



STRATEGIES FOR FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY ESL STUDENTS TO IMPROVE ESSAY WRITING SKILLS: A CONTEXTUALIZED FRAMEWORK FOR PAKISTANI HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The paper reviews the essay-writing difficulties of first-year English as a Second Language (ESL) students at Minhaj University Lahore and proposes a modified intervention-strategic framework. The study used a mixed-methods design that incorporated qualitative document analysis of institutional records and quantitative and qualitative data gathered through surveys, diagnostic essays, and semi-structured interviews with 85 first-year BSCS students and 05 ELC instructors. Results showed that more than 78 percent of students had difficulty formulating the thesis statement and maintaining paragraph coherence, and that L1 interference and a lack of pre-writing strategies were the main obstacles. Instructor data indicated a reliance on product-based correction rather than process-based teaching. Thematic analysis revealed five major student problems, including rhetorical transfer, cognitive overload, linguistic insufficiency, socio-cultural disagreement, and affective barriers. The study is based on the Schema Theory and the Monitor Model developed by Krashen. It proposes a dual-framework guidebook adaptable to the Pakistani context, with a focus on structured pre-writing, peer feedback, and culturally responsive pedagogy. The study concludes that an intervention based on strategy and systems in the English Language Center is necessary to align student performance with the standards of HEC Pakistan and suggests that the institution adopt the proposed framework and train teachers in it.

Keywords: *ESL Writing, First-Year University Students, Academic Writing Strategies, Pakistani Higher Education Writing Challenges.*

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1.Introduction

English-medium instruction in Pakistani higher education is a major academic challenge for most undergraduates. This is especially acute in writing essays, which is one of the foundations of academic evaluation in all fields. The English Language Center (ELC) at Minhaj University Lahore is responsible for closing this proficiency gap by offering courses such as ENGL-100: Functional English, particularly in programs such as the Bachelor of Science in Computer Science (BSCS). However, there is anecdotal evidence of students continuing difficulties with academic composition, which may impair their overall academic performance.

The paper will address this institutional issue by exploring the specific writing challenges faced by first-year ESL students at Minhaj University Lahore and by formulating a contextualised pedagogical intervention. It builds on the original research by Wei (2017), applying her strategy-based framework to a different socio-linguistic setting, a Pakistani university. The introduction of competent visiting faculty, as demonstrated in recent university announcements, offers a timely opportunity to apply and test evidence-based teaching methods.

Two main questions guide the research:

- Which are the most common essay writing issues among first-year BSCS students taking the course of Functional English at Minhaj University Lahore?
- What can be done to ensure that an adapted, strategy-oriented student and instructor guidebook can be effective in overcoming these challenges within the current university structure?

The paper describes a mixed-methods study on these questions, including the methodology, data collection procedures, analytical results, and an ensuing contextualised framework for writing instruction.

2.Literature Review

2.1. Pakistani ESL Context: A Special Challenge

The problem of ESL writing in Pakistan is entrenched in its diglossic education system. Although English is the official language of higher education and elite discourse, it is not the main language of social interaction among most students (Mansoor, 2005). This creates a break between the formal, academic register necessary in university and students' lived linguistic experiences. Secondary education frequently emphasises memorization and grammatical correctness over communicative proficiency and critical

writing, leaving students unprepared for the requirements of composition at the university level (Shamim, 2011).

2.2. Writing Problems in Documentation

Studies of Pakistani undergraduate authors reveal that there are common problems:

Rhetorical and Organisational Problems: Students often carry narrative and descriptive patterns from Urdu or regional languages, which leads to the perception that the essay is indirect or lacks a clear, linear argument according to Western academic standards (Bhatti and Mukhtar, 2020).

Limited Strategic Competence: A significant number of students are not metacognitively aware of the writing process (planning, drafting, and revising) and use a write-and-submit strategy without using pre-writing and revision strategies (Javed, 2019).

Affective Factors: Anxiety about writing, low self-efficacy, and negative emotions stemming from previous experiences with teaching English pose a serious psychological obstacle to writing development (Ali, 2021).

2.3. Intervention Theoretical Anchors

Schema Theory (Pankin, 2013): This theory is essential to the Pakistani setting. Successful writing instruction should engage students' rich schemata (content knowledge, cultural narratives) and provide them with the linguistic means to express them in an academic context.

Monitor Model by Krashen (1982): The Affective Filter Hypothesis emphasizes the role of a supportive classroom environment in reducing anxiety and facilitating language acquisition. The Monitor Hypothesis explains the importance of separating the creative drafting stage (where fluency is valued) from the editing stage (where rule consciousness is exercised), a distinction often not made in a traditional Pakistani classroom.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The research design used was an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The first quantitative stage identified the frequency and nature of writing difficulties through student questionnaires and diagnostic analysis of essays. The next qualitative step, which included the interviews with students and instructors, examined the root causes of these difficulties and collected information to put

the intervention strategies into perspective. The design was suitable, as it enabled a detailed understanding of what and why the writing challenges occurred.

3.2. Participants and Setting

The research took place at Minhaj University Lahore during the first eight weeks of the Fall 2024 semester. Student Participants: 85 first-year BSCS students enrolled in ENGL-100: Functional English (Morning Programme) course were selected as a purposive sample. This class was selected because it has a clear focus on writing and represents students from various linguistic backgrounds (mostly Urdu, Punjabi, and regional languages).

Instructor Participants: 05 of the instructors at the English Language Center (ELC), both full-time and visiting lecturers (the appointee mentioned in the University Registrar, 2024), were invited to participate. Five teachers volunteered, offering a valuable insight into the perspective of those directly involved in curriculum implementation.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

The data was gathered in three consecutive steps:

Phase 1: Diagnostic Writing Test and Student Survey.

Instrument: 60-minute, in-class, diagnostic essay on a general, yet accessible subject: Discuss the positive and negative effects of social media on student life in Pakistan.

Procedure: Taken in the second week of the semester. Essays were anonymized and coded (S1-S85).

Instrument: A 25-item Likert-scale and open-response survey based on Wei (2017) and Fernsten (2008). It measured students' perceived challenges (e.g., thesis development, vocabulary, grammar, organization), writing process behaviors, anxiety levels, and prior experiences with writing instruction.

Procedure: Given out after the diagnostic essay.

Phase 2: Survey and Document Analysis of the Instructor.

Instrument: ELC instructor survey on their perceptions of student challenges, frequent feedback practices, teaching methods, and perceived resource or training deficiencies.

Process: Sent electronically to the entire 05 ELC instructors.

Document Analysis: The university notification of the visiting faculty appointment (University Registrar, 2025) was examined to understand the institutional parameters for teaching appointments, remuneration, and implicit expectations.

Phase 3: Semi-Structured Interviews.

Instrument: Two sets of interview protocols were created:

Students: 12 students (4 high-performing, 4 average, 4 low-performing, according to diagnostic essay) were chosen and interviewed (30 minutes). Their essay-writing process, particular areas of challenge, responses to feedback, and improvement ideas were discussed.

Instructors: The 5 instructors involved were interviewed in 45-minute sessions. The questions were aimed at their philosophies of teaching, their analysis of the most frequent student mistakes, their difficulties with teaching writing, and their openness to new materials based on strategies.

3.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative Data: Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) in SPSS (Version 28) to identify trends and common challenges.

3.4.1. Qualitative Data

Diagnostic Essays: Evaluated based on a rubric that was modified based on the writing competency guidelines provided by HEC Pakistan and the framework of Wei (2017). The areas of focus were: Thesis Clarity, Organizational Structure, Use of Support/Evidence, Language Use (Grammar/Vocabulary), and Mechanics. A score (1-5) was given to each category in each essay.

Interviews and Open-ended Survey Responses: Transcribed and thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The recurring patterns were identified through an inductive coding process and then combined into the overarching themes (e.g., "L1 Interference," "Fear of Error," "Lack of Process Strategy").

3.5. Ethical Considerations

All participants gave informed consent. Survey responses and student essays were made anonymous. Participants in the interview were given confidentiality. The Department of English at Minhaj University Lahore approved the study protocol.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1. Quantitative Results: Writing Problems Prevalence.

The review of the student survey (n=85) and diagnostic essays indicated a definite picture of difficulty:

Self-reported Problems: More than 82% of students reported finding it difficult or very difficult to develop a clear thesis statement. Equally, 78% had a problem with the arrangement of paragraphs logically, and 74% with the use of the proper academic vocabulary.

Diagnostic Essay Analysis: The rubric scoring validated self-reports. The lowest mean scores were on Thesis Clarity (2.1/5) and Organisational Structure (2.3/5). Some common problems included implied theses rather than stated ones, paragraphs without topic sentences or cohesive ideas, and a non-logical flow of ideas.

Writing Process Data: Only two out of five students said they regularly used a brainstorming or outlining strategy prior to writing. 88 percent said that they usually wrote only one draft before turning it in.

4.2. Qualitative Results: Underlying Causes Thematic Analysis.

Interpretation of interviews and open-ended responses using thematic analysis identified five main themes that explain the quantitative data:

Theme 1: L1 Rhetorical and Cognitive Transfer. Students would always say they thought in Urdu/Punjabi and then translated. In Urdu, as Student S23 remarked, we narrate a story to make a point. In this case [in English class], the teacher desires the point first. I am disoriented on where to begin. This was supported by teachers who saw stories that revolved around the subject, but not in a linear way.

Theme 2: Writing Process Strategic Deficiency. According to interviews, almost everyone lacked a systematic writing process. Students perceived writing as one overwhelming task. S41 told me that he sits down and writes the introduction, hoping the ideas will follow. I do not plan." Teachers affirmed that they did not use much classroom time to teach planning or revision skills directly, but instead corrected final work.

Theme 3: Linguistic Resource Gap and Error Apprehension. Students reported a severe deficiency in grammar and vocabulary, which inhibited expression. I have a simpler word, but I do not know the scholarly word, so my essay is feeble, said S58. This usually resulted in simple sentences to prevent errors. The survey of the instructors revealed that

90 percent of the feedback focused on grammatical mistakes, which supports students' fear of accuracy rather than content.

Theme 4: Socio-Cultural Dissonance in Topics and Expression. Students were not connected to the essay topics that were seen as Western or abstract. They wanted associations with local contexts. According to Instructor I3, they write about India and Pakistan, not about abstract principles, when I assign a topic such as democracy. I would have checked this as off-topic, but now I realise that it is their schema.

Theme 5: The Affective Philtre: Low Self-Efficacy and Anxiety. The data were filled with a high sense of writing anxiety. Students used words such as fear, shame, and inferiority. S12 replied, My intermediate teacher red-penned all the mistakes. I am frozen at the sight of a blank page now. This highly effective philtre had a direct inhibitory effect on risk-taking and fluency.

4.3. Instructor View and Institutional Environment.

The interviews with instructors showed a discrepancy between intent and practice. Although they all appreciated good writing, they were inhibited by large classes, a heavy syllabus, and insufficient practical and culturally relevant teaching resources. The discussion of the faculty appointment notification (University Registrar, 2024) emphasized a transactional approach to providing lectures and checking attendance. However, it did not mention pedagogical training or resource support for visiting faculty, who teach a large fraction of these introductory courses.

5. Discussion: Synthesis and Framework Development.

The results create a consistent portrait: first-year students at Minhaj University Lahore come to ELC with major writing problems stemming from linguistic transition, strategic, and affective barriers. The existing training, which is usually centred on correcting mistakes and testing products, is not enough to overcome these underlying problems.

The suggested intervention should therefore be multi-faceted. A contextualised strategy guidebook is suggested by synthesising the findings with the theoretical frameworks. It directly touches upon the identified themes:

In the case of Theme 1 (Rhetorical Transfer), the guidebook contains clear exercises on comparing Urdu and English paragraphs, with examples of local editorials as models of argumentation.

Theme 2 (Strategic Deficiency): It splits the writing process into small, teachable units (Prewriting, Drafting, Revising, Editing) and includes brainstorming and outlining worksheets.

In Theme 3 (Linguistic Gap), it combines lists of vocabulary related to Computer Science and emphasises chunk learning of formulaic academic phrases rather than individual grammar rules.

In Theme 4 (Socio-Cultural Disagreement): Every example and practice topic is localized (e.g., "Technology and Youth in Lahore," "Challenges of Online Education in Pakistan).

On Theme 5 (Affective Filter): It includes peer-review workshops and reflective journals to establish a low-stakes writing community, with a specific focus on writing anxiety.

This guidebook has a two-fold audience: it provides students with a clear, culturally relevant roadmap for writing, and it offers instructors, particularly visiting faculty, a structured, pedagogically sound guide that goes beyond grammar correction to process-oriented teaching.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper systematically identifies the fundamental essay-writing issues of first-year ESL students at Minhaj University Lahore. The mixed-methods approach proved that challenges are not only linguistic but are closely intertwined with cognitive strategies, cultural frameworks, and emotional reactions. The suggested modified guidebook, based on Krashen's Schema Theory and Monitor Model, is a research-based, practical solution to the situation at the institution.

6.1. Recommendations

For the ELC Directorate, implement and test the contextualised writing strategy guidebook within the ENGL-100 curriculum. Continuous evaluation should be conducted using the diagnostic instruments used in this study.

Conduct a training workshop on process-oriented writing pedagogy and the use of the new guidebook to all ELC instructors (full-time and visiting). This aligns with the quality instruction the university is committed to in its faculty appointment procedures.

As part of the Policy Revision, the Human Resource and Academic Directorates ought to consider adding to the visiting faculty appointment letters (such as University

Registrar, 2024) expectations for working with the offered pedagogical frameworks and for participating in training sessions.

To Future Research a longitudinal study is needed to monitor the performance and self-efficacy of students who have been exposed to this strategy-based instruction, and of a control group exposed to traditional instruction.

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