

DIAGNOSING EFL STUDENT READINESS FOR ACADEMIC WRITING PROJECTS

Evidence from a *Research Method in ELT* Class

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Abstract

This study investigated students' initial academic writing competence and learning readiness before participating in a *Research Method in ELT* course designed through project-based learning and differentiated instruction. The study was motivated by the need to identify students' academic writing problems at the beginning of instruction so that classroom support could be planned more accurately. A descriptive diagnostic design was used. The participants were thirty-five undergraduate students enrolled in an ELT research method course at a private university in Central Java. Data were collected through a diagnostic questionnaire covering academic writing knowledge, research and methodological readiness, learning readiness, self-regulation, learning preferences, motivation, and open-ended responses. The quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, while the open-ended responses were interpreted thematically. The findings showed that students had moderate overall readiness for academic writing. They showed stronger readiness in motivation, awareness of the importance of academic writing, openness to feedback, and willingness to collaborate. However, they still faced serious challenges in synthesizing academic sources, formulating researchable problems, selecting appropriate research instruments, managing long term academic projects, and working independently. The learning preference data also indicated that students needed step by step guidance, model texts, lecturer feedback, peer discussion, and visual organizers. These findings suggest that diagnostic assessment is essential for designing responsive academic writing instruction. The study concludes that students' initial needs should be used as the basis for differentiated scaffolding, project-based writing activities, and meaningful academic support in ELT higher education.

Keywords: academic writing readiness; diagnostic assessment; differentiated instruction; English language teaching; project based learning

Introduction

Academic writing is a central competence for university students in English language education. It requires students to transform reading, research knowledge, argument, and language control into a coherent scholarly text. In EFL higher education, this competence is difficult because students must work with disciplinary content and English academic conventions at the same time. Recent studies show that EFL students often struggle with grammar, vocabulary, organization, idea development, paraphrasing, citation, and the construction of research based arguments (Alzahrani, 2025; Asnas & Hidayanti, 2024; Nenotek et al., 2022; Pasaribu et al., 2024). These problems are not only linguistic. They also involve

research literacy, academic confidence, time management, feedback use, and the ability to work independently on a long writing project.

The problem becomes more serious in *Research Method in ELT* courses. Students are not only expected to understand research concepts. They are also expected to identify a researchable problem, formulate research questions, select instruments, read relevant literature, and communicate findings in an academic

article format. This combination creates a heavy cognitive load for students who have limited experience reading and writing research articles. Studies on EFL academic writing readiness indicate that writing readiness includes grammar, vocabulary, structure, formatting, and time management, but it also depends on broader factors such as self efficacy, motivation, and strategic learning (Mujiono et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). A diagnostic assessment is therefore needed before lecturers design instructional treatment, especially when the expected product is a journal style article.

A diagnostic perspective is important because it shifts academic writing instruction from assumption to evidence. Instead of assuming that all students have similar readiness, lecturers can identify which aspects are already strong and which aspects require scaffolding. Wang and Xie (2022) argue that diagnostic assessment can reveal discourse level weaknesses, composing strategies, and students knowledge status in academic writing. Shoaie et al. (2024) also emphasize that diagnostic writing scales can provide targeted feedback by identifying content, organization, and language descriptors. A recent meta synthetic review further recommends contextually valid writing assessments because EFL writing assessment practices need to support learning, not merely classify performance (Taufiqulloh et al., 2025). These arguments support the use of diagnostic assessment as an entry point for instructional design.

The present study is situated in an undergraduate *Research Method in ELT* class. The course required students to move from conceptual understanding of research methodology to the production of an academic writing project. In this context, project based learning is relevant because it organizes learning around an

authentic product and a sequence of inquiry, planning, drafting, feedback, revision, and presentation. Studies in English language education show that project based learning can improve student engagement, collaboration, critical thinking, and writing autonomy when it is supported by clear guidance and meaningful tasks (Alvarado-mendoza et al., 2026; Asfihana et al., 2022; Prawiro et al., 2025; Sari & Prasetyo, 2021). However, project based academic writing may be ineffective when students are asked to complete complex projects without adequate diagnosis and scaffolding.

Differentiated instruction provides a useful response to this problem. It allows lecturers to adjust content, process, product, and learning support based on students readiness, interests, and learning preferences. Recent evidence in EFL higher education suggests that differentiated instruction can address diverse learning needs when instructors provide flexible grouping, varied materials, and supportive learning pathways (Tajik et al., 2024). In academic writing, differentiation may include model texts for students who need concrete examples, guided worksheets for students who struggle with research design, peer review for students who need interaction, and independent extension tasks for students who are more ready. This approach becomes stronger when it is informed by diagnostic data rather than general observation.

Self regulated learning is another important construct in academic writing projects. Long writing projects require students to set goals, manage time, monitor progress, seek feedback, revise drafts, and maintain motivation. Recent EFL writing studies show that self regulated learning based instruction can support academic writing development, especially when students are guided to

plan, monitor, and evaluate their work (Anggraeni et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2023). Metacognitive writing strategy instruction also improves writing performance and motivation because students become more aware of what they do before, during, and after writing (Han, 2024). Therefore, diagnostic data about self regulation are necessary for designing project milestones and feedback cycles.

The integration of technology and artificial intelligence has also changed academic writing instruction. Digital tools can support reference search, language checking, paraphrasing practice, and feedback. Yet these tools require ethical and critical use. Recent studies report that AI tools may support academic writing clarity, feedback literacy, and productivity, but they also raise concerns about dependence, academic integrity, and unequal digital competence (Khosravi et al., 2023; Malik et al., 2023; Ozfidan et al., 2024; Williyen et al., 2024). Diagnostic data can help lecturers decide when technology should be used as scaffolding and when students still need explicit instruction in source use, academic integrity, and scholarly voice.

Based on these concerns, this study aimed to diagnose students readiness for academic writing projects before implementing a project based and differentiated instructional model. The study addressed two research questions. First, what is the readiness profile of EFL students in academic writing, research methodology, self regulation, and motivation before an academic writing project? Second, what learning support do students expect for completing academic writing tasks in a *Research Method in ELT* course? The findings are expected to help lecturers design evidence based academic writing instruction that is responsive to students actual needs. The study also contributes to ELT scholarship by showing how diagnostic assessment can

connect research method instruction, academic writing pedagogy, differentiated support, and project based learning.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive mixed method design. The quantitative component was used to map students readiness through a diagnostic questionnaire, while the qualitative component was used to interpret students open ended responses about challenges, expected support, and possible research interests. The design was suitable because the purpose of the study was not to test treatment effectiveness, but to generate baseline evidence for instructional planning. The diagnostic approach follows the view that writing assessment should provide formative information for teachers and learners (Shoaei et al., 2024; Taufiqulloh et al., 2025).

The participants were thirty five undergraduate students enrolled in a Research Method in ELT course in an English education program. They were preparing to learn research methodology and develop an academic writing project. The participants were selected because they represented the actual class that would receive project based academic writing instruction. In this course, the final expected output was a research based academic article draft. This output required students to combine ELT problem identification, literature reading, research design, academic paragraphing, citation, and revision.

The instrument was a diagnostic questionnaire developed for identifying students initial readiness for academic writing and research based projects. It consisted of Likert scale items, multiple response preference items, and open ended questions. The Likert scale items covered four dimensions: academic writing knowledge and skills, research and methodological readiness, learning

readiness and self regulation, and academic motivation with deep learning orientation. The multiple response section asked students to indicate preferred learning support, preferred working mode, and preferred presentation of materials. The open ended section asked students to explain their biggest challenges, the support they expected from the lecturer or peers, and possible research topics they wanted to explore.

The data collection procedure was conducted before the main instructional intervention. Students completed the diagnostic test at the beginning of the course. This timing allowed the lecturer to use the findings for designing differentiated learning pathways, selecting examples, preparing scaffolding materials, and planning feedback cycles. Students responses were treated as baseline data, not as grades. This was important because diagnostic assessment should reduce anxiety and help students recognize their learning needs rather than label them as weak writers.

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Means and standard deviations were calculated for each dimension and each item. The interpretation was based on the tendency of the mean score on a five point scale. A lower mean indicated lower perceived readiness, while a higher mean indicated stronger perceived readiness. The multiple response data were summarized using frequency and percentage. The qualitative data from open ended responses were analyzed thematically. The responses were read repeatedly, coded into recurring issues, and grouped into themes related to topic selection, academic language, source use, methodology, and self regulation. The quantitative and qualitative findings were then integrated to produce an instructional diagnosis.

Finding and Discussion

The diagnostic result shows that students entered the course with moderate overall readiness. The overall readiness profile reached 2.93 with a standard deviation of 0.60. This result indicates that students were not completely unprepared, but their readiness was uneven across dimensions. The strongest dimension was academic motivation and deep learning orientation, with a mean score of 3.70. The weakest dimension was academic writing knowledge and skills, with a mean score of 2.54. Research and methodological readiness reached 2.89, while learning readiness and self regulation reached 2.97. The profile is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Students Readiness Profile by Diagnostic Dimension

Dimension	Items	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Academic writing knowledge and skills	8	2.54	0.73	Low to moderate
Research and methodological readiness	5	2.89	0.78	Moderate but unstable
Learning readiness and self-regulation	5	2.97	0.62	Moderate
Academic motivation and deep learning orientation	4	3.70	0.71	Positive
Overall readiness profile	22	2.93	0.60	Moderate with clear gaps

Table 1 indicates a clear gap between motivation and technical academic writing readiness. Students believed that academic writing was important and they showed willingness to improve. However, they did not yet have strong confidence in the skills needed to complete a research article. This finding is consistent with recent studies showing that EFL students often recognize

the importance of academic writing but still struggle with the operational demands of writing research based texts (Alzahrani, 2025; Asnas & Hidayanti, 2024; Mujiono et al., 2023). The gap suggests that motivation alone is not enough. Students need structured instruction that converts motivation into concrete writing performance.

The item level analysis gives a more precise picture. The lowest item was students ability to work independently on academic tasks without constant supervision. This item reached only 2.03. The next weakest areas were distinguishing general topics from researchable ELT problems, formulating research problems or questions, synthesizing ideas from multiple academic sources, designing a small scale research project, understanding academic writing conventions, and selecting appropriate research instruments. These findings are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Lowest Readiness Indicators

Indicator	Mean	SD
Work independently on academic tasks without constant supervision	2.03	1.03
Distinguish general topics from researchable ELT problems	2.14	0.90
Write a clear and focused research problem or question	2.31	0.89
Synthesize ideas from multiple academic sources	2.31	1.09
Design a small-scale research project	2.34	0.95
Understand academic writing conventions	2.37	1.04
Select appropriate research instruments	2.54	0.97

The weaknesses shown in Table 2 are central to academic article writing. Students cannot produce a strong article if they cannot identify a researchable problem, build a literature based argument,

or design a feasible method. Their low score in independent academic work also indicates the need for visible project milestones. This supports the argument that academic writing development requires strategy, self regulation, and feedback, not only language correction (Anggraeni et al., 2025; Han, 2024). The finding also aligns with Wang and Xie (2022), who found that novice EFL academic writers may have discourse level problems because of limited genre knowledge, weak planning, and poor time management.

Although students had weaknesses in technical academic writing, several strengths were also found. Students were highly open to receiving constructive feedback from peers and lecturers, with a mean score of 4.14. They also strongly believed that academic writing was important for their future academic or professional career, with the same mean score. Students motivation to improve academic writing reached 3.57, while their tendency to understand concepts meaningfully rather than memorize them reached 3.60. These strengths are pedagogically valuable because they provide an affective foundation for project based and differentiated instruction. Students who value feedback and meaningful learning are more likely to benefit from iterative drafting, peer review, and reflective tasks.

The preference data provide additional evidence for instructional design. Students did not prefer a fully independent model at the beginning of the course. The most frequently selected support was step by step guidance. This option was selected by 29 students, or 82.9 percent of the class. Lecturer feedback was selected by 20 students, and model texts and examples were selected by 17 students. In terms of material presentation, written explanations and visual organizers were preferred by

many students. The summary is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Preferred academic writing support

Preferred support	Frequency	Percentage
Step-by-step guidance	29	82.9
Lecturer feedback	20	57.1
Model texts and examples	17	48.6
Written explanations	23	65.7
Visual organizers	20	57.1
Working individually	22	62.9
Working in small groups	12	34.3
Peer discussion and collaboration	10	28.6

The preference pattern supports differentiated instruction. Students needed a combination of explicit guidance, examples, feedback, and visual support. Step by step guidance can be used for students with low readiness, while model texts can help students notice the structure of abstracts, introductions, methods, and discussions. Visual organizers can support students who struggle to connect research problems, literature, and methods. Lecturer feedback remains important because students still need expert confirmation when they move from a broad topic to a feasible research design. This finding is consistent with Tajik et al. (2024), who argue that differentiated instruction in EFL higher education must respond to different learner needs through varied forms of content, process, and support.

The working mode preference also needs careful interpretation. A majority of students selected individual work, but a smaller group still selected pairs, small groups, and peer discussion. This does not

mean that collaboration should be removed. It means that the final academic writing product may remain individual, while the learning process can include collaborative scaffolding. This arrangement fits project based learning because students can discuss research ideas, review sample articles, exchange feedback, and solve methodological problems together while still producing their own article draft. Studies on project based learning in English language education show that collaboration, communication, and motivation can improve when the project structure is clear and when students receive adequate support (Alvarado-mendoza et al., 2026; Asfihana et al., 2022; Prawiro et al., 2025; Sari & Prasetyo, 2021).

The qualitative responses strengthened the quantitative findings. Students most frequently reported difficulty in choosing research topics, narrowing broad ideas, and formulating research problems. Others reported problems with grammar, vocabulary, formal academic tone, paragraph coherence, paraphrasing, synthesis, citation, and APA style. Several responses also showed anxiety about methodology, especially selecting research design, instruments, and participants. These themes are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Qualitative Theme Summary from Open Ended Responses

Theme	Evidence from responses	Instructional implication
Finding researchable topics	Many students mentioned uncertainty in choosing ELT problems and narrowing broad interests	Essential question, topic clinic, and problem-mapping activity

Academic language and paragraph control	into feasible study topics.	
	Students reported problems with grammar, vocabulary, coherence, formal tone, and paragraph development.	Model texts, guided paragraph analysis, language-focused mini workshops
	Source use and synthesis	Annotated reading, synthesis matrix, APA practice, citation feedback
	Methodological readiness	Research design gallery, instrument examples, consultation cycles
Self-regulation and confidence	Students expected continuous lecturer guidance, feedback, deadlines, and examples to reduce confusion.	Project schedule, milestone monitoring, peer review, reflective journal

The themes show that students academic writing problems were interconnected. Topic selection was connected to literature reading because students could not easily identify research gaps without reading research articles. Literature reading was connected to synthesis because students needed to combine ideas from several sources. Synthesis was connected to citation and academic integrity because students needed to paraphrase responsibly.

Methodological readiness was connected to research questions because a weak research question made it difficult to choose design and instruments. This chain of difficulty explains why academic writing should not be taught as isolated grammar practice. It should be taught as a research based process with integrated support for idea development, source use, method design, and revision.

The findings also justify the use of diagnostic assessment before project based instruction. A project based academic writing course can easily become overwhelming if students are asked to complete an article without clear scaffolding. The diagnostic data show that the course should begin with problem identification and article structure, not with independent drafting. It should then move to reading and synthesis, research design, instrument selection, paragraph development, citation practice, and staged revision. This sequence can reduce cognitive overload because students build the article section by section. It also reflects the instructional value of diagnostic scales described by Shoaee et al. (2024) and the need for contextually valid writing assessment described by Taufiqulloh et al. (2025).

The study has several implications for Research Method in ELT instruction. First, the first meetings should focus on transforming broad interests into researchable ELT problems. Students can be guided through topic clinics, problem trees, and gap identification activities. Second, source use should be scaffolded through annotated reading, synthesis matrices, and guided paraphrasing. Third, methodology should be taught through concrete examples of research designs and instruments. Fourth, project milestones should be visible. Students need deadlines for topic approval, research question refinement, literature matrix completion, method outline, first draft, peer feedback,

and final revision. These steps can support self regulation and reduce dependence on last minute writing.

The findings also support a differentiated pathway. Students with lower readiness can receive guided worksheets, short model articles, sentence frames, and closer lecturer feedback. Students with moderate readiness can work with peer feedback sheets and article section checklists. Students with higher readiness can be given extension tasks such as comparing journal article structures, evaluating methodological rigor, or preparing a conference style abstract. Differentiation does not mean creating separate courses for each student. It means providing different levels of support within the same project cycle. This is especially relevant because the diagnostic profile showed a wide range of readiness across students.

Technology should be used carefully. Students may benefit from reference managers, grammar checkers, online dictionaries, digital feedback tools, and AI supported brainstorming. However, the diagnostic result shows that students still need explicit guidance in academic integrity, paraphrasing, citation, and scholarly voice. Recent studies warn that AI tools can support writing feedback and productivity, but they can also create overreliance and ethical confusion if students do not understand how to evaluate, revise, and take responsibility for generated text (Khosravi et al., 2023; Malik et al., 2023; Ozfidan et al., 2024; Williyan et al., 2024). Therefore, technology should function as a scaffold, not as a replacement for thinking, reading, and composing.

The diagnostic result also confirms the importance of feedback literacy. Students reported strong openness to feedback, but openness must be transformed into action. Lecturers need to teach students how to interpret comments, prioritize revisions,

and document changes. Feedback should not only correct grammar. It should address research focus, paragraph logic, literature integration, methodological alignment, and citation accuracy. Ducasse et al. (2023) note that technology enabled academic writing feedback should consider student needs and preferences. In this study, students preference for lecturer feedback and model texts suggests that feedback should be combined with examples of revised writing.

Another important point is the relationship between readiness and confidence. Students may report that academic writing is important, but they may still avoid independent work because they do not yet know how to start. This pattern is common in EFL academic writing classes. The task looks meaningful, yet the route toward completion is unclear. For this reason, the first instructional response should not be correction. It should be orientation. Students need to see the whole article structure, the function of each section, and the connection between research questions, method, findings, and discussion. Once students understand the map of the article, feedback becomes easier to use because each comment can be linked to a specific writing purpose.

The diagnostic result can also be translated into project based learning phases. The essential question phase should address topic selection and problem formulation. The planning phase should address research design, instrument choice, and literature sources. The scheduling phase should respond to students low independence and time management needs. The monitoring phase should include lecturer feedback, peer discussion, and reflective journals. The assessing phase should use a transparent rubric that covers content, organization, source integration, methodology, and language. The evaluating phase should ask students to reflect on what changed in their writing

and what support helped them most. This phase based interpretation makes the diagnostic test directly useful for classroom design.

In a differentiated academic writing class, the same diagnostic result can guide content, process, and product differentiation. Content differentiation may include short articles, annotated samples, reading guides, and research method summaries. Process differentiation may include mini lessons, writing conferences, peer review, group problem solving, and independent revision time. Product differentiation may include different levels of expected output during the early stages, such as a topic map, a research problem paragraph, a synthesis matrix, a method outline, and a partial article draft. The final product can remain the same, but the route toward that product should not be identical for all students.

The finding on preferred individual work is also pedagogically useful. Many students wanted to write individually, but they also wanted guidance and feedback. This suggests that students may value personal ownership of the article while still needing social and instructional support. A balanced design is therefore needed. Individual writing can be combined with peer response, lecturer consultation, and group analysis of model texts. This balance protects authorship while using collaboration as a scaffold. It also helps address academic integrity because students learn to make their own decisions rather than depend fully on peers or digital tools.

The study further implies that academic writing assessment should be introduced early. If students only see the rubric at the end of the course, the rubric functions as judgment. If they see and use the rubric from the beginning, it functions as guidance. The diagnostic findings suggest that students need to know how their

article will be evaluated. A rubric can help them monitor whether their research problem is focused, whether their literature review synthesizes sources, whether their method matches the research question, and whether their paragraphs are coherent. This makes assessment part of learning rather than a final administrative requirement.

For lecturers, the diagnostic data provide an efficient basis for material development. Because the lowest readiness areas were research problem formulation, synthesis, methodology, and independent work, the lecturer should prioritize these areas in the first half of the course. Grammar and vocabulary support are still needed, but they should be embedded in authentic article sections. For example, students can learn formal academic tone while revising their introduction, learn reporting verbs while writing the literature review, and learn passive or active voice choices while writing the method section. This integration prevents language instruction from becoming disconnected from the academic writing project.

For students, the diagnostic test can build metacognitive awareness. Students can compare their own readiness with the class profile and set personal goals. A student with weak source synthesis can focus on reading and paraphrasing practice. A student with weak methodological readiness can seek examples of instruments and procedures. A student with low independence can use a weekly checklist and consultation schedule. This reflective use of diagnostic data supports self regulated learning because students learn to plan, monitor, and evaluate their academic writing process.

Overall, the study shows that EFL academic writing readiness is multidimensional. The students were motivated and willing to receive feedback,

but they needed explicit scaffolding in research problem formulation, synthesis, methodology, conventions, and self regulation. These findings support an instructional model that integrates diagnostic assessment, project based learning, differentiated instruction, and self regulated writing support. The course should not start from the assumption that students already know how to write an article. It should start from evidence about what students can and cannot yet do.

Conclusions

This study diagnosed EFL students readiness for academic writing projects in a Research Method in ELT course. The findings show that the students had moderate overall readiness, but the readiness was uneven. Their strongest area was motivation and belief in the importance of academic writing. Their weakest areas were independent academic work, identifying researchable problems, formulating research questions, synthesizing sources, understanding academic conventions, designing research, and selecting instruments. These weaknesses are important because they are the core requirements for producing a research based article.

The study also found that students preferred step by step guidance, lecturer feedback, model texts, written explanations, and visual organizers. The qualitative responses confirmed that students needed support in topic selection, academic language, source use, methodology, citation, and project management. These findings indicate that diagnostic assessment should be used as the basis for instructional planning. Lecturers can use the diagnostic profile to design differentiated scaffolding, project milestones, feedback cycles, and reflective activities. Project based academic writing instruction will be more effective when it begins with a clear understanding of students initial readiness.

The practical implication is that Research Method in ELT courses should be designed as guided academic writing projects. Students should not only learn research concepts. They should also practice turning those concepts into a publishable style academic text through staged drafting and feedback. The study recommends using diagnostic tests at the beginning of the course, followed by differentiated article writing workshops, peer review, lecturer consultation, and reflective self monitoring. Future studies may examine how the diagnostic profile changes after a full semester intervention and how each dimension of readiness predicts improvement in students final academic articles.

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ISSUES