

Perception of Difficulties and Learners' Reasons in Academic Writing: A Self-Imposed Prophecy

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Abstract

As a writing teacher, I find teaching writing most challenging. To begin with, writing skills are not meant to be taught, and students cannot just "know how to write" after they had attended lessons on writing skills. Writing is a process. Learners may master one process easier than others. Academic writing is a fear many undergraduates face when they enter higher institution. To make matters worse, learners may "acquire" their fear for writing in high schools. When they enter universities, the difficulties of writing reach a different level—especially for those who already feared essay writing in schools. One may see the fear of academic writing in universities as the unresolved fear from essay writing in high schools and this unresolved fear snowballed into the fear of academic writing in universities. This study is done to explore the fear of writing among undergraduates. This quantitative study is done to investigate if there is a relationship between beliefs, expectations, behaviour and results when it comes to writers' perception of writing difficulty. 373 participants were purposely chosen to participate in this study. They are undergraduates in a public university in Malaysia who attended one semester of academic writing. The instrument used is a survey. A summary of the findings showed interesting information about the reasons why learners find academic writing difficult. The summary also revealed the sources of fear of academic writing and their influence on the learners.

Keywords: Academic Writing Difficulty, Beliefs, Expectations, Behaviour, Results.

Introduction

As a writing teacher, I find teaching writing most challenging. To begin with, writing skills are not meant to be taught, and students cannot just “know how to write” after they had attended lessons on writing skills. Writing is a process. Learners may master one process easier than others. Academic writing is a fear many undergraduates face when they enter higher institution. To make matters worse, learners may “acquire” their fear for writing in high schools. When they enter universities, the difficulties of writing reach a different level—especially for those who already feared essay writing in schools. According to Rahmat, et al (2022), the most influential type of fear is the manifestation of their own fear. One may see the fear of academic writing in universities as the unresolved fear from essay writing in high schools and this unresolved fear snowballed into the fear of academic writing in universities.

Sabti et al (2019) report interrelationship between writing fear, writing achievement motivation and writing self-efficacy. Fear is negatively correlated with self-efficacy. Learners performance in writing is reduced when they fear writing. Is the fear of writing comes from the writing activities, or the teachers, or the self-imposed prophecy of the learners? Are the learners fear of writing manifested from what they think of their writing ability/ or lack of it? This study is done to explore the fear of writing among undergraduates. This study is also done to explore the relationship between belief, expectations, behaviour and results in the perception of writing difficulties among learners. Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions

- How does belief influence writers’ perception of difficulties?
- How do expectations influence writers’ perception of difficulties?
- How does behaviour influence writers’ perception of difficulties?
- How do results influence writers’ perception of difficulties?
- Is there a relationship between belief, expectations, behaviour and results in perception of writing difficulties?

Literature Review

Academic Writing Difficult?

Academic writing is often seen as difficult for many reasons. According to Sabti, et al (2019), writing is a complex task for many ESL (English as a second language) learners. One of the reasons of the difficulties is that learners lack hand-on exercises on writing. Moses and Mohamad (2019) found that writing is challenging for learners. Students found that they struggle with academic writing because they lack vocabulary in the language they chose to write in. Some found writing difficult because they have problems with grammar, and spelling. Sometimes, students lack the readiness to learn academic writing and that would affect their motivation to write further.

Many fear academic writing because of what they perceive it as difficult. According to Bulqiyah et al (2021), writing is perceived as difficult by undergraduates and that perception makes it so. Their study found that the source of difficulties comes from affective problems among other things. Affective refers to attitude of the writers. This is supported by Merton (1948) who theorised that the difficulty begins with the writers’ belief that it is difficult.

Moving on in a cycle of fear. The learners' fear of writing caused them to impose more problems and writing teachers can be trapped in this cycle of fear. Students' fear caused them to exhibit behaviour that they do not favour writing. This makes it more challenging for teachers. It thus make sit more difficult to motivate the students to want to write. When teachers lack professional experience to handle the challenges students face, the cycle of writing difficult continues.

Past Studies

Bulqiyah et al (2021) tertiary students' investigated perspectives on academic writing difficulties. This explanatory research used mixed mode methods. 21 undergraduates responded to the survey while 6 students were chosen to be interviewed. Findings showed that tertiary students do face problems in academic essays. The problems are categorised into (a) affective problems, (b) teaching and learning of writing course, (c) cognitive problems, (d) transferring language , (e) process of writing and also (f) linguistic problems.

Maznun et al (2017) explored the problems faced by undergraduates in writing introduction of their project reports. 5 introduction sections were analysed. The writers were then interviewed. Results showed that student face problems when they wrote introductions especially for move 2 which is actually counter claiming, indicating research gap, raising questions from previous studies and continuing tradition. Findings also revealed that students had difficulty in writing the background of the study, theoretical framework and the statement of the problem. This indicated their unawareness of the appropriate rhetorical structure of the introduction section.

The quantitative study by Sajjad et al (2021) investigated the academic writing challenges faced by university students in KFUEIT. The instrument used is a survey for students and also for teachers. 40 students responded to the survey. Findings revealed interesting findings on what learners claimed as difficulties in academic writing. They faced problems with word choice, vocabulary, and paraphrasing. Findings from teachers showed that teachers felt that the most challenging factor in academic writing is critical writing and style.

Conceptual Framework

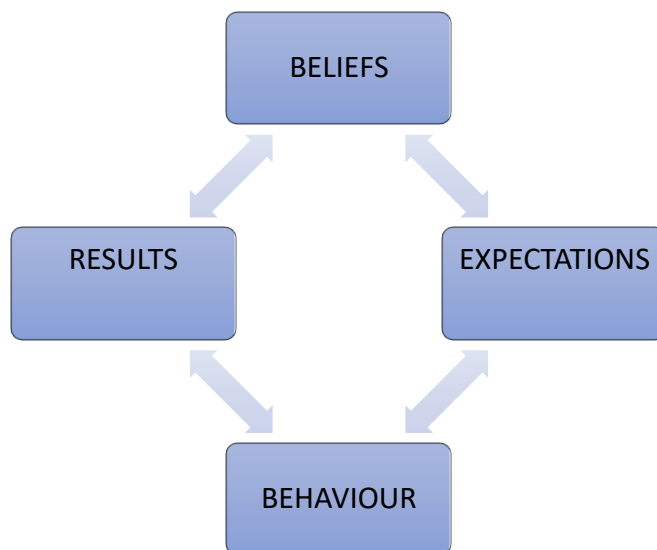


Figure 1- Conceptual Framework of the Study- Self- Imposed Prophecy in Perceived Academic Writing Difficulties

This study (figure 1) is rooted from self-fulfilling prophecy by Merton (1948). There are two types of self-fulfilling prophecy and they are other-imposed prophecy and self-imposed prophecy. Other imposed-prophecy is caused when others' expectations of another individual affects the actions of that individual. Self-imposed prophecy is when one's own expectations are the cause for one's actions. In the context of this study, the fear of writing difficulties stems from the writers' self-imposed prophecy. The writer begins with having personal (a) beliefs about their own writing abilities. This belief is then followed by their (b) expectations of how writing is to be taught. This expectation is then accompanied by the writers; (c) behaviour in the writing process. Finally, the behaviour affects the (d) results of the writing.

Methodology

This quantitative study is done investigate if there is a relationship between beliefs, expectations, behaviour and results when it comes writers' perception of writing difficulty. 373 participants were purposely chosen to participate in this study. They are undergraduates in a public university in Malaysia who attended one semester of academic writing. The instrument used is a survey. The items were adapted from Klimova (2014) to merge with Merton's (1948) self-imposed prophecy categories. Table 1 shows the distribution of items in the survey. Section A has items on demographic profile. Section B has 4 items on personal beliefs. Section C has 5 items on expectations (from the writing teacher). Section D has 16 items on behaviour and section E has 9 items on results

Table 1

Distribution of Items in Survey

SECTION	Self-Imposed Prophecy (Merton ,1948)	Writing Constraints and Difficulties (Klimova ,2014)	NO OF ITEMS
B	BELIEFS	Personal	4
C	EXPECTATIONS	Teachers	5
D	BEHAVIOUR	Punctuation	9
		Language Use	7
E	RESULTS	Writing Skills	9
			34

Table 2

Reliability Statistics for the Survey

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.852	34

Table 2 shows the reliability statistics for the survey. SPSS analysis revealed a Cronbach alpha of .852; thus, showing good reliability of the instrument used. Further SPSS analysis was done to answer the research questions.

Findings

Findings for Demographic Profile

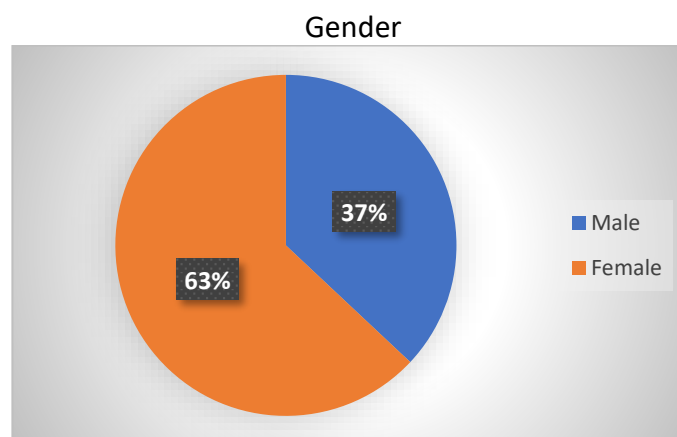


Figure 2-Percentage for Gender

Figure 2 shows the percentage for gender. 37% are male and 63% are female respondents.

Semester

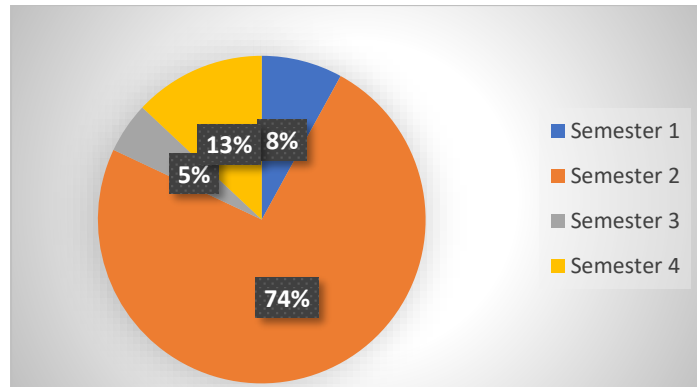


Figure 3- Percentage for Semester

Figure 3 shows the percentage for current semester of respondents. 8% are in semester 1. Next, 74% of the respondents are from semester 2, 5% are from semester 3 and 13% are from semester 4.

Previous English Grade(College Writing 1)

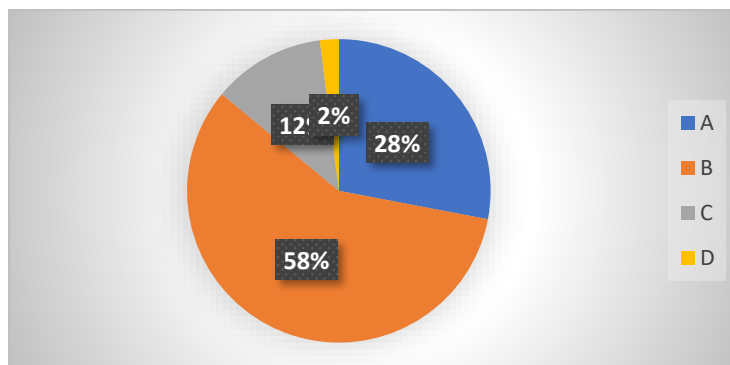


Figure 4- Percentage for Previous Semester’s English Grade

Figure 4 shows the percentage for respondents’ previous semester’s English grade. 28% of the respondents obtained “A” for their English. Next, 58% of them obtained a “B”, while 12% obtained a “C” and 2% scored a “D”. Knowing the previous writing grades helps the researchers foresee the personal beliefs on writing difficulties.

Findings for Beliefs

This section presents data to answer research question 1: How does belief influence writers' perception of difficulties?

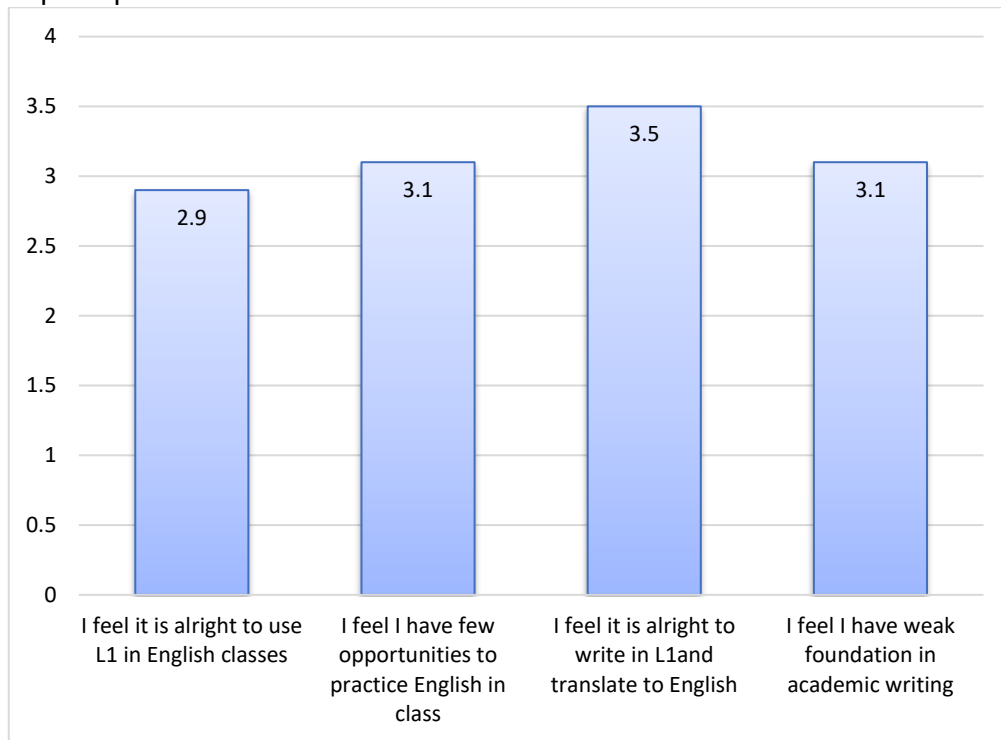


Figure 5- Mean for Personal Belief

Figure 5 shows the mean for personal belief. The highest mean is 3.5 for the item “feel it is alright to write in L1 and translate to English”. This is followed by two items with the same mean of 3.1 and they are “feel I have few opportunities to practice English in class” and “I feel I have weak foundation in academic writing”.

Findings for Expectations

This section presents data to answer research question 2: How do expectations influence writers' perception of difficulties?

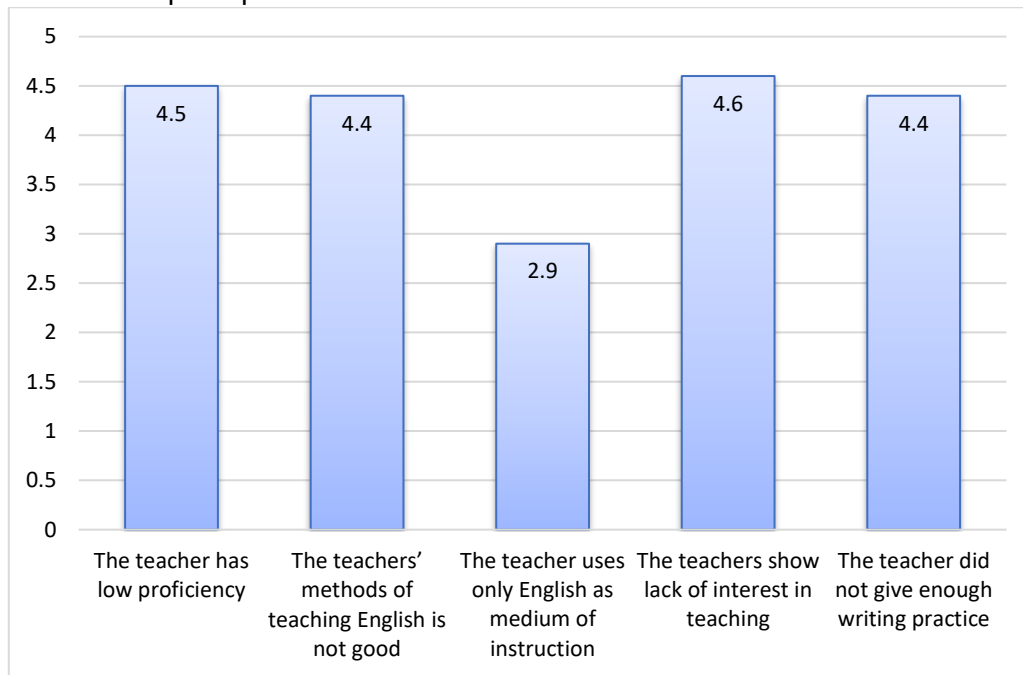


Figure 6- Mean for Expectations

Figure 6 presents the mean for expectations. The highest mean is 4.6 for the item "The teachers show lack of interest in teaching". This is followed by the mean of 4.5 for "The teacher has low proficiency". The lowest mean is 2.9 for the item "The teacher uses only English as medium of instruction".

Findings for Behaviour

This section presents data to answer research question 3: How does behaviour influence writers' perception of difficulties? In the context of this study behaviour refers to (i) perceived difficulties in punctuation, and (ii) perceived difficulties in language use.

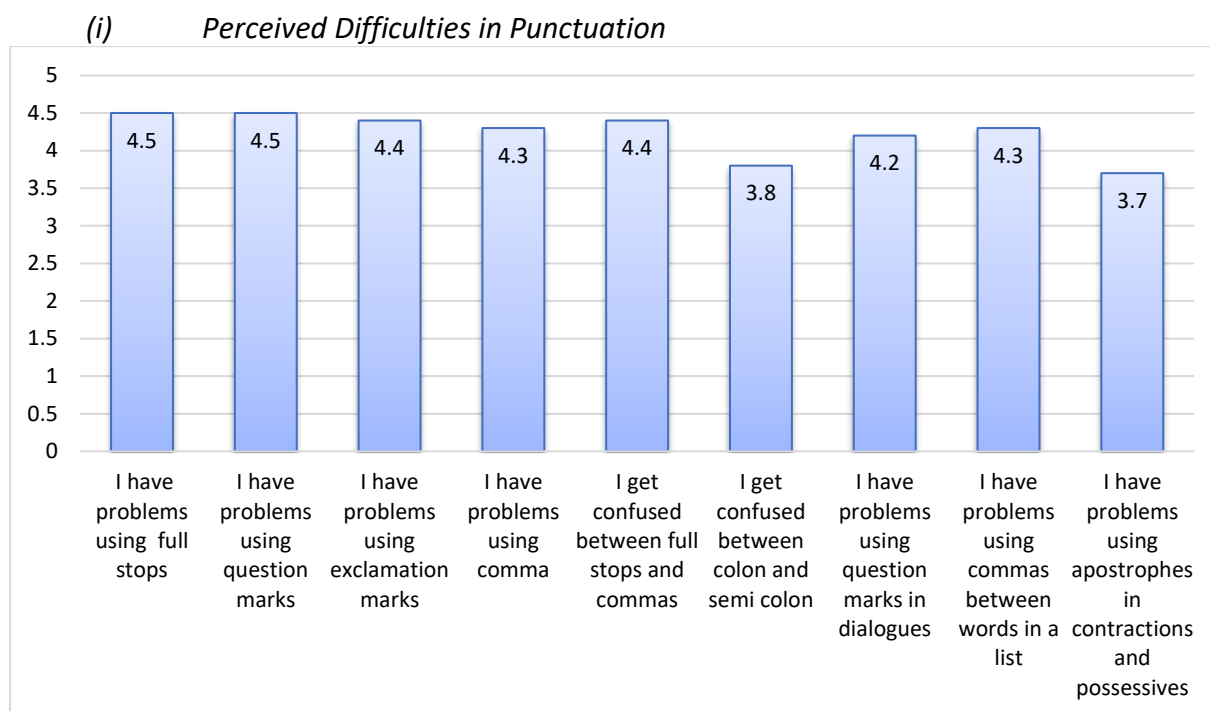


Figure 7- Mean for Writers' Behaviour (Perceived Difficulties in Punctuation)

Figure 7 shows the mean for writers' behaviour -perceived difficulties in punctuation. Two items share the highest mean of 4.5 and they are "have problems using full stops" and "have problems using question marks". Next, two items have the same mean of 4.4 and they are "have problems using exclamation marks" and "get confused between full stops and commas".

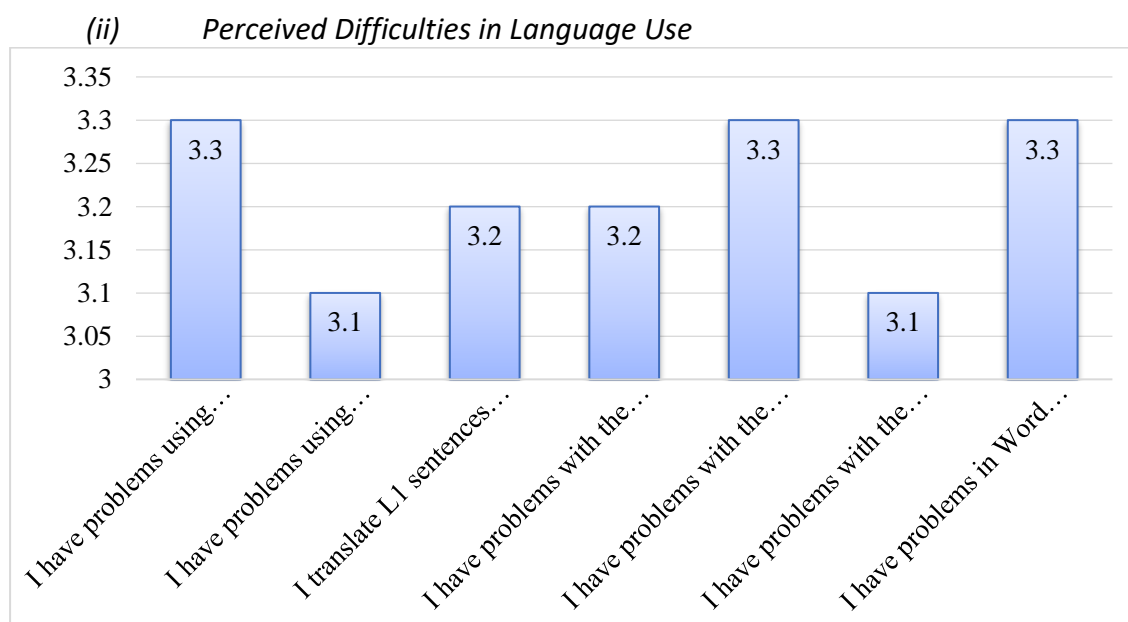


Figure 8- Mean for Writers' Behaviour-Perceived Difficulties in language Use

Figure 8 shows the mean for writers' behaviour- perceived difficulties in language use. Three items share the highest mean of 3.3 and they are "have problems using appropriate language in my writing", "I have problems with the use of articles" and "have problems in word choice".

Word Order In my sentences”. Next, two items have the same mean of 3.2 and they are “I translate L1 sentences when I write” .

Findings for Results

This section presents data to answer research question 4: How do results influence writers’ perception of difficulties?

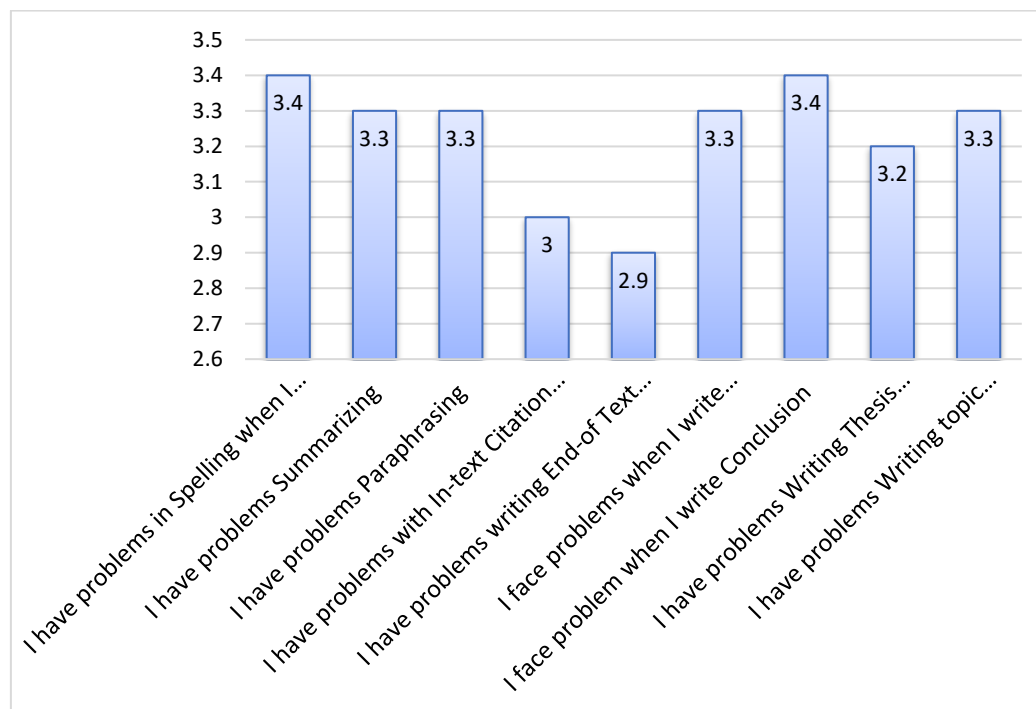


Figure 9- Mean for Results -Writing Skills

Figure 9 presents the mean for results (writing skills). Two items had the highest mean of 3.4 and they are “have problems in Spelling when I write” and “I face problem when I write Conclusion”. Next, four items had the same mean of 3.3 and they are “have problems Summarizing”, “have problems Paraphrasing”, “face problems when I write Introduction”, and “have problems Writing topic Sentences”.

Findings for Relationship between belief, expectations, behaviour and results in perception of writing difficulties

This section presents data to answer research question 5: Is there a relationship between belief, expectations, behaviour and results in perception of writing difficulties?

To determine if there is a significant association in the mean scores between motivational beliefs and self-regulation, data is analysed using SPSS for correlations. Table 3 shows there is no association between personal beliefs and expectations when it comes to writing. Table 4, 5 and 6 show there are associations between expectation and behaviour, behaviour and results, as well as results and beliefs respectively

Table 3

Correlations between beliefs and expectations

		TOTALmean BELIEFS	TOTALmean EXPECTATIONS
TOTALmeanBELIEFS	Pearson Correlation	1	.025
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.631
	N	373	373
TOTALmeanEXPECTATIONS	Pearson Correlation	.025	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.631	
	N	373	373

Table 3 shows the correlation analysis between beliefs and expectations. Correlations analysis shows that there is no significant association between beliefs and expectation.

Table 4

Correlation between Expectation and behaviour

		TOTALmean EXPECTATIONS	TOTALmean BEHAVIOUR
TOTALmeanEXPECTATIONS	Pearson Correlation	1	.104*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.045
	N	373	373
TOTALmeanBEHAVIOUR	Pearson Correlation	.104*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.045	
	N	373	373

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 4 shows correlation analysis between expectation and behaviour. Correlations analysis shows that there is a low positive significant association between motivational beliefs and self-regulation ($r=.104^*$) and ($p=.045$). The coefficient is significant at the .05 level and this association is therefore significant. According to Jackson (2015), positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. Weak positive correlation would be in the range of 0.1 to 0.3, moderate positive correlation from 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation from 0.5 to 1.0. This means that there is a weak positive significant relationship between expectation and behaviour.

Table 5

Correlation between behaviour and results

		TOTALmean BEHAVIOUR	TOTALmean RESULTS
TOTALmeanBEHAVIOUR	Pearson Correlation	1	.579**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	373	373
TOTALmeanRESULTS	Pearson Correlation	.579**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	373	373

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5 shows correlation analysis between behaviour and results. Correlations analysis shows that there is a high positive significant association between behaviour and results ($r=.579^*$) and ($p=.000$). The coefficient is significant at the .05 level and this association is

therefore significant. According to Jackson (2015), positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. Weak positive correlation would be in the range of 0.1 to 0.3, moderate positive correlation from 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation from 0.5 to 1.0. This means that there is a strong positive significant relationship between behaviour and results.

Table 6
Correlation between Results and Beliefs

		TOTALMean RESULTS	TOTALMeanB ELIEFS
TOTALMeanRESULTS	Pearson Correlation	1	.298**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	373	373
TOTALMeanBELIEFS	Pearson Correlation	.298**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	373	373

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 6 shows correlation analysis between results and beliefs. Correlations analysis shows that there is a weak positive significant association between results and beliefs ($r=.298^*$) and ($p=.000$). The coefficient is significant at the .05 level and this association is therefore significant. According to Jackson (2015), positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. Weak positive correlation would be in the range of 0.1 to 0.3, moderate positive correlation from 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation from 0.5 to 1.0. This means that there is a weak positive significant relationship between results and beliefs.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings and Discussion

A summary of the findings showed interesting information the reasons why learners find academic writing difficult. The summary also revealed the sources of fear of academic writing and their influence on the learners. The fear began with the learners' personal belief that academic writing is difficult. This belief can be rooted from the learners' fear of academic writing. Next, this personal beliefs snowball into the learners' expectations from the writing teacher of what academic writing is. This expectations then influences the learners' behaviour towards writing activities/ assignments and thus, influences the are expectation and behaviour, behaviour and results; as well as well, results and beliefs. In the context of this study, beliefs does affect expectations; but the affect is not reciprocal. Behaviour and expectations slightly affect one another. Behaviour and results ; as well as results and beliefs effect on another.

Findings in this study is consistent with past studies. The study by Bulqiyah et al (2021) also reported that learners' belief influence the way they view academic writing and their difficulties. Maznun et al (2017) reported that problems that learners face lie in the process of the writing approach. Finally, Sajjad et al (2021) agreed that these perception and belief of students fear of academic writing puts more challenges to the writing teachers.

Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

The teaching of academic writing is not merely teaching of writing skills and processes. Writing teachers have to stop the cycle of perception that academic writing is difficult. According to Graham (2019), the teaching of academic writing needs to improve on instructional time, teachers' preparation and beliefs about writing. Teachers need to change classroom practices when it comes to teaching academic writing. Rahmat, et.al (2021) suggests that teaching writing needs creativity of teachers so that learners may not fear learning academic writing even if they initially perceived it as difficult. Future research could look into more creative ways to teaching academic writing. Perhaps researchers could look at how learners deal with the difficulties in academic writing.

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