



Undergraduates' Views on the most Difficult Aspects of Academic Writing in the English Language

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Abstract: Proficient academic writing skill is the need by students of higher education levels to acquire academic success. Therefore, enhancing one's English language skills, particularly academic writing at the undergraduate level, is crucial for academic success in Pakistani universities. The most significant difficulty, on the other hand, is related to the level of academic writing proficiency exhibited by college-level students. As a result, this study was undertaken using a quantitative technique to evaluate students' opinions of problematic and tough areas of academic writing skills and to provide recommendations based on them. All enrolled students at public universities in Sindh were included in the study population, and 372 students were chosen using purposive sampling to participate in this study. The research was carried out utilizing a descriptive survey research approach, with questionnaires serving as the major data collection tool. The study's findings revealed that students struggle with reviewing, summarizing and synthesizing passages, commenting, constructing sentences, paraphrasing, cohesion between paragraphs and sentences, and grammatical issues. Based on these data, it is vital for teachers to take into consideration students' writing issues, and the explanation of extra writing sessions is among the pedagogical implications.

Introduction

The English language is regarded as being more essential due to the fact that it is acknowledged as a worldwide language and is widely used across the world in order to communicate with individuals who come from a variety of cultural contexts, ethnic communities, and social backgrounds (Lee, 2018). In addition to its use for communication, the English language is widely recognized as a source of knowledge that is scientific and technological in nature all over the world, which increases both its significance and the need to acquire it (Kalinowski et al., 2019; Abdelrady & Akram, 2022). Moreover, English is both the country's official language and a necessity for several white-collar occupations in

Pakistan; this is because the language serves as a form of screening for the vast majority of employment opportunities (Costa&Coleman, 2013). In a similar vein, English is the language of instruction in higher education, which not only assists students in evaluating local and worldwide resources but also facilitates personal development and professional advancement (Mahboob, 2017). On the other hand, the most significant issue associated with the level of English language proficiency is associated with unskilled teachers and inadequate resources (Akram, 2020), language speaking anxiety (Akram et al., 2019), lack of teachers' professional development programs (Akram & Yang, 2021).

Therefore, improving one's command of the English language, particularly one's capacity for academic writing at the undergraduate level, is a prerequisite for advancing and expanding research activities inside the educational institutions of Pakistan. It has been observed that traditional English language courses that are based on general English are unable to meet the needs of university students for academic writing. This is due to the fact that the majority of undergraduates in Pakistan do not demonstrate any ability to write, particularly academic writing skills that are required to promote research activity in the country. Therefore, a progressive critical method of learning the academic English language can boost beginners' writing skills for academic discourse and critical thinking about the rules of the field. Writing critically is a requirement for students in higher education; hence, in the majority of academic writing, it is more important to analyze and assess the subject matter than it is to present a straightforward and straightforward description of the subject matter (Hyland [2009](#)). In relation to the components of writing, all four major areas of language, i.e., grammar, reading, writing and vocabulary, possess a significant association with the academic performance of students (Sadia et al., [2021](#)).

Learners at the higher education level are expected to write academic articles, reports, synopses, and, ultimately, a detailed research thesis. This is a requirement that must be met in order to successfully complete bachelor's degree programs and other higher degree programs in virtually every field of study. At the undergraduate level, the writing assignments are analytical, and they require critical literacy in order to synthesize the evidence drawn from data collection to prove and conclude on a certain and specific theory. At this point, the vast majority of our students are at a loss for what to do because their instructors also have high expectations of them and believe that academic writing ability was supposed to be taught to them by their language instructors in earlier sessions and

mastered by those instructors (Khan et al., 2021). On the other hand, Mumtaz (2021) underlined the necessity for University of Education, Lahore students to increase their vocabulary through enough practice in order to convey themselves more effectively to the readers. This sad state leads ESL learners to mental pandemonium. Keeping this situation in mind, the study in hand was planned to dig out the real explanations of learners' poor performance and what they really need to be taught and how to be taught while developing their academic writing abilities. In this regard, the current study is led by the following objectives:

1. To investigate undergraduate students' perceptions about the problematic and challenging areas of academic writing skills.
2. To offer suggestions for potential remedies to the problems with academic writing that undergraduate students experience.

Significance of the study

Given the importance of writing skills in higher education, the current study aimed to educate students on how to acquire English as a foreign language and how to play their role as writers with responsibility in order to be globally ready. According to the findings of this study, learning how to write is just as vital a skill to acquire as speaking, reading, and listening are. This research would help students improve their writing abilities by bridging the gap between the writing skills they acquire in school and the writing skills necessary at the university level.

Methodology

In order to explore students' perceptions about the problematic and challenging areas of academic writing skills, the researcher collected the data through a quantitative approach through SPSS software as the quantitative technique offers measurable proof, the ability to generalize results, the recruitment of a bigger sample in a shorter amount of time, and the opportunity to gain insight into a wide range of experiences (Gorman & Johnson, 2013).

Population and sampling

The population of this study consisted of all the enrolled students attending public universities in the province of Sindh. By using a convenient sampling technique, 685 students were calculated to collect the data. Subsequently, all the questionnaires were distributed personally by the researchers through personal visits after taking consent from the universities' deans or heads of departments. Nevertheless, out of the whole students, only 372 participants completed the surveys.

Instrumentation

A Need Analysis (NA) survey questionnaire, premeditated by Cai (2017), was adapted with certain additions and deletions. Its relevance in the context of the current research was evaluated through pilot testing. It was divided into three sections; section 1 was based on demographic information of the study respondents, section 2 was about general writing skills, and section 3 was

related to the linguistic difficulties of the students. All the items of sections 1 and 2 were rated on a five-point Likert scale, where from "very easy" to "very difficult" responses were used to identify the challenging areas of academic writing skills.

Reliability and Validity of the Instrument

The reliability of the instrument, as well as its construct validity (CV) and face validity, were all verified through the use of pilot testing. In the pilot study, participants represented ten per cent of the overall sample population. In order to rate the appropriateness of the questionnaire, opinions and analyses from experts were also sought. The calculated values of all of the tests were acquired as satisfactory overall. Thereby, a real study could be carried out.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data derived from the questionnaires were analyzed descriptively, and the results were presented in the form of tables.

Findings

General writing skills

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of general writing skills

No.	Items	Mean	SD
1.	I can easily write sentences in English.	3.2	1.1
2.	I can review a paragraph or essay in a very short time.	2.6	1.2
3.	I can easily write a story.	3.1	1.3
4.	I can easily summarize comprehension.	2.8	0.9
5.	I can easily give comments on regarding any comprehension.	2.9	0.8
6.	I can easily write conclusions regarding any comprehension.	3.3	1.2

By representing the analysis of data in table no 1. The results indicate that the majority of the students found writing sentences in English easy, as the mean value was greater than 3 (Lawless&Heymann, 2010). Regarding reviewing a paragraph or essay, the majority of the students found it hard to attempt and attained a mean value of only 2.6. In relation to writing a story, the majority of the students (i.e., 3.1 Mean value)

found it easy to write a story. In contrast, summarizing and giving comments on comprehension were found hard by a majority of the students and attained mean values of only 2.8 and 2.9, respectively. In relation to writing a conclusion, the majority of the students (i.e., 3.1 of Mean value) found it easy to write the conclusions of comprehension.

Linguistic Difficulties

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of linguistic difficulties

No.	Items	Mean	SD
1.	I can quickly understand the academic genre's distinctive linguistic characteristics.	3.1	1.1
2.	I can easily construct sentences and paragraphs using suitable syntax.	2.5	1.2
3.	I can readily summarize and synthesize passages.	2.9	1.3
4.	I have the ability to paraphrase with precision.	2.8	1.1
5.	I am capable of writing cohesive paragraphs.	2.4	0.7
6.	I am able to use punctuation in the appropriate places.	3.1	1.3
7.	I am able to easily link or transition between sentences.	2.6	0.9

By representing the analysis of data in table no 2. The results indicate that the majority of the students could understand the academic genre's distinctive linguistic characteristics easily as the mean value was greater than 3, i.e., 3.1 (Lawless & Heymann, 2010). Regarding the construction of sentences and paragraphs, the majority of the students found it hard to construct sentences and paragraphs using suitable syntax and attained a mean value of only 2.5. In relation to passage synthesis and summarization, the majority of the students found it hard to summarize and synthesize passages easily, achieving a mean value of only 2.5. Similarly, the ability of precise paraphrase was also found hard by a majority of the students and attained a mean value of only 2.8. In terms of writing cohesive paragraphs, the majority of the students found it hard to maintain links among paragraphs, and the average score they got was only 2.4. In contrast, using punctuation in the appropriate places was found easy by a majority of the students, with a mean score of 3.1. In relation to maintaining links or transitions between sentences, the majority of the students found it hard to maintain links or transition between sentences easily, with a mean score of 2.6.

Discussion

This study aimed to accomplish two objectives. Firstly, the study investigated the undergraduate students' perceptions about the problematic and challenging areas of academic writing skills

across all the enrolled students attending public universities in the province of Sindh. Secondly, the study intended to offer suggestions for potential remedies to the problems with academic writing that undergraduate students experience.

Based on the descriptive statistical tests, the results showed a number of areas where undergraduate students' academic writing skills were weak and where they were strong. When it comes to areas in which the students excelled, the majority of them found that it was easy to compose English sentences and stories. On the other hand, the findings of Mumtaz (2021) showed that pupils struggled most with writing both sentences and stories in English. Another identified strong area was the ability to write a conclusion and apply punctuation in appropriate places, as indicated by students. A similar finding has been revealed by Sadiq and Khanam (2022), where writing conclusions and application of punctuation were indicated as the strong areas by the students.

In terms of academic writing difficulties, the findings revealed several challenging areas of academic writing skills of undergraduate students. Accordingly, cohesion among paragraphs was found as the weakest area for a majority of the students, and they found it difficult to maintain a link among the paragraphs. A conclusion quite similar to this one was discovered by Ravichandran et al. (2017), where the students identified difficulty in organizing their thoughts and maintaining a flow from

paragraph to paragraph as an issue that they believe needs to be improved. Another identified weak area was the construction of sentences and paragraphs, where a majority of the students found it hard to construct sentences and paragraphs using suitable syntax. Ahmed (2019) discovered a conclusion quite similar to this one, in which the students recognized the difficulty in writing sentences and paragraphs due to a lack of knowledge of syntax and tenses.

Recommendations and Conclusion

In light of the findings of the current study, a few of the following suggestions may be considered to improve the academic writing skills of undergraduate students in Pakistan.

1. To make sure English language skills are at higher levels of education, it's important to put a lot of focus on analyzing mistakes in the written work of first-year university students. Since many academics agree that university students don't have a natural understanding of how English rules work.
2. Through the process of error analysis, students should be given English language methods that rely on self or peer correction. These practices should be based on the most common mistakes found in written tasks. For self-correction, they should be given texts or excerpts from the same genre. This will help them feel more confident. They need different kinds of short English language courses and tests that are tailored to their fields.
3. As mentioned earlier, special attention should be paid to choosing courses or tests that can help improve students' use of words and language and help them write better academic writing skills.
4. Students should be given reading assignments that are extensive and should be encouraged to help them become familiar with particular genre-based vocabulary as well as the conceptual understanding meaning of phrases and words pertinent to their respective fields of study.
5. Students at the higher education level should be required to differentiate between distinct writing materials authored by native and non-native speakers with an emphasis on the morphology and expressiveness of the texts.
6. Students should be encouraged to write on material regardless of the subject matter of each written assignment they are given, regardless of the discipline.
7. There is a requirement to supervise curriculum creation from the ground up (school to university level). In addition, the linkage between schools and colleges, as well as between colleges and universities, should be begun through relatively frequent seminars and training programs.
8. The reading and writing instruction of English at the higher education level ought to be brought up to date with the most recent methods and theories that are used internationally.
9. In addition to this, it is important to place emphasis on the student's motivation and attitude toward the development of content and task-oriented academic writing.

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