Academic Writing Problems Faced by ESL Learners in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

English is used as a medium of instruction for educational purposes all over the world. All the subjects such as Mathematics, Social Sciences, and Technology are taught in English. However, students face difficulties to communicate effectively in that present study was conducted to find out the writing difficulties and the reasons for those difficulties. The sample consisted of the postgraduate students of University of Education Faisalabad campus. This study used quantitative method. The data were collected via questionnaire and were analysed by calculating frequency, mean, and standard deviation. The data analysis depicted grammar, preposition, vocabulary and sentence structures as main problems. Students felt that insufficient teaching methods are the cause of these problems. The students needed that teachers may deliver lectures in English language to improve their writing skills.

Key words: *Academic Writing, ESL Learners, Spelling, Vocabulary*

Introduction

Academic writing skills are an important but most difficult skills for university students especially who did not have English as their native language (Lee & Tajino 2008, Negari, 2012). They face many problems in the areas of vocabulary and spellings. The effective writing skills require mastering the grammar of that language. Studies revealed that poor grammatical structures of language affect the performance of written assignments (Myles, 2002). Writing is used as a mode of appraisal, which shows the writer's skill especially in ESL content. For the ESL learners learning English is the need of the hour (Ying, Siang, & Mohamad, 2021). Academic writing is a process in which we show our ideas, perception,

and information. It must deal with the specific topic. The features of an academic writing are valid, reliable, precise, and use references from the other. According to Adams and Keene (2000) teaching of English can help the students to improve their academic writing and speaking Skill. Students with their academic career must have to cope with different writing Genre such as Summery, essays, reviews, and research articles. Daoud and Al-Hazmi (2002) showed that non-native speakers of the English language explored a new world of academic writing by assessing self-integration of learning and intellectual commitment.

The development of writing is influenced by many factors like writing ability, language proficiency, and experiences of such languages (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2008; Kubota, 1998). Academic writing must be written in formal language and style Academic writing must have a serious thought constructed on the basis of grammatical pattern. Teachers uses the different Approaches such as Product, Process, and Genre to enhance the writing skill of students. Product approach is followed by many teachers in our schools and colleges which focuses on mimicry and memorization of model text. The process approach in which creativity is more demanded than the memorization. The genre approach involves learners to complete their writing not only as text to produce but this text involves all the structures and features which is directly related to the given topic. This research focus on writing for academic purpose: problem faced by ESL learners in UE Faisalabad campus. ESL writing is one of the major challenges for both students and teachers. According to AL Faddy (2012) the basics of academic writing is to see the talent of learners to check the related references, and organize them in such a way that they develop its own expression. Instead of a single person, academic writing deals with the society (Bruke, 2012). It is necessary for ESL learners how the use of Colon, Semicolon, in their writing. ESL learners must be conscious in order to reduce the mistake while writing a dialogue, Summery, research paper or the title of thesis. Academic writing becomes a very prominent factor for professional career. It is a truth that we judge students' ability through their writing at higher level.

Literature Review

According to Musa (2010), writing is difficult skill to acquire due to involvement of many components like punctuation and spelling. English for specific purposes is divided into two types. First is English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) second is English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Its aim is to improve students' skills of communication reading and writing in a very short time period so that they can achieve success in life. In 1960's English become the most dominant area of EFL learning or teaching. Its importance is shown by a number of Universities that provided M. A. in that specific language.

Another contributing factor is the writing styles of the writers (Kubota, 1998). Researchers investigated that writing skill transfers between first language and second language (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2008; Kubota 1998). On the other hand, many researchers argued that the first and second languages are different from each other (Grabe, 2001; Petrice & Czarl, 2003). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) state that the main point which must be done in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) teaching is use of authentic materials that help the students to acquire better opportunities for jobs. ESP defined as a process of teaching of English for academic studies and professional purposes. Hutchinson and Waters says that there are two historical steps that give life to ESP. Firstly World War brought a new phase of development in the fields of life such as science, technology and economy (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) that's why English becomes the language of

knowledge. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987) at that time English became the language of demand of people than other language. They also point out that spoken English can vary from written English.

With the help of rhetorical and linguistic options, novice writers need writing tasks after careful examination of complex variables in composition (Johns, 2008). Many researchers explored the teachers' perceptions about the academic writing (Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Zhu, 2004). Many researchers examined the students' perceptions (Grami, 2010; Yiu, 2009). The third group explored the students' writing sample (Ezza, 2010; Tahaineh, 2010). The last one explored the judgements of the students about their academic advisors (Bacha & Bahous, 2008; Myles & Cheng, 2003).

Dudley Evans and St. John assert that ESP is not only related with some particular fields and it is not merely used by adult students but also by young adult in secondary level. There are types of ESP language described by David Carter in (1983), first is restricted language used by waiters and traffic police. But people who use that language are not able to communicate in new situation. Carter developed the second type of ESP that is English for Academic and Professional Purposes. ESP is further divided into three types such as English for Business and Economic (EBE). Hutchinson and Waters state that the other type is particular subject.

Hutchinson and Waters differentiate EAP and EOP. EAP use and learnt for study purposes and EOP is used by students when they get a job. EOP has great importance in profession and it is the language of doctors, lawyer, tourist and nurses. EAP is a language which is taught in educational institute and students wants to specialize in that language during their ESL programmes. Myles in (2002) says that academic writing is a conscious process and needs much practice to compose developed and analyze ideas. Grammar is the most complex area for second language learners (Farouq, 2012). Nyasimi (2014), the challenges using correct sentence structures and paragraph development need struggle by the students. Grammar is not a set of rules, but a growing structure of language (Kleisar, 2005). There is a close relationship between language and culture. Baker (2003) argues that language reflect our belief, values, morals and entirely culture and by learning language one's learn language. Many ESL learners learn L1 from their school that is why when learning second language students are not able to collect their ideas in form of academic writing in ESL context. This situation is alarming because they do not know what academic English is and use conversational English for writing purposes

Academic writing is the main component of students' socialising at university level. It is important for students to improve soft skills and academic writing skills needed by students (Jacobs, 2007). Academic writing and business writing are two types of writing styles. Business writing is based on hard facts. Academic writing is that in which reader describe their beliefs and values to explain a subject. Business writing may be called practical writings. These writings include CVs, application and personal letters for jobs. Academic writing has eight features such as complexity, hedging formality, explicitly, responsibility etc. The language of these writings is accurate and simple. The students must talk oriented in learning process to ensure academic tasks and understanding the rules of academic writing for their success (Pineteh, 2014). It is the responsibility of the students to overcome their shortcoming of poor writing skill and their lack of English competency. Academic writing requires effort and commitment needed guidance by teachers to appreciate the fact.

Several writings are conducted in the area of academic writing in English as a second language context and identify the problems that students face while academic writing. Lee and Tajino (2008) proposed that the development of second language is attributable to experiences in that language than to transfer of cultural patterns in first language. Wiggle (2002) says that writing shows not only the thought of the person but also the new information in the world. Academic writing is the type of critical writing and to produce new information in second language advocated by Arnopolsky. The academic writing skills need individual attention and regular feedback (Pineteh, 2014). English can help the students to make effective use of academic requirement and learning context (Adams & Keene, 2000). English writing skills make the students proficient in critical thinking and inspiration to earn and utilize powerful word expressions and best vocabulary (Abdulwahed, 2010; Ismail, 2011).

Fujioke did a survey and suggest how Asian students achieved academic writing. Major problem faced by ESL learners is critical thinking rather than lexical problems. Research shows that lack organize ability due to their translating text first in Urdu then write in English. Abad (1988) find that ESL learner problems in writing skill due to inappropriate teaching method and unsuitable environment which is not suitable to learn a foreign language. According to Al Murshidi (2014), poor academic writing skill is responsible for low language proficiency. The reasons included wrong choice of vocabulary, grammar errors, irregular verbs, spelling mistakes and punctuation (Al-Khairy, 2013).

ESL students face two types of problems first is lack of vocabulary, spelling mistake, pronunciation and errors in syntax or morphology. The second is that they are not able to express their ideas properly when write about a common topic of everyday life. He points out that cause of these problems is students' inefficiency in English inside and outside classrooms. Ballard and Clancy say that academic writing become tough for non-native speaker because they are less familiar with English. Al Mukharge says in (1985) mother tongue is the greatest hindrance in academic writing for ESL learners. Academic writing skills have an important role for non- native speakers of English language like objectivity, formality and complexity for using the language accurately and precisely (Abdulwahed, 2010).

The Objectives of the Study

The objectives of study were:
1. To find out the writing difficulties that postgraduate students have to meet in their academic writing courses.
2. To investigate the reasons of the writing difficulties among students of University of Education FSD campus.
3. To find out the problems in academic writing course.

Research Questions

These were the research questions of study:
1. What are the kinds of writing used by postgraduate students in UE?
2. What are writing difficulties faced by students in UE FSD Campus?
3. What are the causes of writing problems faced by students?
4. What are the suggestions to solve this problem?

Methodology

The research was descriptive in nature. The researchers used quantitative method to explain the writing for academic purpose, problems faced by ESL learners in UE Faisalabad campus. The population of this research was the students of English department of University of Education Faisalabad Campus. Students were selected from semester four and five. The respondents belonged to different backgrounds because of socio economic and educational culture varies. The study sample consisted of 100 students randomly selected from University of Education FSD campus after taking data of ESL students who had undergone the course of academic writing. Thus, each student served as a sampling unit for the study. Thus, from the responses of this sample the data has been collected and analysed.

The research questions for this study were most appropriately investigated using the exploratory tools of questionnaire. With the use of the survey questionnaire this study took on the combined quantitative approach of research. By means of employing this approach, the researcher was able to obtain the advantages of both quantitative approach and overcome their limitations. Data from quantitative research differs in several ways. This is a major difference in data interpretation. A precise distinction between facts and opinions was available in this type of research (Cooper & Schindler, 2006).

Results

Data of all questionnaire (N=100) were entered in SPSS version 23. Analysis of data was presented in the form of tables followed by interpretation. Information collected through questionnaire was analysed by calculating frequency, mean, and standard deviation. The frequency shows that how students responded on five-point Likert scale. The mean values show the balancing point of their responses on each problem. Standard deviation shows that how much responses deviated from the mean. To find the difference in distribution of responses, chi-square test was conduct.

Table 1

Mean, SD of responses of problems faced by postgraduate students in academic writing (N=100)

Statements	Mean	SD
Weak foundation of target language	4.24	0.88
Lack of motivation	4.08	0.95
Use of L1 in the classroom	3.86	1.28
Structural difference between L1 and	3.98	1.27
Cultural difference in L1 and L2	3.97	1.13
Problems in register	3.90	1.05
Difficulties in expression	3.74	1.25
Grammatical error	4.01	1.13
Lack of vocabulary	4.27	0.96
Problems in use of syntactical structure	4.00	0.98
Difficulties in proposition	3.84	1.23
Problems in use of sentences	3.45	1.30
Spelling errors	3.56	1.33

Table 1 showed problems faced by post graduate students in academic writing. Mostly students responded that they agreed or strongly agreed with these problems but intensity of the problems is different. Students felt problems in expression and they considered the structural differences between L1 and L2 caused grammatical and spelling errors those results in problems in syntactical structures. Prepositional problems caused confusion in use of correct tenses. Mostly these problems occur as a result of the Lack of vocabulary encountered by students that is associated with the use of L1 in L2 classrooms. The eighty-seven percent students were agreed or completely agreed that lack of vocabulary is most common problem among postgraduate students. The mean value (M=4.27, SD=0.96) is highest among all other problems.

Table 2

Mean, SD of responses about types of academic writing

Statements	Mean	SD
Academic writing is important area of study	4.53	0.73
Prescribed syllabus	3.94	1.11
Types of writing	3.55	1.13
Types of writing included in syllabus are sufficient.	3.27	1.25

Table 2 showed the types of problems carried by the learners in University of Education. Respondents responded in both ways positive and negative. They found weaknesses in syllabus as well as they were not satisfied with the types of writing in their classrooms Mean values (M=4.53 SD= 0.73) showed that the respondents consider academic writing as an important area of study. However, they were not satisfied with their prescribed syllabus. Mean values (M=3.94 SD= 1.11) reflects this clearly. There is no significant difference in results about the respondents' views towards the satisfaction and sufficiency of academic writing included in their syllabus (M= 3.55 SD=1.13) (M=3.27 SD =1.25)

Table 3

Mean, SD of responses about problems Identified by postgraduate students

Statements	Mean	SD
Need for guidance	4.42	0.90
Opportunity to practice academic writing in classroom	3.76	1.19
Assessment system	3.61	1.27
Familiarity with referencing style used in academic writing	3.15	1.30
Insufficient Teaching strategies	3.22	1.39

Table 3 showed that students' problems in academic writing is lack of guidance (M=4.42 SD=0.90). Mean values showed that (M=3.76 SD=1.19) the respondents do not get opportunity to practice academic writing in their classrooms. Assessment system in U. E. (M=3.61 SD=1.27) is also a cause of problems in academic writing. According to the respondents, insufficient teaching strategies (M=3.22 SD=1.39) caused problems in their academic writing. Results showed that the students were not familiar with referencing style (M=3.15 SD=1.30) and they considered that the less opportunities to practice academic writing in classrooms (M= 3.76 SD=1.119) as a cause of their problems.

Table 4

Mean, SD of responses about main problem Areas in academic writing

Statements	Mean	SD
Grammatical error	4.01	1.13
Problems in register	3.90	1.05
Lack of vocabulary	4.27	0.96
Problems in use of syntactical structure	4.00	0.98
Difficulties in proposition	3.84	1.23
Problems in use of tenses	3.45	1.30
Spelling errors	3.56	1.33

Table 4 revealed that mean values represent that the lack of vocabulary (M=4.27 SD=0.96) was the major problem in academic writing. Respondents faced problems in the organization of syntactical structure (M=4.00 SD 0.98). Table showed that learners encountered problems in register (M= 4.27 SD=0.96) as well as prepositions (M=3.84 SD=1.23) pose difficulty in academic writing. Results showed (M=4.01 SD 1.13) that students face grammatical errors in writing. Another important area of language learning is pointed out i.e. use of tenses for sentence formation (M= 3.45 SD=1.30), this is closed to spelling errors which was very significant problem in writing in general. These identified issues in academic writing became the basis of problems in syntactical structure of L2 for ESL learners in University of Education. The mean value (M=4.27, SD=0.96) was highest among all other means of problems.

Table 5

Percentage, Mean and SD of responses about how to overcome the writing problems

Statements	Mean	SD
Learner cantered classroom	4.33	.910
Teacher as a facilitator	4.61	.723
Use of multiple teaching facilities	4.53	.735
Classroom writing tasks	4.42	.674
Use of simple English in classroom	4.21	.891
Specific material for academic writing	4.22	.860
Extensive reading	4.30	.990

Table 5 showed the suggestions about how to overcome problems in academic writing. Mean values (M=4.61 SD=.723) presented that the respondents emphasize the role of teacher in classroom. 69 % respondents agreed that the teacher should be a facilitator in teaching process that is in line with new concepts of teaching and learning. The participants of the study suggested (M=4.53 SD= .735) the use of multiple teaching strategies as well as they also suggested (M=4.42 SD=.674) that classroom writing task enhanced their skills. Respondents favour (M=4.33 SD=.910) the learner cantered classrooms and use of simple English in classrooms (M=4.21 SD=.891). Participants of the study suggest extensive reading (M=4.30 SD= .990) for the improvement of academic writing the mean values showed the balancing point of their responses on each problem. Standard deviation showed that how much responses deviated from the mean.

Table 6

Mean, SD of responses about problems related to lack of writing skills

Statements	Mean	SD
Opportunity to practice academic writing in classroom	3.76	1.19
Classroom writing tasks	4.42	0.67
Teacher as a facilitator	4.61	0.72
Specific material for academic writing	4.22	0.86
Extensive reading	4.30	0.99

Table 6 showed results of the research question that the lack of academic writing in classrooms is a reason of the problems faced by ESL learners, respondents agreed with the concept of importance of writing task in classroom (M= 4.42, SD=0.674). They also focused on the availability of specific and relevant material for the development of academic writing skills. (M= 4.22, SD= 0.860). Extensive reading for the enhancement of vocabulary is also needed.

Findings and Discussion

The result of recent study shows the problems faced by students such as grammar, preposition, Vocabulary, Sentence structures and grammatical errors, the same has been pointed out by Eng, Luyue, and Lim (2020). Students felt that insufficient teaching methods are the cause of these problems. A number of students agreed that guidance and practices of academic writing is necessary to improve their writing skills. Computer programmed such as Endnote use to help pupils to gain these objectives. Student considers teachers use L1 in ESL classes is one of the main causes of their failure in academic writing which is stressed by Gaffas (2019) also. Teachers also have low proficiency in that target language. The students needed that teachers should provide lectures in English language because it increases their writing skills. The administration chooses such a curriculum which enhances their writing abilities.

The eighty-seven percent students were agreed or completely agreed that lack of vocabulary is most common problem among postgraduate students. Another student mentioned vocabulary. This is because a reasonable vocabulary is needed for students to function effectively in their programs. Moreover, the findings of the current study revealed that the students face difficulties in grammar like prepositions, tenses word structure and in syntactical structures. Grammar is extremely important in conveying accurate messages. A large number of respondents agreed that the guidance is important for students in the development of academic writing skills. A significant number of respondents agreed that the students should be given the opportunity to practice academic writing in classroom as they do not get the opportunity to practice academic writing in their classrooms. The informants pointed out that teachers play an important role in improving learners' academic writing skills.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the main problem which university students" face in academic writing is weak foundation of English language skills. Umar and Noreen (2021a) also asserts that "students lack basic skills of EL, which ought to be

acquired at primary and middle level. Higher secondary level is not to learn the basics of the language but to master the skills as a lifelong learning" (p.178). Moreover, the findings of the research ascertain that problem in the use of register, poor expression of writing, lack of continuity, frequent grammatical errors, lack of vocabulary, poor syntactical structure, incorrect usage of proposition, difficulty in the usage of correct tenses and spelling errors are some of the major problems which university students' face in academic writing. The reasons behind the lack of academic writing skills of the students' include usage of L1 in classrooms, structural and cultural differences of L1 and L2, lack of guidance and practice, assessment system and incompetence of teachers in terms of teaching methodologies. Khan and Khan (2020) also points out the incompetence of language teachers in term of language skills and teaching methodologies especially at primary and middle level in most of the low stature private sector schools. Moreover, Umar and Noreen (2021b) and Alam and Uddin (2013) blame the criteria of assessment and assessment driven teaching and learning practices as one of the major cause of poor language skills of the students'.

Recommendations

The findings of the research recommend that teachers must motivate the students so that they are able to learn the target language. Students should not be allowed to use the L1 in the classroom in order to enhance the ability of their L2. University should revise the syllabus and teachers should guide the students and provide opportunity to practice academic writing in classrooms. Moreover, modern means of assessment should be adopted and teachers should apply various teaching methodologies in classrooms.

Therefore, the researchers recommend that the Universities should introduce ESL learning programs for students to develop their language skills. Teachers should ask the students to practice writing skills in classrooms as well as assignments should be given to enhance the writing practice of the students. Moreover, teachers need to check the work of every student and should must provide feedback individually. This will help in identification of the specific errors which the student makes and will help the teacher to guide that particular student according to its needs. Moreover, Universities should develop the English language curriculum according to the needs of the students and the needs of the ESL classrooms in Pakistani context. The curriculum must focus on all language skills including reading, writing, listening and speaking as only writing skills will not help to develop language skills as language is developed through integrated learning and without extensive reading and extensive practice of listening and speaking students will not be able to develop proficiency in writing. Therefore, teachers must assign extensive reading tasks to the students and should encourage them to listen content in English and communicate in English inside and outside the classrooms. Moreover, teachers need to be trained for teaching English in specific context. Recruitment criteria must be revised and language teachers must be recruited based on their language skills proficiency not on their academic performances. However, along with language skills proficiency, teachers must have appropriate teaching skills and they should use variety of teaching methodologies to engage students' interest. Universities should encourage the use of audio-visual aids and information technology and must provide the same to help develop language skills of the students.

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