



INVESTIGATING THE PROBLEMS AFFECTING ESL LEARNERS' ACADEMIC ESSAY WRITINGS OF BS STUDENTS AT GC UNIVERSITY HYDERABAD

Jawairiya Qureshi

jawairiya204@gmail.com

Lecturer English, Department of English, GC University
Hyderabad, Pakistan.

Dr. Zahid Ali

zahid.ali@gcu.edu.pk

Assistant Professor, Department of English, GC University
Hyderabad, Pakistan.

Muhammad Qureshi

muhammadqureshijan968@gmail.com

English Language Teacher, University of Sindh Jamshoro,
Pakistan.

Syyeda Rabia Batool

syyedarabiab@gmail.com

Researcher, University of Sindh Jamshoro, Pakistan.

Abstract

Academic essay writing is a fundamental component of higher education, yet many English as a Second Language (ESL) learners experience persistent linguistic and organizational challenges that adversely affect their academic performance. This study explores the issues of academic writing of BS students in GC University Hyderabad focusing on grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, coherence, cohesion, organization and academic writing conventions of academic essays. The main goal is to identify the main obstacles that prevent students in essay writing skills and suggest the ways to enhance academic writing teaching. A quantitative research design was used and the structured questionnaire was used to gather data from the BS students of various academic departments in the study using purposive sampling. Descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used to find the prevalence and significance of the identified writing difficulties. The results show that students have many problems in grammar, sentence structure, academic words, paragraph organization, coherence and cohesion, referencing, and critical arguments. These challenges are further complicated by limited exposure to academic writing, lack of feedback, and lack of proficiency in English. This study reveals that providing academic writing through targeted writing workshops, frequent formative feedback, process writing and effective language support can be highly effective in developing students' essay-writing abilities. The results have important implications for English language teachers, curriculum developers, and university administrators in developing pedagogical interventions that will help ESL students successfully develop academic writing skills in the university context. This research aims to equip educators with strategies to help ESL students overcome common difficulties in academic essay writing, while also providing students with the tools needed for success in this area of their academic journey. The purpose of this book is to provide some strategies for educators to address the common challenges faced by ESL students in academic essay writing and to provide some tools for students to succeed in this aspect of academic writing.

Keywords: *Academic Writing Challenges, English as a Second Language (ESL), English Language Proficiency, Higher Education, Weak Vocabulary.*

Corresponding Author: Jawairiya Qureshi (Lecturer English, Department of English, GC University Hyderabad, Pakistan.)

Email: jawairiya204@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Academic writing is considered an essential skill in the academic setting, as it helps students express ideas, critical thinking, and foster academic dialogue. Essay writing is one of the most important types of writing in academic context to measure students' analysis skills, language skills, and proficiency in a subject. Writing academic texts is a much more challenging task for students whose first language is not English (ESL) and who are expected to learn language, conventions of writing, critical thinking, and rhetorical organization simultaneously. This, in turn, presents many ESL learners with ongoing difficulties affecting their academic success and self-confidence in college environments (Hyland & Jiang, 2024).

English is now the language of choice in many higher education institutions, the language of scientific research, and the language of international research collaboration worldwide. More and more universities demand that their students write academic essays, reports, research papers, reflective assignments and dissertations in English, despite students' native language. There are clear advantages of this global phenomenon to have students from around the world participate in academic institutions; however, there are also substantial challenges for students who are learning English in a country that is not their native language. Studies have shown that ESL learners often face challenges in grammar, word choice, coherence and cohesion, citation, argument development and academic style, which are all factors which lead to poorer writing performance (Lee, 2024; Graham, 2025).

Academic essay writing is not just about being able to write grammatically correct sentences. Success in writing an effective essay will require that the student: Make logical arguments, synthesize evidence, critically analyze information, and organize thoughts and ideas in an effective manner. These skills tend to be underdeveloped among ESL students due to them learning the English language and accepting the conventions of academic writing. Educational research suggests that students' linguistic ability is not sufficient for academic success in writing unless they can also develop their disciplinary literacy and genre-specific writing proficiency (Hyland, 2025).

With the swift incorporation of technology into higher education, academic writing has also been affected. AI-powered writing tools, online grammar checkers, automated feedback systems, and digital learning platforms have opened up new avenues for enhancing writing proficiency. But, unequal access to these technologies and lack of digital literacy skills amongst learners still restricts their effectiveness in many developing countries. The integration of technology with explicit pedagogical guidance and formative assessment (FA) has been highlighted as a potential strategy to improve ESL learners' writing skills in recent studies (Ranalli & Yamashita, 2024).

English is an official language and it is the prime medium of education in most universities despite being a second language to most of the students in Pakistan. Therefore, students in undergraduate studies are expected to fulfill assignments, exams, presentations, research reports and academic essays in English in their degrees. While students are learning English in their school education, during university education, they must be prepared to communicate at an academic level but many do not have sufficient academic writing competence to communicate at a higher level (Khan & Ahmad, 2024).

English language learning in the educational context in Pakistan faces a few challenges. The students' academic writing abilities tend to be limited by traditional teacher-centered teaching method, examination-driven learning, crowded classrooms, inadequate opportunities for writing practice, and inadequate individualized feedback. The limitations are more striking at the university level, where students suddenly are expected to write more complex academic texts without being taught academic writing systematically (Rahman et al., 2025).

The students of the GC University Hyderabad are diverse academic community with varying educational background, language proficiency and socio-economic characteristics. Students from the rural and semi-urban regions have limited exposure to the English language outside of the classroom. As a result, they report significant problems with academic writing that is appropriate for college. In the process of teaching students, the faults of students' writing organization, grammar, vocabulary, coherence, referencing, and analysis are often observed by teachers, and these errors have an impact on the students' learning results.

The current changes in the educational system of Pakistan stress upon outcome based education, critical thinking and research based learning. The reform of these universities calls for the enhancement of students' academic communication abilities to promote their employability and international competitiveness. It has thus become strategic for higher education institutions to develop the competence of writing academic essays. A detailed analysis of factors affecting ESL learners' writing is essential to design interventions based on evidence, which will meet students' linguistic, and academic needs (Higher Education Commission Pakistan, 2025).

There are many studies on ESL writing problems conducted in different countries, but few of them have addressed the problems of ESL writing in Pakistani public universities especially in Sindh. International findings may not be applicable to local educational contexts because of institutional, linguistic/cultural, pedagogical differences that can have a significant impact on students' writing experiences. The study of the experiences of BS students at the GC University Hyderabad is helpful to gain insights into the contextual factors influencing academic essay writing performance and adds to the literature on ESL writing in Pakistan.

Also, knowing the most common writing problems can assist teachers of English in planning instructional programs and making curriculum enhancements and writing support services. These can promote students' academic confidence, improve learning outcomes and encourage greater participation in scholarly communication. Therefore, this study aims to understand the issues confronted by the ESL learners' academic essay writing abilities of BS students of GC University Hyderabad and to draw some meaningful recommendations for improving teaching and learning of academic writing in higher education.

1.1. Problem Statement

The writing of academic essays continues to be an ongoing problem for ESL writers in Pakistan. After several years of studying English, many BS students still encounter significant challenges in grammar, vocabulary, organization, coherence and cohesion, referencing, paraphrasing and development of a critical argument. These deficits can lead to poor academic outcomes, diminished confidence, and less involvement in the academic conversation.

While teaching academic essays to students at GC University Hyderabad, teachers often see a number of recurring issues such as grammatical mistakes, lack of good paragraph construction, poor use of academic vocabulary, poor thesis statements, and poor logical development of ideas. While these issues have a direct impact on pupils' academic achievements, little empirical research has specifically explored the underlying causes of these in this institutional setting. Therefore, there are not enough available data to support curriculum development and instructional improvement.

This study thus aims to examine the language, cognition, teaching and learning, and context factors that influence ESL learners' academic essay writing in BS students of GC University, Hyderabad and the strategies for enhancing the academic writing competence.

Research Gap

While there has been some exploration of ESL writing problems in developed education system in the past, there is limited research on the ESL writing problems of

undergraduate students of public universities in Pakistan, especially in Sindh province. The focus of the majority of the previous studies is on grammatical errors and comparatively lesser attention is given to higher level writing skills like organization, argumentation, coherence, critical thinking, and academic discourse.

Furthermore, little research examines the interaction of institutional resources, instructional practices, feedback mechanisms, technological support and students' educational backgrounds on academic essay writing performance. A small number of studies exist that have specifically examined the experiences of BS students at GC University Hyderabad. To fill in the above gaps, this study aims to conduct a comprehensive quantitative study of the linguistic, pedagogical and contextual factors and how they impact on ESL students' academic essay writing in local university context.

1.2. Research Objectives

The study aims to

1. To investigate the major problems affecting academic essay writing among ESL learners at GC University Hyderabad.
2. To identify the linguistic factors influencing students' academic writing performance.
3. To examine the instructional and institutional factors contributing to students' writing difficulties.
4. To determine the relationship between English language proficiency and academic essay writing performance.
5. To recommend effective pedagogical strategies for improving academic essay writing among undergraduate ESL learners.

1.3. Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the major problems affecting ESL learners' academic essay writing at GC University Hyderabad?
2. Which linguistic factors significantly influence students' academic essay writing performance?
3. How do instructional practices affect students' academic writing abilities?
4. Is there a significant relationship between English language proficiency and academic essay writing performance?
5. What strategies can improve academic essay writing among undergraduate ESL learners?

1.4. Scope of the Study

The study is restricted to the BS students of the GC University Hyderabad. It only concerns academic essay writing students' ESL learners with quantitative research. This

investigation explores language, teaching, and context factors that are affecting student writing. This study does not cover other types of academic writing such as research reports, dissertations and creative writing.

1.5. Significance of the Study

This research is valuable for English language teaching in Pakistan because of the empirical evidence it offers on the academic writing problems faced by undergraduate ESL students in Pakistan. The results will help English Language Teachers to enhance writing teaching, formative assessment and feedback.

Based on the results, curriculum developers can adjust academic writing courses and incorporate process-based writing teaching into the academic courses of universities. The results can be used by the University Administration to create writing centers, faculty development programs and academic support to enhance students' writing skills.

The study also has implications for Second Language Writing (SLW) research as a whole since it advances the understanding of ESL academic writing in the higher education system in Pakistan. Finally, the recommendations can feed into policy dialogue for educational policymakers wanting to enhance English language teaching, academic literacy and employability of graduates in higher education institutions.

2. Literature Review

Academic essay writing is a multi-faceted skill that involves learners' linguistic ability, critical thinking, academic literacy and rhetorical organization. Essay writing is a potentially one of the most difficult academic activities for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners as it requires mastery of grammar, vocabulary, coherence, cohesion, organization, citation practices and argument development. Many studies have been carried out in various educational settings that have consistently found that the ESL student faces a variety of challenges when it comes to writing well-structured academic essays that have a strong impact on their academic achievement (Hyland & Jiang, 2024).

In the last ten years, there has been a significant amount of development in the field of literature related to academic writing in ESL. Previous studies have tended to concentrate on grammatical errors and word recognition problems, but recent research has focused on the quality of the writing in terms of higher order abilities such as critical thinking, metacognitive awareness, genre knowledge, self-regulated learning and digital writing literacy. In recent times, scholars have contended that academic writing is not just a linguistic skill but a cognitive, social, and disciplinary process that is ongoing and involves teaching, feedback, and interaction with academic texts (Hyland, 2025).

In many academic institutions around the world, academic essay writing is a key tool for assessing students' knowledge, critical thinking, and communication abilities. Essays are an academic genre that demands students to build logical arguments, critically interpret evidence, weave together multiple sources, and present ideas in a formal

academic style. Thus, essay writing is seen as a key component of academic literacy, indicating students' capacity to engage in scholarly communities (Wingate, 2024).

While it is important, many of the undergraduates find it difficult to perform at university level writing standards. Studies have shown that students often struggle to organize ideas, present well developed arguments, incorporate evidence, and follow academic writing conventions. For ESL learners, these difficulties are amplified as they also learn the language and the writing practices of the discipline (Graham, 2025).

Studies in other countries have proved that poor academic writing is one of the major causes of poor academic performance among tertiary students. Hyland and Jiang (2024) cite this study, which suggests that many ESL learners have good levels of conversational English, but may not necessarily have the academic literacy needed to create sophisticated written arguments. This discrepancy emphasizes the difference between the general language proficiency and academic writing proficiency.

ESL learners consistently have been cited in the literature as a population at special risk for academic writing difficulties. Comparatively, ESL learners tend to have linguistic interference from their L1 on grammar, sentence structure, choice of words, and rhetorical organization (Lee, 2024).

One of the common problems that people report is grammar accuracy. Common errors include those involving verb tenses, subject–verb agreement, articles, prepositions, punctuation, and sentence structure. The grammatical errors have a negative impact on the clarity and credibility of academic essays and often lead to lower marks in the assessment process (Rahman et al., 2025).

Essay quality is further impacted by the limitations in vocabulary. There is a need for accurate words, words that are specific to a field of study, and the use of the correct word with the correct meaning. In the case of many ESL learners, these are the only words that they can use over and over again, and are the only slang terms or expressions that they have. So, their essay writing is often found to be lacking in lexical sophistication and ability to convey complex ideas (Nation, 2024).

One additional common problem is coherence and cohesion. Good academic writing involves a logical sequence of ideas and the use of suitable transitioning words and phrases, and the arrangement of paragraphs. Studies indicate that many ESL learners have weak ties between sentences and paragraphs, leading to inconsistent organization and weak arguments (Hyland, 2025).

Grammar is still the best predictor of academic writing quality. A number of research studies have been carried out in Asian, Middle Eastern and African classrooms have confirmed that grammatical competence is a crucial factor in determining essay performance (Lee, 2024).

In recent investigations it had been found that the grammatical mistakes are not just mechanical. Many students struggle to form complex sentences, to understand and correctly use the correct verb tenses, and to understand and correctly use passive voice, and to apply the correct academic sentence structures. This often happens due to the lack of exposure to authentic academic texts and limited opportunities for guided writing practice (Khan & Ahmad, 2024).

Furthermore, through-language grammar instruction with too much focus on rules and not enough on contexts seldom enhances students' writing ability. Current studies suggest that grammar be embedded in realistic writing tasks in order to foster meaningful language learning and retention (Graham, 2025).

Academic vocabulary is another key element of writing well. While Coxhead's Academic Word List has remained a cornerstone for academic literacy teaching, recent research highlights the significance of vocabulary in academic writing that is specific to the discipline (Nation, 2024).

Research shows that a lack of academic words can hinder students in their abilities to explain, assess evidence, and present convincing arguments. Often, ESL learners will resort to repeating commonly used familiar words, using informal expressions or simply translating the vocabulary from their mother tongue, and this causes the overall quality of their essays to suffer (Hyland & Jiang, 2024).

A more recent empirical study also shows that there is a positive correlation between extensive reading and vocabulary development. Students who achieve regular access to academic journal articles and scholarly texts show much greater language variety and sophistication in their writing than students who have less exposure to these texts (Wingate, 2024).

Organization is among one of the hallmarks of a successful academic essay. A good essay has an introduction, a thesis, well-developed body paragraphs, and a conclusion. Every paragraph should include a main idea, evidence to back it up and use a transition device to link paragraphs together (Hyland, 2025).

However, many research studies show that ESL students often write essays that lack a strong organization. Students may often add ideas that do not relate to the writing task, do not have good topic sentences, and do not have logical transitions throughout the essay. They have weaknesses that significantly lower readability and academic quality (Rahman et al., 2025).

Coherence deals with the logical connection of ideas while cohesion deals with the linguistic devices used in the connection of ideas in a text. There is a strong evidence that poor use of conjunctions, reference words, substitution and lexical cohesion are regular characteristics of the poorly organized essays of ESL learners (Lee, 2024).

Today, writing involves more than just using correct words; it is expected that students show analytical thinking and reasoning when writing in the classroom. Essays are expected to analyse information, compare different viewpoints, incorporate and summarise scholarly material and to build and defend informed arguments.

Recent studies highlight that many ESL students struggle to make an academic argument that they can convince existing knowledge of, or existing audience, of the validity of their argument (Graham, 2025). Often, students will summarize information without evaluating sources or offering new interpretations.

Experts have contended that explicit teaching of argumentation skills greatly enhances academic writing skills. Providing students with opportunities to develop claim, evidence, counterclaim, and synthesis skills improves their writing and critical thinking (Wingate, 2024).

Feedback is a key factor in L2 writing development. Process-based writing strategies allow students to make several drafts, based on the feedback they receive from their teacher and peers as well as their own feedback. Many studies have found that positive feedback can greatly enhance students' grammatical accuracy, organization, vocabulary, and development of arguments (Lee, 2024).

There have been recent investigations that differentiate between direct and indirect corrective feedback. Direct feedback gives explicit corrections, indirect feedback encourages students to self-correct. Both methods are effective in producing better writing but research indicates that their use together results in better long-term learning (Hyland, 2025).

In many developing countries, however, teachers are faced with limited opportunities to give individual student feedback due to overcrowded classrooms. Consequently, students do not obtain enough opportunities for revising and refining their academic writing, which leads to the enduring weakness of writing (Rahman et al., 2025).

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and educational technology have revolutionized the teaching of academic writing. Grammar checkers and automated writing assessment tools offer real-time corrections in terms of language and structure, while plagiarism detection software identifies copied content, and AI-driven writing tools offer suggestions and support on writing.

In recent times, studies have shown that AI writing tools can improve grammar, vocabulary, and sentence construction when used responsibly with proper supervision by teachers (Ranalli & Yamashita, 2024). However, there are concerns about the overreliance on AI technologies, as it can decrease students' writing and critical thinking skills (Hyland & Jiang, 2024).

Researchers suggest that AI should be used in addition to explicit writing instruction and teacher feedback.

English is an official language and is the major medium of instruction in higher education in Pakistan. Although students have studied the English language for years, they still face challenges when writing even after having received communicative exposure, examination focused training, and insufficient academic writing training in school (Khan & Ahmad, 2024).

In recent years, grammar, vocabulary, coherence, organization, referencing and critical analysis have been found to be the most frequent errors by university students in Pakistan. In addition, the scarcity of writing centers, inadequate teaching materials, and the large classroom size, they argue, limit the opportunities for meaningful writing practice (Rahman et al., 2025).

Research in the universities of Pakistan also suggests that students from rural education background have more difficulties than those from urban background due to the unequal educational opportunities and their limited access to English language academic resources (Ahmed and Malik, 2025).

While a few studies have been conducted on ESL writing in Pakistan, few studies have focused specifically on academic essay writing of BS students in GC University Hyderabad. This institutional gap is a good reason to conduct the present study.

The reviewed literature supports that there are several interrelated linguistics, cognitive, instructional, and contextual factors that affect ESL academic essay writing. Grammar, vocabulary, organization, coherence, critical thinking, feedback and technology all impact students' writing. There is abundant evidence in international research about the problems of ESL writing but very less empirical research is available on public universities of Sindh especially on the GC University, Hyderabad.

This study, therefore, fills an important gap in the context, by examining the quantitative analysis of the factors that influence academic essay writing among undergraduate English as a second language (ESL) learners. The results of the study will be beneficial in both theoretical and practical aspects of English language teaching in higher education in Pakistan.

3. Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is a conceptual structure that helps explain the relationships between the variables being studied and helps interpret the results of the research. Theoretical frameworks in the field of second language (L2) academic writing, are used to explain why learners will find it difficult to write and how factors such as instruction, cognition, language and sociocultural will affect L2 writing. This study is based on the theories that complement each other: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT), Flower and Hayes' Cognitive Process Theory of Writing, and Cummins' Common

Underlying Proficiency (CUP) Theory. These theories together explain the language, cognitive and social aspects of academic essay writing by ESL learners.

In the Sociocultural Theory of Vygotsky (1978), learning is a social process in which knowledge is built by interacting with teachers, peers, and the learning environment. Language learning and writing development takes place through meaningful communication, collaborative learning and guided instruction in the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

In the context of academic essay writing, this theory implies that students can develop their writing skills by the sequence of scaffolding learning, peer review, feedback from the teacher, collaborative writing, and classroom discussions. Instead of learning to write independently, students need to be guided in their writing to gradually move them toward becoming autonomous academic writers (Lantolf & Poehner, 2024).

The current study is consistent with recent research on the relevance of the Sociocultural Theory for the field of ESL writing. The research has shown that, for university students, grammar, organization, coherence and argument development are significantly boosted by collaborative writing, peer feedback and teacher scaffolding (Hyland, 2025). Interactive learning environments also create learner confidence and alleviate writing anxiety, allowing learners to be more active in academic discourse (Lee, 2024).

The relevance of Sociocultural Theory for BS students of GC University Hyderabad is because the majority of learners have backgrounds in which teacher-centred teaching is a predominant way of teaching. Enhancing opportunities for collaborative writing, guided revision and constructive feedback can have a significant impact on improving students' academic writing skills.

Flower and Hayes (1981) proposed that writing is a recursive cognitive process involving three interrelated components:

- Planning
- Translating ideas into written text
- Reviewing and revising

The Cognitive Process Theory takes a different perspective on writing than the previous theories, because it suggests that writers continually shift back and forth between planning, drafting, evaluating and revising throughout the writing process.

This model has been substantiated by recent education research, especially in the field of second language writing. Quality academic writers take time to generate ideas, plan arguments, assess evidence and revise multiple drafts before writing the final essay (Graham, 2025).

However, many ESL learners tend to pay more attention to grammatical correctness and neglect planning and revision. As a result, they may be plagued by poor

thesis statements, weak organization, repetition of ideas and weak supporting evidence in their writing (Hyland & Jiang, 2024).

The writing problem faced by the BS students in the present study may be attributed to the language limitation alone or the ineffective writing strategies as well. Structured planning skills, strategies, procedures to outline and revision skills can improve essay quality.

Cummins' Common Underlying Proficiency Theory differentiates between conversational language proficiency and academic language proficiency. Cummins (2000) suggests that learners can acquire basic interpersonal communication skills quite rapidly, and cognitive academic language proficiency needs a number of years more of instruction and meaningful academic exposure.

Cognitive academic language proficiency is essential for academic essay writing because students have to analyze information, synthesize scholarly literature, develop logical arguments and communicate using vocabulary and formal conventions of the academic disciplines.

Recent research has once again confirmed Cummins's distinction, as it has been found that many university students have good conversational English, but a weak capacity to complete academic English tasks that involve higher-order thinking and advanced language use (Nation, 2024; Graham, 2025).

In Pakistani universities, students get more clear teaching of grammar and reading comprehension in school education and less explicit academic writing teaching. For this reason, Cummins' theory is extremely relevant to this investigation because many undergraduate students lack a strong academic literacy skill set when they enter into university.

4. Conceptual Framework

Based on the reviewed literature and theoretical foundations, this study proposes that academic essay writing performance among ESL learners is influenced by several independent variables operating simultaneously.

Independent Variables

- Grammar proficiency
- Academic vocabulary
- Sentence structure
- Organization of ideas
- Coherence and cohesion
- Critical thinking
- Teacher feedback
- Writing practice
- English language proficiency

- Learning resources
- Technology-assisted learning

Dependent Variable

- Academic Essay Writing Performance

The conceptual framework assumes that improvements in linguistic competence, instructional support, and writing practice positively influence students' academic essay writing performance. The relationship among these variables forms the basis for the quantitative investigation conducted in this study.

4.1. Global Concerns Regarding ESL Academic Writing

With globalization and the international mobility of students, academic writing has emerged as a major concern in higher education across the world with the growing use of English as the medium of instruction and science. The problems encountered by ESL learners are reported in similar ways in universities in Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America, despite the differences in the educational system in each country (Hyland & Jiang, 2024).

A major problem that is a concern in the world is the poor academic writing skills among students in the under graduate level. Research from around the world reveals that even students who have acceptable academic reading comprehension and overall language proficiency often have difficulty creating coherent and evidence-based academic essays (Wingate, 2024).

Another concern relates to writing anxiety. It has been found from recent research that such factors as fear of grammatical errors, lack of confidence in using the language and not enough vocabulary prevent students from communicating complex ideas in writing. The negative impact of writing anxiety on students' motivation, creativity, and academic performance has been shown (Lee, 2024).

The digitalization and artificial intelligence have added to the challenges. While AI writing tools can enhance grammar and sentence construction, there is concern that relying too heavily on automated writing tools could diminish students' independent thinking and academic honesty (Ranalli & Yamashita, 2024).

In addition, international universities have become more focused on the importance of citations, the fundamentals of referencing, recognition of plagiarism, and ethical writing. These expectations, which many ESL learners need to be explicitly taught, include techniques for citing sources, paraphrasing, and integrating sources into the text (Hyland, 2025).

Besides, process based writing instruction that uses multiple drafts, formative assessment, giving task to students to work together and providing continuous feedback and correction is recommended by global educational organizations, in addition to traditional examination based evaluation (UNESCO, 2025).

In Pakistan's higher education institutions, the hurdles faced by ESL students in academic writing are more apparent. English is the language of higher education, government, research publication and professional communication. As a result, higher education students should be able to write at a sophisticated level in their academic majors.

Even with this expectation, there are still some contextual factors that are still affecting the development of writing.

The first problem is that teachers continue to use teacher-centered teaching methods which emphasize memorization, rather than making students analyze and write. The students usually rely on rote learning for test preparation, and the critical thinking and argumentation skills have been limited in their development (Khan & Ahmad, 2024).

Other issues include limited exposure to authentic English Language texts that are academic. Most students make use of class notes more than academic textbooks and scholarly journal articles. This exposure is limited, leading to limited vocabulary acquisition, development of academic style, and access to scholarly discourse (Ahmed & Malik, 2025).

Large classes, inadequate writing laboratories, low numbers of language support services and high teaching loads are also structural issues in higher education institutions. Due to these conditions, teachers' ability to give individual feedback for students' writing improvement is limited and is widely recognized as a key component in writing improvement (Rahman et al., 2025).

Digital inequalities exacerbate the inequality of learning opportunities too. Some students have daily access to digital learning platforms, grammar checkers, and database of academic information while others have restricted access to the Internet and lack sufficient digital literacy, which impacts their academic writing abilities.

4.2. Local Concerns at GC University Hyderabad

Within GC University Hyderabad, faculty members have reported persistent weaknesses in students' academic essay writing across various BS programs. Commonly observed problems include:

- Frequent grammatical errors.
- Weak sentence construction.
- Limited academic vocabulary.
- Poor paragraph organization.
- Weak thesis statements.
- Inadequate coherence and cohesion.
- Improper referencing and citation.
- Limited critical analysis.
- Lack of supporting evidence.

- Weak conclusions.

These writing deficiencies often reduce students' examination performance, assignment quality, and research productivity. Many students enrolled at GC University Hyderabad come from rural and semi-urban educational backgrounds where opportunities to practice English writing outside the classroom remain limited. Differences in prior educational experiences, school instruction, and language exposure contribute to variations in writing proficiency among undergraduate students.

Although English language courses are included within university curricula, there remains limited empirical evidence identifying the specific factors affecting academic essay writing in this institutional context. Consequently, this study seeks to generate evidence-based recommendations that can support curriculum revision, teacher training, and academic writing interventions tailored to the needs of BS students at GC University Hyderabad.

4.3. Chapter Summary

The theoretical framework demonstrates that academic essay writing is shaped by linguistic competence, cognitive writing processes, and socio-cultural learning environments. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Flower and Hayes' Cognitive Process Theory, **and** Cummins' Common Underlying Proficiency Theory collectively explain the multidimensional nature of ESL writing development. The review of global and local concerns highlights persistent challenges related to grammar, vocabulary, organization, critical thinking, feedback, technology use, and institutional support. These theoretical perspectives provide the foundation for the quantitative methodology adopted in the present study.

4.4. Results and Data Analysis

This chapter presents the findings of the quantitative analysis conducted to investigate the problems affecting ESL learners' academic essay writing among BS students at GC University Hyderabad. Data collected from **300 respondents** were analyzed using **SPSS Version 29**. Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis were employed to address the research objectives and answer the research questions.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table

Distribution of Respondents by Gender (N = 300)

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	168	56.0

Female	132	44.0
Total	300	100.0

4.5. Interpretation

Table 5.1 indicates that **56%** of the respondents were male, whereas **44%** were female. The relatively balanced gender distribution ensured adequate representation of both male and female BS students.

Table

Distribution of Respondents by Department

Department	Frequency	Percentage
English	60	20.0
Education	55	18.3
Computer Science	70	23.3
Commerce	55	18.3
Social Sciences	60	20.0
Total	300	100.0

Interpretation

The respondents represented five academic departments. Computer Science students constituted the largest proportion (**23.3%**), while the remaining departments contributed relatively equal percentages, ensuring diversity within the sample.

Reliability Analysis

Table

Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Statistics

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Grammar Proficiency	6	.84
Vocabulary	5	.81
Organization & Coherence	7	.86
Critical Thinking	5	.79

Teacher Feedback	6	.82
Writing Practice	6	.83
Overall Instrument	35	.85

Interpretation

Cronbach's Alpha values ranged from **.79 to .86**, while the overall questionnaire demonstrated a reliability coefficient of **.85**, indicating high internal consistency. According to Creswell and Creswell (2024), reliability values above **0.70** are considered acceptable for educational research.

Descriptive Statistics

Table

Mean Scores of Academic Essay Writing Challenges

Variable	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Grammar Difficulties	4.21	0.63	High
Vocabulary Limitations	4.10	0.71	High
Sentence Structure	4.03	0.74	High
Organization of Ideas	3.98	0.76	High
Coherence & Cohesion	3.94	0.72	High
Critical Thinking	3.82	0.77	Moderate
Teacher Feedback	3.71	0.81	Moderate
Writing Practice	3.66	0.84	Moderate
Technology Support	3.42	0.86	Moderate

Interpretation

The findings indicate that **grammar difficulties (M = 4.21)** constituted the most significant challenge affecting students' academic essay writing, followed by **vocabulary limitations (M = 4.10)** and **sentence structure (M = 4.03)**. Teacher feedback, writing practice, and technology support received comparatively lower mean scores, suggesting moderate challenges in these areas.

These findings support previous studies that identify grammar and vocabulary as major barriers to ESL academic writing (Hyland & Jiang, 2024; Lee, 2024).

Pearson Correlation Analysis

Table 5.5

Correlation between English Language Proficiency and Academic Essay Writing Performance

Variables	r
English Proficiency & Essay Writing Performance	.71

Interpretation

Pearson correlation analysis revealed a **strong positive relationship** between English language proficiency and academic essay writing performance ($r = .71$, $p < .001$).

The findings indicate that improvements in English language proficiency are associated with higher levels of academic essay writing performance. The result is statistically significant and supports previous research demonstrating that language competence strongly predicts writing achievement (Hyland, 2025).

Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 5.6

Predictors of Academic Essay Writing Performance

Predictor	Beta (β)	t	p
Grammar Proficiency	.36	6.81	< .001
Academic Vocabulary	.28	5.39	< .001
Organization of Ideas	.21	4.34	< .001
Teacher Feedback	.18	3.86	.002
Writing Practice	.15	3.29	.004

Model Summary

² Adjusted R²

78 61 .60

Interpretation

The regression model explained **61% of the variance** in students' academic essay writing performance ($R^2 = .61$).

Grammar proficiency emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .36$), followed by academic vocabulary ($\beta = .28$) and organization of ideas ($\beta = .21$). Teacher feedback and writing practice also made statistically significant contributions to essay writing performance.

These findings suggest that improving students' linguistic competence and providing regular instructional support can substantially enhance academic writing outcomes.

5. Summary of Findings

The quantitative analysis produced several important findings:

- Grammar was identified as the most serious academic writing problem among ESL learners.
- Limited academic vocabulary significantly affected students' ability to express ideas effectively.
- Many students experienced difficulty organizing paragraphs and maintaining coherence.
- English language proficiency demonstrated a strong positive relationship with academic essay writing performance.
- Teacher feedback significantly improved students' writing competence.
- Regular writing practice positively influenced essay quality.
- Grammar proficiency emerged as the strongest predictor of academic writing performance.

6. Discussion and Analysis

The results show that a number of language and teaching related factors are interwoven in the academic essay writing of ESL learners. Writing proficiency was best predicted by grammar proficiency, suggesting that students still struggle significantly with sentence construction, verb usage, articles, prepositions, and punctuation. The findings of this research align with the research by Lee (2024) that grammatical competence is one of the main factors that affect the quality of academic writing in L2 writing.

Active use of vocabulary, another limitation, also had a significant impact on the performance of essay writing. Students said it was difficult to choose academic vocabulary and discipline-specific terms. The result is in line with Hyland and Jiang (2024) who claimed that lexical competence plays a crucial role to build a coherent academic argument and to engage in academic discourse effectively.

The study also found that organizational skills (coherence and cohesion) remain significant difficulties for undergraduate students. There were problems in many responses with developing logical argument, organizing paragraphs, and connecting ideas. This has also been noted by Graham (2025), who noted that systematic instruction in planning, drafting, revising and development of arguments is necessary for successful academic writing.

The teacher feedback variable also was a major predictor of writing outcomes. There was a correlation between constructive and timely feedback and students' writing competence, while limited feedback showed poor correlation. The finding is consistent with Lee (2024) who showed that formative feedback is beneficial for the development of writing, as it assists learners in identifying and remedying linguistic and organizational inadequacies.

There were also high scores for writing practice on academic essay writing performance. Students who were regular writers showed their confidence and proficiency. This discovery is in line with Hyland's (2025) process-writing approach which emphasizes ongoing process of drafting, revising, reflecting.

The results overall suggest that language proficiency, pedagogical techniques and experiences of writing practice have an impact on academic essay writing for BS students at GC University Hyderabad. The findings of this study reinforce the theoretical frameworks proposed in Chapter 3, such as the Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the Common Underlying Proficiency Theory of Cummins, and the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing of Flower and Hayes, which all maintained that language proficiency, cognitive processes, and instructional support are interdependent and work together to influence the development of effective academic writing.

Finally, conclusion, recommendations, limitations of the study, future directions and references.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore problems faced by ESL learners' academic essay writing among BS students of GC University Hyderabad. Academic essay writing is a vital part of higher education as it allows students to express knowledge, show critical thinking, and participate in academic dialogues. The task of writing academic essays, however, is one of the most challenging tasks for many ESL

learners because it incorporates all three language skills along with cognitive organization.

The results indicated that students in the undergraduate level have problems with grammar, academic words usage, sentence construction, organization of ideas, coherence and cohesion, critical thinking and academic argumentation. Of these factors, the strongest predictor of academic essay writing success was grammar proficiency. Students indicated that they were having regular difficulties with the following: verb tense, finding articles, subject–verb agreement, complex sentences, and punctuation. These linguistic difficulties had a negative impact on the clarity and general quality of their academic writing.

Students' writing ability was also greatly affected by their vocabulary. The very high number of students who indicated that they did not have the academic vocabulary to communicate their ideas, make persuasive arguments or use discipline specific terminology were a concern of many respondents. This lack of vocabulary frequently led to repetitive expressions, use of colloquialism, and to some extent to inadequate explanation of complex ideas. Results also showed that students had problems in organizing paragraphs, coherence between ideas and building logical argument with supporting evidence.

The statistical analysis showed a high positive correlation between English language competence and writing skills in the academic essay, suggesting that there is a direct link between the two. The statistical analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between English language competence and writing skills in the academic essay, suggesting that there is a direct link between the two. In addition, teacher feedback and frequent practice of writing were found to be important factors in the development of writing. The students with constructive feedback and continuous writing activity showed more competency of writing than the students with limited instructional support.

The study also identified some institutional and contextual issues that may impact academic writing development. It is found that limited writing practice in classrooms, low amount of individual feedback, lack of exposure to scholarly literature and traditional teacher-centered teaching approaches are some of the factors that affect students in learning academic writing skills. The results indicate that academic writing improvement needs to be not only achieved through the enhancement of students' language competence, but also through the strengthening of teaching methods, instruction design and the system of service provision for students.

In general, the results confirm the theoretical foundations on which this research is based. The Sociocultural theory by Vygotsky highlights the role of cooperative learning and scaffolding in writing development. The Cognitive Process Theory of Flower and Hayes proposes that writing is a process which involves planning, drafting,

revising, and evaluating ideas throughout. The Common Underlying Proficiency Theory of Cummins is another example of how academic writing relies on higher levels of cognitive academic language proficiency than simply conversational language proficiency. These theoretical frameworks collectively offer a complete explanation of the writing problems of undergraduate ESL students.

The study helps to fill the gap in the existing literature of the field of second language writing with empirical data from a public university in Sindh, Pakistan. It also provides concrete suggestions which can help English language teachers, curriculum planners, university administrators and policy makers to enhance academic writing instruction in higher education.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Universities should introduce dedicated academic writing courses** focusing on essay organization, academic vocabulary, grammar, critical thinking, citation, and referencing.
2. **English language instructors should adopt a process-based writing approach**, encouraging students to plan, draft, revise, edit, and reflect on their writing rather than emphasizing only the final product.
3. **Regular formative feedback should be integrated into writing instruction.** Individualized teacher feedback and peer-review activities can significantly improve students' writing accuracy and confidence.
4. **Writing centers should be established at universities** to provide individualized academic writing support, tutoring, and consultation for students experiencing writing difficulties.
5. **Academic vocabulary development should receive greater instructional emphasis** through extensive reading, vocabulary-building exercises, and exposure to authentic academic texts.
6. **Critical thinking activities should be incorporated across undergraduate curricula**, enabling students to develop analytical reasoning and argumentation skills necessary for effective academic writing.
7. **Technology-assisted writing tools** such as grammar-checking software, plagiarism detection systems, and automated writing feedback platforms should be integrated responsibly into classroom instruction under teacher supervision.
8. **Faculty development programs should be organized** to train instructors in contemporary approaches to teaching academic writing, providing effective feedback, and integrating digital learning resources.

9. **Students should be encouraged to participate in regular writing competitions, seminars, and workshops** to strengthen their academic communication skills and increase writing confidence.
10. **The Higher Education Commission (HEC) should promote standardized academic writing frameworks** across universities to improve consistency in English language instruction and academic literacy development.

8.1. Limitations of the Study

Although the study has succeeded in meeting its aims, there are some limitations which should be considered. The study was only conducted at GC University Hyderabad which might not allow generalization of the results to other universities in Pakistan. There may be variations between institutions in higher education in educational environments, student demographics and institutional practices.

Secondly, quantitative survey design was used in the research, which mainly focused on students' perceptions. The qualitative interviews, classroom observations or analysis of students' essays may have given a better understanding about the nature of writing difficulties.

Thirdly, the study was based on self-reported questionnaire data, which can be subject to social desirability bias and/or the perception of the individual.

Fourth, the study was conducted solely with BS students and did not include students in the postgraduate category; their academic writing experiences may be quite different.

Finally, the selected linguistic and instructional variables were analyzed. Other issues like writing anxiety, motivation, self-efficacy, socioeconomic factors, digital literacy, and influence of the first language were not examined in detail, and could also be a potential cause of academic writing performance.

8.2. Future Directions

Future researchers may extend the present study in several important ways.

1. Comparative studies may be conducted across multiple public and private universities to determine regional differences in ESL academic writing challenges.
2. Longitudinal research may investigate the development of students' academic writing skills throughout their undergraduate education.
3. Mixed-methods research combining questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, and writing sample analysis may provide a more comprehensive understanding of writing difficulties.

4. Future studies may examine the influence of **artificial intelligence-assisted writing tools** on students' academic writing development, ethical writing practices, and learning outcomes.
5. Researchers may investigate additional psychological variables such as writing anxiety, academic motivation, self-regulated learning, and writing self-efficacy.
6. Experimental research may evaluate the effectiveness of different instructional interventions, including process writing, peer feedback, collaborative writing, and technology-enhanced instruction.
7. Further studies may compare academic writing challenges among students from different disciplines, including Engineering, Business, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences.
8. Future investigations may also explore the relationship between academic reading habits and academic writing proficiency among university students.

The findings from such studies will contribute to the continuous improvement of English language education and academic literacy in Pakistani higher education institutions.

References

- Ahmed, R., & Malik, S. (2025). English academic writing challenges among undergraduate students in Sindh. *Pakistan Journal of Language Education*, 12(1), 41–59.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2024). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. Multilingual Matters.
- Etikan, I. (2024). Sampling techniques in educational research: Recent developments and applications. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 118, 102134.
- Flower, L., & Hayes, J. R. (1981). A cognitive process theory of writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 32(4), 365–387.
- Fraenkel, J. R., Wallen, N. E., & Hyun, H. H. (2025). *How to design and evaluate research in education* (11th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.
- Graham, S. (2024). *The science of writing instruction*. Routledge.
- Higher Education Commission Pakistan. (2025). *National Higher Education Policy and Quality Enhancement Framework*. Higher Education Commission of Pakistan.
- Hyland, K. (2019). *Second language writing* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Hyland, K. (2025). *Teaching and researching writing* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Hyland, K., & Jiang, F. (2024). Academic writing in a changing educational landscape. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 68, Article 101421.

- Khan, A., & Ahmad, S. (2024). English academic writing challenges among Pakistani undergraduate students. *Journal of Education and Educational Development*, 11(1), 77–96.
- Lantolf, J. P., & Poehner, M. E. (2024). *Sociocultural theory and the teaching of second languages*. Routledge.
- Lee, I. (2017). *Classroom writing assessment and feedback in L2 school contexts*. Springer.
- Lee, I. (2024). Feedback and second language writing in higher education. *Assessing Writing*, 60, Article 100857.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2024). *Learning vocabulary in another language* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Rahman, M., Ali, S., & Hussain, N. (2025). ESL writing challenges in Pakistani universities: A quantitative perspective. *Pakistan Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 8(2), 45–67.
- Ranalli, J., & Yamashita, J. (2024). Technology-enhanced writing instruction for second language learners. *Language Teaching Research*, 28(3), 512–530.
- Richards, J. C., & Renandya, W. A. (Eds.). (2002). *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice*. Cambridge University Press.
- UNESCO. (2025). *Global education monitoring report 2025: Quality learning for all*. UNESCO.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Wingate, U. (2024). Academic literacy and writing development in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 49(6), 1123–1138.
- Yin, R. K. (2024). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (7th ed.). SAGE Publications.