

Exploring Academic Writing Needs and Challenges Experienced by ESL Learners: A Literature Review

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Abstract

The review paper aims to identify the challenges and academic writing needs faced by the students, specifically in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts. The paper systematically reviews, analyzes, and summarizes relevant studies, categorizing the identified challenges and demands of students in academic writing. The central finding is that students often struggle with academic writing due to a lack of enthusiasm and insufficient practice in this skill. The paper emphasizes the formal writing style, scholarly voice, and intellectual values inherent in academic writing. The study employs a comprehensive approach, including a thorough review of the literature, an examination of academic papers and these as examples, and a detailed analysis of each paper's components. The sections include an analysis of the title, an assessment of the abstract, and a description of the introductory section, covering issues, purpose, recommendations, and appendices, along with conclusions. Importantly, the review paper extends its focus beyond the university context, aiming to contribute to graduate students and society by addressing these challenges, which are crucial for enhancing academic writing proficiency and benefiting both students and society.

Keywords: ESP/ESL/EAP, academic writing, academic challenges, writing difficulties, graduate students

1. Introduction

ELT is the teaching of English to people whose first language is not English. English Language Teaching, or ELT for short, is a discipline within academia that focuses primarily on the teaching and learning of languages. In nations where English is not the native tongue, ELT is quite prevalent. Due to the enormous number of immigrants from non-English nations, it is also taught in English-speaking nations. It is common knowledge that teaching languages is a complicated task. The degree to which a learner's original language differs from English also affects how difficult it is for them to learn.

Learners of the English language frequently make mistakes in grammar, vocabulary, and sentence formation. Academic writing is often considered to be the most arduous aspect for English language learners, primarily concentrating on crucial language skills such as grammar and writing proficiency. (Rymanova & Bolsunovskaya, 2020). Researching: What specific challenges do graduates have when it comes to academic writing? By identifying these flaws, looking into them, understanding the causes of them, and providing a suitable fix for the research academics, Investigating the challenges the graduate students have using writing mechanics including punctuation, spelling, grammar, and topic sentences. (Alharbi,2019). Writing for academic purposes enables communication with both internal and external audiences. Writing allows one to articulate ideas more effectively and persuasively, which enhances one's professional image in the workplace. Writing for a general purpose versus a scholarly purpose has various purposes. It must be written within a precise framework and adhere to a set of rules, grammatical syntax, and procedures. (Angelina,2022) noted that the students had difficulties with discourse markers, parts of speech, tenses, spelling, prepositions, vocabulary, punctuation, coherence, and clear focusing when writing paragraphs. They also had trouble with clear construction, coherent academic essays, and paraphrasing.

The primary critical elements include sentence structure, tone, thought, formal language, organization, and word choice patterns. Students are expected to select, evaluate, report, summarize, paraphrase, draw conclusions, engage in debate, utilize grammatical structures, and prevent plagiarism. (Khadawardi, 2022) findings indicated that the pupils lacked academic style, cohesiveness, and language knowledge. Additionally, the researcher discovered that pupils detest writing due to linguistic and cognitive challenges with text structure and paragraph organization. Graduates do not, however, generate academic writing that is up to par or demonstrate critical thinking skills. The participants acquaintance with the rhetorical components of academic writing is the cause of their difficulties. According to the results of the analysis, the most significant area in which students struggle is accurate grammar (21 out of 56 participants), followed by correct orthography (7 participants), paragraph structure (8 out of 56 participants). Essay structure was the most often selected option (5

out of 56 participants). Essay structure was the most often selected option (5 out of 56 participants), 15 participants demonstrated inadequate rhetorical abilities and a lack of familiarity with academic language. (Anderson & Medina, 2019) The researchers describe the requirements and difficulties experienced by graduate students when drafting their papers and other types of research writing in general. The researcher then clarifies the academic requirements, saying that students will make recommendations and suggestions considering the results.

1.1 EFL

EFL, or English as a Foreign Language, denotes the learning of English by individuals residing in countries where English is not the predominant language. (Nordquist,2019)

1.2 ESL

ESL, which stands for English as a Second Language, encompasses tailored methodologies for teaching language to individuals whose native language is not English. (Nordquist,2019)

1.3 EAP

EAP, or English for Academic Purposes, pertains to language instruction geared towards academic or vocational training. Notably, individuals often learn this language for immediate application in educational settings, with potential future use in professional environments. (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987)

2. Academic Writing

Academic writing is an articulation of reasoning originating from cognitive processes. It is the manifestation of intellectual capacity through written expression, encapsulating knowledge, and conceptual comprehension. (Weyers & McMillan, 2014)

3. Writing Difficulties

The main accomplishment of writing is the capacity to articulate thoughts in writing in a second or a foreign language while maintaining a decent level of accuracy and coherence. Writing exercises are necessary for students to do because they help to reinforce the language they have already acquired while learning the rules of grammar. For instance, sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling. Grammar and the use of meaningful words are the most difficult aspects of writing. Many ESL and EFL students struggle with this. It is because the style, tone, organization, and consistency of written language are different. In language training, grammar and vocabulary usage are frequently seen as antagonistic concepts. According to (Jan Frodesen, 2018) authors can help develop the rich linguistic resources needed to articulate ideas and aid in error correction.

4. Literature Review

Preparation, drafting, and revision are all steps in the writing process. Writing is the process of organizing thoughts, in addition to the critical thinking that results from the expansion of one's vocabulary and command of proper sentence structure. Students who are dealing with academic writing struggles, particularly those studying at National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University and in Russian higher education, encounter challenges related to organization, coherence, and connectivity in their writing. These obstacles include issues with text-level organization, structural weaknesses, ineffective arrangements of ideas, punctuation errors, inappropriate sentence structures, spelling mistakes, inadequate vocabulary and grammar usage, and a lack of effective sentence fluency. (Rymanova & Bolsunovskaya,2020). Regarding the value of writing as a skill, numerous studies have found that even though writing has been acknowledged as an essential and challenging skill for many students, particularly research scholars in the academic field, it is still important. "The logical organization and arrangements of the written sentence within a paragraph and paragraphs within the units of discourse and the expression of ideas" are the definitions of academic writing. (Amin & Alamin, 2012)

The perceptions of academic writing among Saudi graduate students who are learning English as a second language indicate that grammar poses a significant challenge in composing papers. Additionally, students express a lack of confidence in their ability to master writing skills. This difficulty is not limited to students majoring in English; those from other disciplines also struggle to produce coherent texts and effectively paraphrase content. (Alhojailan, 2021) According to (Anurrahman et al.,2017), the researcher indicates that students lacked the necessary knowledge and skills to handle academic writing at the tertiary level. They demonstrated limited proficiency in understanding the structural and linguistic aspects of argumentative writing. The study findings revealed that students encountered challenges in various areas, including grammatical errors, inadequate punctuation, inaccuracies in information, spelling mistakes, inappropriate lexical choices, and difficulties with cohesion devices or conjunctions.

Writing in a second language presents additional challenges while trying to grasp academic writing. Most ESL students perceive academic writing to be a challenging task overall. (Lo-Yeung, A & Mohan, A.B 1985) and (Al Fadda, 2012). In academic writing, students face various challenges and pressures, and a review of the data revealed that outlining and writing a draft help identify the abilities required for successful writing. (Al Khairy, 2013). Numerous learners made mistakes that fell into categories such as syntactic, morphological, lexical, lexico-grammatical, spelling, and punctuation errors. L2 learners encounter writing difficulties encompassing grammar, mechanics, sentence structure, and the selection of appropriate vocabulary to express their ideas effectively. The research highlighted that many of the errors made by students pertained to rhetorical strategies, vocabulary choice, cultural understanding, and idiomatic usage. (Alharbi,2019). The students in writing skills have difficulty framing an appropriate grammatically correct sentence or at maximum paragraph writing.

(Maamujav et al., 2021). To strengthen their academic writing skills, L2 students must develop advanced skills in complex text analysis, interpretation, and composition in a variety of contexts. The research academics emphasize low self-efficacy, which does require more direction and feedback. (Mendoza et al.,2022). Highlighting two primary challenges faced by students. First, there is a deficiency in mastering vocabulary, indicating a limitation in their vocabulary proficiency. Secondly, students struggle with grammatical accuracy, as they encounter difficulties in using correct grammar to articulate themselves effectively. Furthermore, linguistic elements pose challenges, particularly in tasks such as paraphrasing and citing accurately. (Angelina,2022). Students encounter difficulties in several key areas based on the results of the study. These include coherence and cohesion, language usage, connecting ideas, organizing thoughts, expressing their own, and constructing effective topic sentences. (Khadawardi,2021)

5. Challenges Faced by the Students in Writing Skills

Studies revealed that academic writing learners of ESL face difficulties in joining a sentence together to make a coherent and cohesion paragraph. Writing a passage in their voice, finding relevant topics and sources, and generating their ideas about their research topics are the main barriers for the students. Grammatical errors could prevent pupils from summarizing and paraphrasing the content. (Al Badi, 2015).

The primary problem is an inappropriate choice of vocabulary, irregular verbs, incorrect framing of sentence patterns, punctuation, and spelling (Amin & Alamin, 2012). Lower-order and higher-order thinking are particularly important while writing a seminar paper, bachelor paper, or dissertation. These tasks also include creating an outline and producing the research paper. Citation, creating a bibliography, utilizing suitable English sentences and vocabulary, and separate sections on grammar structures, lexical structures, and punctuation are among the characteristics that cause students the most trouble. (Klimova, 2013). Finding the appropriate references through research, pertinent points for article writing, integrating ideas from diverse sources, and paragraph development were found to be the most difficult parts of the academic writing process, particularly linguistic accuracy. Grammar, vocabulary, spelling, etc., are a few examples. (Ntereke, B & Ramoroka, B.T 2016)

6. Theoretical Background

The paper's theoretical background begins with an explanation and a description of the academic writing skills and academic needs of the graduate students. Furthermore, the need for academic writing skills is observed in the students' perceptions. This is to review whether the academic writing needs of the students are met or if they need any other strategies or recommendations to complete the program successfully. According to this paper, the perceptions of the graduate students have been concentrated. In this review paper, the significance of academic writing skills, the challenges and needs of graduate students, and their requirements in academic writing are studied.

On the other hand, according to (Mendoza et al.,2022) when writing academic literature, researchers frequently make mistakes in trying to create a review paper before doing any research. Periodically, students find it challenging to present solid arguments due to a lack of vocabulary or formal structure for writing an assignment or a project. And they need proper guidance and feedback to enhance their academic writing. (Granger, S & Larsson, T 2021) say that core vocabulary is seen as a foe among students' attempts to begin writing for an academic purpose. They find that vocabulary usage is difficult, but it plays a vital role in effective writing, grammatical structures, punctuation usage, word patterns for authoring an article, and proposal writing.

(Murray, R & Moore, S 2006) elucidate that many college students were more nervous about completing their first few writing tasks. It can be challenging to make the jump from excellent high school writing to strong college writing. The students, who come from various cultural backgrounds, must adapt to various learning cultures. Comparing college writing to high school writing helps to grasp how they differ from one another. Writing is not that easy to jot down what a student reads from the prescribed material or a primary text. Whereas academic writing differs, and it has its own boundaries and unique writing style. Academic writing has a formal tone, avoids using the first person, concentrates on the research subject under consideration, and uses precise word choice.

Academic writing is intended to express the consensus meaning regarding difficult concepts or ideas within a community of academic specialists and practitioners. On the other hand, it focuses on describing and exploring concepts regarding which aspects of writing are challenging and why students find it difficult; academic challenges and needs should be addressed instead of theoretical background and a literature review. There is a relationship between what students read and what they produce when it comes to academic writing. It must be designed properly with formal language and technical jargon, vocabulary, sentence patterns, and syntax.

To produce academic writing, one must elaborate on concepts, plan for a writing assignment, read critically, and draw pertinent information from scholarly literature, as explained by (Murray, R & Moore, S 2006). Being critical, creating a network between texts, presenting a careful argument, and supporting statements or assertions with similarly careful arguments are all examples of intertextuality. Finding the voice, writing, generating grammatically sound sentences, using punctuation, and writing paragraphs are the important comments. A detached and objective perspective is needed for most academic writing types. Logic and supporting data are used in academic arguments to defend intellectual positions. To reach conclusions, arguments must be presented logically, with the appropriate structure and sequence.

(Al Fadda, 2012) says ESL graduate students from linguistic and varied cultural backgrounds find it tough and challenging to acquire how to write academic English. (Qasem, A.F & Zayid, I.E 2019) Learning how to write is a challenging process for students learning English

as a second language. There are several difficulties in writing research in L2, and since both the research proposal and the project are written in L2, high proficiency and an in-depth understanding of the field are essential. It seeks to pinpoint the principal difficulties encountered in formulating and drafting a research proposal. (Al Marwani, 2020) challenges experienced, especially when a student expresses an idea, while it is necessary to paraphrase, summarize, and incorporate data from many sources when analyzing ideas and preparing to communicate in an academic written text, generating ideas using a variety of academic jargon or vocabulary.

Academic writing has its purpose, conventions, and expectations, which are highly creative and innovative. Every researcher should be aware of producing an error-free research proposal or a thesis. The researchers must be able to appreciate the importance of great writing skills, the use of English grammar in academic writing, and the worth of a document's readability, clarity, and fluency. Graduate students should be aware of common mistakes made by ESL researchers when writing academically.

7. Findings and Implications

In academic writing, the attitude and perception of the participants were recorded, and most of them have experienced and found academic writing challenging. From the referred papers, few students have experienced that academic writing is neither difficult nor easy. Difficulties were encountered while writing their assignments, selecting the topics and relevant references, maintaining cohesion, and organizing the ideas in a coherent order. When compared to these contradictory challenges, paraphrasing, referencing, and citations were reported as the least problematic. Students need related academic words and structure when writing an assignment. This is due to lack of knowledge, awareness, and practice in academic writing. About 72% to 77% of the students required assignment writing requirements. (Ali Badi, H.A.I 2015)

Students experience challenging areas to deal with and difficulty expressing ideas and connecting the grammar articles and structure, academic vocabulary, making a proper and meaningful sentence, spelling, and grammar. The findings make it clear that students need to be immersed in academia by learning academic writing norms because they lack language and are inexperienced researchers. Enroll pupils in a particular course to improve their language and academic writing abilities. The focus group is postgraduate students, which is the limitation of the study, and it can be further extended to different courses. (Al Marawani, M 2020)

Reading content-based articles, and writing assignments are different, but for authoring an article, thesis, or publication paper, a wider range of vocabulary knowledge is needed. Knowledge in specific fields will trigger writing more effectively. It is suggested that students pick up some language and practice writing the structure as a response to its problem. (Saglamel, H & Aydogdu, M.Z 2022)

The aspects of writing perceived as challenging, it includes synthesizing information, proper in-text citation, using appropriate academic style, and organizing points into paragraphs. The suggestions given for effective academic writing are that students may not have learned much about summarizing, and paraphrasing, especially budding graduates, as they possess inadequate reading and writing skills. This is due to a lack of awareness of the requirements for writing and practice before writing a final draft. From the students' perception, they experience that a lot of practice and exercises should be done before writing an academic work. (Ntereke, B & Ramoroka, B.T 2016)

According to (Mendoza et al.,2022) the results show that all the students have gained mastery over writing academically and have experienced writing for an academic purpose. The students had satisfying experiences as a result, supporting their sense of self-efficacy. It takes a comprehensive approach to improve academic writing. The single diary used to record the data, which reflects the learner's concepts and learner histories, is one of the study's shortcomings. (Valor-Gea et al.,2014) The study's findings show that linguistic and vocabulary sections were challenging despite most students' lack of confidence in their academic writing abilities. Scholars who are not native English speakers struggle with academic writing and publishing. (Qasem, F.A.A et al.,2019) 70% of the students struggle with L2, and some of them have low English competence, which has a detrimental impact on how well they write projects and research papers.

Due to a lack of terminology, a lack of enthusiasm for creating proposals and initiatives, and a lack of good specialization knowledge. The suggestion for the findings is that students should focus on academic writing and involve themselves in more activities and tasks, such as training workshops related to academic writing. Special lectures and group projects conducted in L2 will familiarize the students with the research topic and assist them in to encountering fewer challenges. Students' linguistic options are constrained when their knowledge of syntax and language is not readily available and accessible, according to (Maamuujav et al.,2021) due to their lack of acquaintance with the academic writing language.

The journal's conclusion is that for teenage L2 students to participate in challenging academic writing assignments, they must grow their linguistic resources and extend their skills. (Al-Zubaidi, K.O 2012) described how academic students come from distinct cultural backgrounds and have different thought patterns. The challenges of preparing a thesis or research paper for publication, the academic community, and their oral and written actions all reflects this. Students find it difficult to learn the necessary writing styles, reference styles, and structure.

(Wang, F.M et al., 2004) academic writing ESL researchers lack knowledge of and expertise with writing support. Students thus experience anxiety when drafting a research paper for publication. Giving enough time is advised in this situation, as it is crucial to the development of excellent writing abilities. A final edit includes grammar correction, peer review, the instructor's insightful comments, and self-revision. (Aldabbus, S & Almansouri, N.E 2022) The hardest part of academic writing is selecting the right words to use in a research report. It may be deduced from these that the lack of practice and the instructional approach, which primarily emphasizes the final product, were the main causes of those difficulties.

Encourage the students, give them tasks to do, and have them read a lot to expand their academic vocabulary to improve and master academic writing skills. To focus on the writing process, including academic writing mechanics, drafting thesis statements, organizing ideas, revising, and so on. The recommendation is to include the students in activities and tasks that call for more practice, and opportunities should be made through providing useful feedback. Students are advised to know the components of academic writing they find challenging and the shortcomings in their writing. They should also demonstrate a level of motivation for improving their academic writing abilities.

8. Recommendations and Conclusion

This paper identifies and concludes with some major weaknesses and difficulties that the students need experienced in academic writing. Despite this research review paper focusing on the major challenges and difficult components of academic writing, it provides a better understanding and perspective of in what area the students have difficulty in writing and in what aspect they are to be trained academically. Academic writing skills are the least focused skills for graduates and need to be motivated, trained, and given solutions. The most effective techniques for teaching academic writing procedures used to train the challenges that students experience while writing academically are discussed in this review paper. To begin with, the abstract, the summary of the study, and all the aspects of academic writing challenges are discussed. The difficulties and challenges in academic writing were identified from the ESL graduate student's perception. Finally, the suggestions and recommendations are provided, the conclusion has answered all the questions about how academic pieces of writing should be trained and presented, the list of references is related to the topic, and it gives a solution on how to overcome the errors and difficult components of academic writing and the ways of solving the challenges while writing academically. The work was created with academic writing and graduate students in mind.

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