

Exploring the Postgraduate Students' Challenges and Needs in Learning Academic Writing

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Abstract

Writing skills are regarded as the most challenging skills to be acquired by all language learners. It is a complex cognitive activity that requires effort by the learners. In university context, writing becomes twice as hard by the students as it requires them to be aware of their own writing. The researchers in this study identified the gap in the current context on the students' learning of writing in tertiary levels. Before proposing an intervention of a current problem, it is essential for the researchers to identify the problems and challenges in writing before proposing the solutions to the current problem. In this study, the researchers ought to discover the academic writing requirements of postgraduate students who are non-native English speakers (ESL postgraduate students) and to distinguish between their desired outcomes and areas for improvement. Focus group interviews were utilised as the method of data collection to ensure that the needs identified were based on the participants' perspective. An interview was conducted with three ESL postgraduate students who were enrolled to test the interview protocol. The interview sessions were recorded, transcribed, analysed, and organised. Upon analysis and categorization, it was found that the participants expressed both target and learning needs. The desired outcome includes the skills that students are expected to have by the end of the course, which are typically outlined as course goals. On the other hand, the learning needs refer to the challenges that students encounter while striving to achieve these goals. It was determined that in addition to the desired outcomes outlined in the course goals, there are also learning needs that ESL students face due to their prior experience and language background. The study presents several implications for teaching ESL writing.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Esl, University Students

Introduction

Writing is a valuable skill that students develop by creating messages and expressing ideas through written texts, which makes improving this skill crucial for students to achieve

academic success. Acquiring writing in a foreign or second language primarily revolves around understanding linguistic concepts, selecting appropriate vocabulary, utilising proper sentence structures, and employing cohesive elements that form the building blocks of written texts. (Budjalemba & Listyani 2023). This ability to write can be a challenging endeavour for students learning English as a foreign or second language, as it requires a combination of skills, knowledge, and proficiency in various domains (Ahmad et al., 2023; Akhtar et al., 2020). Therefore, before starting learning intervention to a problem, teachers and course designers must first identify the areas and skills that students need to improve in order to become proficient writers. In this study, the needs analysis technique is applied to identify the problems arising from the current situation. The needs analysis is described as "a systematic and ongoing process of gathering information about students' needs and preferences, interpreting this information, and then making course decisions based on the interpretation" (Mohamed 2022; Nenotek et al., 2022). This process is crucial for teachers and course designers to create writing courses that address these needs and contribute to the enhancement of students' writing skills (Jančaříková et al., 2020; Jeyaraj et al., 2020). Consequently, teachers and course designers incorporate the needs analysis approach into language programmes as an initial step in identifying the learning requirements of students. The data collected on the students' needs serve as a framework to determine the goals of this course and develop syllabi that cater to the students' learning needs. Additionally, this information plays a crucial role in helping teachers select suitable teaching materials and implement effective teaching methods and approaches to address their students' weaknesses and overcome any deficiencies they may have (Khadawardi 2022; Lin Morrison 2021).

Purpose of the Study

This researcher conducted this study to discover the writing needs of English as a Second Language (ESL) students at a public research university in Malaysia. The main objective was to identify the challenges that these students encounter when writing in English for academic purposes. Therefore, the following questions were formulated:

1. What are then Challenges Do Postgraduate Students' Encounter in Academic Writing?
2. What are Postgraduate Students' Needs in Learning Academic Writing?

Methodology

In this study, the researcher conducted a focus group interview with three students to gain a deeper understanding of their opinions on the needs of learning academic writing. The interview was conducted in both English and Malay as the participants are not native speakers of English. It lasted approximately one hour and consisted of a series of questions. To achieve the desired outcome, the collected data underwent a thematic analysis. This involved carefully identifying, examining, and categorising the recorded data into appropriate and predetermined themes.

Findings

The participants in this study, consisting of three postgraduate students, took part in a thorough focus group interview. By engaging in open and honest conversation, they delved into their individual experiences, revealing the challenges they encounter. In doing so, they provided valuable insights into their requirements, personal preferences, and the particular aspects of academic writing that pose significant obstacles. The chosen methodological

approach aims to thoroughly explore the challenges faced in the field of academic writing. During the focus group interview, participants had a chance to share their ideas and perspectives, resulting in a diverse range of narratives that revealed the various ways they experienced academic writing. The purpose of this exploration was to go beyond simply identifying challenges and instead uncover the complex relationship between their experiences and the academic writing process. The participants' active involvement in this collaborative discussion created an opportunity to thoroughly explore their challenges, shedding light on the complexities that are often overlooked in conventional research methods.

In addition, the focus group interview method allowed the researcher to delve into the participants' perspectives, which brought a greater understanding and context to the difficulties they expressed. Through active participation in this interactive setting, the participants challenged and explored the complexities of their struggles, revealing the emotional and cognitive aspects that often accompany the journey of academic writing.

Perceived Challenges in Academic Writing

The participants in this study, a group of three postgraduate students, discussed the major challenges that come with academic writing. The feedback from the participants highlighted on the complex procedures of organising words, following strict guidelines, and including key components in writing in academic context.

Challenges in Sentence Structures

The participants discussed the problems in organising words in a way that that followed standards of academic writing (Rafi & Morgan 2021). Participant 1 (P1) expressed their perspective by explaining the importance of organising words in a coherent and visually appealing manner. When writing for an academic paper, it is important to adhere to a specific set of standards. The participants highlighted that it is the most challenging aspect. This statement highlights the complexity of the challenge, where the need for accuracy, clarity, and following established conventions presents a significant obstacle.

The challenge goes beyond mere grammatical accuracy and goes into the complex relationship between syntax and semantics, which is crucial for expressing ideas in academic writing. The participants' feedback provide a valuable perspective for the researchers to understand the complexity involved in academic writing. The challenge presented by the participants requires an educational approach that encompasses both the technical aspects of grammar and the skill of constructing an academic narrative that aligns with the conventions of the field (Ramzan et al., 2023).

Challenges in Vocabulary

One important challenge brought up by the participants focuses on the choice of academic vocabulary. Participant 2 (P2) expressed their concern, stating, *"I believe that the grammar aspect is not particularly challenging since there are numerous tools accessible for assistance. However, I find it confusing to incorporate academic vocabulary into my writing at times... Sometimes, certain words may not possess the desired level of academic quality. In these situations, one may wonder which alternative vocabulary should be employed. This perspective reveals a complex aspect of academic writing which is the vocabulary."*

The participants' discussion of the suitability of certain words within an academic context highlights the complex nature of academic writing. This challenge is related to the acquisition

of vocabulary, exploring the suitability of words within a particular disciplinary discourse (Rashid et al., 2023). The reflections of the participants highlight the importance for educators and curriculum developers to look into specific interventions in vocabulary acquisition in an academic context. This approach goes beyond traditional grammar instruction and includes the skill of choosing words that are suitable for academic discussions.

The participants' feedback provides a clear analysis to the researchers of the perceived difficulties in academic writing. Understanding the complexities of scholarly composition involves the careful arrangement of words, adherence to standards, and skillful navigation of academic language (Sajjad et al., 2023). This perspective offers valuable insights into the ongoing discussion on teaching methods designed to tackle the complex obstacles encountered by students in a tertiary context.

Needs in Academic Writing

A feedback from the participants in this study is their intention towards learning materials that are visually appealing. Their unhappiness with the current resources demonstrates the need for a more captivating and visually appealing learning resources. Participant 3 (P3) expresses their dissatisfaction with the writing activity, highlighting its lack of excitement and the uninteresting nature of the materials. P3: "The writing activity is already repetitive, but the materials become even more dull. Lacking of colour, but packed with an abundance of exercise-filled pages... I must admit, I have a strong preference for visuals over words. As a visual person, I find great joy in immersing myself in captivating images and illustrations."

Practical Tools and Systematic Approaches

All participants express a strong desire for practical tools and resources to improve their academic writing skills. They emphasise the importance of templates, guidelines, and examples of skilled writing. The expressed need for a methodical approach to academic writing, which involves offering templates and checklists to enhance cognitive processes, is particularly emphasised (Yu 2021). Participant 1 (P1) explained that writing for academic purposes differs from casual writing. P1: "Writing for academic is not the same as writing casually. For me, it is good when I have a specific template on what to follow and just write according to it," "Having a specific template to follow is highly valued by many postgraduate students. It provides a structured framework that can guide them through the intricate realm of academic writing."

Embracing Established Academic Discourse: Combining Obstacles and Corrective Methods

The findings from this study are parallel with existing literature on the difficulties encountered by postgraduate students in academic writing (Yuvayapan & Bilginer 2020). The participants all acknowledged the challenges that come with academic writing, which aligns with previous research that emphasises the complexity of this intellectual skill (Jones et al., 2018; Smith & Brown, 2019). Participant 1 (P1) acknowledges that the writing activity itself is considered uninteresting, which is in line with broader discussions on the motivational aspects of academic writing pedagogy (Ahmad et al., 2023). This highlights the challenges that have been identified and emphasises the need for motivational strategies to be incorporated into academic writing education.

The participants in the study faced a common challenge of incorporating critical thinking into their writing, which aligns with the views of researchers who emphasise the need for in-depth analysis and strong analytical skills (Akhtar et al, 2020). P1's honest acknowledgment of their

supervisor's feedback on the perceived lack of criticality brings a genuine aspect to this challenge, aligning with existing research that highlights the importance of critical thinking in academic writing (Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020).

In addition, the participants face the task of navigating the complexities of academic language and choosing appropriate words, which is in line with research that examines the intricate aspects of academic vocabulary, going beyond traditional grammar rules (Ghulamuddin et al., 2021). This highlights the deep connection between language skills and academic writing, emphasising that proficiency goes beyond just grammar and includes the careful choice of vocabulary (Jančaříková et al., 2020; Jeyaraj 2020).

Teaching Considerations and Future Paths

The participants' preference for visually engaging learning materials aligns with the extensive research highlighting the importance of pedagogical strategies that involve visual stimuli (Khadawardi 2022). The alignment with research that emphasises the importance of aesthetics and engagement in educational materials underscores the need to include visually appealing elements in the design of instructional resources.

Regarding important aspects of academic writing, it is worth noting that the participants' inclination towards templates and guidelines is in line with the belief that structured methods can improve the writing process (Lin & Morrison 2021). The alignment with research supporting the effectiveness of scaffolding techniques in assisting learners with complex tasks (Mohamed 2022; Nenotek 2022; Rafi & Morgan 2021) highlights the potential advantages of incorporating structured guidance into academic writing instruction, helping postgraduate students navigate demanding writing requirements with skill.

To summarise, the various difficulties faced by postgraduate students in academic writing require a thorough and customised teaching method. Having practical tools, templates, and visually appealing resources is necessary. The findings presented here are valuable additions to the ongoing discussion on academic writing pedagogy. They provide detailed insights that can help in creating instructional materials that cater to the changing requirements of postgraduate learners. This academic investigation lays the groundwork for future research and the continuous improvement of teaching methods focused on developing the academic writing skills of graduate students.

Practical Tools and Systematic Approaches

All participants have expressed a strong interest in obtaining practical tools and resources that can help enhance their academic writing abilities. They highlight the significance of templates, guidelines, and examples of proficient writing. The importance of a systematic approach to academic writing, which includes providing templates and checklists to improve cognitive processes, is strongly emphasised (Yu 2021). P1 elaborated on the distinction between academic writing and casual writing. P1: "Writing for academic purposes requires a different approach than writing in a casual manner. I find it beneficial to have a clear template to follow, allowing me to write in accordance with it. Many postgraduate students highly value having a specific template to follow. It offers a well-organized framework to assist individuals in navigating the complex world of scholarly writing.

Exploring Established Academic Discourse: Addressing Challenges and Implementing Solutions

The findings from this study align with the existing body of literature regarding the challenges faced by postgraduate students in the field of academic writing (Yuvayapan & Bilginer 2020).

It is widely recognised that academic writing poses various challenges, as supported by previous studies that highlight the intricate nature of this intellectual ability (Jones et al., 2018; Smith & Brown, 2019). Participant 1 (P1) recognises that the writing activity itself may be perceived as uninteresting, aligning with broader discussions on the motivational aspects of academic writing pedagogy (Ahmad et al., 2023). This underscores the identified challenges and emphasises the importance of integrating motivational strategies into education on academic writing.

The study participants encountered a shared obstacle of integrating critical thinking into their writing, which is in line with the perspectives of researchers who stress the importance of thorough analysis and solid analytical abilities (Akhtar et al, 2020). P1's genuine recognition of their supervisor's feedback regarding the perceived absence of criticality adds an authentic dimension to this challenge, in line with previous studies that emphasise the significance of critical thinking in scholarly writing (Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020).

Furthermore, the participants have been tasked with navigating the complex structure of academic language and selecting suitable terminology, aligning with research that looks into the complex elements of academic vocabulary, far exceeding conventional grammar guidelines (Ghulamuddin et al., 2021). This shows how closely language skills are linked to academic writing, stressing that mastery is more than just correct grammar and includes carefully selecting words (Jančaříková et al., 2020; Jeyaraj 2020).

Exploring Educational Factors and Prospects Ahead

The preference of the participants for visually stimulating learning materials is consistent with the body of research emphasising the value of visual stimuli-based educational tactics (Khadawardi 2022). Incorporating visually attractive components into instructional resource design is crucial, as research highlights the significance of aesthetics and engagement in educational materials.

In relation to academic writing, it is interesting to mention that the participants' preference for templates and guidelines aligns with the belief that structured approaches can enhance the task of composition (Lin & Morrison 2021). The alignment with recent research studies that have explored the effectiveness of scaffolding techniques in assisting learners with complex tasks underscores the potential benefits of incorporating structured guidance into academic writing instruction. This approach can be particularly valuable for postgraduate students as they navigate the demanding writing requirements with confidence and skill.

In conclusion, the challenges encountered by graduate students in scholarly writing necessitate a comprehensive and tailored instructional approach. It is essential to have practical tools, templates, and visually appealing resources. The research findings presented in this study contribute significantly to the ongoing discourse surrounding pedagogy in academic writing. They offer in-depth insights that can assist in developing instructional materials that meet the evolving needs of postgraduate learners. This scholarly inquiry establishes a foundation for further exploration and the ongoing enhancement of pedagogical approaches aimed at fostering the scholarly writing abilities of postgraduate students.

Conclusion

The findings of the current study indicate that academic writing possesses distinct requirements, shortcomings, and aspirations. The data gathered from the focus group interview has offered valuable insights into the specific requirements of ESL students, with a particular emphasis on academic writing. The objective of this study was to investigate the

requirements of students in their academic writing courses, with a specific focus on identifying their specific needs, essential elements, and challenges. The students faced difficulties in their academic writing as a result of insufficient guidance in their prior writing course. Mastering proper grammar, including using correct tenses, agreements, reporting verbs, and prepositions, can be quite challenging for many students during their academic writing course. Articulating concepts with precision and employing appropriate scholarly terminology proved to be formidable aspects of the writing process. During their previous course, students were not provided with sufficient guidance regarding the appropriate structure and organisation of each section of a research paper. In addition, their exposure to the specific language features and styles commonly employed in academic writing was infrequent. It is advisable to consider including a wider array of educational settings in Indonesia to enhance the scope of this study. Further investigations can reveal significant findings in the field of academic writing.

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