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## The Role of Volition in Graduate Students' Academic Writing

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### Highlights

Amidst the hardship, motivation is not sufficient to drive students during task completion.

**ABSTRACT:** Due to Covid-19 outbreak, students and teachers experience a rapid shift from conventional to online learning which requires students to be more self-regulated learners. The purpose of this study is to discover how graduate students remain focused and keep devoting effort in academic writing task completion. This research employed a qualitative study involving 13 graduate students of the English Education Master Program of a private university in Indonesia. Data were collected by distributing questionnaire and conducting interview. The data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics. Further, open coding techniques were utilized to examine the interview data. There are three major findings drawn in this study, namely, volitional strategies used by students in the academic writing task, persistence amid pandemic situation, and the role of volition in maintaining students' motivation. The themes describe how students show their determination during the goal-achievement process of academic writing assignments. Students frequently encounter hardships in their learning process which might distance themselves from accomplishing the learning demands. This study shed the light on fruitful merits of volition, particularly in driving students to stay focused despite challenges or distracting situation.

**Keywords:** volition, volition strategies, academic writing, online learning

## Introduction

Writing is one of the productive skills which demands students to express their ideas and generate a written product. Thus, writing is deemed as a complex process since writers generally engage in several stages, namely, goal setting, ideas construction, and diction selection processes to convey purposeful ideas (MacArthur, Philippakos, & Graham, 2016). Within the arduous and challenging process, it cannot be denied that writing is an ability which needs extensive time to be developed. Despite its' complexity, writing is a prominent skill which should be cultivated by EFL learners, particularly college students.

Frankly speaking, students frequently encounter various impediments in the process of accomplishing their writing tasks. The main obstacle for EFL students is language. English becomes one of the barriers for them in expressing their ideas. "Creating a good piece of composition in the native language is hard work, let alone in the foreign language like English" (Setyowati & Sukmawan, 2016, p. 366). Jwa (2019) argues that EFL students frequently encounter impediments in writing ideas straightforwardly. Further, lack of grammar knowledge, inappropriate diction, and inaccurate punctuation become EFL learners'

shortcomings in academic writing tasks (Zaki & Yunus, 2015). Another crucial hindrance faced by EFL students is time management. Students tend to procrastinate doing their writing tasks (Diasti & Mbato, 2020) and accomplish these tasks in a restricted time frame. EFL students frequently avoid themselves from completing the assignment to do other enjoyable activities (Girguère, Sirois, & Vaswani, 2016). As a result, they often attain low academic achievement.

Dealing with the hardships, the majority of EFL students perceive writing as a demotivating task. Hence, EFL students inculcate a negative attitude towards writing (Setyowati & Sukmawan, 2016). It is suggested that students have to establish robust motivation as one of the successful writing achievement factors is determined by a long-lasting motivation. Motivation will assist students tackle the academic writing difficulties (Nasihah & Cahyono, 2017). Moreover, motivation would refrain students from procrastination behavior (Bäulke, Eckerlein, & Dresel, 2018). Indeed, the interplay between motivation and academic writing attainment could not be neglected. Yet, motivation might be fruitless if students do not devote great endeavor and perseverance to attain their writing goals. Therefore, volition is used to protect students' goals from other disruptive learning events that potentially deteriorate their ongoing learning processes.

Volition has become one of the most discussed topics by educational researchers. Sizable research has highlighted the fundamental role of volition in the learning process. Deimann and Bastiaens (2010) explored the role of volition in distance education by conducting a longitudinal study. Distance education provides flexibility to the students in which they could attend the class while taking care of other activities. However, they stated that students often faced various challenges in distance education such as difficulties in controlling negative emotion, fatigue of a heavy workload, or some family issues. The results showed students endeavoured to accomplish the tasks despite obstacles that they face. They concluded that volition provided potential benefits for the students, specifically to engage students in a more independent learning as well as eliminate emerging difficulties during the learning process.

In another study, Damaianti (2017) discovered that volition strategies engaged students in the reading activity. She reported the role of volition in affecting students' motivation in reading. The findings indicated that volitional strategies enhanced students' motivation in reading activity. As a result, students were able to keep working on reading tasks even though they encountered obstacles. In a similar vein, a study conducted by Lomi and Mbato (2019) investigated students' volition in a public speaking class. They found that students experienced anxiety in their speaking practice. Amid this learning obstacles, students had a strong determination to keep practicing their speaking skills persistently. This study concluded that students' awareness of self-control supported them to exhibit more satisfying speaking performance.

A correlational study conducted by Birgili, Seggie, and Kiziltepe (2018) explored the relationship between volitional strategies and academic achievement in a flipped learning environment. This study presented that there was a significant relationship between volitional strategies and students' academic achievement. The results showed that students maintained their efforts by adhering to their well-planned study schedule. To tackle academic difficulties, students used the help-seeking strategy in which they discussed their learning issues with

friends or significant others. In short, this research also reemphasized that students who utilized volitional strategies would attain satisfying academic achievement compare to those who did not employ volitional strategies.

As elaborated previously, the link between volition and graduate students' academic writing has not been investigated. This study was undertaken to shed more light concerning volition in the goal-achievement process. This present research focuses on students' volition in academic writing task completion amid the pandemic situation. Covid-19 brings immense effect on humans' life, especially in education. The learning activity is shifted to online learning mode. Online learning is considered as an adaptation to the Covid-19 outbreak (Sujarwo, Sukmawati, Akhiruddin, Ridwan, & Siradjuddin, 2020). Accordingly, teachers have to explore various kinds of online platforms or applications to support learning activity. By conducting the learning and teaching process through online mode, students are allowed to access learning material at anytime and anywhere they want. In other words, online learning provides flexibility for students. Hence, students have to be autonomous and self-regulated learners in which they have to be responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and regulating their learning process. Students frequently experience impediments or challenges in online learning activities, such as, the tendency to procrastinate, reluctance to seek for help, lack of preparation before class, and poor time management skill (Rasheed, Kamsin, & Abdullah, 2020). Therefore, volition is needed to aid students remain focused and persistent in the online learning situation. In congruence with Kuhl and Beckmann (1985), volition protects students' intention in attaining a particular goal from distractions. Volition becomes one of the pivotal aspects in goal-striving process since students are often unable to resist other lure activities. Volition encourages students to take action in the process of achieving their goals (Keller, Ucar, & Kumtepe, 2020). In relation to writing, volition insists students to work persistently when they encounter distraction situations or hardships which hamper them in goal attainment process. This study fills the gap in the literature by exploring how volition protects students from distracting situation and engage them to perform intended action related to goal-achievement behavior. A research question was formulated in this study:

*RQ1*. How did graduate students manifest their volition in academic writing task?

## Method

This current research employed qualitative study to examine how graduate students displayed their volition in academic writing, specifically to analyse students' academic writing process in an online learning. Qualitative study allows researchers to analyze and describe a phenomenon based on the participants' belief or opinion (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010). To comprehend the holistic view of the phenomenon, several instruments were utilized to collect the data, namely, questionnaire and in-depth interview.

## Participants and the context of the investigation

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The participating class was part of English Education Master's Program, henceforth called EEMP, of a reputable private university in Indonesia. EEMP embraces diversity in the learning environment as shown by the tangible evidence that EEMP students come from various regions in Indonesia, such as Sumatra, Nusa Tenggara, Java, Papua, Borneo, and even from Thailand.

This research was conducted from August to November 2020 involving 13 graduate students (4 male and 9 female) who were taking academic writing class in the academic year of 2020/2021. The majority of the participants were female aged ranging from 23-35 years old. Further, some students worked as teachers at school or non-formal English institution.

Table 1.

*Participants Demographic Profile*

Demographic Factors		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	4	31%
	Female	9	69%
Current Job	Teacher	6	46%
	Student	7	54%
Marital Status	Single	10	77%
	Married	3	23%

One of the salient tasks in academic writing class is publication. Students have to undertake research and publish at least one study to an accredited journal. This particular demand is required by The Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture through the Directorate of Higher Education in which students should publish a research article as a prerequisite to obtain a degree (Mukminin, Ali, & Ashari, 2015). The participants of this study are exposed to deal with academic writing tasks in the journey of pursuing their degree. Honing writing skill will be helpful to expand students' knowledge and enhance students' critical thinking (Wijaya & Mbato, 2020). Students have to stipulate long-term goals as academic writing tasks require extensive time to be accomplished. Furthermore, online learning requires students to be more self-regulated learners. Yet, they are likely to be easily disturbed by other captivating activities which might alienate them from task completion. It can also be stated that students oftentimes encounter obstacles in writing process such as lack of motivation, tendency to procrastinate task completion, and disguised writing goals (Wijaya & Mbato, 2020). Therefore, volition is helpful to prompt students to remain focused in completing writing assignment. This present study attempted to discover how students displayed their volition in academic writing tasks despite challenges and distracting situations found in an online learning.

### Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed two different instruments, namely questionnaire and interview. The questionnaire was adopted from Mbato (2013) which encompasses three aspects of volition including goal-setting, action control, and environmental control. The questionnaire was distributed on the first of October 2020 through *Google Form*. The participants (n=13) would respond to a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1="strongly disagree" to 5="strongly agree".

Further, the researchers conducted interview two weeks after distributing the questionnaire to gain deeper understanding on students' experience dealing with academic writing task in this online learning situation. The participants chosen in this interview session were selected purposefully. To select the interview participants, the researchers determined several criteria, such as students who had other responsibilities (e.g., working or taking care of the family), students who showed strong and low volition based on the questionnaire result. The interview guideline was framed by the work of Mbato (2013), Zaki and Yunus (2015); Keller *et al.*, (2020) who discussed about volition and academic writing difficulties. The interviews were conducted one-on-one in which the researchers addressed specific questions to each participant one by one at a time (Creswell, 2012). The researchers utilized structured interview, allowing researchers to "ask the same set of questions" to the participants (Ary *et al.*, 2010, p. 438). Due to the Indonesian Government's regulation facing Covid-19 outbreak, the researchers conducted phone interviews. The interviews lasted thirty minutes for each participant and audio-recorded.

The data were analyzed through several stages. First, the data obtained from questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistic. The data were calculated by focusing on the mean score of degree agreement for each statement. Second, the researchers transcribed the audio-recorded interview to alleviate analyzing the data. Then, the researchers organized the data through open coding. Open coding is accomplished by organizing data in the same pattern or theme (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 173). The next step is labeling the patterns in the same themes, namely, academic writing difficulties, coping strategies, volition in the midst of pandemic situation, and volition when the going gets hard.

## Findings and Discussion

### Findings

This subchapter reports results from the findings of students' questionnaire and students' interview session. The overarching finding of this study is that the students demonstrate strong volition in academic writing task despite hardships or distracting situation.

Table 2.

*Students' Volition: Action control*

Number	Statements	Mean (out of 5, n=13)
1	In my writing process, I direct all my attention to what I am writing.	4.00
2	I am the type of person that is persistent in achieving my writing goals.	3.92
3	Overall, I am the type of person that will keep trying until I achieve my writing goals.	4.31

The data from the questionnaire in Table 2 showed that students had tendency to keep working in spite of academic writing difficulties that they faced. By definition, these students kept putting tangible efforts to accomplish their academic writing tasks. Instead of ceasing their writing processes, students devoted their effort to finish their academic writing assignments. The majority of the students experienced the same writing obstacles, specifically related to writing skills. They stated:

*I often face obstacles in my writing. Those are related to grammatical complexity and lexical richness. (P1)*

*During my writing process, I find some difficulties related to diction and grammar. I also spend too much time putting my thoughts to proper words. (P2)*

*There are several difficulties that I encounter when writing. First, it deals with my own writing skill or competency. I would say I have a difficulty with academic writing since I lack familiarity with it and also my academic words are limited. (P3)*

Further, students had different coping strategies employed to tackle the impediments. The students admitted:

*I read some resources from the published academic writing article in which I can learn how the qualified authors apply the grammatical complexity in their writings. While to deal with the lexical richness, I try to use dictionaries for assisting me in finding the words variation. (P1)*

*To deal with my academic problem, I always try to find some additional online sources to back up my writing. (P3)*

*For my own writing skill, I read more journal articles and watch video tutorials on YouTube to enrich and learn how others write academically. By doing so, my vocabulary is extended and I can apply to improve my writing.(P4)*

*I enrich my vocabulary by reading articles. I also ask friends to proof read my writing which is mostly concerning about the effectiveness of my sentences. (P6)*

Table 3.

*Students' Volition: Environmental control*

Number	Statements	Mean (out of 5, n=13)
1	3 I am the type of person that is able to protect my writing goals from distractions and temptations.	3.23
2	I can handle negative peer pressures in relation to my writing goals.	3.77
3	My surrounding will not prevent me from achieving my writing goals.	3.23

The results showed in Table 3 describe that students have high tendency to keep working although they encounter difficulties. Moreover, students showed a good balance in accomplishing their academic tasks and completing other responsibilities. Students' strong volition was exemplified by Participant 1:

*As a mother of two, it is hard for me to stay focused on my writing completion since at the same time I have to deal with other important tasks. Sometimes, I have to procrastinate to finish my writing accomplishment because nurturing my two kids and taking care of my family are still my priorities. This pandemic has forced me to do many other tasks. I have to manage my time more efficiently by planning my own daily schedule, listing things to do as well as finishing targets for all my tasks. Even though it doesn't always work as I planned, but at least it helps me to be more efficient in using my time. (P1)*

Similarly, Participant 4 expressed the hardship of learning during pandemic situation. Yet, he demonstrated his volition to achieve his writing goals:

*This pandemic has become a big challenge to me in completing my writing task. Because of limited time and plenty tasks to complete be completed, time management is greatly important. I always ensure that I manage and organize my time well.(P4)*

Students determined and remained focused to attain their writing goals. They were able to keep on the right track of goal-striving process beneath distracting situation occurred in online learning. Although students oftentimes had to deal with any other activities, they were able to manage their time wisely. Those statements indicated how students regulated their time to comply the writing task demand since they had to carry out other responsibilities as well.

Table 4.

*Students' Volition: Goal-setting*

Number	Statements	Mean (out of 5, n=13)
5 1	Once I have made my goals in writing, I try to achieve them.	4.38

The findings shown in Table 4 present that the majority of the students were committed to their goal attainment process. They consistently monitored their performance to ensure whether it had directed their behaviour, attitudes, and efforts to reach their goals. The findings of this study revealed that volition provided significant merit to the students, specifically in maintaining their motivation. The students articulated how they stayed focused on completing their writing task:

*I remind my learning goals to keep me focused in doing the task. (P2)*

*When I am not motivated in completing the task, I recall again my goals, why I want to study in this university. (P5)*

*By reminding myself about the deadline (mostly) but also reminding myself that actually writing can help me to improve myself. By realizing that I will be able to write better, it helps me focus on finishing the writing task. (P6)*

Due to the hardships, one of the students would like to give up. She expressed:

*I have almost stopped accomplishing my writing task due to my tiredness and boredom but then I try to refresh my mind and encourage myself that I am able to complete my writing. (P1)*

Based on the above-mentioned statements, students realized that they had to attain their desired goals. They kept reminding themselves about their writing goals. By using goal-oriented self-talk, students will maintain or even increase their motivation whenever they encounter hardships.

## Discussion

The findings of this study show three major themes include coping strategies used by students, perseverance to complete task amid pandemic situation, and a significant role of volition in maintaining students' motivation.

### *Volition strategies used by graduate students in academic writing*

One of the major characteristics of students with strong volition is persistence to keep devoting endeavor during goal-achievement process. Volition can be defined as post decisional processes where students take actions to keep their intention in completing task (Keller *et al.*, 2020). Students will frequently encounter challenges or hardships in their daily learning basis. Hence, they have to seek an effective coping strategy towards the difficulties. Students would achieve their success in completing academic task when they are knowledgeable on how to approach the task as well as use resourceful ways in the progress of completing the task (McCaan & Turner, 2004).

Previous researcher in educational realm focuses on investigating specific reasons veering students to degrade their endeavour whenever they experience failure of challenges (see Newman, 2002). Conversely, other students demonstrate their motivation and effort to resolve the difficulties (Newman, 2002). Deimann & Bastiaens (2010) argue that volition assists students in taking actions to tackle academic problems. As seen in the interview results, students attempted to find other sources which could be used as the guideline on how to write academically. Another coping strategy was watching YouTube videos. This particular finding



is closely interlinked with the findings discovered by Mutiamiftah, Atmowardoyo, & Jabu (2018). Their findings revealed that YouTube videos provide fruitful benefits to enhance students' writing competency including dictions and the target language rules. To tackle the lack of advanced vocabulary mastery, students utilized thesaurus to find varied academic vocabulary. Further, help-seeking strategy was employed as well by students in which they asked assistance from peers or knowledgeable others. The use of help-seeking strategy presents that students are aware of their inability to deal with difficulty of a particular task on their own (Newman, 2002). These findings were echoed well with Mbato and Cendra's (2019) idea that supportive learning environment will encourage students to ask help whenever they needed. Students might increase their academic achievement if they obtain an effective assistance from teachers (Koc & Liu, 2016). Therefore, teachers' role is needed to create supportive learning environment in which students feel more courageous to be proactive help seekers.

### ***Persistence in the midst of pandemic***

COVID-19 pandemic affects every aspect in human life, particularly education. Due to this pandemic, schools all over the world shut down the learning activities to prevent the spread of the virus (Toquero, 2020). As a result, both teachers and students experience a rapid shift from conventional learning to online learning. Online learning, as a part of distance learning, is believed to be one of the effective solutions to this ongoing global life issue (Sujarwo *et al.*, 2020). Online learning provides students with the convenience to access learning material without being demarcated by time and sites (Dhawan, 2020). Due to the flexibility of online learning, students relatively allocate their time to do other enjoyable activities. Rasheed *et al.*, (2020) mention that one of the challenges in online learning is students' poor time management skill. Distracting situations are also acknowledged to hamper students from completing academic tasks. As a result, students tend to procrastinate the task completion (Rasheed *et al.*, 2020). Corona virus has spread massively and rapidly in Indonesia since March 2020. The Education Minister of Indonesia swiftly closes schools and universities to retard the deployment of the virus. The learning process is conducted through online mode. Higher education institutions are better prepared to face this alteration. Indeed, this pandemic situation brings a new challenge for students. However, the pandemic should not lower their effort to achieve their desired goals. Surrounded by distracting situation, students should be able to take intended actions related to goal-striving process. In this study, volition assists learners to stay on the right track when they face distraction as well as heighten their effort to reach their desired learning goals.

### ***Maintaining students' motivation***

Volition plays a significant role in students' performance since it drives students to carry out strategic actions and maintain their effort in goal-striving process (McCann & Gracia, 1999). One of volitional control strategies proposed by Heckhausen & Kuhl (1985) is motivational control. Motivational control is needed to maintain or increase students' motivation whenever they encounter adversity (McCann & Gracia, 1999). Motivation control strategy could elevate students' attempt to accomplish their goals. Volition appeared to enhance students' motivation in task completion when the going got tough. Students have to be mindful that they could not continuously rely on knowledgeable or more capable others to support their learning processes. Due to this reason, they should cultivate a more robust volition to keep working persistently and preserve their main focus on their goal-striving processes (Mbato, 2013). The strategy used by students to enhance their motivation was goal-oriented self-talk. Goal-oriented self-talk enables students to highlight reasons of their persistence in completing a certain task (Wolters,

2003). These findings are in line with (Husman *et al.*, 2000) who declares that volition aids students enhance their motivation and engagement in goal-achievement process.

### Conclusion

This study scrutinized how volition helped students tackle academic difficulties and challenges occurred in online learning. The major hardship faced by students was related to the distracting situation. Students frequently exhibited procrastination behavior since they had to accomplish other pivotal responsibilities. To cope with this obstacle, volition had been proved as one of positive learning behaviours helping students to maintain their long-term focus and carry out supportive actions to fulfil their desired learning objectives. Further, students' motivation often decreased whenever their going got tough. Students demonstrated their resilience as well through implementing a goal-oriented self-talk strategy. As a result, students elevated their motivation and effort to attain their directed goals. Volition provided significant effects in assisting the students attain their desired goals by promoting them to dedicate more consistent and durable learning endeavour. In relation to the benefits promoted by volition, students are well suggested to possess a strong volition in their learning processes. Students have to be knowledgeable about varied volition strategies which can guide them to create more meaningful learning processes and become long-life learners who are willing to confront various learning hurdles.

This present study cannot be detached from a number of shortcomings. First, the results of the study could not be generalized since it was conducted in a small scope. Second, the aim of the study is merely focused on investigating how students displayed their volition in academic writing tasks. Due to these drawbacks, future research is advocated to conduct studies with interconnected variables by investigating in-depth correlations among volition, procrastination behaviour, and academic achievement.

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