

ACADEMIC WRITING CHALLENGES FACED BY PAKISTANI POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore difficulties that Pakistani postgraduate students encounter while writing in an academic context. The study explores the difficulties which students face, for example, lack of sufficient academic vocabulary, inability to avoid plagiarism, or difficulty in constructing the overall argument. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study found out that these barriers were related to learners themselves, educational context and instructional strategies. Likewise, this paper attempts to give recommendations which might help improve the academic writing skills of the Pakistanis postgraduate students studying in Pakistan and those studying abroad.

Keywords: Academic Writing Challenges, English Academic Writing Proficiency, Instructional Strategies for Academic Writing.

INTRODUCTION

As an academic skill, writing is very essential for postgraduate students, especially those in English speaking academic contexts (Hyland, 2016). Although English is the medium of instruction, Pakistan students struggle to communicate in English, this deficiency hinders their academic achievements. In the past, rote learning was the foundation of the Pakistani educational system which hindered a student's capability to write at a postgraduate level. The current paper intends to investigate these difficulties from the lenses of the students and their supervisors and suggest recommendations on how to deal with these challenges.

2. Context of the Study

2.1 Overview of Pakistan's Education System

The authors depict the educational sector as being highly centralized, with uniformity in curriculum and standards of examinations, and controlled by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of the country. It is mandatory to learn English language

starting with the primary education; however, a large number of students leave schools and universities with an inability to use English proficiently, especially in academic writings (Shamim, 2008). It appears that the approaches still tend to be focused on grammar and translation of exercises without adequately developing creative writing and analytical writing skills. This training gap does not only serve to disadvantage the students within English-medium schools in Pakistan but even English speaking foreign countries (Mahboob, 2017).

2.2 English Language Teaching in Pakistan

The authors observe that English language training in Pakistan uses teaching methodologies that have grown redundant, where too much emphasis is placed on accuracy of the language rather than communication. This is perhaps also the reason for the widespread lack of writing in all three aspects of the secondary and tertiary stages of education, because young people are unable to structure

arguments in an academic way (Hyland, 2016). The put forth curriculum in both private and public universities ignores the essential academic writing techniques that are vital for research work, as the focus is on literature and basic communication skills (Shamim, 2008).

3. Literature Review

3.1 Academic Writing Difficulties

Past studies show that there are a number of key factors that impact the academic writing of students in Pakistan and these include low academic vocabulary threshold, Limited knowledge and understanding of cohesive devices, Difficulties in presenting logical arguments and addressing the issues of plagiarism (Hyland, 2016). Other international studies have also noted similar issues with non-native English writers in other countries like China and India who have problems with academic language and coherence (Li & Casanave, 2014).

3.2 Cultural and Educational Influences

Respect for authority as a cultural feature can affect how a critical voice is shaped, in this case students tend to shy away from contesting ideas or offering their own thoughts to the discussion. Other similar trends have also been observed in countries like Japan and Korea where the students are affected by the hierarchical norms of the culture in their engagement (Kubota, 2018). Moreover, students are not able to actively engage with content and improve their understanding and knowledge because of over-dependence on rote learning and lack of emphasis on independent thinking. Moreover, these aspects of culture are aggravated by absence of trained qualified teachers who can teach the students about the writing process.

4. Theoretical Framework

The sociocognitive theory of language explains the socio-psychological and contextual factors in relation to language learning. Its application is relevant within the context of the obstacles that the Pakistani postgraduate students have to encounter owing to the fact that the students' cognitive development, culture and education are integrated in the student's performance of academic writing. (Vygotsky, 1978; Swales, 1990).

4.1 Socio-Cognitive Theory

Vygotsky's socio cognitivism (1978) states that learning happens in the community as new knowledge is acquired from those who know something more. For example, this means that academic writing in students' cases, employs the use of collaborative learning, peer's feedback, as well as their teachers' help. Besides, the socio-cognitive perspective also addresses the concept of scaffolding, where teachers provide aid that is organized and that will help the students to develop their writing abilities gradually (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976).

4.2 Genre Theory

As Swales (1990) noted, genre theory is another aspect which helps to comprehend the academic writing difficulties of Pakistani postgraduate students. According to genre theory, there are rules and formats that define each form of academic writing. In the view of Swales, students should comprehend the writing forms which include research articles, literature reviews, and argumentative essays for which they are required to write. The Pakistani system of education does not expose students to these genres; hence, they do not manage to write well academically.

4.3 Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

Particularly, it can be stated that the author draws on the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987) as a culturally and historically situated framework per which people learn and behave. CHAT enables the examination of students' academic writing in relation to their social, cultural, and institutional contexts. In Pakistan, the culture of memorizing rather than understanding and the weak culture of critical analysis are two major reasons for students being unable to write academically.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This investigation employed a sequential mixed-methods design, with quantitative and qualitative runs in specific phases (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Luckily, within the students' population, a reasonable sample was found that enabled the researcher to meet the questionnaire half way. A questionnaire with three sections was developed for

use. While quantitative research predominated, qualitative elements were also included through semi-structured interviews. Ten Students and five supervisors who were aiming at the same objectives were effectively able to overlap many issues and illustrate relevant discussion on the challenges and opportunities.

5.2 Population and Sampling

Postgraduate students from public and private universities in Pakistan formed the target population of this study. Out of these, 150 students were conveniently sampled with the aim of obtaining students from different regions, disciplines and types of institutions. Moreover, purposive sampling was used to choose 5 supervisors who had prior experience of supervising postgraduate students to provide instructor's perspectives.

5.3 Data Collection Methods

There are questionnaires and semi-structured interviews which are the two aspects which were necessary for data collection over the research process.

5.3.1 Questionnaires

Questionnaires were administered in order to collect data regarding one hundred and fifty of the respondents of the study. The questionnaire comprised of closed questions and Likert style items intended to measure the academic writing self-reported challenges faced by the students. Such domains included: vocabulary, plagiarism, argumentation, average confidence in academic writing. They were also pre-tested on a small number of students before the large scale administration to test the comprehensibility and validity of the instrument.

5.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured Interviews were conducted with 10 students and 5 supervisors in order to add onto the

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Challenges Faced by Students in Academic Writing

| Challenge | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Limited Vocabulary | 85 | 56.7 |
| Plagiarism Issues | 72 | 48.0 |
| Difficulty in Argumentation | 68 | 45.3 |
| Lack of Cohesion | 60 | 40.0 |

quantitative information gathered. The aim of the interviews was to go deeper into the experiences and perceptions of the participants. The interview questions were broad and targeted students such struggles as what the challenges are, what they have put in place to overcome such struggles, and what supervisors do to assist students. They were also conducted in English or Urdu. The selection of the language was based on the preference of the respondent and all interviews were tape recorded after permission was given.

5.4 Data Analysis

5.4.1 Quantitative Analysis

The questions asked in the questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively with the aid of statistical package for social studies (SPSS). Feedback was collated from respondents and descriptive statistics which include percentage, frequency and mean were used to summarize the responses. Any statistically significant differences between the norms (gender, type of institution, and discipline of study) and the writing challenges were analyzed using statistical methods such as t-tests and ANOVA.

Almost all students face challenges that the study has stated, students require a specific amount of time to develop those problems. The students seem to resolve such problems as a result of the processes they undergo during writing. However, as it has been stated earlier, these problems happen to exist to most of the students globally.

By reaching their graduation phase or higher levels, students have to develop the language skills needed to be proficient in expressing themselves in all forms of writing. In order to write clearly, students comprehend the purpose of writing, which assists them with developing well-structured and logical written work. Otherwise, without a sequential or logical arrangement, what they have written will not make sense since it lacks a clear framework, and others will be unable to follow their ideas.

Table 2: Common Themes Identified from Interviews

| Theme | Number of Participants Mentioning |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Limited Vocabulary | 12 |
| Lack of Training in Citation | 9 |
| Cultural Barriers | 8 |

5.5 Validity and Reliability

So as to preserve the reliability and validity of this study several measures were taken. The questionnaire was put through the experts in the field so as to assure the content validity. A pilot study was done in order to improve the instrument and to make it easier for understanding. For qualitative data, member checking was employed by sharing summaries of the interviews conducted to the respondents for them to certify the accuracy of the received information. Triangulation was accomplished by the use of both quantitative and qualitative data to deepen the understanding of the research problem and its context (Creswell, 2018).

5.6 Ethical Considerations

Before the start of data collection, permission was secured from the relevant university ethical review board. The process also involved obtaining informed

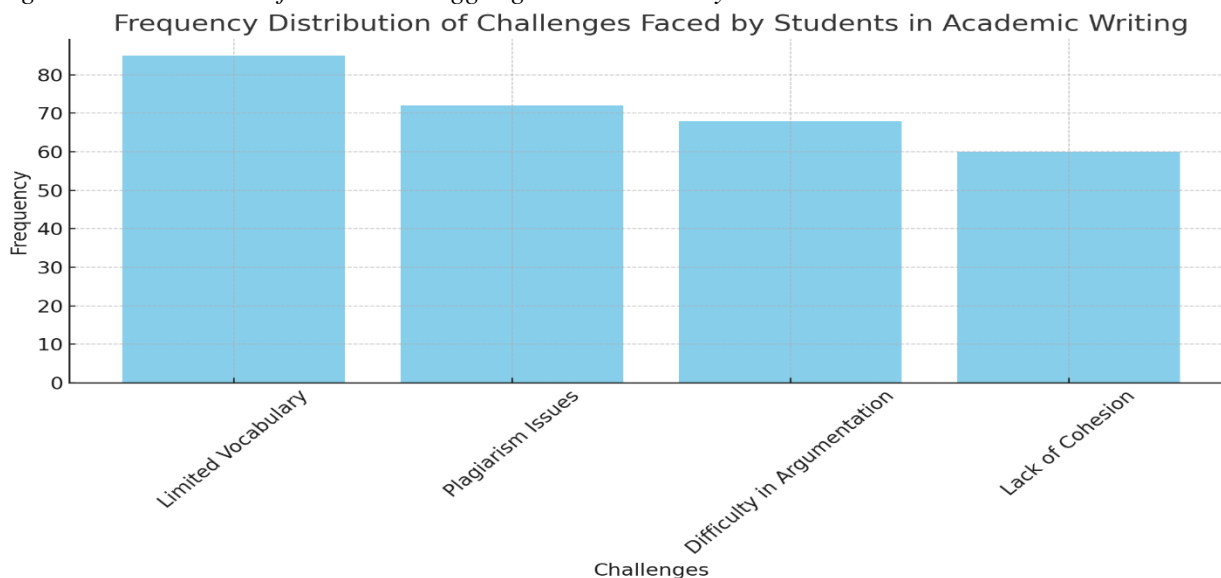
consent of all respondents so that they were fully informed on the objectives of the study, on their ability to withdraw from the study at any moment and on the confidentiality of their answers. Names of the participants were represented with pseudonyms believed to protect their identity and all papers to do with the data were kept in a safe place.

6. Findings

6.1 Limited Academic Vocabulary

One of the problems that emerged was the shortage of academic vocabulary among the students. A number of students at master level especially in Pakistan complained of effective expression owing to the unavailability of higher vocabulary. Such reports have been documented in other global studies where non- English children encounter problems in fluent writing due to lack of adequate specialized vocabulary (Hyland, 2016; Li & Casanave, 2014).

Figure 1: Distribution of Students Struggling with Vocabulary



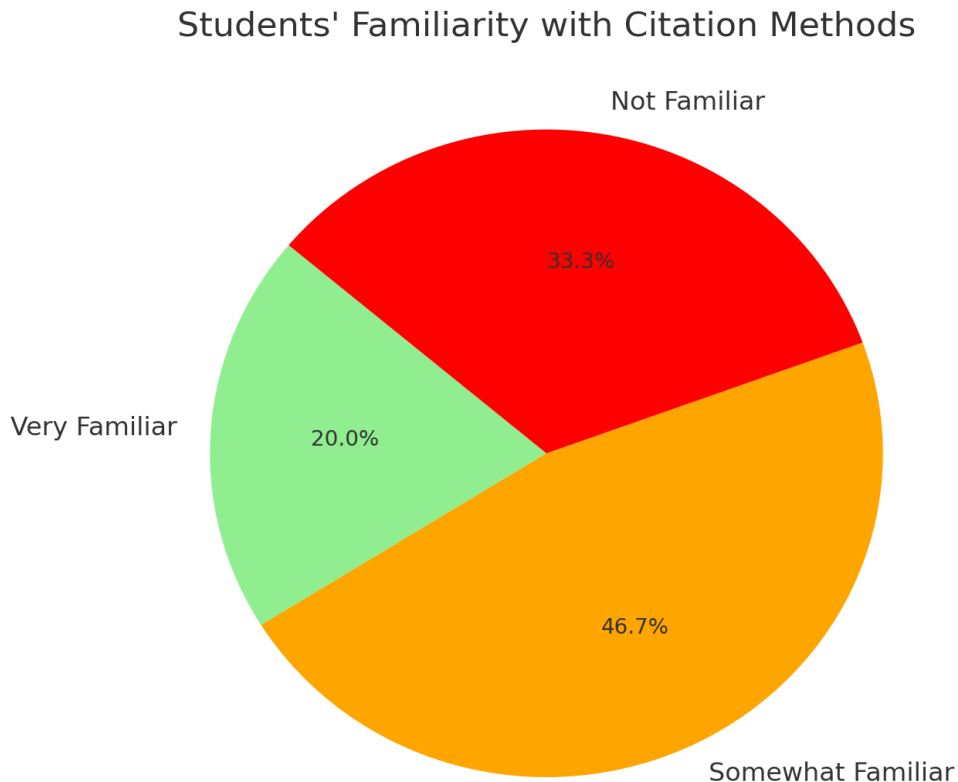
6.2 Plagiarism and Paraphrasing

The research indicated that many of the students were not able to find effective ways to revolve their sentences without copying them, thereby committing

plagiarism. This was mostly because of inadequate teaching of the correct use and citation of academic sources, during undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Further concerns have also been raised

regarding international students in countries such as Malaysia and India indicating that more efforts should be given in training for plagiarism.

Figure 2: Students' Familiarity with Citation Methods



6.3 Structuring Arguments and Cohesion

Yet another problem was the effective approach in writing where students were able to devise arguments. Poor students however excelled at integrating ideas into the text and creating a 'story', but this therefore meant that poorly constructed arguments were the order of the day. Teachers also observed that students received low grades due to lack of critical evaluation, and were more inclined to descriptive narratives that failed to offer the requisite understanding or critique.

7. Discussion

7.1 Factors Contributing to Writing Challenges

The research pinpointed a number of reasons which contributed to the problems of writing among Pakistani students. One of the most severe factors being the absence of reasonable academic background and training from the lower levels of education standard. Rahman (2018) found that, behind much of this was the class emphasis on the rote of learning. Furthermore, these problems were exacerbated by the absence of exposure to resources like academic journals and writing's clinics (Hussain & Ali, 2020). Such trends have been noted in other developing nations like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka where students' educational outcomes are greatly determined by availability of educational facilities and resources.

Table 3: Factors Contributing to Academic Writing Challenges

| Contributing Factor | Frequency Mentioned |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|
| Rote Learning | 10 |
| Lack of Resources | 8 |
| Insufficient Academic Preparation | 7 |

7.2 The Role of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Courses

It was established that students who study abroad education found EAP courses useful. Yet, Ahmadi, Alvi, and Lai's study (2019) found that the content of such courses does quite often fail to specifically address the needs of Pakistani students, many targeted Pakistani students who needed help with academic writing styles, arguments, and critical thinking skills. The same weaknesses have been observed in EAP courses in other scattered countries such as China and Thailand where relevancy of content appears to weaken these classes.

8. Proposed Solutions

8.1 Enhancing Academic Vocabulary

In order to counter the problem of vocabulary deficiency, it is important that universities adopt the policy of implementing wider reading and vocabulary development activities as part of their curriculum. The language of the texts focused on the reading for pleasure that was recommended can assist students in developing the language for effective academic discussions. Similar programs have worked in other contexts too, like in South Korea and Japan, reading programs have increased the academic writing efforts among students (Kubota, 2018).

8.2 Training in Plagiarism Avoidance

Plagiarism, paraphrasing and academic integrity issues need to be compulsory taught to all classes of postgraduate students using workshops. It is these workshops that sensitizes students on how to correctly attribute sources and avoid plagiarism through use of paraphrasing more appropriately. Also, internationally therefore, plagiarism workshops have been reported to enhance students' knowledge about academic integrity, in Australia and in the United States.

8.3 Developing Critical Thinking Skills

It is equally crucial to integrate activities that promote critical analysis and self-directed learning. Instructors should motivate students to analyze views, accommodate different angles, and formulate reasonable conclusions. Group discussions, peer reviews, and reflective writing assignments might help in the development of these abilities. Similar strategies have been successfully used in Western universities in a bid to enhance students' abilities in critical thinking skills.

9. Conclusion

Pakistani postgraduate students experience a number of hindrances in developing skills of writing in English language for academic purposes, largely due to the inherited problems of their previous education and sociocultural subordination that typifies their possible engagement. Dealing with such matters requires organizational modifications from various perspectives – content preparation, staff development, and resources management. Pakistani universities can adequately equip students to deal with the demands of academic writing at the postgraduate level by integrating broader EAP programs, equipping students with relevant vocabulary and developing their critical thought.

10. Implications for Future Research

Further research can focus on the effect of strengthened academic writing programs on how students perform after a specified period or the effect of varied teaching approaches on writing skills of Pakistani learners. Also, comparative analysis of students in Pakistan and those in other countries would add more to understanding how the context of learning shapes one's writing proficiency (Creswell, 2018).

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