



**STUDENTS' CHALLENGES IN ACADEMIC WRITING: INTERNATIONAL
PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to identify international tertiary students' challenges in academic writing. The article suggests a systematic review of the scientific literature related to higher education students' challenges in academic writing. Possible reasons for that might be the mismatch between required English language proficiency upon graduation and application to the higher education; L1 interference and incompetent linguistic ability. This article serves as background for further empirical study. Additionally, the paper provides suggestions and recommendations to overcome mentioned difficulties in academic writing. The results are useful for tertiary instructors who teach English writing related courses.

Keywords: academic writing; challenges; international perspective.

Introduction

Writing is one of the most essential skills that foreign language students should learn in school and after they graduate. According to Adams & Keene (2000) as cited in Al-Tamimi (2018) students who can achieve communicative competence in writing can develop their language skills and succeed academically at all levels of education. Moreover, writing is considered as a process of discovery as writers seek their way while struggling experiencing a challenge in thinking, composing, and putting their ideas together (Ismail, 2010).

Students' literacy issues were evident in their writing, as observed by their teacher during the process, and were attributed to students' literacy backgrounds. This emphasizes the importance of a "Foundation program" (Dimitriou et al., 2020, p. 17) for students like these.

According to Bailey (2011) the most difficult feature of academic writing is vocabulary of academic English. Meanwhile, they have to study "a series of conventions in style, referencing and organization". Furthermore, their lecturers are frequently concerned about their students' lack of critical thinking skills, as well as their inability to answer specific questions and their inability to develop logical answers. Additional concerns include vocabulary, plagiarism, and referencing abilities.

Aim of the study

The study aimed to investigate students' challenges in academic writing from an international perspective. Hence, the findings of this study will contribute to the higher educational institutions, specifically to instructors to reduce the challenges that students face in academic



writing by identifying their difficulties and offering some recommendations to overcome them.

Previous studies: challenges in academic writing and suggestions for overcoming

Singh (2019) conducted a qualitative study to explore international English as a foreign language (EFL) Master's students' academic writing challenges in a Malaysian university. Those difficulties were investigated from instructors' perspectives. The data was collected through semi-structured interview from 16 lecturers who taught graduate students in various courses. It was discovered that students mostly face difficulties with "lack of English language proficiency, challenges in expressing ideas, unorganized academic writing structure, intentional plagiarism, proofreading and editing, translation, mismatch in academic writing culture, cheating in their academic writing" (Singh, 2019, p-s. 977&978). Furthermore, it was suggested for students to improve their English language proficiency before entering the university or during their studies not to face aforementioned challenges.

A similar study conducted in Indonesian university to investigate the ability of EFL learners in writing academic papers (Husin & Nurbayani, 2017). This paper aimed to explore students' thesis quality. The descriptive-quantitative research examines the thesis quality of students in terms of "language, structure, concept understanding, theoretical framework, methodology, content, writing mechanism, and references" (Husin & Nurbayani, 2017, p. 1) used. This research also seeks to identify any factors that influence the thesis quality of English Department students. The main data comes from fourteen English Department students' theses that were tested in 2013. From a variety of perspectives, students' thesis stands in the moderate category, with an average score of 3.16 on a scale of 2.61–3.40. The aspect of language, as mentioned above, becomes important for determining students' ability to write a thesis well and correctly. All whilst, the quality of the development and application of a theoretical framework is categorized as low, with an average score of 2.5. However, the aspects of methodological capacity and complete and relevant references classify the quality as very high, with an average score of 3.8.

Another study was conducted by Tajik et al. (2021) to investigate graduate students' perceptions of the importance of the English language, the impact of previous experience on their perceptions, and the difficulties they face in academic reading and writing in English. The data was collected through online survey from 10 Kazakhstani universities. Academic reading and writing in EMI sessions are perceived differently by undergraduate and graduate students than



reading and writing in their L1 medium. The main reasons were cultural differences and differences in medium instruction across countries. International studies, for example, have found that even if a student is excellent at English according to their country's standards, the writing standards and styles of EMI may differ significantly from what students are used to. Furthermore, students' previous experience in academic writing in secondary school differs from that required for EMI sessions. Furthermore, participants suggested that universities may provide more courses in EMI programs, as well as more comprehensive, timely, and effective support to help students improve their academic reading and writing skills (Tajik et al., 2021).

Cennetkusu (2017) investigated international students' challenges in academic writing from U.S. university graduate students and course instructors' perspectives. Moreover, documents analysis was also conducted where the researcher analyzed "graduate program manuals, course syllabi, writing samples from the students and online resources such as manuals and writing samples" (p. 3). The study implemented mixed method (both quantitative and qualitative) to collect the data from participants. The quantitative data from 65 international graduate students and course instructors were collected via survey and qualitative part of the data was collected from aforementioned documents' careful analysis. Furthermore, despite of that course instructors claimed that the most challenging feature in academic writing for students were "using proper grammar", "connections and transitions", followed by "presenting ideas clearly" (p. 4), students assumed that it was "having less rich vocabulary and expressions" and "choosing correct words". Cennetkusu claims that it is evident that there is a misconnection between what professors observe and what students experience while writing an academic text. According to the findings of the study, if parties in higher education become aware of each other's expectations and practices, higher education via second/foreign language would most likely produce successful writers.

According to Al-Fadda's (2012) study the most challenging feature of academic writing for students was differentiating between spoken and written styles of English, followed by constructing an outline before starting a writing and avoiding plagiarism. The analytic descriptive approach was implemented to collect the data from participants of the study. The researcher collected the data via questionnaire tool from 50 postgraduate students in King Saud University, Saudi Arabia.

Al Badi (2015) scrutinized the difficulties that ESL learners experience in academic writing. The study implemented the qualitative design and the questionnaire as the tool for a data collection.



The data was collected from 20 postgraduate international students who were studying in an Australian university. As a result, it was discovered that students faced challenges mostly with “language use, coherence, and cohesion followed by both expressing their own voice as well as selecting a significant topic and relevant references” (p. 5). It was suggested that in order to overcome those challenges in academic writing, students’ needs and difficulties should be identified by course instructors and curriculum designers. Moreover, it should be clear what instructors expect from students to do: instructions and expectations regarding writing tasks. Another useful strategy is to teach students brainstorming skills regarding the writing task (Abdulkareem, 2013). Lastly, the research mentioned that there might be various reasons for students’ challenges in academic writing which is an issue for a further investigation.

Conclusion

This study reviewed the literature systematically regarding students’ challenges in academic writing from an international perspective. It was discovered that difficulties of students in academic writing differs based on some features such as their L1, cultural context and previous learning experience. Furthermore, most mentioned difficulties were the students’ low level of English language proficiency, specifically inappropriate usage of the grammar and vocabulary, and challenges in expressing ideas. As the study is a basis for further empirical research, it will be completed by data collection, data analysis and finding’s sections. To overcome challenges in academic writing several recommendations were provided in the previous studies such as taking a “Foundation program”, improving the English language proficiency before entering the higher education and discussing expectations of academic writing course instructors and students from each other. To sum up, this study made a partial contribution in investigating students’ challenges in academic writing and can be useful for instructors and program coordinators.

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