



CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN ACADEMIC ESSAY WRITING: A STUDY OF FIRST-YEAR ESL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The development of academic writing skills is crucial for success in higher education. Yet, first-year English as a Second Language (ESL) students often face significant challenges in mastering academic essay writing. This study examines the difficulties these students encounter, focusing on issues such as grammar, coherence, vocabulary, and essay structure. It also explores effective strategies for improving writing, including prewriting activities, peer feedback, and vocabulary development. It offers recommendations for ESL instructors on how to better support students in overcoming these challenges. Using a mixed-methods approach, which included surveys with 60 ESL students and interviews with 10 ESL instructors, the study reveals that grammar and essay structure are the most common obstacles to learning. It highlights the importance of structured writing frameworks and personalised feedback in enhancing writing skills. The findings provide practical insights for both students and instructors, aiming to improve the academic writing skills of ESL students and support their success in higher education.

Keywords: *Academic Writing, Coherence, ESL Students, Essay Structure, Grammar, Higher Education, Peer Feedback, Vocabulary Building, Writing Strategies.*

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1. Introduction

The development of academic writing skills is crucial for success in higher education. This is especially true for English as a Second Language (ESL) students who face numerous challenges in mastering the art of academic writing. First-year ESL students often find academic essay writing overwhelming, not only because of the complexity of the English language itself but also due to their unfamiliarity with the academic conventions expected in English-speaking countries.

This study examines the challenges encountered by first-year ESL students in academic essay writing, with a particular focus on issues such as coherence, grammar, vocabulary, and structure. Additionally, it explores strategies that ESL students can adopt to enhance their writing and how instructors can better support these students to ensure academic success. By examining the students' perspectives and the teaching practices employed by ESL instructors, this paper provides comprehensive insights into improving academic writing skills for first-year ESL students.

2. Research Objectives

The key objectives of this study are:

1. To identify the primary challenges faced by first-year ESL students in academic essay writing, including issues related to grammar, coherence, and essay structure.
2. To assess the effectiveness of various strategies employed by ESL students to improve their writing.
3. To provide actionable recommendations for ESL instructors on teaching strategies that can effectively address these challenges and improve students' academic writing skills.
4. To offer insights into how linguistic, cognitive, and cultural factors influence the academic writing of first-year ESL students.

3. Research Questions

This research aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the key challenges faced by first-year ESL students in academic essay writing?

2. How do linguistic and cognitive factors affect ESL students' writing performance, particularly in terms of coherence, structure, and argumentation?
3. What strategies can ESL students use to improve their writing skills in academic contexts?
4. How can ESL instructors modify their teaching practices better to address the specific writing needs of first-year ESL students?

4. Literature Review

First-year English as a Second Language (ESL) students often face significant challenges in academic writing due to the stark differences between their linguistic and educational backgrounds and the demands of university-level writing. Academic English writing, particularly at the university level, requires not only basic literacy but also the ability to engage with complex academic tasks, such as constructing coherent arguments, analysing texts, and organising ideas effectively. For ESL students, these academic tasks are often compounded by linguistic difficulties, cognitive comprehension issues, and unfamiliarity with the organisational patterns expected in English writing. These challenges are particularly pronounced during the first year of university, when students are still adjusting to the academic environment.

Due to these difficulties, many ESL students struggle with essay writing. They often encounter problems in areas such as grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, and the logical flow of ideas. Furthermore, the process of organising thoughts and ideas in English can be particularly challenging for students whose first language may have different linguistic structures and cultural norms. These differences can make it more difficult for students to adapt to the English-speaking academic environment, leading to feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and a lack of confidence in their writing abilities.

Many of these challenges stem from the fact that ESL students often lack adequate training in academic writing. In their home countries, they may not have had extensive exposure to essay writing or the conventions of academic English. This lack of experience, coupled with cognitive and linguistic challenges, makes it difficult for them to perform well in writing tasks. Moreover, the limited support they receive in ESL classrooms can further exacerbate these difficulties. As a result, first-year ESL students often struggle to keep up with the academic writing demands of their university courses.

Academic writing is a crucial skill in higher education, but for ESL students, it can often be a source of anxiety and frustration. According to Wei (2017), the challenges faced

by ESL students in academic writing stem from both linguistic and cognitive barriers. These students are often expected to quickly adapt to English academic writing conventions, which may be vastly different from those in their native languages. This section reviews the existing literature on the challenges of ESL writing, effective writing strategies, and best practices for teaching academic writing to ESL students.

4.1. Challenges in ESL Academic Writing

Several key challenges faced by ESL students in academic writing have been identified in the literature:

1. **Grammar and Syntax:** Many ESL students struggle with English grammar, particularly in the areas of sentence structure, verb tense, and article usage. Studies by Sidman & Karathanos (2015) indicate that ESL students often struggle to produce grammatically correct complex sentences and effectively utilise academic vocabulary.
2. **Coherence and Cohesion:** ESL students often struggle with ensuring coherence in their writing. They may struggle to organise their ideas logically and connect their paragraphs and sentences effectively. Hu (1995) found that students often fail to maintain a clear line of argumentation, leading to essays that are difficult to follow.
3. **Cultural and Educational Differences:** ESL students often come from educational systems that differ significantly from those in English-speaking countries. These cultural differences can affect their approach to writing and their understanding of academic expectations. Reynolds (1993) explains that ESL students may rely on rhetorical structures from their native languages, which may not align with the expectations of English academic writing.

4.2. Effective Writing Strategies for ESL Students

To overcome these challenges, several strategies have been proposed in the literature. Wei (2017) emphasises the importance of prewriting exercises, including brainstorming, outlining, and mind mapping. These activities help students organise their ideas before writing and provide a more transparent structure for their essays. Additionally, peer feedback is an effective strategy for enhancing writing skills. Peer review enables students to receive constructive feedback from their classmates, which helps them refine their arguments and improve the clarity of their writing (Rollinson, 2005).

Furthermore, explicit instruction in essay structure, grammar, and the use of academic vocabulary is crucial for ESL students. According to Nunan (1999), providing students with clear, step-by-step guidance on how to write academic essays can help them internalise the conventions of academic writing.

5. Methodology

This study employs a **mixed-methods research design**, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to explore the challenges faced by first-year ESL students and the strategies they use to improve their essay writing. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the students' perspectives, as well as insights from ESL instructors.

5.1. Participants

The study involves 60 first-year ESL students enrolled in an academic writing course at two different public sector and one private sector university in Pakistan. These students come from a range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, 10 ESL instructors with experience teaching academic writing to ESL students participated in the study.

5.2. Data Collection

1. **Survey:** A structured questionnaire was administered to 60 students to assess their writing challenges and strategies. The survey included questions about difficulties with grammar, coherence, paragraph structure, and vocabulary, as well as questions on the writing strategies students used, such as prewriting, peer feedback, and outlining.
2. **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 ESL instructors to gather qualitative data on their experiences teaching writing to first-year ESL students. The interviews focused on the challenges they observe in their students' writing, the strategies they use to teach academic writing, and their perceptions of the effectiveness of these strategies.

5.3. Data Analysis

The quantitative data from the surveys were analysed using **descriptive statistics**, which allowed the researcher to identify patterns in the students' reported challenges and strategies. The qualitative data from the interviews were analysed using **thematic**

analysis, where key themes related to student writing difficulties and teaching strategies were identified and coded.

6. Results

The survey conducted with first-year ESL students revealed several critical areas of challenge in academic writing:

- **Grammar Proficiency:** A substantial 70% of respondents reported significant difficulty in mastering grammatical structures, particularly when attempting to construct complex sentence forms and utilise appropriate verb tenses. This challenge was exacerbated by inconsistencies in tense usage, which hampered the fluency and coherence of their written work.
- **Essay Organisation and Coherence:** Approximately 65% of participants indicated that structuring their essays in a logically cohesive manner was a primary difficulty. This encompassed issues with both paragraph organisation and the seamless integration of ideas throughout the essay, leading to a fragmented argument that lacked clarity.
- **Vocabulary Usage:** A notable 60% of the students reported challenges in applying academic vocabulary appropriately, particularly in adhering to discipline-specific lexicons and maintaining the formal tone required in academic writing. This hindered their ability to express ideas with precision and sophistication.

In terms of strategies employed to overcome these challenges, the survey results indicated that **80% of students** found prewriting activities, such as brainstorming and outlining, to be practical tools for organising their thoughts and enhancing essay structure. However, despite the perceived utility of these strategies, only **45% of students** consistently utilised them, highlighting a gap between awareness and application.

6.1. Interview Results

Interviews conducted with instructors revealed several recurring themes that reflect the challenges and pedagogical approaches in teaching ESL writing:

- **The Role of Peer Feedback:** Many instructors emphasised the significant role of peer feedback in the writing process. Peer review was identified as a valuable pedagogical tool, enabling students to critically engage with one another's work

and identify errors or areas for improvement. This process was particularly beneficial for students struggling with coherence and essay structure, as it provided an opportunity for collaborative revision and increased clarity in their writing.

- **Challenges of Large Class Sizes:** Instructors consistently noted that large class sizes presented a significant barrier to providing individualised feedback, which is essential for addressing the specific needs of each student. The impersonal nature of large classes limited opportunities for focused, detailed writing instruction, thus impeding students' ability to make rapid and substantial improvements in their writing skills.
- **Importance of Structured Writing Frameworks:** Instructors underscored the necessity of providing students with clear and structured writing frameworks, such as templates for essay structure and specific guidelines for crafting coherent paragraphs. These frameworks were viewed as critical tools in helping students organise their thoughts and ensure logical flow in their essays, thus enhancing the overall quality and coherence of their writing.

7. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that first-year ESL students face significant challenges in academic writing, particularly in the areas of grammar, coherence, and vocabulary. These challenges can be attributed to both linguistic factors (e.g., differences in grammar between English and students' native languages) and cognitive factors (e.g., difficulty organising ideas logically).

The strategies employed by ESL students, such as prewriting and peer feedback, were found to be effective in improving their writing skills. Prewriting activities helped students organise their thoughts before writing, while peer feedback provided them with valuable insights into their writing from their classmates. However, the inconsistent use of these strategies suggests that more structured instruction is needed to help students develop effective writing habits.

Instructors' perspectives on the challenges of teaching writing to ESL students highlighted the importance of providing clear writing frameworks and individualised feedback. The limitations posed by large class sizes were identified as a barrier to providing personalised instruction. This suggests that smaller class sizes or more targeted feedback mechanisms, such as one-on-one conferences or digital feedback tools, could improve the writing support provided to ESL students.

8. Recommendations

8.1. For ESL Students:

- **Consistent Use of Prewriting Strategies:** Students should be encouraged to regularly use prewriting strategies such as brainstorming, outlining, and creating mind maps to organise their ideas before writing.
- **Engagement in Peer Review:** Students should actively engage in peer review sessions to gain feedback on their writing and learn from their peers' strengths and weaknesses.
- **Focus on Vocabulary Building:** Students should dedicate time to expanding their academic vocabulary by reading scholarly texts and practising the use of new words in their writing.

8.2. For ESL Instructors:

- **Provide Structured Writing Frameworks:** Instructors should provide students with clear writing frameworks, such as templates for writing essays, to help them organise their ideas effectively.
- **Integrate Peer Feedback:** Peer feedback should be incorporated into the writing process as it helps students refine their essays and improves their ability to identify and correct errors.
- **Offer Individualised Feedback:** Instructors should offer personalised feedback, particularly in large classes, to address the specific writing challenges of individual students.

9. Conclusion

First-year ESL students face numerous challenges in academic writing, particularly in the areas of grammar, coherence, and vocabulary. However, by using effective strategies such as prewriting, peer feedback, and vocabulary building, students can significantly improve their writing skills. ESL instructors play a crucial role in supporting these students by providing structured writing frameworks, individualised feedback, and opportunities for collaborative learning.

This research highlights the importance of a comprehensive approach to teaching academic writing, one that addresses the linguistic, cognitive, and cultural challenges faced

by ESL students while equipping them with the essential tools to succeed in higher education.

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