THE APPLICATION OF GRADUAL CHUNKING TECHNIQUE IN MANAGING STUDENTS' ACADEMIC PROCRASTINATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Siti Aisah[1], Rini Setyowati[2]
[1,2] Universitas Pelita Bangsa, Indonesia
*Corresponding Author: aisaahh14@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
This study aimed to explore students' experiences in applying the gradual chunking technique to manage academic procrastination. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to understand the subjective meanings constructed by students when dealing with the tendency to delay academic tasks. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with students in the Islamic Guidance and Counseling Education Program at Universitas Pelita Bangsa who had experienced academic procrastination and had applied gradual chunking in completing academic assignments. The data were analyzed thematically with the support of NVivo through data reduction, coding, categorization, theme development, and verification. The findings indicate that academic procrastination emerges from the interaction of internal and external factors. Internal factors include negative perceptions of academic tasks, academic anxiety, perfectionism, weak time management, and physical fatigue. External factors include social media distraction, heavy task loads, closely spaced deadlines, and social and academic dynamics. The application of gradual chunking was perceived to help students initiate tasks, reduce feelings of being overwhelmed, improve focus, and strengthen self-regulation and self-efficacy during task completion. These findings suggest that gradual chunking has strong potential as an academic support strategy for helping students manage procrastinatory behavior.

Keywords: Academic procrastination; Gradual chunking; Self-regulation; Self-efficacy; University students

INTRODUCTION

Higher education plays a crucial role in developing human resources who are not only academically competent but also capable of managing themselves effectively. In contemporary learning environments, university students face increasingly complex academic demands, intensive assignment schedules, and the need to adapt to highly digitalized learning contexts. This condition requires strong self-regulation so that students can plan, initiate, and complete academic tasks responsibly.

At the same time, advances in information technology have made access to learning resources easier, yet they have also expanded the range of potential distractions. One of the most persistent challenges in this context is academic procrastination, namely the conscious delay of academic tasks despite awareness of its negative consequences. In the literature, academic procrastination is commonly understood as a form of self-regulatory failure characterized by delay, avoidance, and a gap between intention and actual task execution (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984; Steel, 2007).

Academic procrastination is shaped by both internal and external factors. At the internal level, it is often associated with low motivation, anxiety, perfectionism, poor time management, and limited confidence in dealing with academic demands. At the external level, procrastination may be intensified by digital distraction, social environment, heavy coursework, and unclear academic instructions. Previous studies have shown that poor time management is associated with increased stress, psychological pressure, and lower quality of task completion (ARIBAŞ, 2021). Academic procrastination may also reduce productivity and contribute to broader psychological difficulties in students' academic lives (Febrianti et al., 2025).

Within higher education, students—particularly those preparing to become educators and counselors—are ideally expected to demonstrate academic responsibility, learning discipline, and strong self-management skills. However, initial observation and preliminary interviews within the context of this study indicated that delaying assignments remained a frequent pattern. This condition highlights a gap between the ideal academic profile expected from students and the empirical reality they experience, thereby underscoring the need for practical, structured, and accessible strategies to help them manage procrastination in everyday academic life.

One strategy that appears relevant in this regard is chunking. Classically, chunking refers to the process of organizing information into smaller units so that it can be processed more efficiently at the cognitive level (Miller, 1956). In the context of academic work, the gradual chunking technique may be understood as a strategy of breaking a large and complex task into smaller, measurable, and manageable stages that can be completed sequentially. This is important because tasks that are perceived as too large often trigger mental overload, feelings of being overwhelmed, and subsequent avoidance.

Conceptually, gradual chunking is also closely related to self-regulated learning. Students who are able to divide assignments into smaller units are more likely to set realistic targets, monitor progress, and sustain motivation throughout the learning process. Zimmerman (2002) argued that self-regulated learners actively manage their learning through planning, monitoring, and reflection. From this perspective, gradual chunking is not merely a task-management technique, but also a means of strengthening self-control, reducing anxiety, and increasing students' sense of capability in handling academic work.

Studies on academic procrastination have grown considerably, yet most of them still focus on measuring procrastination levels, identifying causal factors, or testing relationships among variables through quantitative approaches. Research that specifically examines students' subjective experiences in applying practical strategies to manage procrastination, particularly through a phenomenological lens, remains relatively limited. Similarly, studies that focus specifically on gradual chunking as a strategy for managing academic procrastination have not been extensively explored in depth.

Based on this gap, the present study seeks to contribute by placing students' experiences at the center of analysis. Rather than testing effectiveness in an experimental sense, the study aims to understand how students interpret, apply, and experience change when using the gradual chunking technique to deal with academic tasks. Accordingly, this study aims to: (1) identify the factors influencing students' academic procrastination; (2) describe students' experiences in applying the gradual chunking technique; and (3) explain the implications of this technique for self-regulation, self-efficacy, and academic productivity.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. The design was chosen because the study sought to understand students' lived experiences, subjective meanings, and psychological dynamics when facing academic procrastination and when applying the gradual chunking technique in assignment completion. The primary concern of the study was not to measure the magnitude of an effect, but to interpret how students experienced, managed, and reflected on delay behavior in their academic context.

Research Setting and Time

The study was conducted at Universitas Pelita Bangsa, specifically in the Islamic Guidance and Counseling Education Program. The setting was selected because it was highly relevant to the focus of the study, namely academic procrastination and the application of gradual chunking among university students. The study was conducted in 2025, beginning in June.

Participants

The participants were active students in the Islamic Guidance and Counseling Education Program who had experienced academic procrastination and had applied gradual chunking when completing academic tasks. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that the data corresponded to the aims of the study. The selection criteria included: (1) active student status, (2) experience in delaying the initiation or completion of academic assignments, (3) prior experience in breaking assignments into smaller stages as a coping strategy, and (4) willingness to participate voluntarily in the study.

Data Collection Technique and Instrument

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This technique was chosen because it allowed participants to explain their experiences openly while enabling the researcher to maintain focus on issues relevant to the study objectives. The interview guide was developed from the theoretical literature on academic procrastination, self-regulation, self-efficacy, and chunking. The main interview areas covered

experiences of delaying academic work, factors contributing to delay, ways of dividing assignments into smaller parts, changes perceived after applying gradual chunking, and the influence of this strategy on focus, anxiety, time management, and confidence. Interviews were conducted individually, and field notes were taken to capture contextual cues, emphases of meaning, and relevant nonverbal responses. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed thematically using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The analysis proceeded through repeated reading of the interview transcripts, open coding of meaningful units related to procrastination experiences and coping strategies, grouping of initial codes into broader categories, and synthesis of categories into major themes. NVivo was used to support the organization of coding, category development, and thematic mapping. However, the software functioned only as an analytic aid; substantive interpretation remained the responsibility of the researcher.

Trustworthiness and Research Ethics

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was strengthened through in-depth engagement with the data and the systematic documentation of the analytic process. Dependability was maintained by keeping the research stages transparent and coherent. Confirmability was pursued by ensuring that interpretations were grounded in the interview data rather than personal assumptions. Transferability was supported by providing a clear account of the research context so that readers may judge the relevance of the findings to other settings. Ethical considerations were addressed by obtaining participants' consent prior to the interviews, protecting their confidentiality, and ensuring that participation was voluntary. Participants were informed of their right to refuse any question or withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences..

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis indicates that students' experiences of academic procrastination cannot be attributed to a single cause. Instead, procrastinatory behavior emerged from the interaction of internal factors, external pressures, and the way students interpreted academic tasks. In this context, gradual chunking was understood by participants as a practical strategy that helped transform an overwhelming task into something more approachable and manageable.

Theme 1. Academic Tasks Were Perceived as Pressuring Burdens

The first theme shows that academic procrastination often began when students perceived assignments as large, difficult, and mentally exhausting. Students tended to evaluate tasks not only in terms of content but also in terms of workload, procedural complexity, and fear of failing to produce a satisfactory result. Once a task was perceived as too demanding, reluctance to begin became more likely. In this sense, procrastination did not simply reflect laziness; it also represented a response to psychological pressure triggered by tasks that were seen as exceeding students' perceived coping capacity. This finding is consistent with Steel's (2007) view of procrastination as a form of self-regulatory failure associated with avoidance of aversive or stressful tasks.

Theme 2. Internal and External Factors Reinforced One Another

The second theme demonstrates that procrastination was produced through the interaction between students' internal conditions and situational pressures in the academic environment. On the internal side, students experienced academic anxiety, perfectionism, declining motivation, fatigue, and weak time management. On the external side, they faced social media distraction, non-academic activities, tightly clustered deadlines, and the burden of multiple assignments. These findings suggest that students did not delay merely because they were unwilling to work, but also

because they struggled to regulate attention, emotion, and priority setting. When external pressure intensified, internal conditions such as anxiety and exhaustion became more pronounced, making procrastination a temporary mechanism for avoiding discomfort. This interpretation aligns with prior research emphasizing the multidimensional nature of academic procrastination (ARIBAŞ, 2021; Febrianti et al., 2025).

Theme 3. Gradual Chunking Helped Students Start Their Tasks

The third theme highlights that one of the clearest functions of gradual chunking lay in helping students initiate work. When a large assignment was broken down into smaller and more specific parts, the first step felt clearer, lighter, and more realistic. Rather than thinking about the task as an intimidating whole, students were able to concentrate on one manageable stage at a time. From a cognitive perspective, this strategy reduced the perception of excessive task load. A previously complex task was reframed as a sequence of attainable actions. In this sense, gradual chunking functioned not merely as an organizational technique, but as a mechanism for reducing overwhelm. This interpretation resonates with Miller's (1956) notion that smaller units of information are easier to process cognitively. The present study suggests more specifically that gradual chunking was especially meaningful at the task-initiation stage, when students experienced difficulty simply getting started.

Theme 4. Gradual Chunking Strengthened Self-Regulation and Self-Efficacy

The fourth theme shows that once assignments were divided into smaller stages, students became more capable of planning time, setting realistic goals, and monitoring progress. Completing each small segment generated repeated experiences of success. These experiences, in turn, strengthened students' confidence and made them feel more capable of finishing the overall assignment. From the perspective of self-regulated learning, this indicates that gradual chunking helped students move from avoidance-oriented behavior toward more active forms of academic self-management. Students no longer merely reacted to task pressure; they began to organize their own work process more deliberately. This finding is in line with Zimmerman (2002), who emphasized that self-regulation develops when learners can set goals, monitor progress, and evaluate their strategies. Furthermore, the repeated completion of small task units may be interpreted as mastery experiences that reinforce self-efficacy. As students felt capable of completing one step, they became more prepared to continue to the next. In this way, gradual chunking appeared to work simultaneously at two levels: reducing cognitive pressure and strengthening students' belief in their capacity to complete academic work.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study enriches the literature on academic procrastination by showing that a seemingly simple task-management strategy may carry deeper psychological significance. Gradual chunking was associated not only with task organization, but also with students' perceptions of burden, readiness to begin, sense of control, and academic self-efficacy. The study's main contribution lies in indicating that this strategy appears particularly useful at the task-initiation stage, when students experience hesitation or emotional resistance toward starting academic work. Practically, the findings offer implications for guidance and counseling services in higher education. Gradual chunking may be integrated into academic support services, time-management training, or self-regulation interventions for students who tend to delay assignments. Because the strategy is relatively simple, flexible, and close to everyday study practices, it has strong potential to be adapted in preventive as well as supportive programs within universities.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the application of the gradual chunking technique in managing academic procrastination among students in the Islamic Guidance and Counseling Education Program. The findings show that academic procrastination arose from the interaction between internal and external factors. Internal factors included negative perceptions of academic tasks, anxiety, perfectionism, poor time management, and fatigue. External factors included non-academic distractions, heavy task loads, demanding academic conditions, and social influences.

The study further indicates that gradual chunking was perceived by students as a meaningful strategy for reducing procrastinatory tendencies. By dividing large assignments into smaller and more structured units, students found tasks easier to manage, experienced less overwhelm, improved their focus, and developed greater confidence in completing academic work step by step. Thus, the technique may be understood not only as a task-management strategy, but also as a means of reducing cognitive pressure and strengthening self-regulation.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the academic procrastination literature by highlighting the role of task structuring in the early stages of task engagement. Practically, the findings suggest that gradual chunking may be considered as part of academic counseling and student support services in higher education. Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted cautiously because they were generated within a specific program context and a qualitative design that does not aim for broad statistical generalization. Future research may extend this work through quantitative or mixed-method designs, involve a wider range of participants, and examine the sustained use of gradual chunking over time.

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