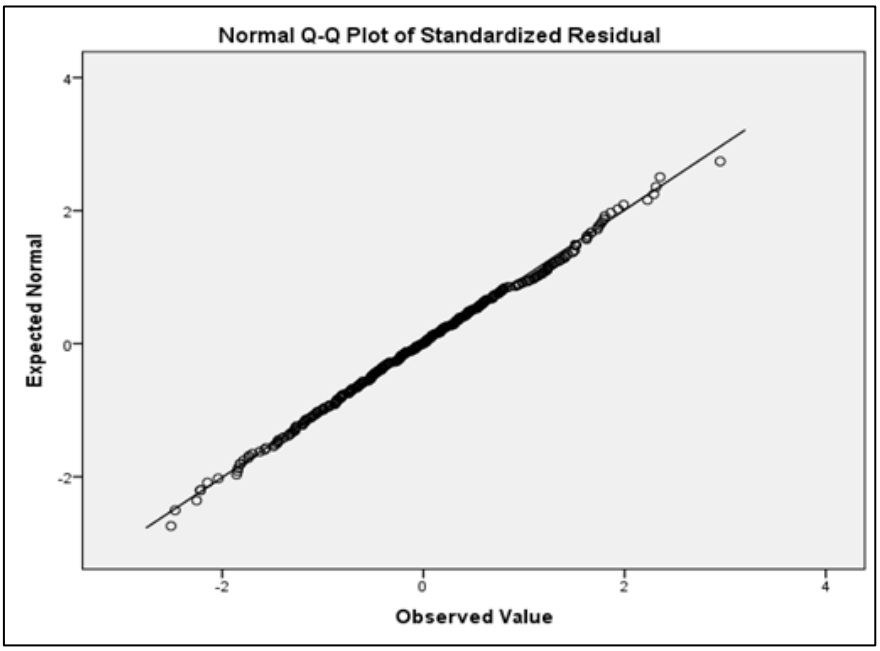

Figure 3: Q-Q plot of residuals

In addition, the regression diagnostics confirmed no multicollinearity concerns, as all VIF values for LP, SP and AP were below 5.0, and Tolerance values exceeded 0.2 (Chatterjee & Simonoff, 2013). This suggests that each predictor uniquely contributes to the model. The information is presented in Table 4 as below:

Table 4: Multiple linear regression results

Predictor	B	Std. Error	β	t-value	p-value	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	3.21	0.14	–	22.93	0.00	–	–
LP	–0.41	0.02	–0.42	–20.50	0.00	0.58	1.81
SP	–0.32	0.01	–0.35	–32.00	0.00	0.60	1.79
AP	–0.30	0.04	–0.32	–7.50	0.00	0.72	1.76

Note: Dependent variable: AWD (academic writing difficulties)

As can be seen from the table, among the predictors, LP had the strongest negative influence on AWD ($\beta = –0.42$, $p < 0.001$), followed by SP ($\beta = –0.35$, $p < 0.001$) and AP, which had a smaller but still significant effect ($\beta = –0.32$, $p = p < 0.001$). Overall, these results suggest that the higher the level of all three predictors were, the lower the level of AWD was.

The regression equations are:

- AWD = 3.21 + –0.41*LP + –0.32*SP + –0.30*AP + ε (with unstandardized coefficients)
- AWD = 0.00 + –0.42*LP + –0.35*SP + –0.32*AP+ ε (with standardized coefficients)

Based on the established equations, it is confirmed that:

1) LP has a negative predictive effect on AWD.
2) SP has a negative predictive effect on AWD.
3) AP has a negative predictive effect on AWD.

6. Discussion

The present paper investigated how academic writing proficiency (AWP) affects the challenges students encounter in academic writing (AWD), specifically examining linguistic, structural, and affective aspects. The results indicate that AWP significantly reduces the difficulties students face in academic writing (AW).

6.1 Impact of linguistic proficiency (LP) on AWD

The results show that LP has the most significant negative correlation with AWD, indicating that students with stronger LP encounter fewer challenges in AW ($r = −0.52$, $p = 0.000$). This aligns with previous research emphasizing the role of linguistic elements in effective communication, as highlighted by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). In addition, challenges related to LP were also mentioned by earlier studies (e.g., Nghi & Truong, 2023; Taye & Mengesha, 2024). Consequently, improving LP can substantially alleviate the difficulties students experience in AW.

6.2 Role of structural proficiency (SP) in AWD

SP also demonstrated a significant negative correlation with AWD ($r = −0.43$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that students who are more adept at organizing their ideas and structuring their texts encounter fewer difficulties. This is consistent with Hyland's (2003) emphasis on the importance of text structure and organization in AW. The ability to sustain

arguments and synthesize ideas effectively is essential for achieving academic success, and SP plays a critical role in this process. Other pieces of research also support the result, revealing the SP obstacles students are faced with (e.g., Sitompul & Anditasari, 2022; Phan *et al.*, 2023). Thus, improving SP can help students better navigate the complexities of AW.

6.3 Influence of affective proficiency (AP) on AWD

Affective proficiency (AP) showed a smaller but still significant negative correlation with AWD ($r = -0.31$, $p = 0.000$), highlighting the impact of emotional and psychological factors on academic writing performance. This supports the Affective Filter Hypothesis (AFH), which posits that emotional states such as motivation and anxiety can influence language acquisition and AW. Constructive feedback and supportive instruction can help lower the affective filter, enhancing students' self-efficacy and reducing their anxiety levels. In this regard, although pointed out by international research (Ene & Yao, 2021), little in Vietnam has paid due attention. As a result, the current finding helps bridge the gap in this context by highlighting the role of AP in reducing AWD.

6.4 Predictive power of AWP components on AWD

The multiple linear regression analysis revealed that LP, SP, and AP collectively explain approximately 37% of the variance in AWD, with LP having the strongest predictive effect ($\beta = -0.42$, $p < 0.001$), followed by SP ($\beta = -0.35$, $p < 0.001$) and AP ($\beta = -0.32$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that while all components of AWP are important, LP plays a more significant role in predicting AWD. The findings support the hypothesis that higher levels of LP, SP, and AP are associated with lower levels of AWD.

7. Recommendations

The results of this study have significant implications for teaching AW. Educators should prioritize improving students' linguistic and structural abilities while fostering a supportive learning environment that addresses emotional factors. For example, lecturers can provide students with supplemental materials that help polish these aspects of language. Simultaneously, thoughtful comments and meticulous instructions should also be considered to facilitate students' knowledge acquisition. Future studies could investigate how various teaching methods and feedback approaches affect AWP and AWD, especially across different cultural settings. Furthermore, examining additional factors like technological literacy and resource availability could offer a more detailed understanding of the obstacles students face in AW.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the present research paper unveiled the influence of linguistic, structural and affective proficiency (LP, SP and AP) on academic writing difficulties (AWD) among

final-year university English majors, with LP being the most significant component. As such, it underscores the importance of developing LP, SP and AP in academic writing (AW). By understanding these components and their interplay, educators can design more effective instructional strategies to support students in overcoming the associated challenges.

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Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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