MENTAL TRANSLATION IN THE WRITING PROCESS: A CASE STUDY OF INDONESIAN EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Mental translation, the internal process of formulating ideas in a first language (L1) before expressing them in a second language (L2), remains a common yet underexplored strategy among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. In Indonesia, where academic writing in English is a key component of university education, students frequently rely on this process, particularly during complex writing tasks. This study investigates how Indonesian EFL students experience and perceive mental translation during English writing. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected from 60 students at ITB STIKOM Bali through open-ended questionnaires and follow-up interviews. Thematic analysis revealed that students often begin the writing process by thinking in Bahasa Indonesia, especially when working on formal or cognitively demanding texts. While many find mental translation helpful for organizing thoughts and reducing anxiety, it also contributes to slower writing speed, overthinking, and a reliance on digital translation tools. The study draws on Flower and Hayes's (1981) Cognitive Process Theory of Writing, Kroll and Stewart's (1994) Revised Hierarchical Model, and Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory to interpret mental translation not as a sign of linguistic deficiency, but as a mediational strategy that supports meaning-making. The findings highlight the need for more inclusive EFL writing instruction that acknowledges mental translation as a valid part of students' cognitive process, while also encouraging gradual development of direct composition in English.
Keywords: mental translation, EFL writing, Indonesian university students

INTRODUCTION

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings such as Indonesia, university students often face significant cognitive challenges when writing in English. One frequently observed but underexplored phenomenon in this context is mental translation, the process of formulating thoughts in the first language (L1), in this case Bahasa Indonesia, before converting them into English. While this strategy is often used intuitively, its role in the writing process and its implications for language development remain poorly understood, particularly from the learners' perspective. From a psycholinguistic standpoint, mental translation is part of how bilinguals process language during complex tasks. According to the Revised Hierarchical Model (Kroll & Stewart, 1994), beginning and intermediate L2 users often rely on their L1 conceptual system to access and construct L2 output. This mental routing is especially evident in academic writing, where learners must generate ideas, organize thoughts, and choose appropriate linguistic structures simultaneously. For many Indonesian EFL students, the default cognitive pattern is to first think in Indonesian, then mentally translate those thoughts into English.

Furthermore, based on the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981), writing is a recursive and problem-solving activity involving planning, translating, and reviewing. In the EFL context, the "translating" phase often includes mental conversion from L1, which can affect fluency, coherence, and complexity. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) further suggests that mental translation serves as a mediational tool, a scaffold that helps learners access meaning through their familiar linguistic resources rather than a deficiency. Despite its importance, mental translation in EFL writing remains under-researched in Indonesia, with most existing studies focusing on output errors or pedagogical interventions rather than learners' cognitive experiences. This study is novel because it foregrounds the learner's own voice, revealing the nuanced and strategic ways in which Indonesian students engage with their first language to construct English texts. Understanding mental translation as

a complex cognitive strategy, not merely a barrier, offers fresh insights into EFL writing processes.

The process of mental translation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing has been widely investigated, particularly in contexts similar to Indonesian university settings where English writing proficiency is a critical learning outcome. Several studies emphasize that Indonesian EFL learners frequently rely on translation from their first language (Bahasa Indonesia) when composing English texts. Putrawan, Mustika, and Riadi (2020) found that many students view translation positively as a bridge to better understanding and producing English. Similarly, Murtisari (2020) revealed that advanced students use translation strategically in their writing process to enhance clarity and accuracy, although they also recognize its limitations. Flower and Hayes's (1981) cognitive process theory underpins much of the understanding of writing as a recursive, non-linear activity involving planning, translating, and reviewing stages. Rahmawati (2020) applied this framework to Indonesian graduate students, finding that mental translation functions predominantly in the translating phase, where ideas formulated in Bahasa Indonesia are converted into English. The cognitive load of this translation process often impacts writing fluency, as supported by Moelyono et al. (2022), who documented that students' use of translation tools like Google Translate further complicates their mental translation experience by introducing reliance on technology rather than internal language competence.

Writing anxiety and its relationship with mental translation have also been explored. Pambayun (2024) highlighted that anxiety frequently stems from students' lack of confidence in direct English thought production, which reinforces mental translation habits. The anxiety is intensified by perceived errors or difficulties in finding appropriate English expressions without reverting to Bahasa Indonesia. This emotional factor suggests a complex interaction between cognitive and affective domains in EFL writing. A newer perspective involves translanguaging, which recognizes the fluid use of multiple languages in the learning process. Khairunnisa and Lukmana (2020) and Retnowaty (2020) argued that translanguaging, including mental translation, can serve as an effective scaffolding strategy in Indonesian EFL classrooms. Their findings suggest that encouraging controlled translanguaging can enhance idea generation and prewriting, thus facilitating smoother transitions from L1 to L2 writing.

Muslem, Syukrina, and Wahidah (2021) examined the specific difficulties Indonesian EFL students face in translating texts, identifying lexical gaps, grammatical challenges, and cultural differences as major barriers. These issues necessitate the deployment of various compensatory strategies, including literal translation, paraphrasing, and code-switching. Ngawul, Semiun, and Napitupulu (2020) echoed these findings, emphasizing the need for explicit instruction in translation strategies to better equip students. Comparative research by Fajrina (2021) demonstrated that Indonesian EFL students' writing strategies differ significantly from native English writers, with a stronger reliance on mental translation and prewriting stages that incorporate Bahasa Indonesia. These differences underline the urgency for tailored pedagogical approaches that acknowledge the centrality of mental translation in Indonesian learners' writing development.

The reviewed literature consistently points to mental translation as a central, though double-edged, strategy in Indonesian EFL writing. While it aids in bridging linguistic gaps and supporting idea formulation, it can also hinder fluency and increase writing anxiety if overused or unmanaged. Incorporating translanguaging practices and focused strategy training may mitigate such challenges. This synthesis underscores the importance of context-sensitive teaching approaches that integrate cognitive, affective, and sociolinguistic dimensions in EFL writing education.

The urgency of this study lies in the growing demand for English-medium academic writing skills in Indonesian higher education, where students often struggle with the cognitive

load of second-language writing. Without acknowledging the role of mental translation, educators risk overlooking important learner strategies and cognitive realities, thus missing opportunities to support more effective and autonomous writing development. This study will focus on students at ITB STIKOM Bali, as one of the universities representing Indonesian EFL learners, to gain insight into their mental translation experiences during English writing tasks. In light of these considerations, this study explores the following research question, how do Indonesian EFL university students describe their experience of using mental translation during English writing tasks?

METHOD

This qualitative study employed a case study approach (Yin, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to explore the experiences of Indonesian EFL students regarding mental translation during English writing tasks. The participants consisted of 60 students from ITB STIKOM Bali, a university where English is taught as a foreign language and writing skills are a key component of the curriculum. Purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015) was used to select students who were actively engaged in academic writing courses and had intermediate to advanced English proficiency levels, ensuring they had sufficient experience with writing in English while still likely to rely on their first language during the process.

Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The use of open-ended questionnaires in qualitative research is effective for gaining in-depth insights into participants' perceptions and cognitive strategies (Dörnyei, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The questionnaire focused on students' experiences of mental translation, including when and why they used it, how it influenced their writing process, and the challenges and benefits they associated with it. Using Google Forms allowed for efficient and flexible data collection from a relatively large group (Evans & Mathur, 2005).

To complement the questionnaire data and gain deeper insights, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a smaller subset of participants. This method enabled the researcher to explore individual experiences in more detail and clarify questionnaire responses, as recommended by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015). Interviews captured the complex nature of mental translation as it occurred during real writing tasks.

All data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), involving familiarization, coding, and theme development to interpret students' strategies, perceptions, and challenges. To ensure trustworthiness, the study implemented member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) during interviews and maintained an audit trail to document analytical decisions (Nowell et al., 2017). This methodological framework provided a robust understanding of how Indonesian EFL university students at ITB STIKOM Bali experienced and managed mental translation during English writing tasks, contributing valuable insights to both psycholinguistic theory and EFL writing pedagogy.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from the questionnaire and follow-up interviews with Indonesian EFL university students at ITB STIKOM Bali. The results are organized into seven key themes, each discussed with reference to existing literature and theoretical frameworks such as the Revised Hierarchical Model (Kroll & Stewart, 1994), the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981), and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978).

1. Thinking in Bahasa Indonesia as the Cognitive Starting Point

One of the clearest patterns that emerged from the data is that students predominantly begin their English writing tasks by thinking in Bahasa Indonesia. This cognitive habit aligns with the Revised Hierarchical Model (Kroll & Stewart, 1994), which proposes that early and

intermediate bilinguals access L2 (English) through the L1 (Bahasa Indonesia) conceptual system. For these learners, L1 functions as a familiar framework for organizing ideas, which are later translated mentally or literally into English. Several student responses support this process. For instance:

> "I usually think in Indonesian first to decide what I want to write, *baru setelah itu saya terjemahkan ke dalam Bahasa Inggris.*"
> [I usually think in Indonesian first to decide what I want to write, then I translate it into English.]

This response exemplifies the mental sequencing of cognitive operations: ideation happens in L1, followed by linguistic encoding in L2. Such an approach reflects the translating phase in the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981), where thoughts are constructed internally before being linguistically realized.

> Another student echoed a similar pattern:
> "*Saya nggak bisa langsung nulis pakai Bahasa Inggris. Pasti mikir dulu dalam Bahasa Indonesia, biar ngerti dulu idenya.*"
> [I can't write directly in English. I have to think in Indonesian first, to understand the idea.]

This reliance on L1 reflects what Vygotsky (1978) would consider a mediational tool, a way for learners to access and manipulate meaning within their zone of proximal development. By starting from the language they know best, students reduce cognitive overload and gain confidence in their ideas before confronting the complexities of English syntax and vocabulary.

Interestingly, the mental translation often begins during the prewriting stage, where students brainstorm or outline their arguments:

> "*Biasanya saya tulis dulu poin-poinnya dalam Bahasa Indonesia, baru setelah itu saya buat versi Inggrisnya.*"
> [I usually write down the points in Indonesian first, then I make the English version.]

This process of drafting first in L1 and then reshaping in L2 demonstrates deliberate translanguaging, where the student uses their full linguistic repertoire to achieve the academic task. Rather than being a sign of dependency, this behavior aligns with Khairunnisa & Lukmana's (2020) findings that translanguaging enhances idea clarity and content depth. However, it's important to note that this approach is not purely strategic for all students. For some, it's unavoidable or automatic, stemming from limited internalization of English grammatical structures:

> "*Pikiran saya otomatis pakai Bahasa Indonesia dulu. Kadang saya harus berhenti lama untuk cari terjemahan katanya.*"
> [My thoughts automatically come in Bahasa Indonesia. Sometimes I have to pause for a long time to find the English translation.]

This reveals a tension between cognitive ease and linguistic struggle. While L1 facilitates initial idea generation, it can lead to disruptions during translation, particularly when English equivalents are elusive or imprecise. The translation bottleneck often results in fragmented writing flow, as supported by Moelyono et al. (2022), who noted that frequent

switching between languages can interrupt writing fluency. Still, many students report that this cognitive starting point in Bahasa Indonesia helps maintain coherence and message clarity, particularly when dealing with complex topics. They find it easier to plan, evaluate, and restructure arguments before tackling English expression:

> *"Kalau saya langsung mikir pakai Bahasa Inggris, kadang bingung sendiri. Tapi kalau pakai Bahasa Indonesia dulu, saya bisa lebih yakin sama isi tulisan saya."*
> [If I try thinking directly in English, I get confused. But when I start with Bahasa Indonesia, I feel more confident in the content of my writing.]

This perspective underscores the affective dimension of mental translation: L1 serves not only as a linguistic support but also as a psychological safety net, reducing anxiety and promoting self-assurance. Thinking in Bahasa Indonesia serves as a familiar starting point for many students, helping them organize their ideas clearly and feel more secure as they begin to write. Although this habit can sometimes slow them down when switching to English, it actually reflects a thoughtful and strategic way of managing the challenges of writing in a second language. Rather than viewing it as a weakness, educators should recognize mental translation as a natural and useful part of the learning process, especially in academic settings where expressing meaningful ideas is just as important as using correct grammar.

2. Mental Translation as a Mediational Strategy Rather Than a Deficit

Rather than viewing mental translation as a weakness or interference in English writing, many students describe it as an intentional and productive strategy. It acts as a bridge that connects their L1 (Bahasa Indonesia) thinking to their L2 (English) writing process, allowing them to access deeper ideas, structure their arguments, and reduce anxiety when expressing complex thoughts.

This perspective aligns with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which highlights how cognitive tools, like language mediate learning. For these learners, mental translation serves as a scaffold, supporting their journey toward independent expression in English.

One student shared:
> *"Pikiran saya akan bekerja dua kali, pertama menggunakan Bahasa Indonesia, setelahnya menuangkan dengan Bahasa Inggris."*
> [My mind works twice, first in Bahasa Indonesia, then I express it in English.]

These expressions illustrate how translation helps students access their full range of thoughts before rephrasing them in English, echoing Khairunnisa & Lukmana (2020) who argue that translanguaging, including mental translation should be seen as an effective cognitive scaffold, not an obstacle. Some participants emphasized the value of translating meaning, not just words:

> *"Dalam pikiran saya, saat menerjemahkan tulisan dari Indonesia ke Inggris, saya tidak hanya sekadar mengalihkan kata demi kata. Saya memaknai konteks dan esensi utama, lalu mencari ungkapan yang wajar dalam bahasa Inggris, memastikan grammar benar dan nuansa terjaga."*
> [In my mind, when translating from Indonesian to English, I don't just shift words one by one. I grasp the context and main point, then find natural English expressions, ensuring correct grammar and preserved nuance.]

Another student candidly wrote:

> *"Sangat membantu meskipun kadang ada beberapa yang bingung cara menyusunnya dalam Bahasa Inggris."*
> [It really helps, even though sometimes I get confused about how to structure it in English.]

These accounts show that for many EFL learners, mental translation is a mediational strategy that promotes idea clarity, reduces cognitive load, and gives students the confidence to engage in writing tasks. While it may slow down writing at times, it facilitates depth of thought and expression, essential components of academic writing.

Thus, mental translation should not be pathologized or discouraged outright. Instead, it can be acknowledged as a transitional phase that enables learners to internalize English language structures at their own pace. With continued exposure, support, and practice, students may rely on it less frequently, but its role as a thinking tool in early stages is undeniable and valid.

3. Impact on Fluency and Writing Speed

Mental translation, while helpful for organizing ideas, often has a noticeable impact on the fluency and speed of students' writing. Many participants in this study acknowledged that the habit of thinking first in Bahasa Indonesia and then translating into English tends to slow down their writing process. This delay is not necessarily a sign of cognitive weakness, but rather an indication of the complex mental effort involved in cross-linguistic processing. One student admitted:

> *"Terkadang membuat waktu pengerjaan tugas menjadi lama karena harus berpikir dua kali."*
> [Sometimes it makes doing the task take longer because I have to think twice.]

Another participant echoed a similar experience:

"Honestly, I'm getting slower. Like, I wanna write something but I don't know the word in English. I will think of the Indonesian word first, then try to translate in a simple way or just use Google Translate if I'm still stuck. And it takes me like forever. Also it's because I keep re-read the sentence just to make sure the tone sounds good, kinda weird lol. It's kinda frustrating sometimes."

This reflection highlights not just the cognitive effort required, but also the emotional toll that translation-related delays can bring. The student's use of tools like Google Translate, paired with constant rereading for tone and fluency, shows a deep concern for natural expression. At the same time, it reveals how mental translation can create a sense of being "stuck" or overwhelmed, especially when clarity in L1 doesn't immediately transfer into coherent L2 output. These responses suggest that mental translation requires students to pause and reflect more frequently than if they were writing directly in their first language. This additional cognitive load can create a sense of hesitation or interruption in the flow of ideas, particularly when students lack immediate access to the appropriate English vocabulary or grammar structures. At the same time, some students shared that the slowness is not entirely negative. For them, taking the time to mentally translate actually helps avoid careless mistakes and encourages them to be more thoughtful in their language use. One participant explained:

"Dengan menerjemahkan dulu di kepala, saya bisa lebih hati-hati dalam memilih kata dan struktur kalimat."
[By translating first in my head, I can be more careful in choosing words and sentence structures.]

This highlights a critical point, although fluency in writing may appear hindered from an external perspective, the slower pace can reflect a deeper engagement with the writing process. Students are not only translating but also evaluating, rephrasing, and refining their language choices to ensure clarity and appropriateness in English. Still, several students expressed a desire to overcome their reliance on translation, believing that direct thinking in English might help them write more efficiently. As one participant put it:

[Saya ingin bisa berpikir langsung dalam Bahasa Inggris agar tidak terlalu lama menulis.]
(I want to be able to think directly in English so it does not take too long to write.)

This desire indicates an awareness of the limitations of mental translation in terms of writing speed. It also reflects a natural developmental trajectory in second language acquisition, where learners move from dependence on their L1 to greater autonomy in L2 thinking and writing.

Overall, while mental translation may slow down the writing process, it should not be seen purely as an obstacle to fluency. Instead, it can be understood as a transitional strategy, one that supports idea formation and accuracy, even if it introduces moments of delay. In time, and with continued practice, students are likely to develop more automaticity in English, which will naturally enhance both fluency and speed in academic writing.

4. Writing Genres That Trigger Mental Translation

The tendency to rely on mental translation is not uniform across all writing tasks. Several students in this study indicated that specific genres or types of writing made them more likely to engage in translation from Bahasa Indonesia to English. Academic writing, particularly tasks that require explanation, argumentation, or detailed descriptions, emerged as the most common trigger.

Students explained that when dealing with complex ideas or technical topics, it felt more natural to think through their thoughts in their first language before attempting to articulate them in English. One participant shared:

"Kalau menulis esai, saya pasti pikir dulu dalam Bahasa Indonesia. Karena ide-idenya kadang susah kalau langsung dalam Bahasa Inggris."
[When writing essays, I definitely think first in Bahasa Indonesia. Because the ideas are sometimes hard if I go straight to English.]

One participant described the emotional and cognitive shift they experience when faced with formal genres:

"Hmm for me, I think the most writing task that I really rely more on translating is when I write something formal, just like essay or report. I don't know why, but when I know that I need to write something formal, honestly I get nervous hehe. I feel like I have to use 'very good English' and that makes me overthinking. But, if it's just something like chat, messages, or caption on IG story, I can just type it in English. So

yeah, just like the answer before, I think it really depends on the type of the task and also the topics."

This student underscores the interplay between language, genre expectations, and emotional factors such as anxiety and self-consciousness. The pressure to produce "very good English" in academic settings can cause students to second-guess their ideas, resulting in greater reliance on their first language to mentally draft and structure their responses. Mental translation, in this sense, becomes a coping mechanism that helps them navigate the demands of high-stakes writing. In contrast, informal genres such as texting, social media posts, or casual conversation allow for more spontaneous English use, with minimal or no translation. These genres are perceived as low-risk and more forgiving, which reduces the cognitive pressure and allows students to experiment with English more freely. Several students noted they were able to "just type in English" when composing messages to friends or writing captions for Instagram stories, suggesting that genre greatly influences their reliance on L1.

This pattern suggests that genres requiring high levels of personal expression or abstract reasoning tend to trigger a stronger reliance on L1. In these cases, mental translation serves as a form of cognitive rehearsal that helps learners organize their ideas with greater clarity before transferring them into the second language. Interestingly, some students noted that they relied less on translation in more formulaic or routine writing tasks. For example, shorter texts such as emails, announcements, or responses to discussion prompts often allowed them to think more directly in English. As one student put it:

"Kalau tulisannya pendek seperti email atau forum, saya bisa langsung pakai Bahasa Inggris karena sudah terbiasa."
[If the writing is short like an email or a forum post, I can go straight into English because I am used to it.]

This contrast between more complex and simpler genres highlights how task type affects language processing. When students feel more confident with the content and structure of a task, they are more likely to bypass the need for mental translation. However, when the demands of the task increase, whether due to vocabulary difficulty, abstract content, or the need for persuasion, students fall back on their L1 to gain control over their thoughts.

These observations align with previous research suggesting that the cognitive demands of certain writing genres intensify the need for scaffolding strategies such as mental translation. Rather than viewing this as a weakness, it can be seen as a flexible and adaptive response to task complexity. Teachers can support students by acknowledging this process and offering genre-specific guidance, helping learners gradually build the confidence to write more directly in English across a wider range of academic contexts.

5. Lexical and Structural Challenges

One of the most frequently cited reasons students engage in mental translation is the difficulty of finding the right words or grammatical structures in English. Many participants described moments when they clearly understood what they wanted to say in Bahasa Indonesia but struggled to express it in English due to limited vocabulary or uncertainty about sentence structure.

These lexical gaps often forced students to pause and mentally translate their thoughts, either word for word or by searching for equivalent phrases. One student reflected:

> *"Kadang saya sudah tahu apa yang mau saya tulis dalam Bahasa Indonesia, tapi bingung cari padanan katanya dalam Bahasa Inggris."*
> [Sometimes I already know what I want to write in Bahasa Indonesia, but I get confused trying to find the equivalent words in English.]

Another student described a similar experience, explaining that the struggle was not only with vocabulary but also with how to arrange their ideas in English:

> *"Struktur kalimat dalam Bahasa Indonesia berbeda, jadi saya harus mikir ulang cara menulisnya supaya sesuai grammar Inggris."*
> [The sentence structure in Bahasa Indonesia is different, so I have to rethink how to write it so it fits English grammar.]

These examples illustrate how linguistic distance between the two languages can increase the cognitive load during writing. Indonesian and English differ significantly in terms of syntax, word order, and morphology, and many students appear to use mental translation as a strategy to bridge these differences. Rather than a sign of deficiency, these efforts reveal the students' attempts to maintain both accuracy and meaning in their writing. They are actively engaging in problem-solving, using their first language as a support system to navigate the second. As one student insightfully shared:

> *"Saya suka menerjemahkan karena saya ingin memastikan maknanya tetap sama dan* grammar-*nya benar."*
> [I like translating because I want to make sure the meaning stays the same and the grammar is correct.]

This intentional use of translation demonstrates how students balance linguistic form and communicative intent. While some might see reliance on L1 as a crutch, these findings suggest that mental translation can serve as a valuable tool when students face lexical or structural barriers. Pedagogically, this highlights the importance of giving students access to strategies that can help them overcome such challenges. Explicit vocabulary instruction, contrastive grammar teaching, and awareness-raising about syntactic differences can reduce the burden of translation over time. More importantly, recognizing that these struggles are part of a natural developmental process can help both teachers and learners approach writing in English with more patience and empathy.

6. Strategies to Reduce Translation Dependence

While many students found mental translation helpful during English writing tasks, several also expressed a desire to lessen their dependence on it over time. This wish did not stem from shame or discomfort, but rather from a growing sense of linguistic confidence and a goal to write more fluently and spontaneously in English. Their responses suggest that students are not only aware of their reliance on translation but are actively seeking ways to move toward more direct thinking in the target language.

One common strategy students shared was increasing their exposure to English in everyday life. Several mentioned the importance of reading articles, watching videos, or engaging with English-language media to familiarize themselves with natural sentence structures and expressions. One participant explained:

"Saya coba sering baca artikel atau nonton video dalam Bahasa Inggris supaya terbiasa. Kalau sering dengar atau baca, nanti bisa langsung kepikiran dalam Bahasa Inggris tanpa harus terjemahin dulu."
[I try to read articles or watch videos in English more often so I get used to it. If I hear or read it often, eventually the ideas will come to me directly in English without needing to translate first.]

Another student emphasized the role of practice and routine in building this habit. By writing in English regularly, both inside and outside the classroom, some students reported being able to reduce their reliance on mental translation, even if it did not disappear entirely. This process, as they described, was gradual but empowering.

"Kalau sering latihan nulis dalam Bahasa Inggris, lama-lama bisa langsung mikir pakai Bahasa Inggris. Awalnya tetap pakai Bahasa Indonesia dulu, tapi makin lama makin lancar."
[If I practice writing in English often, eventually I can think directly in English. At first, I still use Bahasa Indonesia, but gradually it becomes more fluent.]

Interestingly, a few students also mentioned trying to "think in English" from the beginning of a writing task. Though challenging, this technique helped them focus on the target language and prevented them from becoming stuck in the structure of their first language. These self-directed strategies suggest a metacognitive awareness of the writing process and a motivation to improve beyond classroom requirements.

This progression aligns with second language acquisition theories that view L1 reliance as a natural phase in language development. As proficiency increases, learners often shift toward more internalized and automatic language production. However, the students' voices remind us that this shift does not occur overnight, and that translation strategies can coexist with efforts to move toward more independent L2 thinking.

For educators, these findings suggest the importance of creating supportive environments where students can experiment with new strategies while still being allowed to use their first language when necessary. Encouraging regular writing practice, offering scaffolded activities, and exposing learners to rich, authentic English input can support their transition from translation-dependent writers to more fluent and flexible users of the language.

7. Perceptions of Mental Translation: A Double-Edged Sword

For many students, mental translation carries a dual meaning. On one hand, it is seen as a helpful companion in navigating the complexities of academic writing in English. On the other, it is sometimes viewed as a sign of limitation or a source of delay. These mixed perceptions illustrate the nuanced role that mental translation plays in the lived experiences of EFL learners.

Several participants described translation as a bridge between their ideas and the target language. It allowed them to process meaning clearly and to organize their thoughts before transferring them into English. In this sense, mental translation was not merely a mechanical activity, but a reflective and intentional strategy. One student put it simply:

"Saya merasa lebih nyaman jika bisa memahami dulu dalam Bahasa Indonesia, lalu baru saya ubah ke Bahasa Inggris. Rasanya lebih jelas dan terstruktur."
[I feel more comfortable if I can understand it first in Bahasa Indonesia, then change it into English. It feels clearer and more structured.]

At the same time, other students expressed concern that relying too heavily on mental translation made them slower, less confident, or overly focused on correctness. This internal conflict often led to moments of hesitation or self-doubt, especially during timed or high-stakes writing tasks. One student reflected:

"Kadang saya jadi terlalu lama mikir karena sibuk menerjemahkan. Kalau terlalu fokus ke terjemahan, saya takut kalimatnya malah nggak natural."
[Sometimes I take too long to think because I am busy translating. If I focus too much on translation, I worry the sentences won't sound natural.]

This tension reveals a broader emotional dimension of mental translation. While it can provide clarity and comfort, it can also contribute to anxiety about accuracy and fluency. The ambivalence students feel reflects not just linguistic concerns but also personal and academic pressures to perform well in English.

These conflicting views support the idea that mental translation is neither entirely beneficial nor entirely detrimental. Instead, it is a strategy that brings both strengths and challenges, depending on how and when it is used. From a pedagogical perspective, this suggests that educators should not frame translation as a weakness, but rather as a natural and context-dependent tool in the learner's cognitive repertoire.

Recognizing mental translation as part of a learner's strategic process allows room for flexibility and growth. As students gain confidence and exposure to English, their reliance on L1 may gradually diminish. But even in advanced stages, the ability to move between languages can remain an asset rather than a flaw, especially when the ultimate goal is not just fluency, but deep, meaningful communication.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the mental translation practices of Indonesian EFL university students during English writing tasks, revealing that mental translation is not merely a compensatory behavior, but rather a strategic and adaptive process deeply connected to cognitive, emotional, and linguistic factors. The findings highlight that students often begin their writing process by thinking in Bahasa Indonesia, which serves as a cognitive foundation that helps them clarify their ideas before expressing them in English. While this process may affect writing fluency and speed, particularly during formal tasks, it also provides a sense of security and scaffolding that supports meaning-making.

Far from being a deficit, mental translation functions as a mediational strategy that enables students to bridge their L1 and L2 knowledge. Students are aware of the challenges, including lexical gaps and syntactic differences, but many also develop personal strategies such as code-switching, paraphrasing, and selective translation, to reduce their dependence on L1 over time. The genre of writing plays a significant role, with formal academic texts prompting more translation efforts than informal writing, due to heightened anxiety and expectations for linguistic accuracy.

The dual nature of mental translation, as both helpful and hindering was consistently acknowledged by participants. They expressed both appreciation for its role in organizing thoughts and frustration with the delays it can cause. These findings suggest that mental translation should not be penalized in pedagogical settings but embraced as part of the natural development of bilingual writing competence. Instructors are encouraged to recognize and validate these internal processes, while also guiding students toward greater direct thinking in English through practice, modeling, and reflective strategies.

Ultimately, mental translation reflects the complex interplay of language, identity, and cognition in EFL writing. Understanding its role can support more empathetic and effective

teaching practices that honor students' linguistic resources and promote deeper engagement with academic English.

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