

## Difficulties in Academic Writing

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of the study was to determine what difficulties UM postgraduate students encounter when learning to write academic writing and to differentiate between students' learning needs and objectives. The sample consisted of 15 postgraduate students enrolled in UM university during academic year 2016-2017. In order to explore these issues, this study was conducted descriptively, and a questionnaire distributed among Postgraduate students at the English department in state university of Malang. This will be followed by responding to the following questions: 1. What are difficulties faced ESL postgraduate students (s3) in UM in academic writing? 2. What are teaching approaches to academic writing either facilitate or impede success? Analysis of the data showed that English as second language (ESL) students face many difficulties in their academic writing, such as difficulty to create an understandable and coherent paragraph, making sentence fragment mistakes, and doing grammatical errors.*

**Keywords:** *Academic writing, Difficulty, ESL, Postgraduate*

### Introduction

Academic writing in English at advanced level is a challenge even for most native speakers. However, it is particularly difficult for English as a second language(ESL) graduate students, who come from non-Anglicized linguistic and cultural backgrounds. So students at advanced level usually encounter difficulties and stresses in their academic writing, such as difficulties to create an understandable and coherent paragraph, identifying the skills needed for successful writing, and avoiding plague words and phrases (Leki and Carson, 1994). However, the problems they face could be as a result of the lack of knowledge or proficiency in English language such as they do not have had much experience in academic writing. The ESL learner's ability to write in academic writing maybe influenced by factors such as writing style, motivation, anxiety over expression, writer's block, and other emotional factors.

Academic writing can be defined as "a mental and cognitive activity since it is a product of the mind" (Al Fadda, 2012, p. 124). Abu-Ghararh and Hamzah(1998,p.87) describes academic writing as " the logical organization and arrangement of the written sentences within a paragraph and paragraphs within the units of the discourse and the expression of the ideas". Al Fadda (2012) indicates that one of the basics of academic writing is the ability of the learners to access the relevant references and evaluate them in order to put the different ideas and options together so that they can develop their own voice. As noted by Al-Khasawned and Mahen (2010), other fundamental writing conventions include making an outline, summarizing and paraphrasing without which students might struggle when writing their task. Other basic elements are forming,

developing, and organizing ideas (Amin & Alamin, 2012). Finally, Al Fadda (2012) points out that learners have to be familiar with punctuation marks such as the period, comma, semi colon, colon, dash, hyphen, and capitalization. In order to explore these issues, this study was conducted descriptively, and a questionnaire distributed among Postgraduate students at the English department in State University of Malang. This will be followed by responding to the following questions: 1. What are difficulties faced ESL postgraduate students (s3) in UM in academic writing? 2. What are teaching approaches to academic writing either facilitate or impede success?

### **Literature Review**

This study sheds light on previous studies and review relevant literature according to the following categories:

- 1. Definition of academic writing.**
- 2. Basics of academic writing.**
- 3. Characteristics of good academic writing.**
- 4. Challenges of teaching academic writing to postgraduate students.**

#### ***1. Definition of Academic writing:***

As it has been pointed out by (Burke, 2010, p. 40-41), "writing can be understood only from the perspective of a society rather than a single individual".

#### ***2. Basics of Academic writing:***

Postgraduate students must be able to establish some basics or rules such as evaluate, and synthesize the words, ideas, and opinions of others in order to develop their own academic voice (Bristol Business School, 2006, p. 3). Moreover, the postgraduate students must follow certain rules in their writing, including punctuation guidelines.

#### ***3. Characteristics of Good Academic Writing:***

According to Yugianingrum there are four characteristics of good academic writing:

1. Writing should play a significant role in the related community.
2. The topic should be interesting for the writer, who believes that there is more to discover about it.
3. The writer must care about the aesthetic quality of the text he/she writes.

education, writing tasks require students to draw on outside sources and adopt the styles and genres of academic discourse (Tardy, 2010, p.12). Also, lack of postgraduate students' confidence in their writing ability made it harder to make revision decisions and explain these decisions to the feedback providers. (Can, 2009, p. 12). Second, lectures always complain about the lack of knowledge and certain skills necessary for academic writing among non-native speakers of English. Some of these skills involve outlining, paraphrasing, and summarizing (Al-Shabanah and Maher, 2005, p. 2). Third, an expert position always requires from the students in academic writing, even when they do not consider themselves experts on their topics (Tardy, 2010, p. 13). Arkoudis& Tran, (2010, 175) pointed out that lectures struggled in their role of assisting students with academic writing. Lectures', then, play an important role in helping students develop their awareness of self-mentioning. With this understanding, the students will be better able to gain control over their writing and meet the considerable challenges of academic writing in second language (Hyland, 2002, p. 357).

**Methodology**

*Descriptive Study*

*Research approach and design*

This research adopted the analytic descriptive approach to facilitate the gathering of information and data to assist in achieving study goals.

*Participants*

The subjects were postgraduate students at the English department in state University of Malang. In order to get data for the study, 15 postgraduate students of English department in State University of Malang were selected to answer the questionnaire.

Table :1  
Participants

<b>Students</b>			
<b>Gender and age</b>		<i>f</i>	%
<b>Male age:</b>	(26-30)	1	6,66
	:(36-40)	5	33,33
<b>Female:</b>	(26-30)	1	6,66
	:(31-35)	1	6,66
	:(36-40)	7	46,66
<b>Total</b>	15		100

*Instruments*

In order to collect data a questionnaire was designed and distributed among (15) postgraduate students of English department at state University of Malang. The questionnaire composed of

three parts. The first part: includes students' bio data, the second part: learners' academic writing difficulties, and the third part: approaches of teaching academic writing. Most of the questions

4.The community should help writers in accessing relevant resources and finding support and guidance.(Yugianingrum, 2010, pp. 40-41)

**4. Challenges of Teaching Academic Writing to Postgraduate Students:**

First, lectures should identify and emphasize the process of academic writing for students. Thus, lectures need to establish and encourage students' attitudes towards the basic elements of academic writing such as definition, strategies, and difficulties. (Montgomery & Baker, 2007). On the other hand, in higher are closed questions.

**Analysis of data**

Once the data had been collected, the appropriate statistical tests were performed to analyze the data test hypotheses, and answer the research questions. All data that captured by the questionnaire were coded. Descriptive statistics included frequency and percentage used to assess the basic characters of the study population

**Result**

Table :2

Frequency and percentage for students' responses on the questionnaire in academic writing difficulties

Academic writing difficulties		No		No idea		Yes	
		f	%	f	%	f	%
1	Will the grammatical features be one of the problems you face in your English writing?	7	46,66	=	=	8	53,33
2	Do you often make sentence fragment mistakes in your writing?	4	26,66	3	20	8	53,33
3	Do you often make subject-verb disagreement mistakes in your writing?	5	33,33	6	40	4	26,66
4	Do you experience difficulty in using pronouns and pronoun-antecedent agreement?	10	66,66	3	20	2	13,33
5	Do you experience difficulty combining sentences in your writing?	7	46,66	1	6,66	7	46,66
6	Is it difficult to create an understandable and coherent paragraph?	5	33,33	1	6,66	9	60
7	Do you often notice the stylistic differences between spoken and written English in English texts?	=	=	3	20	12	80

**Testing questions**

**Research question one**

From the ESL students' perspective, what are the difficulties faced ESL postgraduate students (S3) in UM in academic writing?

As shown in the results in table 2, the percentage indicates that students face many difficulties in academic writing, such as 1. Creating an understandable and coherent paragraph 60%. 2. Making sentence fragment mistakes and doing grammatical mistakes 53.33%. 3. Experience difficulty when combining sentences in their writing 46.66%. 4. Making mistakes in subject-verb disagreement 26.66%. 5. Having difficulty in using pronouns and pronoun-antecedent agreement 13.33%.

The findings above explain why most Indonesian students, who tend to speak fluently, still have poor writing skills.

The second research question, "from the students' perspective, what are teaching approaches to academic writing either facilitate or impede success?"

Certain teaching approaches can facilitate or impede success in academic writing.

Table :3  
teaching approaches to academic writing

Approaches		No		No idea		Yes	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
1	Will you spend time reviewing what you write?	2	13,33	1	6,66	12	80
2	Does most of your reviewing focus on the sentence and paragraph level?	3	20	1	6,66	11	73,33
3	Do you always focus your reviewing on the grammar points of your writing?	6	40	3	20	6	40
4	Do you know which type of plague words and phrases you should avoid?	1	6,66	6	40	8	53,33
5	Do you include each of the three steps (planning, writing, and revision) in your writing process?	=	=	2	13,33	13	86,66
6	Do you write an outline before writing a draft?	1	6,66	1	6,66	13	86,66

From the students' perspective, many approaches were seen to facilitate success.

**Research question two**

From the students' perspective, what are teaching approaches to academic writing either facilitate or impede success?

According to the questionnaire results in table (3), we can note that there are many approaches that facilitate students' success in academic writing. The following are a few examples:

1. Writing an outline before writing a draft (86.66%). 2. Including each of the three steps (planning, writing, and revision) in their writing process (86.66%). 3. Reviewing what they have written before submission (80%). 4. Reviewing to focus on sentence and paragraph level (70.33%). 5. Avoiding plague words and phrases (53.33%). 6. Focusing on reviewing the grammar points in writing (40%). On the other hand, there are many additional approaches, such as differences in requirements or style, that impede students' success in academic writing.

The answers of the first question, what are the difficulties faced ESL postgraduate students (S3) in UM in academic writing? Showed that:

Creating an understandable and coherent paragraph is one of the major difficulties postgraduate students in UM university face 60%. Making sentence fragment mistakes and doing grammatical mistakes (53.33). Experience difficulty when combining sentences in their writing (46.66%). Making mistakes in subject-verb disagreement (26.66%). Having difficulty in using pronouns and pronoun-antecedent agreement (13.33%). The results were consistent with those of many studies, such as Parsons (2010) and Yong (2010), which have discussed the difficulties of academic writing.

On the other hand, there are many approaches that facilitate students' success in academic writing such as: writing an outline before writing a draft, including each of the three steps planning, writing, and revision and avoiding plague words and phrases. All these helped students practice academic writing. Conversely, there were also many approaches, such as different requirements or different styles, which impeded students' in academic writing.

## **Conclusions**

In the view of the data presented, the following conclusions were reached regarding the difficulties of academic writing:

ESL students face many difficulties in their academic writing, including those caused by creating an understandable and coherent paragraph, making sentence fragment mistakes, and doing grammar mistakes.

There are many approaches for teaching academic writing; some of them can facilitate success, such as: outlining before writing a draft, writing, and revision. Avoiding plague words and phrases and reviewing the grammar points. And others can impede success, such as the use of different writing styles.

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## Appendix

Table :1  
Participants

Students			
Gender and age	Male age: (26-30)	<i>f</i>	%
			:(36-40)
Gender and age	Female: (26-30)	5	33,33
		1	6,66
		1	6,66
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