

EFL Students' Academic Writing Development Through Draft-Rewrite Cycles: Evidence from Private Universities

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Abstract

Academic writing remains a major challenge for EFL students, particularly when composing the introduction or background of the study section of thesis manuscripts. This section requires students to establish the research context, present a clear problem, connect previous studies, identify a research gap, and justify the significance of the study. This study aimed to investigate how draft-rewriting cycles helped EFL pre-service teachers develop effective background sections and to identify the aspects of academic writing that improved through the stages of first draft, content revision, organisation revision, language editing, and proofreading. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research involved 20 EFL pre-service teachers from a private university. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and students' thesis manuscripts. The data were analyzed using qualitative procedures consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. The findings revealed that draft-rewriting cycles supported students by transforming writing from a one-time task into a staged, reflective, and manageable process. The first draft helped students express initial ideas and reveal writing difficulties. Content revision strengthened the clarity of the research problem and relevance of supporting information. Organisation revision improved coherence, paragraph unity, and logical flow. Language editing enhanced grammar, vocabulary, sentence clarity, and academic tone, while proofreading improved mechanics, formatting, and citation consistency. The study concludes that draft-rewriting cycles are pedagogically valuable for supporting EFL students' academic writing development, especially in private university contexts where students have diverse educational and linguistic backgrounds.

Keywords: Academic writing; Draft-rewriting cycles; EFL students; Thesis background section

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INTRODUCTION

Academic writing remains one of the most demanding competencies for students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly in higher education contexts where students are expected to construct arguments, synthesize literature, and communicate ideas using formal academic conventions. Unlike general writing, academic writing requires students to demonstrate conceptual clarity, logical reasoning, rhetorical control, and linguistic accuracy at the same time. For many EFL students, this process is challenging because they must express complex ideas in a language that they do not use as their first language. Their difficulties commonly appear in idea generation, paragraph unity, argument organization, academic vocabulary use, grammatical accuracy, and the ability to maintain coherence and cohesion across extended texts. These challenges are especially visible when students write the introduction or background of the study section, which requires them to present a research problem,

justify its significance, review relevant studies, and identify a research gap. When these elements are not well developed, the introduction may become too broad, repetitive, descriptive, or insufficiently connected to previous research. Therefore, academic writing in EFL contexts should not be understood only as a matter of language proficiency, but also as a complex process involving critical thinking, rhetorical awareness, and continuous revision (Ali & Zayid, 2022; Alshammari, 2020; Anaktototy, 2023; Zhang & Kang, 2022).

The difficulty of writing academically is also influenced by students' learning contexts and their exposure to English discourse. Studies comparing ESL and EFL writers show that differences in language exposure affect lexical diversity, syntactic complexity, cohesion, and readability (Gilquin, 2023; Zhang & Kang, 2022). EFL students often have more limited access to authentic English academic discourse, making it harder for them to internalize the structure and rhetorical moves commonly used in scholarly writing. As a result, they may rely on fixed syntactic patterns, overuse general statements, or struggle to connect literature with the research gap. Cross-language exposure and L1 influence may also shape how students use cohesive devices, organize ideas, and construct logical transitions between paragraphs (Bui et al., 2021; Cordero & Santos, 2023). These issues suggest that EFL students need explicit and sustained instructional support, particularly in developing the introduction or background section, because this section functions as the foundation of an academic paper. A weak introduction may affect the clarity of the entire study, while a well-developed introduction helps readers understand the context, urgency, and contribution of the research.

One pedagogical approach that can address these challenges is the draft-rewriting cycle. This approach views writing as a gradual and recursive process rather than a one-time product. In the draft-rewriting cycle, students move through several stages: first draft, content revision, organisation revision, language editing, and proofreading. The first draft allows students to express their initial ideas without being overly burdened by linguistic perfection. At this stage, the primary goal is to generate ideas, identify the central issue, and begin constructing the background of the study. Content revision then helps students evaluate whether their ideas are relevant, sufficiently developed, and clearly connected to the research problem. This stage is crucial because many EFL students need guidance in strengthening the depth of their background, clarifying the significance of the topic, and linking prior studies to the research gap. Organisation revision follows by helping students arrange ideas logically, usually from broader contextual issues to more specific research concerns. Through this stage, students can improve the flow of the introduction and avoid overlapping or disconnected explanations. Language editing then focuses on grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and academic tone, while proofreading helps students correct surface-level errors such as spelling, punctuation, formatting, and citation accuracy (Barreda-Parra et al., 2023; Conohuillca, 2021; Cunha, 2020; Olmo & González-Catalán, 2024).

The efficacy of draft-rewriting cycles lies in their ability to provide structured opportunities for students to rethink, reorganize, and refine their writing. Instead of expecting students to produce a complete and polished introduction in a single attempt, the cycle enables them to improve their text progressively. This is important because effective academic writing requires both meaning-making and language control. Content and organisation revisions help students develop the substance and logic of their writing, while language editing and proofreading improve clarity, accuracy, and academic acceptability. In addition, the cycle encourages students to become more reflective writers because they are required to evaluate what they have written, respond to feedback, and make purposeful revisions. Previous studies have emphasized the

importance of process-oriented writing instruction, formative feedback, and genre-aware pedagogy in improving L2 academic writing (Lenis et al., 2020; Pavez & Galdames-Fernandois, 2022; Sito & Mosquera, 2021; Villalba & Salazar, 2024). When applied to the introduction or background section, draft-rewriting cycles can help students produce writing that is more focused, coherent, literature-based, and aligned with academic conventions.

The implementation of draft-rewriting cycles is particularly relevant in private universities, where EFL students often come from diverse educational, linguistic, and socio-academic backgrounds. Some students may enter university with limited experience in academic writing, while others may have difficulty adapting to English-medium academic expectations. In such contexts, lecturers need an instructional strategy that is systematic, flexible, and responsive to students' varying levels of readiness. Draft-rewriting cycles offer this structure because each stage provides a clear focus for improvement. Lecturers can give feedback on the research problem and content development during the early stages, guide logical organization in the middle stage, and address grammar and mechanics in the later stages. This staged feedback prevents students from becoming overwhelmed and helps them understand that writing quality develops through revision. Moreover, the use of teacher feedback, peer feedback, and online writing support can strengthen the effectiveness of the cycle by giving students multiple sources of input (Lv et al., 2021; Mao et al., 2024; Waluyo, 2023; Zhai & Razali, 2023).

Although many studies have discussed academic writing difficulties and process-based writing instruction, there is still a need for more focused investigation into how draft-rewriting cycles help EFL students develop the introduction or background of the study section in private university contexts. Existing literature often examines writing performance in general, while the introduction section receives less specific attention despite its central role in establishing the research context, significance, and gap. The novelty of this study therefore lies in its specific focus on the use of structured draft-rewriting cycles to support EFL students in producing effective introduction or background sections. By emphasizing the stages of first draft, content revision, organisation revision, language editing, and proofreading, this study contributes a practical and pedagogically grounded model for improving academic writing in private universities.

Based on this background, the present study aims to examine the implementation of draft-rewriting cycles in helping EFL students develop their academic writing, particularly in writing the introduction or background of the study section. It also seeks to explore how each stage of the cycle supports students in improving content quality, organization, language accuracy, and final writing clarity. To achieve these objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions: How do draft-rewriting cycles help EFL students develop an effective introduction or background of the study section in academic writing? What aspects of students' academic writing improve through the stages of first draft, content revision, organisation revision, language editing, and proofreading in private university contexts?

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate how draft-rewriting cycles supported EFL pre-service teachers in developing the background of the study section of their thesis manuscripts. A qualitative design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to explore students' experiences, perceptions, writing challenges, and revision practices in depth rather than measure writing improvement statistically.

Since the focus of the study was not only on the final written product but also on the process through which students revised their drafts, a qualitative approach enabled the researcher to obtain rich and contextual data from students' written reflections, interview responses, and thesis manuscript revisions.

The case study design was selected because the research was bounded within a specific academic context, namely EFL pre-service teachers in a private university who were preparing or revising the background section of their undergraduate thesis. This design allowed the researcher to examine the implementation of draft-rewriting cycles within a real instructional setting and to understand how students experienced each stage of the cycle, including first draft writing, content revision, organisation revision, language editing, and proofreading. Through this design, the study could capture the complexity of academic writing development, including how students responded to feedback, reorganized their ideas, improved coherence, and refined their academic language.

This design was suitable for addressing the objectives of the study because the research questions focused on how draft-rewriting cycles helped EFL students develop an effective background of the study section and what aspects of their academic writing improved through the revision stages. These questions required interpretive analysis of students' views, revision decisions, and written outputs. Therefore, qualitative inquiry provided an appropriate framework to reveal the meaning behind students' writing practices and the pedagogical value of the draft-rewriting process. However, the qualitative case study design also had several limitations. First, the findings were context-specific and could not be generalized to all EFL students or all private universities. To address this limitation, the study provided a detailed description of the research context, participants, and procedures so that readers could determine the transferability of the findings to similar contexts. Second, because the data involved students' perceptions, there was a possibility of subjective responses or social desirability bias. This was mitigated by using multiple data sources, namely interviews, reflective journals, and thesis manuscripts, so that the findings could be compared and triangulated. Third, researcher interpretation could influence the analysis. To minimize this bias, the researcher applied systematic coding procedures, maintained an audit trail, used participant codes, and conducted repeated reading of the data before drawing conclusions. These steps were taken to strengthen the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study.

Research Participants and Objects

The participants of this study were 20 EFL pre-service teachers enrolled in an English education program at a private university. They were selected using purposive sampling because they met the specific criteria required for the study. The selection of 20 participants was considered sufficient for qualitative inquiry because it allowed the researcher to obtain rich and detailed data while still making the analysis manageable and focused. The participants were coded as P1 to P20 to protect their identities and maintain confidentiality. The main research objects were the participants and their thesis manuscripts, particularly the background of the study section. The background section was selected because it is one of the most challenging parts of academic writing for EFL students. In this section, students are required to introduce the research topic, explain the importance of the issue, review relevant literature, identify the research gap, and justify the need for the study. These rhetorical demands make the background section an appropriate object for investigating the effectiveness of draft-rewriting cycles.

The selection criteria for the participants were as follows. First, the participants had to be pre-service teachers majoring in English education. Second, they had to be in the

process of writing or revising their undergraduate thesis. Third, they had to have completed at least one draft of the background of the study section. Fourth, they had to participate in the draft-rewriting cycle, including first draft writing, content revision, organisation revision, language editing, and proofreading. Fifth, they had to be willing to participate in interviews and write reflective journals during the research process. Students who had not yet written the background section or were unwilling to provide their manuscripts and reflections were excluded from the study.

Research Instruments

The instruments used in this study were semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. These instruments were selected because they enabled the researcher to collect qualitative data related to students' experiences, challenges, perceptions, and revision strategies during the draft-rewriting cycles. In addition, students' thesis manuscripts were used as supporting documents to trace the development of the background of the study section across revision stages. The semi-structured interview was developed based on the research objectives and the stages of the draft-rewriting cycle. The interview questions explored students' difficulties in writing the background section, their experiences in producing the first draft, the types of feedback they received, the revisions they made, and their perceptions of how the cycle helped them improve their writing. Semi-structured interviews were used because they provided flexibility for the researcher to ask follow-up questions while still maintaining focus on the main research topics. This format allowed participants to explain their experiences in their own words and enabled the researcher to obtain deeper information about the writing process.

The reflective journal was designed to record students' thoughts and revision activities after each stage of the draft-rewriting cycle. Students were asked to write reflections on what they revised, why they made the revisions, what difficulties they encountered, and what they learned from each stage. The journal prompts were developed to correspond with the five stages of the cycle: first draft, content revision, organisation revision, language editing, and proofreading. Through reflective journals, students could document their writing development continuously, while the researcher could identify patterns in their revision awareness and writing strategies.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the instruments, several steps were taken. First, the interview guide and reflective journal prompts were developed based on the research questions, writing process theory, and the objectives of the study. Second, the instruments were reviewed by experts in EFL academic writing and qualitative research to evaluate their clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study focus. Third, the instruments were tried out with several students who had similar characteristics to the participants but were not involved in the main study. Feedback from this try-out was used to revise unclear or overlapping questions. Fourth, data triangulation was applied by comparing interview data, reflective journals, and thesis manuscript revisions. In qualitative research, reliability was strengthened through consistency in data collection procedures, clear documentation of the research process, and careful coding of the data.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative data analysis procedures consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification, as suggested by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). These stages were applied systematically to interpret the data obtained from interviews, reflective journals, and thesis manuscripts. The first stage was data condensation. In this stage, the researcher selected, focused, simplified, and organized the raw data according to the research objectives. Interview transcripts and reflective journals were read repeatedly to identify meaningful statements related to students' academic writing difficulties, experiences in each draft-rewriting

stage, feedback responses, and perceived writing improvement. Irrelevant or repetitive information was reduced, while significant information was coded. The initial codes included writing difficulties, research problem clarity, content development, organisation improvement, language accuracy, proofreading awareness, feedback response, and student reflection. The thesis manuscripts were also examined to identify revisions in the background section, especially changes in idea development, logical flow, coherence, cohesion, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics.

The second stage was data display. After coding, the data were organized into tables, matrices, and thematic categories. The researcher displayed the data based on the five stages of the draft-rewriting cycle: first draft, content revision, organisation revision, language editing, and proofreading. This display helped the researcher compare students' experiences and writing changes across the stages. For example, students' interview responses were displayed together with their reflective journal entries and manuscript revisions to identify whether their stated experiences matched the changes found in their writing. This process also helped reveal patterns, similarities, and differences among participants.

The third stage was conclusion drawing and verification. In this stage, the researcher interpreted the displayed data to answer the research questions. Themes were developed from recurring patterns in the data, such as improvement in research problem formulation, clearer literature-to-gap connection, better paragraph organisation, improved academic tone, and increased awareness of revision. The conclusions were verified by returning to the data repeatedly, comparing evidence from different sources, and ensuring that each conclusion was supported by sufficient data. Triangulation was used to strengthen the credibility of the findings by checking consistency among interviews, reflective journals, and thesis manuscripts. Through these stages, the data analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of how draft-rewriting cycles helped EFL pre-service teachers improve the background of the study section. The analysis did not only focus on whether the final manuscripts became better, but also on how students experienced the revision process, what aspects of writing changed, and how the cycle encouraged them to become more reflective and independent academic writers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

How do draft-rewriting cycles help EFL students develop an effective introduction or background of the study section in academic writing?

The findings revealed that draft-rewriting cycles helped EFL pre-service teachers develop a more effective introduction or background of the study section by transforming writing from a one-time task into a guided, reflective, and staged process. In the first draft stage, students were able to express their initial ideas, although many of their drafts were still general, unfocused, and weak in connecting the research topic with the research problem. This stage was important because it allowed students to make their ideas visible and gave lecturers an initial basis for providing feedback. Rather than expecting students to produce a perfect background section from the beginning, the first draft functioned as a diagnostic text that showed students' real difficulties in academic writing.

During the content revision stage, students began to strengthen the substance of their background sections. They revised unclear problem statements, added more relevant contextual information, and improved the connection between the topic and previous studies. This stage helped students understand that the background of the study should not only introduce a topic but also explain why the topic matters, what problem exists, and why the study needs to be conducted. The interview and reflection data

showed that students became more aware of the need to support their claims with relevant literature and avoid overly broad explanations.

The organisation revision stage helped students arrange their ideas more logically. Before revision, many students tended to write background sections with scattered ideas, repeated explanations, and unclear movement from general issues to specific research gaps. Through organisation revision, they learned to sequence ideas more systematically by beginning with the general context, narrowing the discussion to a specific problem, reviewing relevant studies, identifying the gap, and ending with the purpose of the study. This stage was particularly useful in helping students build coherence and avoid overlapping ideas.

The language editing and proofreading stages helped students improve the readability and academic quality of their writing. Language editing enabled them to revise grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and academic tone, while proofreading helped them correct spelling, punctuation, formatting, and citation errors. These stages did not merely improve surface-level accuracy; they also increased students' confidence because they could see that their writing became clearer and more acceptable as an academic text. Overall, the draft-rewriting cycle helped students develop an effective background section by guiding them through progressive improvements in content, organisation, language, and final presentation.

Table 1. Thematic Display of Draft-Rewriting Cycles

Stage of Draft-Rewriting Cycle	Main Function in Writing Development	Evidence from Qualitative Data	Analytical Interpretation
First draft	Making initial ideas visible	Students produced initial background sections with general ideas, unclear problems, and limited literature support.	The first draft served as a diagnostic stage that revealed students' actual writing difficulties.
Content revision	Strengthening substance and relevance	Students added context, clarified research problems, and connected issues with previous studies.	Content revision helped students move from descriptive writing to problem-based academic writing.
Organisation revision	Improving logical flow and coherence	Students reorganized paragraphs from general context to specific gap and research objective.	Organisation revision supported rhetorical control and reduced overlapping ideas.
Language editing	Improving academic tone and linguistic accuracy	Students revised grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and formal expressions.	Language editing enhanced clarity, precision, and academic acceptability.
Proofreading	Refining final accuracy and presentation	Students corrected spelling, punctuation, formatting, and citation errors.	Proofreading improved the final readability and professionalism of the manuscript.
Overall contribution	Developing effective academic introduction/background	Students produced clearer, more coherent, and better-	Draft-rewriting cycles functioned as a structured pedagogical

supported background sections.	scaffold for academic writing development.
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Table 1 indicates that draft-rewriting cycles helped EFL students develop the introduction or background of the study section through a gradual and structured writing process. Each stage played a specific role in improving the quality of students' academic writing. The first draft functioned as an initial diagnostic stage where students expressed their ideas, although their writing was still general, unclear, and weakly supported by literature. Content revision then helped students strengthen the substance of their writing by clarifying the research problem, adding relevant background information, and connecting their ideas with previous studies. Organisation revision further supported students in arranging their ideas more logically, particularly by guiding them to move from a general issue to a specific research gap. Language editing and proofreading refined the final quality of the manuscript by improving academic tone, grammatical accuracy, citation consistency, and surface-level correctness. Therefore, the chart shows that the cycle did not only improve the final product but also guided students through different layers of academic writing development.

Table 2. Illustrative Interview Transcript Excerpts of Draft-Rewriting Cycles

Participant	Interview Excerpt	Theme
P3	"In my first draft, I only wrote the general topic, but after the content revision, I understood that I had to explain the real problem and why my research was important."	Awareness of research problem
P6	"The cycle helped me because I did not revise everything at once. First, I focused on the content, then the order of ideas, and after that I checked the language."	Structured revision process
P9	"Before revision, my background was jumping from one idea to another. After organisation revision, I could arrange it from general issue to specific gap."	Improved organisation
P12	"The feedback made me realize that my literature was not connected to my research gap. I revised it by adding previous studies and explaining what was missing."	Literature-to-gap connection
P15	"Language editing helped me make my sentences more academic. I changed informal words and corrected grammar mistakes."	Academic language improvement
P18	"Proofreading was useful because I found many small mistakes in punctuation, spelling, and citation format that I did not notice before."	Final accuracy and mechanics

The interview excerpts in Table 2 support the findings shown in Chart 1 by providing qualitative evidence of students' experiences during the draft-rewriting cycles. The participants' statements show that they initially struggled to formulate a clear research problem, arrange ideas coherently, and connect literature with the research gap. However, after participating in the revision stages, they became more aware of how to improve the background section systematically. For example, some participants reported that content revision helped them understand the importance of explaining the real problem and research significance, while others stated that organisation revision helped them arrange ideas from general issues to specific gaps. The excerpts also indicate that language editing and proofreading increased students' awareness of academic vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, spelling, and citation accuracy. Thus, Table 1 confirms that draft-rewriting cycles supported students not only cognitively, by helping them understand the structure and function of the background section, but also practically, by guiding them to revise their manuscripts step by step.

What aspects of students' academic writing improve through the stages of first draft, content revision, organisation revision, language editing, and proofreading in private university contexts?

The findings showed that several aspects of students' academic writing improved through the draft-rewriting cycles. The first major improvement was content clarity. In the early drafts, students often introduced topics without clearly explaining the academic problem. Their writing tended to be broad and descriptive, with limited justification for why the study was necessary. After the content revision stage, students were able to clarify the focus of their research, strengthen the explanation of the problem, and provide more relevant background information. This improvement indicated that students became more aware of the rhetorical function of the background section as a space to establish context, urgency, and research significance.

The second improvement was organisation and coherence. Students' initial drafts frequently showed weak paragraph flow, unclear transitions, and repeated ideas. Through organisation revision, students learned to arrange their background sections more logically. They improved the sequence of ideas by moving from a broad issue to a specific problem, then to previous studies, research gap, and research objective. This stage helped students understand that academic writing requires not only correct sentences but also a clear structure that guides readers through the argument. As a result, their revised manuscripts became more coherent and easier to follow.

The third improvement was the connection between literature and research gap. Many students initially used previous studies only as additional information rather than as evidence to support the research gap. After the revision cycles, students became more capable of using literature to position their study. They learned to compare previous findings, identify what had not been sufficiently discussed, and explain how their own study addressed the gap. This finding suggests that draft-rewriting cycles helped students develop a more analytical approach to academic writing. The fourth improvement was language accuracy and academic style. Through language editing, students improved grammar, word choice, sentence structure, and academic tone. They reduced informal expressions, corrected grammatical errors, and used more precise academic vocabulary. Although language problems did not completely disappear, students' revised texts showed better clarity and formality. The fifth improvement was mechanical accuracy. Through proofreading, students became more careful in checking spelling, punctuation, formatting, capitalization, and citation consistency. This stage improved the final quality of the manuscript and helped students become more responsible for the technical accuracy of their writing. It can be presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Improved Aspects of Students' Academic Writing across Draft-Rewriting Stages

Draft-Rewriting Stage	Aspect Improved	Description of Improvement	Evidence Indicator in Manuscripts
First draft	Idea generation	Students began expressing the research topic, initial problem, and possible study focus.	Initial background section was produced, although still broad and incomplete.
Content revision	Content clarity and relevance	Students clarified the research problem, added relevant context, and strengthened the significance of the study.	Revised drafts showed clearer problem statements and more focused explanations.
Content revision	Literature support	Students added and connected relevant previous studies to support the research background.	Literature was no longer merely listed but linked to the problem and gap.

Draft-Rewriting Stage	Aspect Improved	Description of Improvement	Evidence Indicator in Manuscripts
Organisation revision	Coherence and logical flow	Students reorganized ideas from general context to specific research gap.	Paragraphs became more sequential and less repetitive.
Organisation revision	Paragraph unity	Students reduced overlapping ideas and ensured each paragraph had a clear function.	Each paragraph contributed a distinct idea to the background section.
Language editing	Grammar and sentence clarity	Students corrected grammatical errors and improved sentence construction.	Revised sentences became clearer, more accurate, and easier to understand.
Language editing	Academic vocabulary and tone	Students replaced informal expressions with more formal academic language.	Writing became more precise and appropriate for thesis writing.
Proofreading	Mechanics and formatting	Students corrected punctuation, spelling, capitalization, citation, and formatting errors.	Final drafts showed fewer surface-level errors and better presentation.
Whole cycle	Writing confidence and independence	Students became more aware of how to revise and improve their own writing.	Reflections showed greater confidence and responsibility in writing.

The interpretation of Chart 2 shows that students' academic writing improved in several interconnected aspects across the stages of the draft-rewriting cycle. In the first draft stage, students improved their ability to generate and express initial ideas, even though the ideas were still incomplete. Through content revision, their writing became clearer, more focused, and more relevant to the research problem. Students also improved their ability to use literature meaningfully, not merely as additional information but as a basis for identifying and justifying the research gap. Organisation revision contributed to better coherence, paragraph unity, and logical flow, as students learned to reduce repetition and arrange ideas more systematically. Language editing improved grammar, sentence clarity, academic vocabulary, and formal tone, while proofreading enhanced mechanical accuracy, including punctuation, spelling, formatting, and citation consistency. Overall, Chart 2 demonstrates that the draft-rewriting cycle improved both higher-order writing aspects, such as content and organisation, and lower-order aspects, such as grammar and mechanics.

Table 2. Illustrative Interview Transcript Excerpts for Research Question 2

Participant	Interview Excerpt	Improved Aspect
P1	"At first, my background was too general. After revising the content, I could focus more on the problem of my study."	Content clarity
P4	"I learned that every paragraph must have a different function. I deleted some repeated sentences because they had the same meaning."	Paragraph unity
P7	"The organisation revision helped me arrange my writing better. Now the background starts from the general issue, then previous studies, then the gap."	Coherence and logical flow
P10	"I used to put previous studies only to make the background longer. After feedback, I understood how to use them to show the research gap."	Literature-to-gap connection
P13	"My grammar was still weak, but language editing helped me correct many sentences and use more academic words."	Grammar and academic

Participant	Interview Excerpt	Improved Aspect
P16	"Proofreading made me more careful. I checked punctuation, references, and spelling before submitting the final draft."	vocabulary Mechanics and citation accuracy
P20	"The stages made writing easier because I knew what to revise first. I became more confident to improve my own draft."	Writing confidence and autonomy

The interview excerpts in Table 2 further explain how these improvements occurred from the students' perspectives. The participants described specific changes in their writing, such as making the background more focused, deleting repeated ideas, arranging paragraphs more logically, using previous studies to support the research gap, and correcting grammar and citation errors. These statements indicate that students became more aware of the purpose of each stage in the writing process. Importantly, the excerpts also show improvement in students' confidence and autonomy. One participant stated that the stages made writing easier because they knew what to revise first, suggesting that the cycle reduced confusion and helped students manage academic writing more independently. In the context of private universities, where students may have diverse levels of English proficiency and academic preparation, this finding is significant because it shows that draft-rewriting cycles provide clear, manageable, and supportive steps for improving thesis writing. Therefore, Table 2 confirms that the cycle contributed not only to textual improvement but also to students' reflective awareness and responsibility as academic writers.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that draft-rewriting cycles helped EFL pre-service teachers develop more effective introduction or background sections by transforming academic writing from a single-product task into a staged, reflective, and pedagogically guided process. This result confirms earlier studies which argue that EFL academic writing difficulties are not limited to grammar or vocabulary, but also involve idea development, argument organization, rhetorical awareness, and the ability to connect prior studies with a clear research gap (Ali & Zayid, 2022; Alshammari, 2020; Anaktototy, 2023; Zhang & Kang, 2022). In the present study, students' first drafts commonly contained general ideas, unclear problem statements, weak literature integration, and limited logical flow. This finding is consistent with Ali and Zayid (2022), who found that students at the early stage of writing research projects often experience difficulty in articulating the research problem and organizing the background of the study. Similarly, Alshammari (2020) emphasizes that EFL writing instruction should not only train students to produce correct sentences but also help them understand how academic texts are constructed. The current findings extend these studies by showing that the background of the study section requires a specific pedagogical intervention because it demands the integration of context, problem, literature, gap, and research significance.

The first draft stage was found to be important because it allowed students to express their initial ideas and revealed their actual writing problems. Although students' early drafts were often broad and incomplete, this stage served as a diagnostic foundation for further revision. This supports process-oriented views of writing which emphasize that writing development begins with generating ideas rather than producing an immediately polished text (Barreda-Parra et al., 2023; Cunha, 2020). The finding also confirms Bhowmik's (2021) argument that EFL writing instruction should position writing as a learning process, not merely as a final product. In this study, the first draft

gave lecturers and students a concrete text to discuss, revise, and improve. Thus, the first draft was not treated as a failure, but as an essential starting point for academic development. This extends previous writing pedagogy research by demonstrating how the first draft can function as a formative tool in thesis writing, particularly in helping students recognize the gap between their intended meaning and the actual clarity of their written text.

The content revision stage helped students clarify the research problem, strengthen the relevance of the background, and connect the topic with previous studies. This finding confirms Lenis et al. (2020), who argue that students writing thesis projects need structured support to develop the content and purpose of their academic texts. It is also in line with Pavez and Galdames-Fernandois (2022), who emphasize the importance of genre-based pedagogy in helping students understand the rhetorical function of academic sections. In the present study, content revision helped students move from merely introducing a topic to explaining why the topic was significant and what problem needed investigation. This finding is important because many EFL students tend to make their background sections descriptive rather than argumentative. The cycle encouraged them to revise vague claims, add relevant contextual information, and use literature as evidence. Therefore, the findings extend previous research by showing that content revision is especially valuable for developing students' ability to construct a problem-based background of the study.

The organisation revision stage improved students' coherence, paragraph unity, and logical progression of ideas. Before revision, students often arranged their background sections with scattered ideas, repeated statements, or unclear movement from general context to specific gap. After organisation revision, they became more capable of sequencing ideas from broad issues, to previous studies, to research gaps, and finally to research objectives. This finding supports studies on cohesion and rhetorical organization in EFL writing, which show that EFL learners often struggle with cohesion, transitions, and the logical arrangement of academic discourse (Bui et al., 2021; Zhang & Kang, 2022). It also confirms Gilquin's (2023) claim that differences in exposure to English discourse influence learners' ability to use complex academic structures. However, the present study adds a more pedagogical dimension by showing that organisation problems can be reduced when students revise their texts through a focused stage. Organisation revision did not simply require students to "make the text better"; it gave them a clear rhetorical direction for arranging ideas and reducing overlap. This suggests that explicit attention to structure is necessary in EFL thesis writing instruction.

The findings also show that language editing contributed to better grammar, vocabulary, sentence clarity, and academic tone. This result is consistent with Yang et al. (2022), who argue that syntactic complexity, accuracy, and fluency should be treated as interconnected dimensions of L2 writing development. In this study, language editing helped students revise informal expressions, improve sentence construction, and use more appropriate academic vocabulary. This confirms Al-Khulaidi and Abdulkhalek's (2022) view that L2 academic writing problems require systematic intervention because students often need support in both content and linguistic accuracy. However, the findings also suggest that language editing is most effective when it follows content and organisation revision. If students focus on grammar too early, they may produce linguistically correct sentences without a clear academic argument. This finding extends previous research by emphasizing the importance of sequencing in the draft-rewriting cycle. The students' writing improved more meaningfully when they first clarified what they wanted to say, then organized it logically, and only afterward refined the language.

Proofreading improved students' awareness of mechanics, formatting, punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and citation consistency. Although proofreading is often viewed

as a surface-level activity, the findings show that it played an important role in developing students' responsibility for the final quality of their academic manuscripts. This supports Conohuilla (2021), who highlights the value of structured pedagogical strategies in university academic writing, including the use of revision and editing practices to improve writing accuracy. It also aligns with Cortés and Cunha (2022), who found that writing-support tools and editing assistance can contribute to students' writing process when used critically. In the present study, proofreading helped students identify errors they had previously overlooked, especially in punctuation and citation format. This suggests that proofreading should not be separated from the broader writing process. Instead, it should be treated as the final stage of academic refinement, where students learn to evaluate their own writing before submission.

Another important finding is that draft-rewriting cycles improved students' reflective awareness, confidence, and autonomy. Students reported that the staged process made writing more manageable because they knew what to revise at each step. This confirms previous studies emphasizing that feedback-rich and process-based writing instruction can foster learner autonomy and writing confidence (Bhowmik, 2021; Waluyo, 2023; Zhai & Razali, 2023). The finding also supports Al-Khulaidi and Abdulkhalek (2022), who note that students' academic writing problems are often connected to their lack of confidence and limited awareness of revision strategies. In this study, the cycle reduced confusion because students did not have to revise content, structure, grammar, and mechanics simultaneously. Instead, they could focus on one writing dimension at a time. This staged support is particularly important in private university contexts, where students may come from diverse educational and linguistic backgrounds and may have different levels of preparation for academic writing.

The role of feedback in the draft-rewriting cycle also confirms previous research on written corrective feedback, peer feedback, and online feedback in ESL/EFL writing. Mao et al. (2024) show that written corrective feedback can support L2 writing development when it is meaningful and connected to classroom practice. Lv et al. (2021) similarly report that online feedback has positive effects on ESL/EFL writing, while Cao et al. (2022) highlight the benefits of online peer feedback for revision quality and learner reflection. The current study supports these findings because students' improvements were closely related to their responses to feedback during content revision, organisation revision, language editing, and proofreading. However, this study also extends previous work by showing that feedback becomes more pedagogically useful when it is distributed across different stages of the writing process. Rather than giving all comments at once, lecturers can provide focused feedback at each stage, such as comments on problem clarity during content revision, paragraph flow during organisation revision, and grammar accuracy during language editing.

The findings also contribute to the literature on genre-based and process-genre approaches to EFL writing. Waluyo (2023) and Zhai and Razali (2023) emphasize that genre-based approaches help students understand the structure, purpose, and discourse expectations of academic texts. The present study supports this view by showing that the draft-rewriting cycle helped students understand the rhetorical role of the background section. Students learned that a background section should not merely provide general information but should establish context, present a problem, review relevant studies, identify a gap, and justify the study. This finding extends genre-based writing research by applying it specifically to the thesis background section in private university contexts. It also suggests that process and genre approaches should be integrated: students need both knowledge of the expected structure and opportunities to revise their texts progressively.

Although the findings mostly confirm previous studies, they also offer a nuanced perspective. Some studies on writing support and technology emphasize the role of

automated writing tools or online feedback systems in improving students' writing (Conohuilla, 2021; Cortés & Cunha, 2022; Lv et al., 2021). The present study does not contradict these findings, but it suggests that tools and feedback are most effective when embedded in a clear pedagogical cycle. In other words, technology or feedback alone may not be sufficient if students do not understand what aspect of writing they need to revise. The draft-rewriting cycle provides the structure within which feedback, reflection, and revision become meaningful. Therefore, this study extends the existing body of knowledge by demonstrating that the effectiveness of writing support depends not only on the availability of feedback but also on how revision is sequenced, scaffolded, and connected to the rhetorical demands of academic writing.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that draft-rewriting cycles are effective in helping EFL pre-service teachers develop more effective introduction or background sections in academic writing. Through the stages of first draft, content revision, organisation revision, language editing, and proofreading, students were able to transform broad, unclear, and weakly supported drafts into more focused, coherent, and academically acceptable background sections. The first draft enabled students to express initial ideas and reveal their writing difficulties; content revision helped them clarify the research problem and strengthen relevance; organisation revision improved logical flow and paragraph unity; language editing enhanced grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, sentence clarity, and academic tone; and proofreading improved mechanics, formatting, and citation consistency. These findings indicate that the draft-rewriting cycle did not only improve the quality of students' written products but also developed their awareness of academic writing as a recursive and reflective process.

The study also concludes that draft-rewriting cycles are pedagogically valuable in private university contexts because they provide clear, manageable, and supportive stages for students with diverse educational and linguistic backgrounds. The cycle helped students reduce writing confusion, respond more meaningfully to feedback, and become more confident and independent in revising their own thesis manuscripts. By focusing specifically on the background of the study section, this research contributes to EFL writing pedagogy by showing how structured revision can support students in establishing research context, explaining significance, integrating literature, identifying gaps, and presenting research objectives. Therefore, lecturers in EFL higher education settings are encouraged to integrate draft-rewriting cycles into thesis writing instruction, particularly for students who need systematic guidance in developing academic argumentation, coherence, and language accuracy.

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DECLARATION OF USING AI TOLLS

The authors declare that artificial intelligence tools were used only to support language refinement, grammatical checking, academic style improvement, and manuscript organization. The AI tools were not used to generate research data, manipulate findings,

replace researcher interpretation, or alter participants' responses. All data analysis, theme development, interpretation of findings, and conclusions were conducted by the authors based on interview data, reflective journals, and thesis manuscript analysis. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, originality, and ethical standards of the manuscript. The use of AI tools was limited to editorial assistance and did not influence the research results.

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