Problems in Learning English Academic Writing among ESL Undergraduate Students at Public and Private Universities in Malaysia

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Abstract
Academic writing has been a daunting task for most English as Second Language (ESL) and English as Foreign Language (EFL) students. This is due to the facets of academic writing that require the writers to be proficient in English language and adhere to the stylistics use of the language. Past studies have cited that some of the problems faced by students are incorrect use of vocabularies, grammatical errors, unable to maintain cohesion and coherence. However, there is scarce of in-depth studies that focus on problems faced by undergraduate students where comparisons are made between public and private universities. By employing multiple case study approach, a total of 19 undergraduate students were purposely selected from two public and two private universities in Malaysia. To understand deeper into the students' experience and problems, the researchers conducted focus group discussions, lesson observations, and analysed several related documents. Data were analysed thematically using thematic and cross case analysis where five emerging themes arise which are writing issues, language-related issues, referencing skills, searching for online sources, and lack of written feedback. The paper indicates several implications for teaching English academic writing that could help to bridge practice gap and suggested a few recommendations for future research.
Keywords: ESL/EFL, Higher Education Institutions, Malaysia, Problems in Learning English Academic Writing, Undergraduate Students

Introduction

Academic writing is a type of formal writing that is written and produced in the context of education with the purpose of disseminating information and knowledge with wider audience. In producing a piece of academic writing, writers are compelled to comply to its academic conventions, such as correct use of English grammar, academic vocabulary, mechanics of writing, and use of referencing to produce writing that is structured. Azmar and Razali (2024) asserted that academic writing goes beyond the rules and regulations of ordinary writing as it tested the students' level of maturity in writing. Based on these characteristics, teaching these technical skills of academic writing has been daunting not only among the English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lecturers but also has been challenging for most ESL and EFL students in learning the skills.

Academic writing requires a unique approach to writing that involves specific conventions and codes, and it aims to facilitate meaningful communication (Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019). Under such circumstances, student-writers are expected to be attentive to the expectations of their lecturers to produce high-quality academic writing that meet their study needs. The skills in academic writing are essential and paramount for students in tertiary context as most of the assessments at this level of education are based on the students' proficiency levels through their writing skills (Azmar & Razali, 2025). Moreover, having good proficiency in writing will help students to become better writers not only during their study years but also in their career later as writing is a lifelong skill.

In reiteration of this, having good mastery of English language is vital for both ESL   lecturers and students to communicate effectively within the academic discourse community. Having such proficiency can help ensure the success of teaching and learning academic writing, as writing is a lifelong skill. At tertiary level of education, English academic writing courses are designed to help students develop and polish their writing skills to an acceptable level in the academia to meet the various needs of educational programs (Aljuaid, 2024). The course requires students to use their critical thinking skills in analyzing ideas, researching skills, and avoiding academic theft in academic writing with correct referencing (Teng & Wang, 2023) in which the course prepares students with techniques in scholarly writing that is required at tertiary education. Under such circumstances, writers are expected to be attentive to the expectations of their ESL lecturers to produce high-quality academic writing.

Research Problem

Despite its importance, students, especially those at the tertiary level, are   still struggling with their academic writing. This is due to several issues especially when they must write in English language, as a second language (ESL) or as a foreign language (EFL). This has become one of the many limitations among the students around the world and these limitations surrounded in several areas, such as the linguistic incompetency, the use and influence of mother tongue, grammatical inaccuracies, limited academic vocabularies and many others. In a study by Handayani (2023) in a university in Indonesia reported that students were having issues in their mechanics of writing where students were unable to construct coherent sentences, developing and expanding their main ideas, and unable to organize their ideas. In a much recent study by Nguyen et al., (2024), they documented that students were having issues with grammar, limited vocabulary, unable to generate ideas for writing, transitioning from writing in L1 to L2, content contextualization and adherence to

academic writing conventions. They also further documented that students were having lack of confidence in academic writing due to less exposure and experience in academic writing and thus they were having lack of motivation to learn and write academically.

On top of that, Riadil et al., (2023) also mentioned in their studies that students were having issues in determining the differences between academic and non-academic language when writing academically. Along with that, they also had issues with misuse of academic vocabulary, producing sentences with grammatical errors due to lack of writing practices and less reading habits. Besides that, in a study by Aldabbus and Alamansouri (2022), they reported four main problems faced by the students which are selecting academic sources for writing, developing thesis statement, summarizing ideas from other sources and lastly writing coherent paragraphs. The same problems were found in a study by Abdulkhalek and Al-Khulaidi(2022) in Yemeni EFL context where students were identified to have issues in maintaining cohesion and coherent in writing, organizing their writing, spelling errors, interventions of first language (L1), wrong referencing styles, and poor reading habits among the students.

One of the most significant concerns raised in the literature is the lack or having lower level of English language proficiency among the students and the influence of the students' first language, which have resulted in various language issues. One of such issues is the incorrect use of lexical bundles and prepositional phrases. In a study by Rashtchi and Mohammadi (2017) revealed that majority of the students had language issues in which they overused and misused prepositional phrases in their sentences which was influenced by their first language, Persian. Similarly, Xin's study (2017) among international postgraduate students in a university in USA, mentioned that students were grappling with issue of translingualism in their academic writing. This is where they are found to borrow and blend words between their first language and second language. As a result, lots of linguistic errors are produced in the students' writings.

Another significant problem among the students in learning English academic writing is adhering to the conventions of English academic writing which is referencing. Referencing in academic writing is very important as this is where the authors are acknowledged. Several past studies have mentioned that one of the problems faced by students in academic writing is referencing. In a study by Tso and Ho (2018) in Hong Kong, they found that most of the students used incorrect formatting when doing referencing. The students were found to make mistakes in punctuations and did not follow the correct formatting for sources they used in writing. This is also in tandem with a study by Mahmood (2020) among EFL students in Pakistan where students had difficulties in using proper references and citations in their written works. Apart from referencing, students were also found to have issues in other technical areas such as their sentence structures and inability to maintain cohesion and coherence in writing.

In essence, Malaysian students are also not excluded in experiencing difficulties in academic writing. Past literature revealed that proficiency in academic writing is reckoned as an important aspect for students' learning at undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Johari, 2018). Nor and Rashid (2018) pointed out that proficiency and comprehension in academic reading are essential aspects that contribute to students' writing competency. Without these

literacies, students will have difficulty in evaluating and synthesizing information from their reading of academic sources and consequently will not be able to produce a critical and concise piece of academic writing (Singh, 2019).

Another important issue in academic writing among students in Malaysian context is the lack of knowledge in research writing. Malaysian ESL students are found to have difficulty in utilizing research-based knowledge especially in doing citation and referencing. Many students are not clear on the importance of referencing in academic writing. Due to this inadequacy, it has led to academic dishonesty in the students' writing where students are found to commit academic plagiarism. Similar findings are found in Kotamjani and Husin's study (2017) where students had problems in reviewing research papers, determining research gaps, writing references, unable to do summarising and paraphrasing and poor use of academic language. These findings are aligned in a much recent study among the postgraduate students conducted by Jeyaraj (2020). Participants were found to be unfamiliar in research scholarly writing, particularly writing the literature review section as they were not well exposed to this type of writing during their undergraduate years.

Given these circumstances, most of the past studies were focusing on international postgraduate students in learning English academic writing, especially in the Malaysian tertiary context (see Akhtar, Hassan & Saidalvi, 2020; Alabere & Shapii, 2019; Almatarneh, Rashid & Yunus, 2018; Johari, 2018; Kotamjani & Husin, 2017; Kotamjani, Samad & Fahimirad, 2018; Rahman & Hasan, 2019; Singh, 2016, 2017, 2019). There is lack of studies that are focusing on the problems faced by Malaysian undergraduate students. Moreover, most of these studies were conducted using quantitative and mixed method designs where there is lack of in-depth studies using qualitative research design to explore the problems faced by undergraduate students. While these studies are very helpful in illuminating the issues faced by students in learning English academic writing, there is a dearth of studies conducted in the Malaysian tertiary context which focus on the perspectives of Malaysian ESL undergraduate students and on top of that, there is lack of studies that focus on the comparisons between public and private universities on the problems faced by undergraduate students in learning English academic writing.

Research aims and Research Question
Therefore, this study is conducted with the aim to explore the problems faced by ESL undergraduate students in Malaysian tertiary education context, specifically those who are learning English academic writing at public and private universities. Hence, the study is guided by the following research question; what are the problems faced by ESL undergraduate students at higher education institutions in Malaysia?

Methodology
To understand deeper into the students' experience and problems in learning English academic writing, the researchers opted qualitative research design by way of multi-site multiple case study approach. Considering the researchers' epistemological and ontological perspectives to understand meanings of individual experience by immersing themselves (the researchers) into the real-life contexts of the phenomenon (Krauss, 2005) has guided the selection of this research design. Multiple case study approach was used to explore the problems faced by undergraduate students from different higher education institutions in

learning English academic writing, specifically at two public and two private universities. To ensure standardization in research procedures, Yin's (1994) replication of logic was employed for every case.

Samples

A total of 19 undergraduate students were purposely selected from two public and two private universities in Malaysia as the research participants. These participants are undergraduate students who are pursuing bachelor degree in various academic programs. They were selected based on specific selection criteria, such as (1) at least a first-year undergraduate student, (2) taking English academic writing course, and (3) possessing intermediate English language proficiency skills or at least having Malaysian University English Test (MUET) exam at Band 3 (Independent User). The participants' demographic details are presented in Table 1 as below.

Table 1
Participants' demographic details

FGD Groups	Institutions (pseudonyms)	Gender	Age	Bachelor Degree (currently pursuing)
FGD 1	Public university A	2 Males 2 Females	Early 20s	Administrative and Science Policy
FGD 2	Public university B	4 Females	Early 20s	Malay Linguistics
FGD 3	Private university A	6 Females	Early 20s	English as Second Language
FGD 4	Private university B	3 Males 2 Females	Early 20s	Business Administration

Research Instruments

To help the researchers to optimize data collection process and to increase the depth of data for multiple case study, multiple research instruments were used. As suggested by Yin (2018), case study approach relies heavily on the use of multiple research instruments in providing rich data. The first type of instrument is focus group discussion (FGD) where there are four FGD groups to represent the institutions. The researchers used semi-structured interview questions which were developed based on the study's research aim and these questions were validated by two experts in the field of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). The researchers also conducted lesson observations in each institution which were done four times and collected several related documents, such as the course syllabus/outline, and sample of assessments which were later used for triangulation purpose.

Procedures

Upon conducting the study, the researchers sent out letters of permission to each gatekeeper to obtain approval to collect data. Each participant was given informed consent forms to indicate their agreement and willingness to participate in the study. FGD sessions with each group were carried out three times at the beginning, middle, and end of the study to fully understand their learning experiences and problems they encountered in learning English academic writing. Each session was voice recorded using a voice recorder and was transcribed verbatim by the researchers. In total, there are 12 FGD transcripts used for data analysis.

Lesson observations were also carried out to observe and 'see' how the students learned English academic writing in the classroom. As what Krauss (2005) mentioned this is done to

understand, immerse, and move into "the culture or organization being studied and experience what it is like to be part of it" (p. 760). During the observations, the researchers observed the teaching and learning process, students' attitudes, and behaviours as well as the interaction between the ESL lecturers and the students. The researchers opted the role as non-participant observant and noted down descriptive notes, such as the learning environment in the classroom, the facilities and classroom arrangements based on what they saw and heard while in the classrooms. At the same time, the researchers also wrote down their reflective notes after the observations based on their hunches, arising questions, and their overall experience conducting the lesson observations. These notes were later used for triangulation purposes. By triangulating the data, it provides "a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility" (Eisner, 1991, p. 110). As what Miles et al., (2014) mentioned triangulation was done to help strengthen the study's findings as case study approach relies heavily on multiple sources of data.

Data Analysis

To analyse the multiple data, the researchers employed six-steps of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). According to Braun and Clarke, thematic analysis is the foundation of all analyses in qualitative study. To understand all 12 FGD transcripts, they were printed, read, and listened for three to four times. This is done to ensure that the researchers have fully immersed themselves into the data sets. After reading and listening to the transcripts, the researchers first created initial codes for each transcript and later generated possible categories to group similar codes. From these categories, the researchers then developed tentative themes and discussed for suitable themes. On top of that, the researchers also performed cross-case analysis to look for similarities and differences between the data sets. This is done to search for significant findings between different cases in terms of its similarities and differences when conducting multiple case studies (Ridder, 2017). Additionally, data from lesson observation field notes and analysis of the related documents, such as the course syllabus/course outlines and sample of assessments were triangulated with the FGD transcripts.

Results

The cross-case analysis reveals five emerging themes that signify the problems faced by Malaysian undergraduate students in learning English academic writing. Table 2 below illustrates the emerging themes from the 12 FGD transcripts.

Table 2

Emerging themes from 12 FGD transcripts

No.	Emerging themes
1.	Writing issues
2.	Language-related issues
3.	Referencing skills
4.	Searching for online sources
5.	Lack of written feedback

Writing Issues

One of the most prevalent issues among the undergraduate students in the study is writing issues. In this context, the students encountered issues, such as unable to generate ideas, difficulty to summarize and paraphrase information, and difficulty to elaborate supporting

details. Students from Public University B admitted that they had problem in generating ideas for their writing. They admitted that it was difficult for them to start generating ideas due to many factors, such as lack of reading habits, and lack of vocabulary. One of the students admitted,

> *"For example, when we were given a topic to write an essay, we do not have the idea on what to write. For example, the topic natural disaster. It is difficult for us to explain what natural disaster is…like what else to elaborate on natural disaster…" (Student 1-Public University B, 1st FGD, lines 507–509, p. 33).*

Students from Public University B admitted that they have lack of ideas in writing especially when they were given topics on current issues for their writing. This could be related to lack of information due to inadequate reading habits. This was mentioned by the students during the FGD sessions that they had lack reading activities. The students even admitted that they did not prefer to engage in reading activities, especially reading English materials. As a result, these students were unable to write whenever they were given topics on current issues. On top of that, analysis of the course syllabus revealed that there were no topics that required students to engage in reading activities. Perhaps, this is one of the factors why students are unable to write and have lack of academic vocabulary. On top of that, this could also be due to their educational background as Malay Linguistics students and English academic writing is the only English course they had for the semester (when the study was conducted). One of the students said, *"Moreover, this is the only English class that we have, the rest of the classes are all in Malay language, so there is lack of knowledge in English".* Therefore, exposure to English language was limited in their day-to-day learning at the university as the main language used for teaching and learning is Malay language (i.e., first language of the students). Student 3 further shared,

> *"We have lack of knowledge basically. Sometimes, to write in Malay language also was quite difficult for us and some more to write in English…" (Student 3–Public University*
B, 2nd FGD, lines 341–342, p. 22).

On the same note, students from Private University A also encountered similar problem of inability to generate ideas for writing. These female students admitted that they too had lack of reading activities which hampered their writing skills. The students mentioned,

> *"I would say yes, but the opposite problem is I do not know what to write about, I have no ideas…sometimes with simple topics also I do not have ideas…" (Student 5–Private University A, 1st FGD, lines 305–306 & 308 p. 20).*

> *"For me, sometimes I have lack of ideas…no ideas of what I should write or what to do…I do not know how to write the idea…(Student 6–Private University A, 1st FGD, lines 316–322, p. 21).*

This problem also occurred due to their lack of reading activities which then limit their ideas construction for writing. These female students asserted that they did not prefer to engage in reading activities. They confessed to feel bored whenever engaging in reading activity especially reading academic articles and journals. Based on the analysis of the course syllabus

at Private University A, the students were required to write three different essays, and according to them they had to refer academic journals for main ideas. Hence, based on this circumstance reading activity does play a significant part in academic writing. Without ample reading, it will be extremely difficult for students to generate ideas for their writing.

This is also the case for students at Private University B. One of the students mentioned that one of the problems that he had was searching for the main idea, "*Yes, the main ideas. Sometimes, I got confused maybe it is my fault because I do not read much*". The student was having this issue as most of the assessments for academic writing course required them to read, synthesize and identify main ideas from academic articles and journals. Another student also confessed to face similar issue,

> "*I think I struggled with how to deliver the points. I know what I want to say, but I do not know how to elaborate it, how to word the ideas. I feel that it is due to the lack of reading because I do not know words and how to use them*" (Student 2–Private University B, 1st FGD, lines 416, p. 27).

In short, students at public and private universities in Malaysia are found to have issue in generating ideas for their writing due to inadequate reading activity. In other words, academic writing is not a stand-alone skill as writers need to supplement their claims and arguments with factual information taken from academic articles and journals. Therefore, reading activity is thus significance to academic writing and students should engage more in reading activity.

Language-related Issues
The second emerging theme from the cross-case analysis is language-related issues in which students were having issues related to grammar knowledge and vocabulary. Students from Public University B were facing this problem due to their educational background as Malay Linguistics students. These students expressed their difficulty in using grammar tenses correctly (i.e., present, past, and future tenses) when writing. They admitted the last time they learned English grammar was during their secondary school years. As they pursued their undergraduate studies, all their courses were conducted in Malay language (i.e., the students' first language) and due to heavy exposure to Malay language, these students have very limited use of English language in their studies, and this has been one of the major setbacks in their academic writing. They admitted,

> "*I think grammar…it is so hard for me because there is present tense, past tense, future tense…we do not know which part to use…tenses like was, were…that is difficult for me…*" (Student 1–Public University B, 1st FGD, lines 517–519, p. 33–34).

> "*As for me, grammar part is the hardest part because…we have been learning grammar since we were young but…I do not know why it is very difficult for me to absorb that…*" (Student 2–Public University B, 1st FGD, lines 520–521, p. 34).

From these excerpts, the students admitted that lack of grammar knowledge was one of the contributing factors to their difficulty in English academic writing. This prolonged issue could be stemmed back from their past learning experience during primary and secondary school

years and their inadequate use of English language since young. All these factors play significant impact towards how these students learned academic writing at tertiary level. Apart from that, the students also have issue with lack of vocabulary. Based on the FGD sessions with the students, the researchers concluded that these students have not been using English language at home and in their everyday communication. As a result, the students have limited English vocabulary and constructing English sentences became difficult for most of them.

> *"I have the ideas to write but it is stuck because I had a hard time finding words in English and due to that, I will lose mood to continue writing because I could not find suitable words and ultimately, I will lose the idea too" (Student 3–Public University B, 1st FGD, lines 527–529, p. 34).*

> *"…but to find suitable words are very challenging for us because we need to write good sentences, but when we cannot find suitable words, that becomes a challenge for us" (Student 4–Public University B, 2nd FGD, lines 336–338, p. 22).*

All four students from public university B admitted that inadequate vocabulary does hamper their writing ability. The students shared that sometimes they have ideas to write, but with insufficient vocabulary, they were unable to translate those ideas into coherent English sentences. This is due to their lack of use of English language since young. Additionally, family's background also plays a significant part in familiarizing them with English reading materials. Majority of the students came from intermediate to low social economic family backgrounds (SES) where their parents do not expose them much with English reading materials and English language at home.

On the same note, students from Private University B also encountered similar language issues, such as grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics of writing, such as spelling errors, and punctuations. One of the students mentioned,

> *"It is the grammar for me…grammar and sometimes the punctuation because sometimes I do not know the grammar or words that I used might be suitable in the sentence and the punctuation, where I should put the comma or where I should put the full stop so, those are my problems…" (Student 3–Private University B, 2nd FGD, lines 455–457, p. 30).*

While this Student 3 was sharing her difficulties in academic writing due to shortage of vocabulary, having issues in grammar and mechanics of writing, another student also mentioned experiencing similar problem.

> *"For me, it is most probably the wording part. As I said earlier, I do not really put the right word in the sentence, so, it might be inappropriate. Sometimes, when I talk or when I write, this thing happened. So, that is the thing that I feel a problem for me…" (Student 5–Private University B, 2nd FGD, lines 478–480, p. 31).*

In short, students at Public and Private University B are found to experience language-related issues where they had problems in grammar and lack of vocabulary due to inadequate reading and these problems had hampered their ability to write academically.

Referencing Skills
Another notable problem faced by majority of the undergraduate students from these institutions is the act of doing referencing. One of the important elements in academic writing is referencing of published works where writers need to acknowledge the original authors by following the correct referencing style. The students from Public University B, Private University A and B shared their collective experiences on the difficulties to cite and reference, especially for different types of sources by saying,

> *"For me, again and again, the citation. That is the hardest part in writing because once the citation is wrong, automatically the reference part is also wrong" (Student 4– Public University B, 2ⁿᵈ FGD, lines 272–273, p. 18).*

> *"I think the most difficult part is referencing where I have to memorize…for example the title, the year and everything. Yeah…only the referencing part that I need to memorize the sequence, and I think it is a bit hard, I guess…" (Student 6–Private university A, 2ⁿᵈ FGD, lines 364–368, p. 24).*

> *"For me it is citation. It is always citation because citation is new to me and there are different types of citations like narrative citation and parenthetical citation…like sometimes you need to put like last name and the year…also when you are extracting information from the website, then you need to like…follow the format…" (Student 1 – Private university B, 2ⁿᵈ FGD, lines 499–508, p. 32–33).*

Based on these excerpts, the students conceded that referencing was challenging to them as they need to 'memorize' the formatting and punctuations when writing both in-text and end-text citations. Moreover, they also shared that it was challenging as different sources have different formatting and punctuations rules that need to be followed. Some of the students mentioned that they did not have prior knowledge in referencing skills, and this was their first time learning it during the academic writing classes.

Searching for Online Sources
The fourth emerging theme of the study is difficulty in searching for suitable reading sources. Having a good source of reading is essential in academic writing as this helps the students to use factual and scientific facts to support their claims and arguments in writing. Students from Public University A mentioned that it was difficult for them to choose suitable articles as they were not aware on the suitability of the article's contents and which specific information of the article that they should extract as points for their writing. They mentioned,

> *"So, for me in academic writing the most difficult part is finding the best journal article to be used…" (Student 1, Public University A, 2ⁿᵈ FGD, lines 730–731 & 734, p. 47).*

> *"Two things I find challenging when learning academic writing. The first one is trying to find the best sources…" (Student 3, Public University A, 2ⁿᵈ FGD, lines 641, p. 41).*

The students claimed that they were instructed by their ESL lecturer to search for online articles, but they were not taught specifically on how to look for main ideas located in the articles. Therefore, they were unsure which information should be taken from the articles for their writing. On another note, it becomes a challenge to them when the online databases subscribed by their institution was not 'user friendly' or somewhat 'outdated' as claimed by the students. They commented that it was quite a hassle for them to search for updated articles and expressed their disappointments by saying,

> *"I do use the library facilities, but I find the Emerald Insight as well as Scopus have outdated resources like ten to fifteen years back. So, it is not very frequently updated, so I am not able to find the latest articles using the library sources…" (Student 1, Public University A, 3rd FGD, lines 754–757).*

> *"For me, I use the library services. I am not saying it is sufficient, maybe it does not have enough materials or articles…or maybe it is a new system, I am not sure, but it is quite hard to find suitable articles…" (Student 2, Public University A, 3rd FGD, lines 771).*

Based on this circumstance, it might be that the students were not well equipped with knowledge or taught on the skills to search for suitable academic articles from the database and hence it was a hassle to them. In this case, the researchers believed that students should be taught on the skills how to search for online academic sources using correct selection of keywords and how to access the university's database so that they are able to search and locate for suitable academic articles for their writing.

Lack of Written Feedback
The last emerging theme is lack of written feedback. Students from Public University A confessed during the FGD sessions that there were lack of written feedback given to them on their writing. They confided to only receive oral feedback on the suitability of the articles that they have chosen for their written assignments. One of the students shared that he had to wait for almost two weeks to receive feedback on his written exercises, while another student confessed that he only received feedback on the number of articles needed for written assignments. Both expressed their disappointments as they were really looking forward to receiving feedback on their writing from their ESL lecturer. They kept on repeating that most of the time they only received oral feedback and that was only on the suitability of the articles but not on their writing. They collectively said,

> *"I do share the same experience because I do text her about the article like, "Madam, can we use five articles instead of four" …then she said, "oh you don't need to do more than four articles because there is specific statement that you must do four, not five…" I think that kind of feedback…regarding the article, not the writing" (Student 3, Public University A, 3rd FGD, lines 293–297, p. 20).*

> *"I received the same kind of feedback…we do not receive feedback on our writing, we just received feedback how to find the articles. But as I know, our lecturer is really busy. I do not receive any writing feedback. Even the personal exercises it took two weeks for*

me to get the feedback. So, we just know how to find the articles but not our writing…"
(Student 2, Public University A, 3rd FGD, lines 365–370, p. 24).

Based on these revelations, it shows that the students are really in need of written feedback on their written works. From the feedback, they would be able to learn from the mistakes and improve on their writing. However, with lack of written feedback from their ESL lecturer, it would be quite difficult for the students to identify their mistakes. Hence, they will keep on repeating the same mistake in their future writing. On the other hand, students from Public University B also experienced the same issue in receiving lack of written feedback from their ESL lecturers. They expressed their disappointments during the third FGD session where they had never receive any feedback, be it oral or written feedback on their writing assignments even though it was almost at the end of the semester (i.e., the third FGD session was conducted at the end of the semester). Due to lack of feedback, these students are not aware on their strengths and weaknesses in writing.

Discussion
Findings from this study indicate that undergraduate students from public and private universities in Malaysia encountered many problems in their English academic writing namely writing issues, language-related issues, referencing issues, searching for suitable online sources, and lack of written feedback. Based on the analysis of the data, there are several factors that contribute to these problems. Majority of the students have writing and language-related issues in their academic writing which stemmed from their lack of proficiency in English language. This is due to less use of English language in their studies and in their everyday communication even though they have been introduced and exposed to English language since young (i.e., English is the second language in Malaysia) (Azmar & Razali, 2024). Some of the students, especially those from public university B, disclosed that academic writing is the only English course that they learn in the semester (i.e., when the study was conducted) as majority of their undergraduate courses are conducted in Malay language (i.e., students' first language) as they are pursuing bachelor in Malay Linguistics. Hence, usage of English language in their everyday communication and during studies is very limited for these students. Moreover, majority of these students come from intermediate to lower social economic status (SES) where their parents are factory workers and full-time housewives. English language is not use in their daily communication at home and their parents may not have awareness on the importance of English language. All these factors do contribute to their difficulties in academic writing.

In relation to that, with limited usage of English language, these students also admitted having lack of reading habit, especially in reading English materials. Due to the constraints of financial ability of their families, some of these students (i.e., particularly those from public university B) do not have English reading materials as they are only supplied with Malay reading materials at home. As consequence, they have difficulty to construct English sentences due to lack of vocabulary. It is very important to highlight that reading activity is very important in assisting academic writing as academic writing relies on the use of factual information to support claims and arguments. Without ample reading, writers will have problem to generate ideas and have lack of academic vocabulary to write. Findings of this study is similar with previous studies by Almatarneh et al., (2018) and Rahman and Hasan (2019) in which the participants in these studies had writing and language-related issues. The students are found

to have various linguistic issues in their writing, such as inadequate use of academic vocabulary, poor organization of ideas, wrong use of grammar and many other language-related issues.

In terms of referencing issues, necessary measures should be taken to help students overcome this problem. First, ESL lecturers need to equip themselves with good content knowledge in referencing skills so that they can educate the students correctly on the technical aspects. Second, students should be given lots of referencing exercises to make them familiar with the technical parts of referencing, such as punctuations, author's surname, and others. By engaging in lots of referencing exercises, students will become familiar to write the in-text and end-text citations on their own. Findings of the study also indicate that students had difficulty to differentiate the format for different types of sources, and this could be done if only they are given ample exercises and thorough explanation on referencing by their ESL lecturers. This is in tandem with previous study conducted by Kotamjani and Husin (2017) among the postgraduate students in Malaysia where students had issues in writing references. Therefore, the researchers suggest the higher education institution to provide necessary workshop or sharing session for both ESL lecturers and students on referencing skills.

Besides that, findings of the study also reveal that students having issues in searching for online sources for their writing. Academic writing requires the writer to support their claims and arguments by doing referencing of published works. In searching for reliable sources of information, students in tertiary context should be taught how to search for online sources through their institutions' databases which can be accessed via the institution's library. First, students need to be familiarized with the institution's subscribed databases and how to access them. This can be done through the services provided by the library where the trained librarians can provide such training for the students. Second, students also need to be taught how to look for specific keywords when searching for articles. This will then help to alleviate the issues of 'outdated' and 'not user-friendly' databases as claimed by some of the students in the study.

Additionally, in terms of the issue on lack of written feedback on students' writing is also another significant finding that the researchers would like to highlight. It is very important for ESL lecturers to provide their students with written feedback as the feedback will help students to identify their mistakes and weaknesses in their writing. The researchers urged ESL lecturers to provide written feedback on the students' writing so that they can improve from their mistakes and not to commit the same mistakes in their future writing and by doing so (i.e., giving written feedback), it will help to bridge the practice gap among the students in improving their writing skills. Without written feedback, students are not aware on the areas of improvement that they need to do on their writing, and this will not help them to polish their writing. As shared in the study, the students mentioned that they only received oral feedback on the suitability of the sources (i.e., articles) but not on their writing. Therefore, it is important and imperative for ESL lecturers to provide written feedback to their students.

Conclusion and Implications
In conclusion, findings of this multiple case study reveal that undergraduate students at both public and private universities in Malaysia encountered similar problems in their English

academic writing. Majority of the students from these institutions have language issues, writing issues, unable to do correct referencing, difficulty in searching online sources, and lack of written feedback on their writing. Based on these issues, there is no doubt that English academic writing is a challenging writing skill to be learned and mastered among the students. The skills require the students not only to have good proficiency in English language but also possessing other skills in producing their academic writing. To alleviate some of these problems, the ESL students should take proactive measures to improve their academic writing skills. Based on the findings of the study, majority of the students confessed to have lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge which then leads to having writing and language issues. To enhance and improve students' knowledge on grammar and vocabulary, they need to engage in reading activity. This reading activity means students should engage more on reading academic materials, such as articles and journals to expose them to academic vocabulary and style of academic writing. By engaging in constant reading activity, it will not only improve their writing skills but also adds to their collection of vocabulary. As a result, it will help students to generate ideas as reading activity can assist students' writing skills. Moreover, students should also engage in lots of writing exercises, either inside or outside the academic writing class to polish their writing skills.

Other related stakeholders, such as the ESL lecturers, curriculum and policy makers, and administration of higher education institutions itself should also take necessary measures. In terms of teaching and learning, it is very much prevalent for ESL lecturers to provide not only oral feedback to their students but most importantly written feedback on their writing. This is very necessary as students need to know and be aware of their writing mistakes to improve their writing. One of the main contributing factors as to why students keep on having problems in their academic writing is the absence of written feedback from the ESL lecturers. Students are not aware on their mistakes and their strengths and weaknesses, and they will continue to commit the same language and writing mistakes in their future writing.

In essence, the researchers believe that it is necessary and important for curriculum and policy makers when designing curriculum for English academic writing course to add topics relating to reading skills, such as skimming and scanning. This is to educate students on how to locate specific main ideas from their reading texts. Once students are occupied with necessary reading skills, whenever they read from articles, they would not have problems to identify the main ideas to be used in their writing. Based on the review and analysis of the syllabus outlines from all four institutions, none of the syllabi contain a section on reading skills. Therefore, the researchers urged the curriculum and policy makers at higher education institutions to consider adding a section or topics relating to reading skills inside the English academic writing syllabus.

As for higher education institutions, the administration should pay close attention to the needs of students in learning English academic writing. Professional supports should be given to the ESL lecturers who are teaching academic writing course. They need to be given opportunity to attend seminars or workshops to enhance not only their content knowledge on academic writing but also their knowledge on pedagogical skills to teach such a demanding skill, for example in learning the latest style of referencing as not all lecturers are well-versed in referencing skills and thus academic supports are needed. Once the ESL lecturers are well-equipped with necessary content knowledge and pedagogical skills to teach academic writing,

only then they can educate their students on the importance of academic writing skills and able to help their students to improve their academic writing skills. At the same time, students should also be given similar academic supports, such as talks and seminars on academic writing which can be done during their semester break, and this should be done continuously every semester.

In terms of the theoretical contributions, the study is closely related with the work of Flowers and Hayes (1981) in their Cognitive Process Theory, and Academic Literacies Model (ALM) by Lea and Street (1998). In Cognitive Process Theory, Flowers and Hayes (1981) have outlined the importance of thinking or thought processes that writers undergone while composing or writing text. This highlighted that while writing, writers are going through a series of mental processes where they think and write while at the same time changing their thoughts on writing. The findings of this study have clearly aligned and supported the theory as writers do have problems in writing where they faced several problems while composing due to the thought processes that the writers going through. In terms of the second theory which is Academic Literacies Model (ALM) by Lea and Street (2006), the theory has outlined the importance of having good academic writing literacies where it contributes to the students' writing fluency in meeting the needs of their study in tertiary education context. Without knowledge on academic writing skills, students will struggle in their writing to meet their study needs at the undergraduate level as most of the assessments at tertiary level test the students' academic writing proficiency. Therefore, these the study supported the two theories which are interrelated in the field of academic writing.

Recommendations
The study suggests a few recommendations for future research in the same field. Since the study only focuses on undergraduate students as the main research participants, future research can be done among postgraduate students to explore their learning and problems in English academic writing. Data collected from this group of students could have yield different findings based on the different demographic details of participants. Additionally, future research can also be conducted at other types of higher education institutions, such as colleges, university-colleges, university with overseas branch, and polytechnics. Findings gathered from these institutions could provide new insights on the issues circling teaching and learning of English academic writing as each of these institutions use different syllabus for their academic writing courses.

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