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**An Investigation of Undergraduate English
Major Students' Difficulties in Academic
Writing**

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Abstract

Academic Writing is a core subject that undergraduate students take during their four years of study. However, many students find the subject challenging. Several studies have been conducted to explore the difficulties students face, yet in Afghanistan, little to no research is available. Hence, this project is a small attempt to address this gap. This research aims to look into the difficulties of undergraduate English major students face in Academic Writing. The writing difficulties were investigated in terms of content, structure, and language. A descriptive quantitative method was employed for this study, and a questionnaire was given to 121 undergraduate degree students from the English Department at Kabul University. The research data were analyzed using SPSS. The research findings revealed that the students faced several challenges in Academic Writing in terms of language, structure, and content. Finally, some recommendations to overcome the difficulties and suggestions for future research are provided.

Keywords: Academic Writing; Difficulties; Undergraduate study; EFL; Afghan Students

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Introduction

In Afghan universities, English is regarded as a core subject, taught at the undergraduate level, to enable the students from the undergraduate degree to attain competency in English in their study majors (Noori, 2018). The acquisition of both receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing) are deemed crucial. However, to the degree, productive skills are concerned. Arguably, writing is an essential skill to acquire (Ariyanti, 2016). In the meantime, English students in Afghanistan, besides acquiring general English language proficiency, are also required to communicate in English academically. Academic Writing is one of the critical courses that the students take for four years. The overall goal of the course is for the students to acquire the necessary skills to write and observe the different kinds of writings and genres. However, many students, even after taking the course for four years, still find the subject a challenging task. For that reason, the overall goal of the current research is to explore the fundamental difficulties English students face in Academic Writing.

As mentioned, most of the students still find this subject difficult. They struggle to

produce high quality and academically verified compositions. Therefore, it is necessary to address and identify where the problems lie. For that reason, this research aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What content difficulties do Afghan's English students face in Academic Writing?
2. What structure problems do they experience?
3. What language difficulties do they face?

Along with the research questions, the current study holds several purposes. First, this research is a small attempt to contribute to the research gap in Afghanistan, where there is less previous evidence exploring the topic. Second, the study is a slight attempt to provide to the body of related literature and offers an overall observation of the difficulties students face when writing academic texts. Besides, understanding the problems will help educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers develop essential strategies to make sure the students can deal with the writing challenges. As a result, students can improve their overall academic performance.

Literature Review

Academic Writing is defined by many scholars. For instance, it is described as a “transformation of knowledge that involves convincing readers of the value, significance, and credibility of one’s work” (Tardy, 2005, p. 325). It obliges the learners to possess the capacity to incorporate various necessary skills, which may involve gathering, revising, synopsising, and rewording the information (Fukao & Fujii, 2001). Likewise, Abdulkareem (2013) describes Academic Writing as “the construction and development of techniques taught in universities such as organizing and generating students’ ideas and critical thinking and developing vocabulary and grammatical syntax” (p.1553). Academic Writing is also described as a form of assessment that requires learners to display understanding and competence of specific skills such as making inferences, analysis, and production (Irvin, 2010).

Academic Writing has a crucial position in the acquisition of a second or foreign language. In this respect, Sanu (2016) asserted that at the university level, to acquire the competency to communicate effectively, students have to master the writing skills, for

they will be required to write in a variety of genres. They have to adapt to the methods of knowing, understanding, interpreting, and organizing knowledge in their writing in different ways such as assignments, essays, summaries, imperative reviews, and research papers (Mutimani, 2016).

Besides, its crucial position in a second or foreign language, Academic Writing is performed for several reasons and has a variety of forms and characteristics, and students are expected to deal with the various types and unique styles of writings. According to Lee (2005), writing could be looked into from dualistic fundamental theoretic perspectives: cognitive and sociocultural perspectives. “The cognitive perspective is goal-oriented and emphasizes the process of writing and revising, whereas the sociocultural perspective is context-oriented and emphasizes the product of writing for a particular audience” (p.3).

Factors Making Academic Writing Challenging

Even though academic writing skill is crucial for undergraduate students, it is perhaps also reported to be a difficult skill to develop too. According to Al Fadda (2012), at an advanced level, academic Writing, even for most native English speakers, is a challenge.

Students may encounter difficulties in terms of grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and at a more advanced level in developing coherent arguments while writing reports and essays. Ahmed (2010) argued that generating a cohesive and efficient composition is typically a demanding task, and the fact that the linguistic principles of the English language are quite distinctive makes it even more challenging.

Similarly, Musa (2010) asserted that attaining writing skills is indeed a challenging task. It consists of some constituents such as a good grip on spellings and punctuation, a thorough command of grammar, the application of suitable vocabulary, proper writing style to fulfill the expectations of the desired readers. What makes Academic Writing even more challenging, according to Street (2004), is the fact that it is not just about following a series of principles or conventions. Instead, "it is a cultural and social practice." It includes the use of a variety of cognitive skills to deliberate control, authority, and uniqueness inside universities. A similar view is stated by Barkaoui (2007), arguing that linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural competencies make Academic Writing challenging for the students.

Results of Previous Studies

The results of several empirical studies reveal that a few factors contribute to the fact that undergraduate students at the universities find learning academic writing skills a challenging task (Mwangi, 2017; Alfaki, 2015; Rahmatunisa, 2015; Xiao & Chen, 2015; Albalawi, 2013; Abdulkareem, 2013; Lamptey and Atta 2013; Al-Khasawneh, 2010; Barkaoui, 2007).

The difficulties students encounter in Academic Writing discovered in previously conducted studies can be grouped under three fundamental categories, as described by Xiao and Chen (2015): content, structure, and language.

1. In terms of content, the students may find it challenging to differentiate various types of genres, formulate the content of their writing, search for relevant sources, provide clear introductions, supporting details, conclusion, and a clear focus on one topic.
2. In terms of structure or form, students might find it challenging to provide proper in-text citations, have problems in capitalization, punctuation, paraphrasing and

summarizing, and formatting references.

3. In terms of language, students' inabilities to construct grammatically correct sentences, the use of appropriate tenses, discourse markers, part of speech, and proper vocabulary choices.

Mwangi's (2017) study revealed that students observed complications relating to terminology usage, their spelling, and the development of arguments in their Academic Writing papers. Similarly, in their research, Albalawi (2013) and Alfaki (2015) concluded that learners mainly revealed problems with grammar, sentence structure, and word choice. Mousaviand Kashefian (2011) discovered that the key reason why Iranian students were not good in English Academic Writing was because of their inadequate level in writing. They encountered difficulties in both content and form. Al-Khasawneh's (2010) study revealed that the main factors that influence students writing were lack of sufficient vocabulary and hiccups in grammar and punctuation.

Alfaki (2015) concluded a lack of motivation as one of the critical factors why EFL/ESL students struggle with writing.

Motivation, according to Barkaoui (2007), consists of learners' attitudes regarding the nature and significance of writing, the dissimilarities concerning learner's first language and second language, "their attitude to the L2, and about their writing competence, which in turn influence learners' engagement, effort, and learning in the L2 writing classroom" (p.42). Similarly, Rahmatunisa (2015) found that ELF students mainly faced three challenges in writing essays, linguistics, cognitive, and psychological problems. Her study also disclosed that the learners struggled concerning culture and religious aspects that influenced students and prohibited them from writing about a topic that was too sensitive in their family.

Lampzey and Atta (2013) discovered that students had difficulties in doing citations of referencing information in their assignments. Their study further revealed that this problem was because learners did not have the necessary awareness about Academic Writing, rewording the data, and organizing in-text citation and bibliographical lists. Similarly, Abdulkareem (2013) investigated the potential components which led to poor academic writing skills. The results of the study concluded that "paraphrasing, referencing, and using citations" were

reported to be problematic. Finally, Xiao and Chen (2015) discovered that a significant challenge in Academic Writing lies in the lack of depth and profundity in content. The students were incapable of producing new ideas and expressing their thoughts in writing. To summarize, Academic Writing is a crucial subject that students, especially at the university level, have to master, but it is also reported to be a difficult skill to acquire. The results of previous studies revealed that students faced several challenges in terms of content, structure, and language when asked to complete academic writing tasks. These difficulties were mainly because of linguistic deficiency, lack of motivation, attitude towards Academic Writing, and writing technicalities.

Methodology

This research used quantitative descriptive survey design. The questionnaire to 121 respondents was distributed. The data were analyzed using SPSS v.23 and evaluated concerning mean scores and standard deviation. The highest mean score that could be obtained was 5, indicating “a major challenge,” and the lowest mean score that

could be achieved was 1 showing “no challenge at all.”

Participants

The study was conducted at the English Department of Kabul University, Kabul, Afghanistan. This department is specially selected to be part of the study because the researcher is currently teaching in this institution. Furthermore, this department is also chosen for its accessibility and convenience. The participants for this study were 121 undergraduate junior and senior year English students.

Instrument

The questionnaire was adapted from Wang and Yu's (2008) study, and the survey questionnaire consisted of Likert Scales statements related to the difficulties encountered in Academic Writing. Few adjustments were made to meet the goals and context of the research—the questionnaire comprised of three sections. Section one informed the students of the purpose of the study; section two asked the students for their demographics, and section three focused on finding out the difficulties students facing in Academic Writing concerning content,

structure, and language with a total of 35 statements.

Results

Demographics

Table 1 illustrates the demographics of the respondents.

Table 1: Respondents' Demographic Information

	Characteristic	Frequency	Percent
Age	17-21	69	51.2
	22-23	52	43.0
Gender	Male	56	46.3
	Female	65	53.7
Year of Study	Junior	43	17.4
	Senior	78	81.0

Also, the questionnaire examined respondents' perceptions of the importance of Academic Writing. The results are shown in Table 2 below reveal that the respondents consider Academic Writing a crucial subject.

The majority of the students 82 (67.8%) think of Academic Writing as an essential subject; whereas, another 35 (28.9%) believe it to be necessary. Only 4 (3.3%) describes it as somewhat necessary.

Table 2: Students' perceptions of the importance of Academic Writing

		Frequency	Percent
<i>Importance of Academic Writing</i>	Extremely Important	82	67.8
	Important	35	28.9
	Somewhat Important	4	3.3
	Important		

The third section of the questionnaire investigated the challenges respondents encounter in Academic Writing in terms of content, structure, and language.

Challenges in terms of content

Table 3 illustrates the top five challenges in terms of content, as reported by the respondents.

Table 3: Challenges in Terms of Content: 5 High challenges

	Mean	Std. Deviation
<i>I find it difficult to:</i>		
1. Distinguish types of genre in Academic Writing	4.23	1.13
2. Analyze the requirement of written task	4.19	1.16
3. Provide sufficient supporting points in my writing	4.08	1.44
4. Provide sufficient main points in my writing	4.03	1.14
5. Complete the whole body of my writing effectively	4.01	1.15

In the meantime, Table 4 indicates the five low-level challenges in terms of content.

Table 4: Challenges in Terms of Content: 5 Low challenges

I find it difficult to:		
1. Identify essential points from other sources to be used in my writing	2.70	1.17
2. Clarify my thoughts or opinions in my writing	2.70	1.29
3. My paragraphs have an unclear focus on the topic selected in my writing	2.63	1.18
4. Provide clear conclusion my writing	2.57	1.23
5. Search for relevant sources related to assigned written tasks	2.56	1.23

Challenges in terms of structure

For difficulties in terms of Structure, Table 5 describes the top five high-level challenges:

Table 5: Challenges in Terms of Structure: Top 5 items with the highest mean score

	Mean	Std. Deviation
<i>I find it difficult to:</i>		
1. Provide proper in-text citation in my writing (APA style)	4.58	1.33
2. Organize the content of my writing accordingly	4.37	1.47
3. Display organization in my writing	4.07	1.26
4. Plan the structure of my writing	4.01	1.37
5. Avoid plagiarism in my writing	3.96	1.16

Whereas, Table 6 illustrates the top five low-level challenges:

Table 6: Challenges in Terms of Structure: Top 5 items with the lowest mean score

I find it difficult to:

1. Provide a clear thesis statement in my writing	2.72	1.58
2. Use appropriate punctuation in my writing	2.67	1.25
3. Use appropriate capitalization in my writing	2.34	1.35
4. Compile a correct reference list based in the APA style at the end of my writing	2.22	1.18
5. Paraphrase and summarize relevant sources in my writing	2.13	1.28

Challenges in terms of language

The top three highest-level challenges in terms of language reported by respondents are detailed in Table 7:

Table 7: Challenges in Terms of Language: Top 3 items with the highest mean score

	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. I find it difficult to use appropriate discourse markers in my writing to connect the sentences	4.58	1.32
2. I have to leave out my ideas because I am unable to find the accurate vocabulary to express my writing	4.05	1.20
3. I use the same vocabulary repeatedly in my writing	4.01	1.15

While Table 8 explains the top three low-level challenges:

Table 8: Challenges in Terms of Language: Top 3 items with the lowest mean score

<i>I find it difficult to:</i>		
1. To construct grammatically correct sentences in my writing	2.80	1.23
2. To use the proper part of speech in my writing	2.56	1.23
3. I use Google to translate my writing to English	2.42	1.34

The overall mean scores calculated for challenges in terms of Content, Structure, and Language are displayed in Table 9:

Table 9: Overall mean scores for challenges in terms of Content, Structure, & Language

1. Overall Mean Score: Challenges in terms of Language	4.08	1.23
2. Overall Mean Score: Challenges in terms of Structure	3.99	1.17
3. Overall Mean Score: Challenges in terms of Content	3.87	1.12

The results in Table 9 reveal that respondents find Academic Writing challenging. The highest mean score is obtained by Challenges in terms of Language $M= 4.08$ ($SD=1.23$). Challenges follow this are in terms of structure $M=3.99$ ($SD=1.17$) and Challenges in terms of Content $M= 3.87$ ($SD=1.12$), respectively.

Discussion and Recommendation

Academic Writing is a complicated process, and many undergraduate students

find it challenging to compose an organized and coherent academic text. Bearing this in mind, the objective of this project is to investigate the challenges in writing academic texts as identifying these challenges will help instructors use appropriate strategies to help students overcome them.

The outcomes of the current research revealed that undergrads perceived Academic Writing as a crucial subject. Still, they also faced several challenges firstly in terms of language, then in terms of structure, and lastly, in terms of content. These findings are

in line with the results reported by Wang and Yu (2008). In their study, Wang and Yu said that in Academic Writing, 'language use' was the most challenging feature, followed by 'content,' and then 'structure.' Yet, these findings were not consistent with the results reported by Xiao and Chen (2015). They discovered that learners found the challenges in terms of content more serious than structure and language.

The current research discovered that firstly, in terms of language, the three highly reported challenges were learners' lack of ability to use fitting discourse markers, appropriate vocabulary to express their ideas, and the use of the same vocabulary repeatedly in their writing. Similarly, Mwangi (2017) discovered that learners had difficulties using appropriate terminologies, their spelling, and the development of arguments in their academic papers. One key reason for the problem could be that the respondents do not have sufficient opportunities to use English outside the classroom, and even at the school, they often tend to use their first language. Also, they barely had writing practice other than the course assignments in which the instructors often comment on the mechanics rather than the writing as a whole (Noori, 2018).

Second, in terms of structure, the majority of the respondents conveyed that they faced problems in terms of providing proper in-text citations, organizing the content, planning to structure, and adequately organizing ideas. Likewise, in terms of citation and referencing, Abdulkareem (2013) found that paraphrasing, referencing, and using quotes were the critical challenges learners encountered in Academic Writing. This challenge may have come from a lack of awareness, also because referencing and citing requires paying attention to a high number of details (Wallace, Schirato, & Bright, 1999). Even though the respondents of this study have briefly studied how to cite and reference various sources of information in their Introduction to Research Course, the fact that they have not had many opportunities to use these aspects practically could potentially be the source of these difficulties. Besides, in terms of organization and coherence, Ahmad (2010) asserted that delivering a coherent text is quite demanding because the stylistic and linguistic standards of English like structure, organization, and grammar differ from other languages. It amplifies the challenge.

Third, in terms of content, the highly reported challenges were students' inability to distinguish types of genres, analyzing the

requirement of a written task, and providing sufficient main supporting and minor supporting points effectively. One reason for this could be that the students are not presented with writing samples, illustrating different writing genres, such as descriptive, analytical, persuasive, and critical (Casanave & Hubbard, 1992). Another potential reason associated with this challenge can be students' lack of reading and writing practice.

To overcome the writing challenges, students need to receive regular feedback from their lecturers on both the process and product of the writing. Lecturers often do not provide students with feedback because they are teaching large mixed-ability classes, and because they teach too many classes (Miri & Joia, 2018). Feedback is a crucial feature that could help students improve Academic Writing (Myles, 2002). Lecturers also should help learners devise effective strategies that can help learners in self-correction and instruction. Besides commenting on areas of improvement, the feedback should also aim to motivate students (Mutimani, 2016). The encouraging comments from the lecturers can help learners develop a more positive attitude toward Academic Writing, and learners with a positive attitude are more likely to flourish in

Academic Writing than those with an adverse reaction (Myles, 2002).

Teachers also should encourage learners to take responsibility for their learning and read widely to enrich their knowledge. Learners need to carry out practical tasks on their own such as keeping journals, diaries, writing essays on a variety of topics, maintaining blogs, or web pages. Also, the integrating of technology into the classes and providing students with a variety of online and print resources can enhance learners' motivation and enrich their learning experience as the integration of technology in the classroom encourages learners to strive, learn more and be actively involved at school (Afrin, 2016; Noori, 2018).

Conclusion and Suggestion

The current study explored the challenges Afghan undergraduate EFL learners face in Academic Writing. The study used a quantitative research method in which a questionnaire was given to undergraduate learners at the English Department of Kabul University. The results of the research revealed that English students in Afghanistan still encounter several challenges in Academic Writing in terms of language, structure, and

content of the writing. However, the vast majority of the students considered Academic Writing extremely important.

In the meantime, as this research only examined a limited number of participants and at one university, it is difficult to generalize the result of the study to other contexts. Therefore, further research is needed in which a more significant number of participants should take part in, and a variety of research instruments should be employed.

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