Undergraduate Students' Self-Perceived Difficulties in Academic Writing

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Abstract
Academic writing requires students to be equipped with important elements of writing to enable them to write effectively. However, numerous studies have found that many Malaysian undergraduate students struggle with academic writing, particularly in the areas of mechanics of writing. Thus, this study is conducted to investigate their difficulties in academic writing, and to identify the most significant difficulty they encountered. The instrument is adapted from Habibi et al (2017) which focused on six problems in academic writing. They are poor organisation or illogical sequence, problems of word choice, grammatical errors, spelling problems, punctuation problems, and capitalisation. A total of 231 undergraduate students were involved in this study. The findings show that the majority of the students experienced academic writing difficulties which are grammar, word choice, and organisation or illogical sequence. On the other hand, they did not perceive spelling, punctuations, and capitalisations as difficulties encountered in academic writing. Therefore, it can be concluded that major difficulties in academic writing involve complex mechanisms which would affect the students to write effectively. It is recommended that educators strategically emphasise on suitable writing strategies that include mechanics of writing.
Keywords: Academic Writing, Mechanics of Writing, Self-Perceived Difficulties, Effective Writing, Undergraduate Students

Introduction
The importance of writing as a productive skill for students, specifically at the tertiary level, has been emphasised by many researchers (Jabali, 2018; Toba et al., 2019). In order to

cultivate writing proficiency, students are required to generate a well-organised composition, utilising good syntax and vocabulary, and customising the language to suit the audience and the purpose (Ceylan, 2019). It is a difficult skill to master on its own and it becomes much more difficult at the university owing to the specialised nature of academic discourse (Fitzmaurice & O'Farrell, 2013). The distinct nature of academic writing which is also referred to as scientific writing, sets it apart from other forms of writing, such as creative writing and journalistic writing (Sajid & Siddiqui, 2015). Academic writing encompasses various forms such as essays, course papers, research papers, book reports, translations, theses, dissertations, books, articles, technical reports, criticisms, and abstracts (Shannon, 2011). The requirement for an unbiased and objective approach is prevalent in various forms of writings. In the study by Fitzmaurice and O'Farrell (2013) emphasises the importance of constructing a persuasive academic argument that relies on logical reasoning and substantiates claims with evidence. Osmond (2013) identifies a specific set of characteristics that are essential for high-quality academic writing. The nature of this writing necessitates conciseness, formality, objectivity, and substantiation. The neglect of crucial elements in writing, including organisation, word choice, grammar, spelling, data extraction technique, punctuation, and capitalization, is a surprising phenomenon among many students (Osmond, 2013). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify the difficulties in academic writing, specifically in mechanics of writing.

Problem Statement

Proficiency in written communication is a fundamental and indispensable skill that undergraduate students must possess in order to succeed in higher education. Nevertheless, acquiring such skills can be challenging for English as a second language (ESL) students. Many students continue to encounter obstacles that impede their ability to produce high-quality written work despite receiving formal instruction and guidance. It has been widely documented by researchers that Malaysian university students encounter difficulties when it comes to completing academic writing tasks, specifically in the domains of grammar, punctuation, and citation. For example, Akhtar et al (2020) stated that there is a lack of awareness among ESL students regarding the importance of language use, as well as lexical, grammatical, and sentence structure, in the production of high-quality written work. When students lack an understanding of the importance of a meaningful language, they have a tendency to exhibit careless writing habits. The improper utilisation of verb tenses and punctuation marks can result in the obscurity and misinterpretation of one's written work. This observation indicates that the students encounter difficulties in the areas of grammar and lexical selection.

Additionally, Hyland (2007), as cited in Akhtar et al., 2019) emphasised the significance of tertiary level students engaging in argumentation and generating ideas in English as a means to enhance their academic achievements. The absence of arguments and coherence in academic writing may render it unsatisfactory and weak. This suggests that students may face challenges when it comes to organising the content within their written work. The deficiency in organising ideas coherently is indicative of a lack of proficiency in written communication. This finding is corroborated by the research conducted by Akhtar et al (2020), which indicates that students who are learning English as a second language encounter significant challenges when it comes to expanding upon their ideas and ensuring a coherent progression of main points. As a result, the written compositions produced by these individuals exhibit a lack of

coherence with ideas that are disjointed and difficult to comprehend. This impedes their ability to effectively articulate their thoughts.

The impact of language errors and a lack of logical sequence in academic writing, particularly at the tertiary level, can hinder students' ability to develop into proficient writers. In turn, they may experience a lack of motivation to write effectively which may contribute to greater writing difficulties. Addressing the self-perceived difficulties of undergraduate students in academic writing is crucial for enhancing the overall quality of education and fostering academic outcomes. In light of this, it is important to identify the specific areas in which students face the most difficulty in order to foster a more favourable disposition towards academic writing. Besides, understanding the problems faced by the students can provide educators and academic institutions valuable insights into potential gaps in academic writing. Hence, this study is conducted to examine the challenges faced by undergraduate students in the mechanics of academic writing and to identify the primary difficulty they encounter in this area.

Literature Review
Academic Writing in Higher Education

Academic writing is a formal style of writing used in universities and scholarly publications. According to Al Fadda (2012), academic writing is very challenging even for the native speakers because it is considered as an advanced level in writing. It includes important elements such as critical thinking, self- expression and writing techniques which involve paraphrasing and summarising (AbdulKareem, 2013). It is a common practice in higher education where students are expected to write academically to demonstrate knowledge and show proficiency with certain disciplinary skills of thinking, interpreting, and presenting. Besides, academic writing involves cultural and social practice, where students need to use different cognitive abilities to negotiate power, authority, and identity within the outlook of universities (Pineteh, 2014). According to Musa (2010), writing skill mastery is a challenging task as it requires the writers to have good grip of spellings and punctuation, the utilisation of rigorous command of grammar, the choice of suitable vocabularies, and the proper writing styles to fulfil the expectations of the targeted readers. Consequently, due to the complex process of writing, especially academic writing in particular, students may not be able to produce a well-structured piece of writing which conforms to the standard required.

Challenges in Academic Writing

Language is mostly a reflection of what is occurring in an individual's thoughts. While learning English, students are required to grasp the four fundamental language skills, which are reading, listening, speaking, and writing, in addition to the English language itself. Brown (2000, as cited in Said, 2018) points out that learning a new language is a laborious process that requires much effort. ESL students are anticipated to face a variety of difficulties and challenges while they learn the language. Writing is a difficult skill to acquire since it is not a simple cognitive activity, but rather a complicated mental output or process that demands proper thinking, discipline, and focus (Grami, 2010). As discovered by Al Fadda (2012), the most difficult aspect in writing for ESL students includes distinguishing between written and spoken words, reviewing correct grammar to use, and connecting sentences together to form a cohesive paragraph. Al Murshidi (2014) agreed that students' inability to generate ideas on the related topics may become a barrier that impedes them to write more. These problems may arise as a result of low language proficiency among the students. Additionally, linguistic

elements such as vocabulary, punctuations and spellings are also considered the major factors that influence students' writing performance (Al-Khairy, 2013). The students often have challenges in developing practical language skills, such as correct spelling of English words in varied social contexts. Besides, since the students are usually concerned on the use of correct grammar, aspects of writing such as spellings and punctuations tend to be ignored (Said, 2018). Based on the aforementioned studies, most ESL learners have difficulty applying academic style in writing due to their linguistic ability. Writing in general is perceived as strenuous for students, but to write academically is even more challenging.

Methodology

This quantitative research used a questionnaire adapted from Habibi, Sri Wachyuni and Husni (2017). The sampling method used for this study is simple random sampling. The form consisted of 27 items in seven sections which are Demographic details, Organisation or Illogical Sequence, Word choice, Grammar, Spelling, Punctuations and Capitalisation. The questionnaire forms were distributed to 231 Universiti Teknologi MARA (Selangor) students of an academic writing course via Google Form. The collected data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) ver. 27.

Data Analysis
Demographic Background

The responses from 71 male and 160 female students were recorded in this study. All of them were taking the same English writing course which is English for Academic Writing. 26 percent of the students obtained A for the English course in the previous semester and majority of the students had good English proficiency. However, 50 percent of the participants perceived themselves as having only fair knowledge on academic writing.

Students' Self-Perceived Difficulties on Academic Writing
Table 1

Organisation or Illogical Sequence

Item	Mean Score	Std. Deviation
1. I have difficulties in writing techniques (paraphrasing, summarising, analysing, synthesising).	3.12	.81
2. I have difficulties in choosing a suitable topic.	3.11	.84
3. I have difficulties in drafting an outline before writing.	2.99	.86
4. I have difficulties in mapping my ideas.	3.02	.92

Table 1 presents the mean scores of difficulties in organisation or using illogical sequence in academic writing. The four items listed as Item 1 to Item 4 are difficulties in writing techniques (paraphrasing, summarising, analysing, synthesising), difficulties in choosing a suitable topic, difficulties in drafting an outline before writing, and difficulties in mapping ideas respectively. Item 1 had the highest mean score which is 3.12 (SD= .81), followed by item 2 with the mean score of 3.11 (SD= .84), item 4 with 3.02 (SD= .92) and lastly, the lowest mean score was item 3 with 2.99 (SD= .86).

Table 2
Word choice

Item	Mean Score	Std. Deviation
1. I always use simple words in writing.	3.80	.83
2. I feel confident when using simple words in writing.	2.19	.70
3. I have difficulties in writing due to lack of vocabularies.	3.50	.94
4. I need more time to write when using new vocabularies.	3.86	.85

Table 2 depicts the mean scores of difficulties with word choice in writing. The four items are students use too many simple words, feel confident when using simple words, lack vocabulary in writing and require more time to write when using new vocabularies. The highest mean score arrived at 3.86 (SD= .85) which was item 4, followed by item 1 with the mean score of 3.80 (SD= .83), item 3 with 3.50 (SD= .94) and lastly, the lowest mean score was item 2 with 2.19 (SD= .70).

Table 3
Grammar

Item	Mean Score	Std. Deviation
1. I have difficulties in using correct tenses.	3.44	.91
2. I have difficulties in using passive voice in writing.	3.24	.89
3. I have difficulties in writing grammatically correct sentences.	3.36	.96
4. I need more time to write using correct tenses according to context.	3.55	.86

Table 3 shows the mean scores obtained by students for difficulties in using grammar. The four items are difficulties in using correct tenses, difficulties in using passive voice in writing, difficulties in writing grammatically correct sentences and the need for more time to write using correct tenses according to context. The highest mean score attained was 3.55 (SD= .86) which was item 4, followed by item 1 with the mean score of 3.44 (SD= .91), item 3 with 3.36 (SD= .96) and lastly, the lowest mean score was item 2 with 3.24 (SD= .89).

Table 4
Spelling

Item	Mean Score	Std. Deviation
1. Correct spelling is not important in writing.	1.66	.85
2 .I have difficulties in spelling new words correctly.	2.82	.94
3. I have difficulties in reviewing the spelling of words in my academic writing.	2.74	.92
4. I need more time to check the spelling of words in my academic writing.	2.96	1.0

Table 4 shows the mean scores obtained by students for difficulties in using correct spellings. The four items are correct spelling is not important in writing, difficulties in spelling new words correctly, difficulties in reviewing the spelling of words in my academic writing, and the

need for more time to check the spelling of words in my academic writing. The highest mean score attained was 2.96 (SD= 1.0) which was item 4, followed by item 2 with the mean score of 2.82 (SD= .94), item 3 with 2.74 (SD= .92) and lastly, the lowest mean score was item 1 with 1.66 (SD= .85).

Table 5
Punctuations

Item	Mean Score	Std. Deviation
1. I have difficulties in using the correct punctuations in my writing.	2.81	.95
2. I have difficulties in differentiating the functions between a comma (,) and a full stop (.).	1.97	.95
3. I have difficulties in differentiating when to use apostrophes (') for contraction and apostrophes for possession. For example: 1) it's means it is (contraction). 2) father's means belongs to father (possession).	2.58	1.06
4. I have difficulties in deciding when to use a comma or a conjunction (and, or, because etc.) to continue a sentence.	2.33	.98

Table 5 demonstrates the mean scores of four items which are difficulties in using the correct punctuations, difficulties in differentiating the functions between a comma and a full stop, difficulties in differentiating when to use apostrophes and difficulties in deciding when to use a comma or a conjunction to continue a sentence. The highest mean score is 2.81 (SD= .95) which was item 1, followed by item 3 with the mean score of 2.58 (SD= .1.06), item 4 with the mean score of 2.33 (SD= .98), and the lowest mean score was for item 2 which is 1.97 (SD= .95).

Table 6
Capitalisations

Item	Mean Score	Std. Deviation
1. Capitalisation is not important in academic writing.	1.77	.89
2. I sometimes forget to capitalise the first letter after a full stop.	1.86	.97
3. I have difficulties in using capital letters for proper nouns (For example: Ali, Kuala Lumpur, Pepsi, Eid Mubarak etc.).	1.86	.95

Table 6 depicts the mean scores of three items which are students do not view the importance of capitalisation in academic writing, forget to capitalise the first letter after a full stop, and have difficulties in using capital letters for proper nouns. The highest mean scores attained were item 2 and 3 which are 1.86 (SD = .97) and 1.86 (SD= .95) respectively. The lowest mean score obtained was 1.77 (SD= .89) for item 1.

The Most Significant Difficulty in Academic Writing

Table 7

The most significant academic writing difficulty perceived by the students

Academic Writing Difficulty	Mean Score	Std. Deviation
1. Grammar	Q1 - 3.44 Q2 - 3.24 Q3 - 3.36 Q4 -3.55	Q1 - .91 Q2 - .89 Q3 - .96 Q4 - .86
Average Mean Score and Std Deviation	Ave: 3.40	Ave: .91
2. Word Choice	Q1 - 3.80 Q2 - 2.19 Q3 - 3.59 Q4 - 3.86	Q1 - .83 Q2 - .70 Q3 - .94 Q4 - .85
Average Mean Score and Std Deviation	Ave: 3.36	Ave: .83
3. Organisation or Illogical Sequence	Q1 - 3.12 Q2 - 3.12 Q3 - 2.99 Q4 - 3.02	Q1 - .81 Q2 - .84 Q3 - .86 Q4 - .92
Average Mean Score and Std Deviation	Ave: 3.06	Ave: .86

Table 7 illustrates the average mean scores for the three most significant writing difficulties perceived by the students. The highest average of mean value is 3.4 (SD = .91) which is grammar. This indicates that the students acknowledged grammar as the most common difficulty that they faced while writing. Next, the second highest average of mean score is 3.36 (SD = .83) which shows the majority of the students viewed word choice as one of the significant writing difficulties. Finally, the item with the lowest average of scores is organisation or illogical sequence with an average mean value of 3.06 (SD = .86).

Discussion and Conclusions

The present research investigated the difficulties that UiTM students experienced while writing in academic settings. The study used a quantitative research technique in which a questionnaire was distributed to undergraduate students who were taking academic writing courses. The study revealed that the students encountered a variety of difficulties in academic writing, particularly in terms of organisation or illogical sequence, word choice, grammar, spelling, punctuations and capitalisation.

Specifically, the data suggested that students perceived grammar to be more challenging than other components of academic writing. However, grammar is vital to convey meaningful information in their writing. Another interesting finding from this study was students admitted to have problems with word choice in academic writing. The results in this study are consistent with the findings by (Al Fadda, 2012). He discovered that the most difficult component of writing for ESL students is reviewing correct grammar to use and linking sentences together to produce a cohesive paragraph. The findings indicated that students were having difficulties to be more selective in their word choice required to fit the nature of academic writing. Academic writing has general words which are acceptable for academic use to reflect the academic style in report writing. Study by Aldabbus and Almansouri in 2022 indicated that students encountered difficulty in selecting the appropriate academic words for their academic writing. In contrast with the findings by Al Murshidi (2014), the participants

expressed their inability to generate ideas on the related topics which became the main difficulty for them to write. Besides, Al Badi (2020) noted that his findings show coherence and cohesion in writing were chosen as the most common difficulty faced in writing academically. Based on these findings and previous studies, there are many challenges faced by the students in writing for academic purposes as it has specific features to be applied by the writers.

To address this issue, some recommendations were made in light of the above-mentioned discussion. First and foremost, students require support in order to overcome the difficulties they have encountered in the writing process. Lecturers could introduce collaborative writing and peer review to encourage students in academic writing. Multiple students working together in writing activities increases student engagement and participation (Kasneci et al., 2023) and this can be achieved by providing detailed instructions and visual elements to promote collaboration (McDonough & Vleeschauwer, 2019). Collaborative writing and peer review can also promote effective feedback with proper guidance from lecturers. Effective feedback allows the students to see their level of proficiency and weakness (Wulandari, 2022) by balancing praise and constructive criticism and explaining why certain mistakes are underlined. This could encourage students to understand better and eventually be more confident to become independent learners. Second, lecturers and students should pay attention not only to the content of the academic writing, but also the grammar used. Without good grammar, the information may not be successfully delivered. In coping with language inaccuracy, Kasneci et al (2023) suggested university lecturers and students incorporate large language models like ChatGPT in teaching and learning classes. Large language models can assist writing tasks to be taught and learned efficiently especially at identifying potential grammatical mistakes, inconsistent language structures and correcting typos. Finally, lecturers must pay special attention to the reading materials used and the method to facilitate students in order to stimulate and maintain their motivation to write for academic writing. Nazaralieva (2021) emphasised that integrating age- and ability-appropriate reading materials in writing activities can boost writing comprehension and vocabulary knowledge.

All in all, this study demonstrates the undergraduate students' self-perceived difficulties in academic writing. The findings could provide insights for the responsible authorities to plan a proper course of action in helping the students to curb the difficulties faced in writing academically. Ultimately, it is hoped that it will boost students' confidence and serve as a guideline in writing with conviction.

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