

ACADEMIC WRITING CHALLENGES: PERSPECTIVES OF MASTERS AND DOCTORAL STUDENTSFaiza Latif*¹, Rafia Razaq², Aasma Nijabat³, Mehak Sohail⁴**Original Article**

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ABSTRACT

The ability to write and communicate in English is a crucial skill for the academic success of students. Therefore, improving one's command of vocabulary knowledge is essential for advancing English language skills. Despite the importance of English academic writing, many students in Pakistan struggle with this skill at postgraduate level. Thereby, this study was undertaken to address the challenging areas of academic writing among postgraduate students by using a qualitative technique and to provide recommendations based on them. All of the master's and doctoral students who were enrolled in the universities of Multan City were included in the population of this study, and 18 students were chosen using convenient sampling to participate in this study via semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that students encounter a number of academic challenges, which include a lack of awareness of plague words and phrases usage, grammatical mistakes, improper usage of pronouns, and lack of cohesion among sentences. Based on the results, it is vital for educational institutions and policymakers to recognize these challenges and take steps to address them by improving English language instruction and providing resources to support academic writing skills.

Keywords: Writing Skills, qualitative approach, academic writing challenges, postgraduate students.

INTRODUCTION

In today's highly interconnected world, English has become the global language of communication. The widespread adoption of the internet and other technologies has made it easier for people from different cultures and countries to connect and collaborate which has led to an increased demand for effective communication in English (Akram et al., 2021). It is evident that from personal to professional life English has been recognized as an essential ingredient of success and those people who are able to write and communicate effectively in English are usually successful in today's globalized world (Akram et al., 2022). Effective communication in English requires more than just a basic understanding of grammar and vocabulary. It involves the ability to express oneself clearly, concisely, and persuasively, while also being able to understand and interpret the nuances of the language. This is especially important when dealing with people from different cultures and backgrounds, as communication styles and norms can vary widely depending on the context. Moreover, with the increasing importance of digital communication,

being able to write effectively in English has become an essential skill for anyone who wants to succeed in the global marketplace. Whether it is through emails, social media, or online messaging platforms, the ability to convey ideas clearly and concisely in English is critical in today's digital age (Abdelrady & Akram, 2022).

Therefore, the ability to write and communicate effectively in English is not just a useful skill, but also a key component of cultural literacy and global citizenship. It allows individuals to engage with the world around them, connect with people from different cultures and backgrounds, and participate in the global conversation.

In Pakistan's educational institutions, the ability to write in English is a crucial skill for academic success particularly at the postgraduate level. English is the language of instruction in many universities and is widely used in academic research and publication. Therefore, improving one's command of the English language, particularly in academic writing, is essential for advancing research activities and contributing to the academic community (Azher, Mehmood & Shah, 2018). Academic writing in English requires a high level of proficiency in grammar, vocabulary, and syntax. It involves the ability to express complex ideas clearly and concisely, while also demonstrating critical thinking skills and a deep understanding of the subject matter. Moreover, academic writing also requires the ability to engage with the existing literature, to analyze and synthesize sources, and present one's own research findings in a logical and coherent manner. For students in Pakistan, improving their command of the English language is not only essential for academic success but also for future career opportunities (Ting et al., 2017). English is the language of international business, and many employers in Pakistan require a high level of proficiency in the language for job opportunities, particularly in fields such as finance, IT, and customer service. Furthermore, the ability to write and communicate effectively in English also allows students in Pakistan to participate in the global academic community (Mahboob, 2017). Academic research is a collaborative effort, and being able to communicate and share ideas with researchers from different countries and cultures is essential for advancing research activities. It is also explained by Nawaz, S. et.al (2021) that we must focus on listening comprehension along with information communication technology use for English Language Teachings

Despite the importance of English academic writing, many students in Pakistan struggle with this skill. Previous research has identified a range of factors that contribute to this challenge, including inadequate English language instruction in schools, a lack of exposure to English language media, and limited access to high-quality English language resources (Khan, Majoka, & Fazal, 2016).

According to a study conducted by Abbasi, Haider, and Farshad (2022) many Pakistani students lack the necessary language skills to write effectively in English, particularly at the undergraduate level. The study found that students often struggled with grammar, sentence structure, and academic vocabulary. This lack of proficiency in English academic writing was identified as a significant barrier to academic success and research activities.

Similarly, a study conducted by Mumtaz (2021) identified a range of challenges faced by Pakistani students in English academic writing. These challenges included limited access to quality academic resources, a lack of familiarity with the academic writing style and format, and a lack of confidence in their writing abilities.

Thereby, to address these challenges the study highlights the challenging areas of academic writing among postgraduate students in Pakistan. By identifying these areas, educational institutions and policymakers can implement targeted interventions to improve students' academic writing skills and enhance their contributions to the academic community. The following objectives guided the research project:

1. To examine postgraduate students' views on the most difficult aspects of academic writing they encounter.
2. To provide possible solutions to the issues with academic writing that postgraduate students face.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher took a qualitative approach to data collection by conducting interviews with students in order to gain insight into how teachers see difficult and problematic aspects of academic writing abilities. This allowed the researcher to investigate how students feel about these aspects. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured style (i.e., a mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions), and they were led by inquisitive inquiries that allowed the researcher to acquire in-depth information. The interviews were conducted over the phone (Tenny et al., 2017). Thus, believed to be the most adapted strategy to investigate the practices of written feedback utilized by teachers in order to promote academic writing skills among students in more detail.

POPULATION AND SAMPLING

All of the master's and doctoral students who were enrolled in the universities of Multan City were included in this study's population. In order to acquire the data, the researcher used a method called convenient sampling and chose 18 students at random to do it. After that, the researcher used the Zoom meeting software to conduct all of the interviews after obtaining permission from the respective deans or heads of departments at each of the universities. In addition, in order to protect the privacy of the people who took part in the study, their real names were substituted with fictitious ones.

TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE INSTRUMENT

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is the degree to which research questions are comprehended quickly and adequately. A useful instrument needs validity and dependability. Creswell (2014) revealed that legitimate instruments accurately captured user purpose. Open-ended study questions require inter-coder reliability, according to Patton (2015). Three peers and two specialists were chosen to evaluate the study's coding approach and conclusions. Independent researchers and subject matter experts reached an 80% consensus, which is lower than Creswell and Creswell's cutoff percentage and demonstrates adequate reliability (2017). Two pilot scheme interviews followed; however, they were not included in the final interviews. After an examination of the reliability of the qualitative interview technique, qualitative data collection participants received a consent letter and interview procedure.

DATA ANALYSIS

Each interview was recorded and transcribed in a semi-structured fashion. The researcher listened to and studied each recorded interview to assess how well it fits into the categories of student interviews. The researcher conducted follow-up interviews to obtain a rich, comprehensive picture of students' perceptions of the difficult aspects of academic writing. As part of the technique, the

qualitative analysis involved the generation, processing, and categorization of transcriptions. It was necessary to locate the data, define it more clearly, categorize it, and expand it (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Themes from interviews as well as motifs from the literature were examined. After the coding was finished, each theme was given a full description. After the principal themes were clarified, organized, and integrated, the key issues and maybe a range of discoveries were revealed. Finally, a story gave an explanation for the development of ideas (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participants' comments, guided by the study's research objectives, indicated various difficult aspects of academic writing they encounter, which are outlined below.

Plague Words and Phrases

Plague words and phrases can be a major obstacle for university students when it comes to academic writing. These are words and phrases that are overused, generic, or ambiguous, and can weaken the clarity and impact of your writing. Using plague words and phrases can make writing seem unprofessional and unconvincing, which can have a negative impact on students' grades. Insufficient knowledge about plague words and phrases emerged as one of the biggest writing challenges among the participants of the study, as to where to use and how to avoid them. There are many examples of plague words and phrases that university students should be aware of. Some of these include:

1. "In conclusion": This phrase is often used at the end of an essay or paper, but it is unnecessary and can weaken the impact of the conclusion. Instead, students should try to summarize their main points in a clear and concise manner.
2. "Very": This word is overused and can make one's writing seem unprofessional. Thereby, instead of using "very," ones should try to find a more specific word that conveys the same meaning.
3. "Basically": This word is often used to simplify a complex idea, but it can also make one's writing seem oversimplified and lacking in depth.
4. "I believe": This phrase is unnecessary in academic writing, as it is assumed that everything you write is your opinion. Thereby, instead of using it, ones should try to present their arguments and evidence in a clear and objective manner.
5. "To be honest": This phrase can make writing seem untrustworthy, as it implies that you may not always be honest in your writing. Thereby, instead of using it, ones should strive to be honest and transparent throughout their writing.

These examples are just a few of the many plague words and phrases that can plague postgraduate students in their academic writing. It's important to identify and eliminate these words and phrases to strengthen students writing.

Previous literature has also highlighted the importance of avoiding plague words and phrases in academic writing. In the book, "The Elements of Style," Wachtel (2000) advise writers to "avoid the use of qualifiers" and to "omit needless words." They stress the importance of clarity and concision in writing and caution against using words and phrases that are unnecessary or overused.

In addition, George Orwell (2021) in his book "Politics and the English Language" highlights the dangers of using vague or meaningless language in writing. He warns against using clichés and "pretentious diction," and stresses the importance of using clear, precise language to convey your ideas.

Overall, university students can improve their academic writing by identifying and avoiding plague words and phrases and striving for clarity, precision, and concision in their writing. By doing so, they can strengthen their arguments, improve their grades, and become more effective communicators in their academic and professional lives.

Grammar Mistakes

Grammar mistakes can be a significant challenge for university students when it comes to academic writing. These mistakes can range from simple errors, such as subject-verb agreement, to more complex issues, such as sentence structure and punctuation. Grammar mistakes can detract from the clarity and credibility of writing, which can negatively impact students' grades. Improper use of grammar on the other hand has emerged as one of the biggest writing challenges among the participants of the study.

Previous literature has also highlighted the importance of grammar in academic writing. For instance, Aronoff and Rees-Miller (2020) in their book, "The Handbook of Linguistics," advise writers to pay close attention to grammar and syntax, noting that "correct grammar and syntax are essential to effective communication." They stress the importance of precision and clarity in academic writing and caution against using overly complex language or convoluted sentence structures.

To avoid grammar mistakes, postgraduate students can take several steps. First, they should proofread their writing carefully, checking for errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. They can also use online grammar checkers and other writing tools to help identify and correct mistakes. In addition, they can seek feedback from their professors or writing tutors, who can provide guidance on grammar and syntax.

Overall, avoiding grammar mistakes is essential for university students to achieve success in academic writing. By paying close attention to grammar and syntax, simplifying language and sentence structures, and seeking feedback and assistance as needed, students can improve the clarity and credibility of their writing and achieve their academic goals.

Use of pronouns

Improper use of pronouns can be a significant challenge for students when it comes to academic writing. Pronouns are an essential part of language, and their proper use can enhance the clarity and coherence of writing. However, incorrect or inconsistent use of pronouns can create confusion and detract from the overall impact of the writing. Improper use of pronouns on the other hand has emerged as another writing challenge among the participants of the study.

Previous literature has emphasized the importance of using pronouns correctly in academic writing. In their book, "The Little, Brown Handbook," Fowler, Aaron, and McArthur (2007) note that "clear and consistent use of pronouns is essential to effective communication. They stress the importance of using pronouns that clearly refer to the intended antecedent and avoiding ambiguity or confusion.

In addition, the American Psychological Association (APA) (2019) Publication Manual stresses the importance of using gender-neutral language in academic writing. This includes using "they" or "their" as singular pronouns when the gender of the person being referred to is unknown or irrelevant. The APA also advises against using gendered pronouns like "he" or "she" when referring to people in general, and instead recommends using gender-neutral language like "people" or "individuals."

To avoid improper use of pronouns, university students can take several steps. First, they should make sure that pronouns are clearly referring to the intended antecedent, and avoid using pronouns that could be interpreted in multiple ways. They can also use gender-neutral language where appropriate, and avoid using gendered pronouns when referring to people in general. Secondly, university students should be aware of the different types of pronouns and their proper use. This includes personal pronouns (e.g., "he," "she," "they"), possessive pronouns (e.g., "mine," "yours," "theirs"), and reflexive pronouns (e.g., "myself," "yourself," "themselves"). Understanding the correct use of these pronouns can help students avoid common errors and improve the clarity of their writing.

Overall, proper use of pronouns is essential for university students to achieve success in academic writing. By paying close attention to the clarity and consistency of pronouns, using a gender-neutral language where appropriate, and understanding the proper use of different types of pronouns, students can improve the coherence and impact of their writing and achieve their academic goals.

Lack of Cohesion Among Sentences

Lack of cohesion among sentences can be a significant challenge for university students when it comes to academic writing. Cohesion refers to the way that sentences and paragraphs are linked together to create a coherent and logical flow of ideas. Without proper cohesion, writing can be disjointed and confusing, which can negatively impact grades and the overall effectiveness of the writing. Lack of cohesion among sentences, on the other hand, emerged as another writing challenge among the participants of the study.

Previous literature has emphasized the importance of cohesion in academic writing. In their book, "The Craft of Research," Booth, Colomb, and Williams (2003) note that "good writing moves smoothly from one sentence or paragraph to the next." They stress the importance of using transition words and phrases, as well as repetition and parallelism, to create a cohesive and coherent flow of ideas. In addition, in the Modern Language Association (MLA) Handbook, Kushner (2003). emphasizes the importance of creating logical connections between sentences and paragraphs. They advise writers to use transitional words and phrases, such as "however," "in addition," and "on the other hand," to connect ideas and signal shifts in the argument.

Ahmad, Mahmood, and Siddique (2019) also highlighted in their study that scholars have traditionally organized texts based on their syntactic structure, which involves examining the grammar and arrangement of words and phrases within a sentence. While this approach is useful for understanding the mechanics of a sentence, it does not fully capture the meaning and nuances of the text. Therefore, it is important for scholars to also consider organizing texts on a semantic level. This involves analyzing the meaning and context of the words and phrases used, as well as the relationships between them, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the text as a whole. By analyzing texts on both a syntactic and semantic level, scholars can uncover deeper layers of

meaning and better understand the author's intent. This can lead to more nuanced interpretations and a richer understanding of the text.

To improve cohesion in their writing, university students can take several steps. First, they should make sure that each sentence is clearly related to the previous sentence and the overall argument of the paper. They can use transitional words and phrases to signal shifts in the argument and create logical connections between ideas.

Secondly, students can use repetition and parallelism to create cohesion in their writing. By repeating key words or phrases, or using parallel sentence structures, students can create a sense of unity and coherence in their writing.

Finally, students can seek feedback from their professors or writing tutors to identify areas where their writing lacks cohesion. By receiving feedback and guidance, students can improve their writing skills and create more effective and cohesive academic writing.

Overall, creating cohesion among sentences is essential for university students to achieve success in academic writing. By using transition words and phrases, repetition, and parallelism, and seeking feedback and guidance, students can improve the coherence and effectiveness of their writing and achieve their academic goals.

CONCLUSIONS

In view of the data presented, the study indicates that postgraduate students face many difficulties and stresses in their academic writing, which primarily include a lack of awareness of plague words and phrases usage, grammatical mistakes, improper usage of pronouns, and lack of cohesion among sentences. Nevertheless, professors do their best to lend a hand by critiquing students' writing in an effort to help them improve in the classroom. Nonetheless, the university must give support to the faculty members to ensure their success.

In conclusion, while English academic writing skills are essential for academic success and research activities in Pakistan, many students struggle with this skill. However, educational institutions and policymakers have recognized this challenge and are taking steps to address it by improving English language instruction and providing resources to support academic writing skills. It is hoped that these efforts will enable Pakistani students to become more proficient in English academic writing, and in turn, contribute to the academic community both locally and globally.

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