

Challenges of English Academic Writing among Saudi Higher Education Students

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Abstract

This paper aimed to provide an overview of the challenges of English academic writing and to investigate how students' learning environments and pedagogical approaches to teaching affect it. Data was collected using online survey. The sample consists of 325 Saudi undergraduate students through a purposive sampling method. The results showed that challenges of mastering, pedagogical approach of teaching and learning environment were a positive significance influence on Mastering of English academic writing among university students in Saudi Arabia. The results provide EFL students and their educators and educational policy makers with a deeper understanding of challenges that the students may face in Higher Education. Researchers should conduct further research on students from diverse disciplines, genders, and ages, as well as from various language institutions and universities.

Keywords: Challenges of Mastering, English Academic Writing, University Students, Saudi Arabia

Introduction

Students and scholars in Higher Education (HE) are increasingly expected to have excellent academic writing skills (Dearden, 2018; Sabet & Salamatbakhsh, 2020). A major publication tool is English academic writing (Buckingham, 2008). The ability to demonstrate knowledge is a crucial academic and student skill (Gheyathaldin & Shishakly, 2020; Oducado et al., 2020). Nevertheless, improving academic writing skills can be challenging, especially for students studying EFL (Noori, 2020). In addition to A native English speaker who works in academia, EFL students face challenges with academic writing in higher education (Zhao, 2017). A student's ability to write well academically begins with their ability to speak the language they hear in their heads (Durga & Rao, 2018). In the literature, academic insufficiency has been

cited as preventing EFL students from taking full advantage of their courses (Mayan, 2019). In the Saudi higher education context, studies revealed that the reluctant decision to provide the learners in Saudi with English as a compulsory subject at a very young age at school was correlated highly with the insufficiency in the academic learning process, let alone their academic writing abilities (Endahati, 2020).

Furthermore, numerous studies have been also shown that EFL students' academic writing development can be significantly influenced by factors such as their engagement in their learning. A definition of learning engagement can be found here as a variety of methods. The general ones are quite broad, while the specific ones are quite narrow. It includes both classroom-based and out-of-classroom engagement, even in out-of-school contexts (Suherdi, 2018). A student's learning engagement occurs when he/she is given enough time and effort to participate in the interactions between students and teachers in learning and teaching activities (Suherdi, 2018). According to Suherdi (2018), learning engagement has a significant effect on language teaching and communication skills. A student's self-efficacy is also influenced by their level of engagement in learning (Han & Hyland, 2015).

It has been found that there is a lack of literature which focuses on students learning English as a foreign language who are facing many challenges in academic writing (Khozaei Ravari & Tan, 2019). As Al-Khairi (2013) points out that EFL students in education at the university level commonly find academic writing challenging task, especially in different academic environments.

According to Al-Sobhi and Preece (2018), several studies have revealed that Saudi Arabian teachers encounter a number of difficulties when they teach English as a foreign language. A variety of academic writing errors have also been found to be made by students majoring in English at Saudi universities Javid & Umer (2014) in past studies. Due to the fact that English is not officially a recognized language in the country, EFL students do not consider learning the language crucial (Qayoom & Saleem, 2020). The purpose of this study is to examine the obstacles and difficulties Saudi EFL students encounter when writing academically in higher education (in terms of obstacles and difficulties).

Problem Statement

Academic English writing is a challenge to many EFL students, especially first-year university EFL students. In recent years, there has been a wide range of newly published researches conducted in the Saudi Arabia Higher Education context, which focused on English academic writing (Ababneh, 2020). However, most of these studies and their approaches to characterising the issues of English academic writing challenges target single aspects of the dilemma. These are grammatical and syntactical errors (Hafiz & Omar, 2018), cohesion and coherence (Alzamil, 2020). On the other hand, this study also examines how technology-based learning environments can be used to reduce academic writing challenges in Saudi higher education by using technology-based learning environments. In this study, we examine the academic writing of Saudi EFL students in relation to the environment of learning and the challenge of mastering. The study will explore diverse pedagogical aspects of EFL students' academic writing learning. Identifying the factors and challenges that could affect the development of teaching and learning English in Saudi universities and improving students' academic writing is also critical. The present study stands to explore the most significant issues affecting EFL students' academic writing development.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to accomplish the following objectives

1. To investigate the effect of challenges of academic writing among Saudi EFL students on mastering English academic writing skill among Saudi EFL students.
2. To identify the effect of students' learning environment on English academic writing skill among Saudi EFL students.
3. To examine the effect of pedagogical approach of teaching writing skill on mastering English academic writing among Saudi EFL students

Literature Review

Theoretical Background of English Writing

Due to the fact that the comprehension of second language writing involves different strategic, linguistic needs, and rhetorical as well as significant facets and learning challenges, it is highly intricate, dynamic, multi-component, and composite. McKinley (2015) argues that the group of writing can play a crucial role in learning English as a second language. Learners can choose from both the product group and the process group. Writing in English is based on a theoretical background that demonstrates the importance of understanding syntax and structure. Their native language is merely a transliteration of what they do (Scontras, Fuchs & Polinsky, 2015). Despite this, second-language writing is often problematic than in the native language due to errors. Learning English through Children's movies can help you learn about languages and cultures, including idioms for students who do not speak English as their first language but are advanced learners. In spoken language, this might be more effective than in academic writing (Cho & Krashen, 2019).

Technology-based Environment for Academic Writing

Literacy begins with learning to write. Especially for undergraduate students who need to write academically, mastering academic writing is a valuable skill. Getting students to write academically is difficult, and it requires a complex process (Sajjad et al., 2021). Students' written communication skills have greatly improved as a result of technology. The use of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp has become increasingly popular among students. Students are also utilizing digital tools to improve their writing skills, such as writing and editing software, as well as automated grammar checks (Defede et al., 2021).

Digital platforms, such as citation generators, have helped students write in formats like APA or Harvard, as technology has simplified tedious tasks within technology-based learning environments. With faster writing processes, students can save time by improving their academic writing skills and performing their homework more thoroughly. Additionally, Grammarly and WhiteSmoke provide real-time error detection as part of automated writing services (Huynh, 2021).

Teaching and Learning Methods

EFL students in Saudi Arabia are often concerned with teaching and learning styles issues (Kalyani & Rajasekaran, 2018). This method is compatible with the most commonly used method of teaching (hands-on training) that uses concrete-sequential learning. EFL learners with mixed learning styles are likely to support a variety of teaching methodologies, given the high percentage of answers that suggested mixed learning styles. To develop an optimal

learning environment, Kalyani and Rajasekaran (2018) encourage teachers to recognize and employ different teaching techniques for the different learning styles of their students.

Learning Environment Issues

Writing is a fundamental productive activity and a language skill that is essential to EFL students (Hussin, 2018). Both beginner and advanced EFL students have negative perceptions about writing because of its complexity and diversified specifications. Two things can be done to set up favoured learning. Writing assistance could be provided by allies and teachers during the modifying and shifting stages of building reactions and comments (Hussin, 2018). By interacting directly and personally with each other, they would be able to gather information from the Internet, disseminate it, and compose themselves.

Challenges of English Academic Writing

Unlike native English speakers, EFL students must work harder and devote more time to find the correct information when writing academic essays. They can be disappointed with this assignment alone due to their limited English vocabulary. As Grami (2010, p.9) argues, writing requires careful consideration, discipline, and concentration, making it difficult to study or teach.

There are other diverse researches conducted by different researchers on academic writing challenges faced by EFL students. Manchishi et al (2015) recruited 80 students and 20 instructors at the University of Zambia to investigate some common mistakes and difficulties postgraduate students may face during their Higher Education study. Key findings indicated that some of the students' common errors associated with conducting projects include comprehensive and complicated headings. The students' flawed understandings of the writing topic, methodology, vocabularies, and describing the literature review was also found to be challenging. Other challenges pointed out by Manchishi et al (2015) faced Higher Education students, including the absence of experience in recognising apparently related literature and inadequate time for academic writing assignments delivery.

At the University of Taif in Saudi Arabia, Al-Khairy (2013) investigated primary academic writing problems associated with Saudi Arabia University students in L2. Al-Khairy (2013) discovered several issues from the sentence construction level to the paragraph level of academic writing. Al-Khairy (2013) concluded that the reasons for low skills in academic writing in EFL settings could be attributed to multiple circumstances. These include grammatical gaps, lack of academic writing practice, lack of motivation, and poor educational environment. As Arabic-speaking students study English as a second language at Jazan University's Preparatory Year, Hafiz and Omar (2018) examined the most popular syntactic errors they encounter. According to findings, students made the most syntactic errors with sentence structure, subject-verb understanding, tense, subordinate verbs, and prepositions.

Pedagogical Approach of Teaching Writing Skill

Based on Khusniddinvich's (2018) pedagogical perspective, several learning strategies do not seem to be utilized to teach English. It was found that Saudi Arabia has a few remarkably qualified teachers, but they are not well versed in EFL teaching. In the Saudi higher education context, studies revealed that the reluctant discussion to provide the learners in Saudi with English as a compulsory subject at a very young age at school was correlated highly with the insufficiency in the academic learning process, let alone their academic writing abilities (Endahati, 2020). The current study will provide an opportunity for the decision makers in

higher education to select appropriate EFL resources, skills, and learning environment that can best accommodate the needs of Saudi EFL students to help them with their academic writing development as well as other similar EFL foreign students.

Framework and Hypotheses Testing

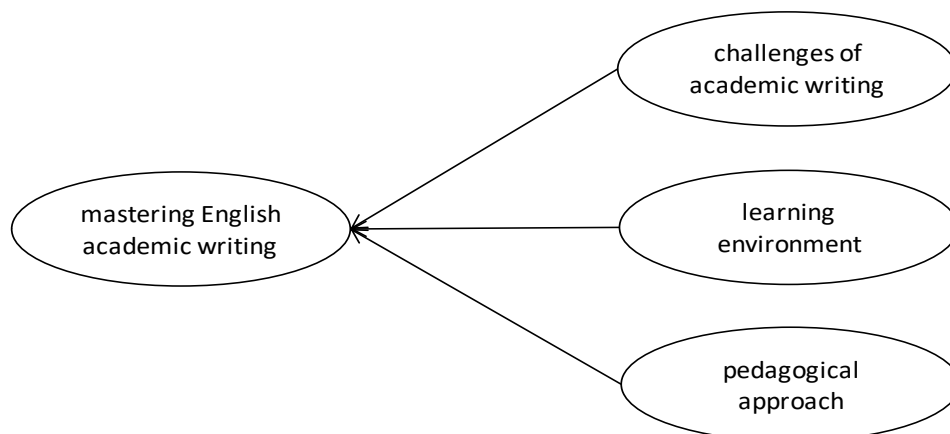


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses Testing

1. Hypothesis 1 (H1): there is a direct effect of challenges of mastering on Mastering of English academic writing among Saudi EFL students.
2. Hypothesis 2 (H2): there is a direct effect of learning environment on Mastering of English academic writing among Saudi EFL students.
3. Hypothesis 3(H3): there is a direct effect of pedagogical approach of teaching on Mastering of English academic writing among Saudi EFL students.

Methodology and Data Collection

Research Design

Considering the current study's nature, it would be appropriate to use a quantitative research design. By employing hypothesis testing, the researcher is hoping to investigate English academic writing challenges in Saudi Higher Education context and the potential role of learning environment engagement.

Population and Sample

The target population of this study consists of Saudi EFL learners in Higher Education. Therefore, the study population can be described as all EFL learners in Saudi Arabia from the different Higher Education institutions that participate in Academic writing. To properly represent the population mentioned above, a sample of 500 randomly selected students who fit the population description is selected for this study. This study emphasizes the education sector due to its importance to the high education in Saudi Arabia, and in line with the efforts of the Saudi government, which works through Vision 2030 to strengthen various education sectors.

The researchers chose this sample due to their familiarity with the issues that addressed in this study. Purposive sampling method was used in this study. Thus, a total of 500 undergraduate students from the different Higher Education institutions that participate in

Academic writing comprise the sample of this study. The participants were undergraduate students who are in the first, second, and fourth years.

The data was collected via online questionnaire that sent to 500 undergraduate students. However, only 325 questionnaires were completed and returned, representing approximately 65% response rate.

Questionnaire Design

This study used the survey method to collect data. The questionnaire is divided into two parts. The first part includes demographic information such as gender, age, and study year. Respondents will be asked about the variables of interest in the second part.

In the survey, four variables are measured (three independent variables and one dependent variable). Based on the appendix, 46 items were adopted from (Tracy, 2019) for independent and dependent variables to ensure content validity.

Data Analysis and Results

Normality Test

As a part of this study, Hair et al. (2014) presented considering a cut-off critical value of 2.58. Table 1 shows that the skewness and kurtosis values for each construct were within the range (± 2.58). In this descriptive analysis, the skewness values ranged from -0.539 to -0.907, while the kurtosis values ranged from 2.392 to 2.516. For variables, Table 1 shows their skewness and kurtosis.

Table 1

Skewness and Kurtosis for Variables

Variable	Skewness	Kurtosis
Challenges of mastering	-.652	2.445
Pedagogical approach of teaching	-.907	2.441
Learning environment	-.695	2.392
Mastering of academic writing	-.539	2.516

Source: Prepared by researcher using SPSS

Descriptive Statistics for Variables

This study's descriptive statistics are shown in Table 2. With 4.368 out of a maximum of 5 making up 87.3%, the highest mean can be observed for challenges of mastering. Furthermore, mastering of academic writing had 4.23 making up 84.6%. Conversely, pedagogical approach to teaching has the lowest mean (4.2120), which makes 82.4%, and the mean of these values (overall mean) is 4.23 (84.6%), which is greater than 3 (Hair, 2006). Furthermore, the calculated standard deviations for all variables in this study ranged from 0.448 to 0.535, indicating substantial acceptable variability.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Variables

Variable	No. Items	Min.	Max.	Mean	%	SD
Challenges of mastering	7	2.00	5.00	4.3683	87.3	.47561
Pedagogical approach of teaching	7	1.13	5.00	4.1201	82.4	.53502
Learning environment	7	1.25	5.00	4.2112	84.2	.44890
Mastering of academic writing	9	1.50	5.00	4.2304	84.6	.45140
Overall	30	2.00	5.00	4.232	84.64	.47561

Validity and Reliability**Assessment of PLS-SEM Path Model Result**

In order to conduct SEM data analysis, a two-stage method is employed, involving the assessment of measurement models followed by the estimation of structural models. The measurement model is assessed for construct validity, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Using PLS-based SEM, this study followed the two-stage successive methodology (Hair et al. 2013). In the manner of Hair et al., (2013), we first examined the measurement model, then analyzed the structural model and tested hypotheses. A fundamental part of assessing measurement models is the assessment of convergent validity. Smart-PLS convergent validity can be confirmed when items load highly (greater than 0.70 or 0.60 in exploratory research), as reported by Hair, Risher, Sarstedt and Ringle (2019); constructs have an average variance extracted (AVE) of at least 0.5, and composite reliability (CR) measures of internal consistency reliability are above 0.70, ranging from 0.918 to 0.932. In addition, Table 3 reveals that the reliability (Cronbach's alpha) values were higher than 0.70 and ranged from 0.898 to 0.914.

Convergent Validity

Factor loadings are greater than 0.50 when a study sample contains more than 200 respondents (Hair 2013, p. 128). Therefore, convergent validity can be demonstrated. Therefore, the model is convergently valid since all indicators are related to their respective constructs.

The factor loading analysis in Figure 2 and Table 3 shows that all loadings are greater than 0.60 and range from 0.618 (MAS9) to 0.859 (PAT2). According to Hair et al. (2019), Smart-PLS has convergent validity when items load highly (greater than 0.70 or 0.60 in exploratory research). According to Hair et al., (2013), items with outer loadings greater than 0.60 should be retained.

Table 3

Items loading, Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability

Main-Variable	Code	Loading	Cronbach's alpha	CR
Mastering of English academic writing	MAS1	0.762	0.898	0.918
	MAS3	0.740		
	MAS4	0.802		
	MAS5	0.820		
	MAS6	0.793		
	MAS7	0.771		
	MAS8	0.708		
	MAS9	0.618		
	MAS10	0.666		
	Challenges of mastering	CHAM1		
CHAM2		0.786		
CHAM3		0.747		
CHAM4		0.849		
CHAM5		0.833		
CHAM6		0.818		
CHAM7		0.780		
Pedagogical approach of teaching	PAT1	0.847	0.914	0.932
	PAT2	0.859		
	PAT3	0.855		
	PAT4	0.768		
	PAT5	0.829		
	PAT7	0.705		
	PAT8	0.818		
	Learning environment	ENV1		
ENV2		0.855		
ENV3		0.728		
ENV4		0.671		
ENV5		0.812		
ENV6		0.856		
ENV7		0.743		
ENV8		0.628		

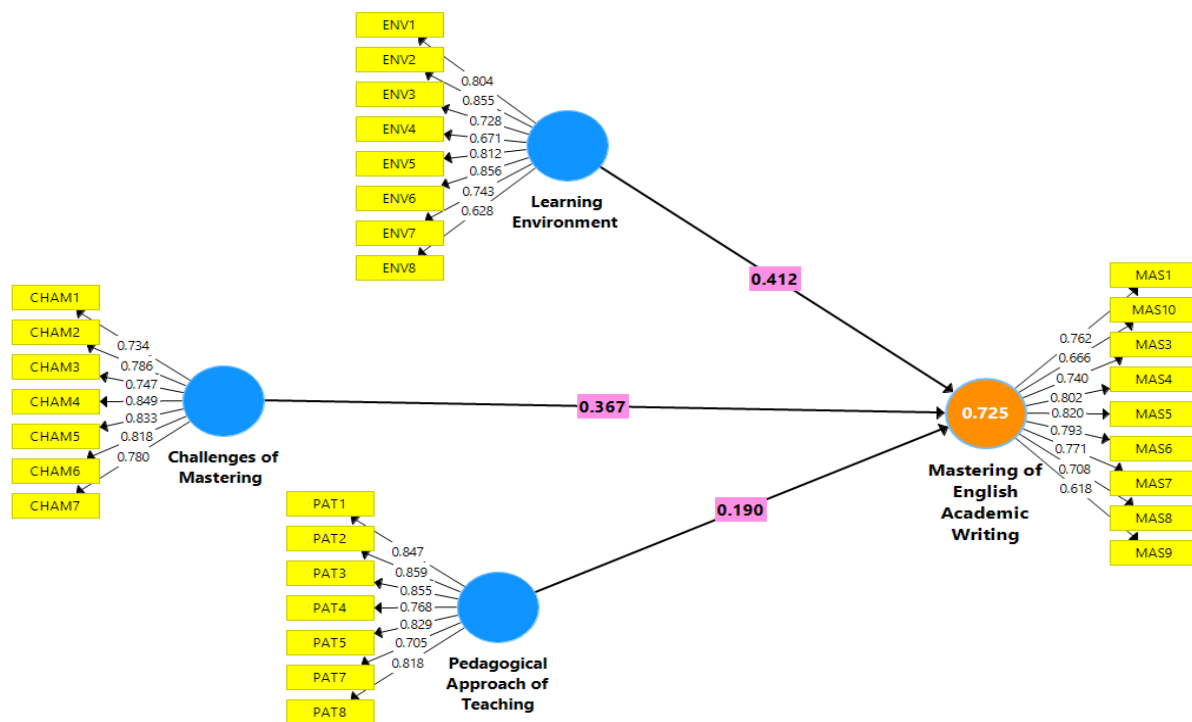


Figure 2: Measurement Model/ Outer Model

Discriminant Validity

Due to the AVE values being greater than the squared correlations, discriminant validity was indicated. In addition, the square root of the AVE for a given construct was greater than the absolute value of its correlation square with any factor ($AVE > \text{correlation square}$). The square root of the AVE for all constructs greater than their correlations with other constructs is shown in Table 3.

In Hair et al (2010), discriminant validity is defined as the degree to which one construct differs from another. A construct's discriminatory validity is evaluated by examining its Average Variance Extracted (AVE) if it exceeds the square correlation among other constructs (Fronell & Larcker, 1981). This study's AVE value exceeded 0.50 and ranged from 0.565 to 0.682, indicating adequate convergent validity and acceptable values. The convergent validity of the study was thus confirmed (see Tables 3 and 4).

Table 4

Discriminant Validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) and AVE for Latent Variables

Variable	AVE	MAS	ENV	CHAM	PAT
MAS	0.555	0.793			
ENV	0.587	0.594	0.766		
CHAM	0.629	0.714	0.757	0.745	
PAT	0.661	0.542	0.730	0.731	0.813

Source: Prepared by researcher using Smart PLS Version 3

Note: AVE: Average Variance Extracted, CHAM: Challenges of mastering, PAT: Pedagogical approach of teaching, ENV: Learning environment, MAS: Mastering of English academic writing.

Coefficient of Determination: R² value

Falk and Miller (1992) recommend that R² values for an endogenous construct be at least 0.10. In Cohen (1988b), R² is considered substantial when it is greater than 0.26 with acceptable power above 0.02; in Chin (1998), R² is considered substantial when it is greater than 0.65 with acceptable power above 0.19. On the other hand, Hair et al. (2017) suggested that acceptable power should be over 0.25 and that R² must be greater than 0.75 to be considered significant.

The squared multiple correlation (R²) value for Mastering of English academic writing (MAS) in this study was 0.725, indicating that the model fit the data well. As a result, CHAM, PAT and ENV explained 72.5% of Saudi EFL students' variance in Mastering of English academic writing (MAS).

The results of Table 5 and Figure 3 show the R² results from the structural model (PLS-SEM), which indicate that all values of R² are sufficient to explain the data well.

Table 5

Coefficient of determination result R²

Independent Variables	Dependent Variable	R ²	Hair et al., (2017)	Cohen, (1988b)	Chin (1998)
CHAM, PAT and ENV	MAS	0.725	Moderate	substantial	substantial

Note: CHAM: Challenges of mastering, PAT: Pedagogical approach of teaching, ENV: Learning environment, MAS: Mastering of English academic writing.

Assessment of Effect Size (f²)

It is advantageous to dictate the effect sizes of particular latent variables' influence on the dependent variables by utilizing the effect size (f²) analysis which is complementary to R² (Chin, 2010). The effect size (f²) can be determined using the formula suggested by Cohen (1988) as follows:

$$\text{Effect size } (f^2) = \frac{R_{\text{included}}^2 - R_{\text{excluded}}^2}{1 - R_{\text{included}}^2} \quad (1)$$

R² included represents the R-squared of the endogenous latent variable when exogenous latent variables are predictors. Whenever the exogenous latent variables are excluded from the structural model, R² excluded represents the R-squared of the endogenous latent variables. Cohen (1988) estimates a small effect size as 0.02, a medium effect size as 0.15, and a large effect size as 0.35. The results show challenges of mastering and learning environment had medium effect size of predictive variable on the sustainable development at 0.312 and 0.174 (more than 0.15) but pedagogical approach of teaching was small effect on mastering of academic English writing (f² = 0.040). Table 6 presents the results of effect size of the independent variables on dependent variable.

Table 6

Effect Size of predictive variables

Variable	Effect size (f^2)	
	Mastering of academic English writing.	Rating
Challenges of mastering	0.312	Medium
pedagogical approach of teaching	0.040	Small
Learning environment	0.174	Medium

Results

The results indicate that challenges of mastering English academic writing have significantly positive and significant influence on mastering of English academic writing among Saudi EFL students ($\beta = 0.367$, $t=8.608$, $P = 0.000$). Furthermore, pedagogical approach of teaching has an exceptional effect on mastering of English academic writing ($\beta = 0.412$, $t= 6.214$, $P = 0.000$). Finally, students learning environment has a significant and positive effect on mastering of English academic writing among Saudi EFL students ($\beta = 0.190$, $t= 2.823$; $P = 0.005$). Therefore, H1, H2 and H3 were accepted. The structural model's direct hypotheses are shown in Table 7.

Table 7

Summary of Structural Model Assessment (Hypotheses)

H	The Relationship	Estimate (path coefficient) (β)	(STDEV)	C.R (t-value)	P-value	Result
H1	CHAM -> MAS	0.367	0.043	8.608	0.000	accepted
H2	ENV -> MAS	0.412	0.066	6.214	0.000	accepted
H3	PAT -> MAS	0.190	0.067	2.823	0.005	accepted

Source: Prepared by researcher using Smart PLS Version 3

Note: CHAM: Challenges of mastering, PAT: Pedagogical approach of teaching, ENV: Learning environment, MAS: Mastering of English academic writing.

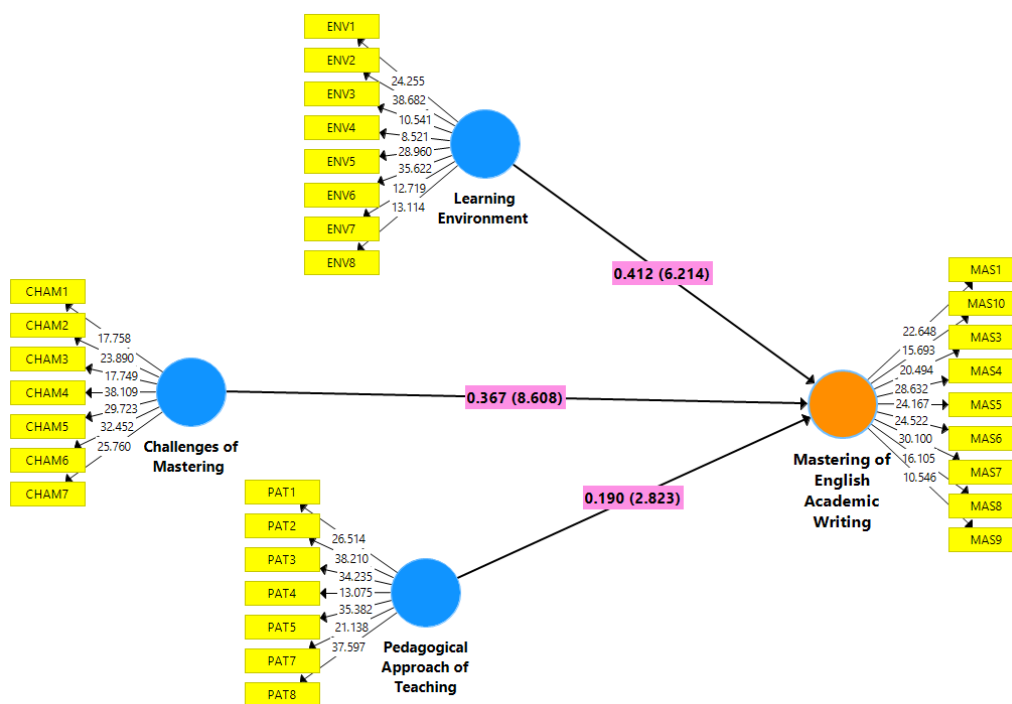


Figure 3: Structural Model with (Bootstrapping) (Hypotheses Results)

Discussion and Conclusion

This study focused on the challenges Saudi undergraduate students face when writing academically in English. The results are summarized in the Table 8 below.

Table 8
Summary of results

Hypothesis	Result	Conclusion
1. H1: There is a direct effect of challenges of mastering on Mastering of English academic writing among Saudi EFL students.	p-value=.000	accepted
2. H2: There is a direct effect of learning environment on Mastering of English academic writing among Saudi EFL students.	p-value=.000	accepted
3. H3: There is a direct effect of pedagogical approach of teaching on Mastering of English academic writing among Saudi EFL students.	p-value=.005	accepted

The results indicated the mean score of mastering of academic writing was 4.23 making up 84.6%. on the other hand, pedagogical approach of teaching has the lowest mean at 4.120, which makes a total of 82.4%, and the mean of these values (overall mean) is 4.23 (84.6%). As a result of the overall mean score, English Academic Writing challenges are categorized as optimistic. According to (Setyowati, 2017), participants had a positive and moderate attitude towards writing in English (82.12%).

Furthermore, the findings showed that challenges of mastering, pedagogical approach of teaching and learning environment have a positive significant influence on mastering English academic writing among Saudi EFL students. Linear correlation ($R^2 = 0.725$) was found between challenges of mastering, pedagogical approach of teaching and learning

environment and Mastering of English academic writing. This study confirms the findings of previous KSA studies (Aljumah, 2012; Alkubaidi, 2014; Ankawi, 2015). Furthermore, Qasem et al (2019) examined the difficulties Saudi undergraduates face in preparing research projects in English. Research topics and finding references are difficult for students. Korean learners' difficulties writing academic texts in English were examined by (Heo and Sim, 2015). According to Kotamjani and Hussin (2017), postgraduate students at University Putra Malaysia face academic writing challenges. A great deal of difficulty was perceived by students when it came to critiquing existing research and identifying research gaps.

Accordingly, undergraduate students in Saudi Arabia are having a difficult time learning academic writing skills, and English teachers find it challenging to teach them.

This study enhances our understanding of the challenges of academic writing among EFL learners. The results provide EFL students and their educators and educational policy makers with a deeper understanding of challenges that the students may face in Higher Education.

The study results may help EFL researchers, teachers, and students better understand the issues that influence EFL teaching and learning in the Saudi Arabian Higher Education context.

Moreover, the study may provide practical ways of handling English academic writing challenges and feed valuable information to teaching and learning EFL English language and linguistics. This study can help English teachers who teach academic writing skills at Saudi universities to better understand students' weaknesses and strengths. It can also help English students to overcome their writing challenges. Students can be motivated to develop their writing skills by this study since it informs and highlights their strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, the study support and enhance students' language learning, teachers need to improve their understanding of the students' needs, challenges, and difficulties so that adjustments can be made to their approaches and ways of teaching.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

Future research can address some of the limitations of this study. First, this study discussed a few factors of challenges elements such as learning environment, challenges of mastering and pedagogical approach of teaching and disregarded other factors such culture, attitude, enjoyment or other variables to obtain a more comprehensive understanding in mastering of English academic writing by undergraduate students in Saudi universities.

Qualitative studies are recommended in the future to collect more detailed information about English academic writing difficulties. Also, samples from other language institutions and universities, from different disciplines, ages, and genders, could be included in further research. In addition, it is recommended to examine how students' first language (Arabic) influences their academic writing, since this may reveal some of the reasons for the difficulties. Moreover, students' attitudes toward writing and actual writing performance and achievements should be examined.

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