



ACADEMIC WRITING CHALLENGES OF FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS FROM DIVERSE LINGUISTIC BACKGROUNDS: CAUSES, PATTERNS, AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the academic writing challenges faced by first-year college students from diverse linguistic backgrounds and to examine their causes, patterns, and pedagogical implications. A mixed-method research design was employed. Quantitative data were collected through a structured writing test and analyzed using an independent samples t-test, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews to explore students' experiences and perceptions of academic writing. The findings revealed significant differences between Urdu-speaking and Punjabi-speaking students in five dimensions of academic writing: sentence structure, vocabulary, cohesion and coherence, paragraph development, and mechanical accuracy. The qualitative findings further indicated that language transfer, limited exposure to English, and insufficient writing practices were associated with these difficulties. This study contributes context-specific knowledge by comparing Urdu-speaking and Punjabi-speaking first-year college students and identifying significant differences across five dimensions of academic writing. These findings provide useful evidence for developing writing instruction that considers students' different linguistic backgrounds in the Pakistani context. The study highlights the need for explicit writing instruction, increased opportunities for writing practice, and greater consideration of students' linguistic backgrounds in classroom teaching. Although the study is limited by its relatively small sample size, it provides useful pedagogical insights for improving academic writing instruction in multilingual educational settings.

Keywords: *Academic Writing Challenges, ESL Learners, First-Year College Students, Linguistic Background, Writing Difficulties*

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1. Introduction

Students' writing skills are regarded as one of the most important elements affecting academic achievement in college. Academic writing is one of the most significant modes of expression where students can demonstrate what they know about the subject matter, critical thinking, logical sequencing of ideas and critical evaluation of knowledge. It is not simply a matter of correctness of the language – it's about how easily understandable it is, how logical it is, and how well it adheres to the academic conventions.

The problem of academic writing has been a challenge to most of the first year students in colleges particularly students having different lingual backgrounds. Usually these students encounter problems due to the difference between their mother tongue and the target language that affects grammar, word choice and sentence structure. In addition, citizens' differing experiences from prior education can lead to challenges in academic writing in a higher education setting. These are exacerbated by the complexity of academic norms and expectations such as stylistic conventions and their formal aspects, cohesive patterns, referencing conventions and discipline-specific norms and expectations.

Although the role of academic writing is acknowledged, many first-year students still find it difficult to write coherent and clear as well as academically appropriate texts. These are not just issues of superficial linguistic mistakes but problems of the development of ideas, organization, and critical thinking. The continuity of these challenges points out the discrepancy between the current writing skills of students and the demands of college-level writing skills. This gap requires a methodological exploration of the factors and trends behind the difficulties of academic writing, especially in linguistically diverse students.

This is further exacerbated the Pakistani context by the fact that the society is multilingual, with the students often having a background of either Urdu a regional language and switching to English-mediated instruction in higher education. This change in language, together with a lack of formal training in writing at earlier stages of education, further poses a hindrance to the acquisition of academic writing skills. Consequently, students have been going into college with poor writing abilities, an aspect that not only lowers their grades but also their self-esteem.

Several empirical research studies have investigated issues that relate to academic writing. As an illustration, Bani Younes and Albalawi (2015) found grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors to be the most prevalent problems among college students, with grammatical error being the most common. But they mainly studied the types of errors and not much on the cause and effect.

Similarly, Aldabbus and Almansouri (2022) reported that students have problems in the accuracy of language and in organizing ideas and presenting arguments in a coherent manner. Language ability proved to be a major factor in determining writing ability in the

classroom. The ability to manipulate language in a way that builds meaning, makes arguments and structures thoughts in an academic context. Students who don't have enough competence could have poor ability to convey their ideas as long as they know a lot about the topic. The lack of grammatical proficiency, vocabulary, and sentence structure can significantly reduce the clarity and coherence and impact the quality of writing overall.

The language situation may be the only factor affecting a student's writing ability, but psychological factors such as writing anxiety, low self-confidence and fear of making mistakes can also be at play. All these factors can stifle the free expression of ideas by the students and can make them avoid complex sentence structure; this can eventually make their writing less rich. Studies have revealed that there is a negative relationship between language and cognition and that their relationship is sustained in a feedback loop which affects the development of writing. In the Pakistani context, the context of second language learners has been taken into account and thus the cognitive and affective aspects of writing are more important.

Such challenges extend beyond academic achievement to the students' academic and career development. Good academic writing skills help students to critically interact with knowledge, clearly express their ideas, and come up with academic work. Poor writing skills, on the other hand, may result in poor academic performance and a poor career prospect. As a whole, the problems of academic writing are multidimensional and include linguistic, structural, cognitive, and psychological. All of these are very interrelated, particularly among the first- year students who are also being acclimatized to the new academic requirements. Although the individual components of writing problems were investigated in the past, no attempts were made to investigate the effect of the variables as a collective variable on the performance of the students concerning writing. This disjuncture underscores the importance of an all-encompassing and situation-specific study on the problems of academic writing.

The study has the following purpose:

In order to cope with the above problems, the current paper aims to investigate the first-year college students' academic writing difficulties that are from various languages background. In particular, it aims to:

1. Determine the language factors of academic writing problems among learners.
2. Research the trends of writing errors and difficulties in written texts of students.
3. Discover the pedagogical implication of these issues on effective teaching and curriculum design.

Research Questions:

- 1: What are some of the major causes of first-year college students' difficulties with academic writing, and who hold such a variety of language backgrounds?

2: How does the academic writing performance of Urdu-speaking students compare with that of Punjabi-speaking students across five assessed dimensions of academic writing?

3: Which didactic approaches can be used to address these academic writing issues?

1.1. Importance of the Study

The research is theoretically, pedagogically and practically important. In theory, it adds to the body of knowledge on second language writing by providing a combined study of the factors and trends behind the writing challenges of academic writing. Pedagogically, and it offers information to the teachers on how to structure more effective instructional strategies that are student-centered and target both the linguistic and higher-order writing skill. In practice, the results may be used to guide curriculum developers and academic institutions in creating specific interventions and support programs that are more responsive to the needs of students.

1.2. Research Gap

Although some studies have been conducted on the problems of academic writing among students, the majority of them have assumed students as a homogeneous group and have not specifically targeted first-year college students of various linguistic backgrounds. The special challenges presented by linguistic diversity (interference with first language, insufficient exposure to academic English, and different levels of education) have not been studied in many instances. Also, previous studies have tended to ignore the crucial period of school-college transition, during which students must learn new rules of academic writing within a rather short period of time. The correlation between language background and the acquisition of higher-order writing skills, including in the area of argumentation, cohesion, and critical thinking, is not well studied. Thus, it is the gaps that this study attempts to fill by targeting first-year college students with a variety of linguistic backgrounds and exploring the effects their linguistic diversity has on their academic writing issues in the environment of higher education.

2. Literature Review

Academic Writing entails the successful use of some of the elements like grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, organization of the text, and spelling (Fatimah, 2019; Isma et al., 2023). The practices in these aspects give students opportunities to present their ideas effectively, coherently and scholarly. But for most students there is a lack of proficiency in one or more of these skills and this can lead to a high number of mistakes in their writing. The errors may create issues of clarity and comprehension, thereby introducing learning obstacles, which in turn affects learning in the academic field (Isma & Baharuddin, 2022; Isma, 2023). Specifically, errors in grammar, incorrect word choice and the structure of sentences reduce the overall level of writing and make it difficult to

understand the arguments. Hence, the focus of nature and pattern of error is important to investigate the problems of students' academic writing. To understand the strength and weakness of students, as well as help teachers in designing special pedagogical treatment, it is important for teachers to find out the patterns of the students' frequent errors (Abdullah et al., 2021).

In this regard, a number of empirical studies have established some of the most common errors among the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Indicatively, studies by Fitrawati & Safitri (2021), Fitria (2020) point out spelling mistakes as a common problem among students. Such errors are mostly due to phonetic spelling, homophonic confusion, and misuse of letter combinations, which diminishes the accuracy and consistency of writing. Equally, Mpepo (2010) cites grammatical errors and inappropriate use of vocabulary as some of the greatest challenges among the first-year university students. These results indicate that the problems in writing go beyond the errors on the surface levels and influence sentence structure and meaning considerably. In line with this opinion, Guesmi (2018) reveals that there are still lingering issues regarding the use of prepositions among EFL learners and that even such minor aspects of language can alter the meaning and make it less clear. In addition to language challenges, academic writing is generally acknowledged as a highly complicated cognitive process, which may encompass planning, organizing, and rewriting ideas (Byrnes, 2002; Dissanayake & Dissanayake, 2019; Gautam, 2019; Nasser, 2016; Patience, 2020). According to Dissanayake & Dissanayake (2019), writing is among the most challenging skills that ESL learners need to have since it involves combining grammar, vocabulary, orthography, and organization of discourse. Written communication requires more accuracy, coherence, and logical structure as opposed to spoken communication, which usually has the advantage of support through context. Therefore, orally proficient students can still find it difficult to write academically. In addition, not only is formal writing a challenge to both second language learners and native speakers because they also have to develop well-organized and convincing arguments (Wingate, 2015). This implies that writing problems are not only linguistic but also cognitive, in the sense that they are processes related to higher-order thinking, like organizing and perfecting ideas. Thus, writing should be taught to respond to linguistic competence and cognitive strategies.

Another factor that plays a significant role in academic writing is the exposure that is given to the English language at a young age. Students with low prior knowledge of the English language often struggle most with mastering language objectives such as grammar and vocabulary building, as well as sentence structure. These restrictions can hinder their ability to share concepts that are written and can have a detrimental impact on their school work. This is not the case for learners who have been exposed to the language from a early age, however, who acquire their L2 language at a slow and systematic pace. Therefore, the

more students are exposed to English at an early age, the longer they are exposed to English, the better they are prepared to meet the expectations of academic writing at tertiary level. This highlights the importance of early language skills in relation to developing writing competence.

Besides linguistic and cognitive variables, psychological variables are important in determining the writing performance of students. Studies show that EFL learners tend to have anxiety about writing, lack confidence, and fear of errors, which adversely impact their capacity to write coherent texts (Li and Wang, 2020). Such psychological obstacles may deter students to employ complex sentence structure, and they may not be able to construct well-organized arguments. In addition, language problems tend to strengthen anxiety, forming a vicious cycle where fear of making mistakes causes avoidance of difficult writing activities. This repetition eventually lowers the quality of writing and retards the acquisition of skills. Thus, both psychological and linguistic issues will be necessary to enhance the performance of students in academic writing.

However, students from all backgrounds are still expected in many academic contexts to use accurate and appropriate language in their writing. In most educational settings, writing assessment rubrics consistently include language-related criteria. For instance, the Council of Writing Program Administrators' Outcomes Statement for first-year college writing highlights that students should "develop knowledge of grammar, punctuation, and spelling" (Council of Writing Program Administrators [CWPA], 2014). Scholars also point out that certain language errors are global in nature (Burt & Kiparsky, 1972), meaning they can disrupt readers' understanding of the message and may lead to negative judgments (Hendrickson, 1980).

Moreover, practice and revision are related to the development of writing. As Zamel (2017) points out, a significant number of students have problems with the revision of their drafts because of the lack of experience with the rules of academic writing. Lack of adequate practice makes the students unable to detect any mistakes, restructure the ideas, and perfect the arguments. This makes them not write in a coherent, clear, and logical manner. Also, there is a lack of involvement in the writing process, which denies students the essential writing skills, which include planning, drafting, and self-editing. This experience of not revising does not only lead to poorly written work, but also makes students less confident as writers. Thus, disciplined writing and clear teaching of the strategies of revision are essential towards the development of academic writing skills.

In this respect, a well-constructed way of expressing ideas in a clear and logical way can be considered good writing (Javed et al., 2013). It not only entails language accuracy but also the skill of being able to arrange ideas in a coherent manner and deliver arguments in a logical way. Therefore, effective academic writing is a product of a

combination of various factors, such as language proficiency, cognitive abilities, psychological preparedness, and experience of writing.

Altogether, it can be concluded that the literature indicates that linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and experiential factors combine to affect the level of academic writing proficiency. Grammatical, lexical, and spelling errors, organization and coherence problems are the common challenges that EFL students have to cope with. Simultaneously, they also have psychological barriers and a lack of exposure to writing practices that make their learning process even more difficult. Although these factors have been previously discussed separately, an integrated insight of the interaction of such factors in the emergence of academic writing in students is still needed. This illustrates the need to undertake an all-inclusive approach to exploring writing issues, and this is what the current study aims to do.

3. Research Methodology

The methods include both quantitative and qualitative, which were used for the purposes of this study to explore the problems in academic writing of first-year students with different language backgrounds.

The quantitative part of the study invoked techniques for the analysis of students' essay writing to reveal and quantify the errors made by the students in each of the following areas: vocabulary, sentence construction, coherence, paragraph development and mechanical accuracy. In the qualitative phase, interviews were held using a semi-structured method to understanding the reasons for these problems, which were identified as including exposure to English, language background, and learning experiences.

Both approaches were applied, and both were used to complement each other, with quantitative error analysis to ensure validity and depth to the study, and with qualitative analysis of why the errors occurred to ensure pedagogically sound, meaningful insights that are more likely to be reliable.

3.1. Population and Sampling

The study population is the first year college students of the public and private colleges in one of the underdeveloped districts of South Punjab in Pakistan where English is taught as a second language. The participants are of diverse linguistic backgrounds where the students whose first languages are Punjabi and Urdu, and other regional languages are also represented.

A purposive sampling method was used to select a sample of 60 first-year students because it was needed to represent all the linguistic groups. The selection criteria were those students who had just left secondary school and were taking compulsory courses on English language. This was a necessary criterion to reach students in a crucial phase of adjusting to academics.

The paper puts the linguistic background as one of the variables of importance when looking into the patterns of writing errors, causes and implications of the errors in the pedagogical perspective. The sample adopted gives enough degree of diversity to investigate the correlation between the first language of the students and their writing performance in English.

3.2. Data collection Instrument

Two main data collection tools were used in the study:

1. A writing task academic essay.
2. Semi-structured interviews

In order to achieve the purposes of this study both the academic essay writing task and semi-structured interviews were mandatory. The essay task was chosen because it gives a true picture of students' writing ability and allows for the detection of knowledge gaps in aspects like vocabulary, grammar, coherence and sentence structure.

Students' language backgrounds and learning experiences were explored by semi-structured interviews to gain greater insight into the nature of the challenges faced in writing.

Both methods complement one another and enhance the study through triangulation, the essay gives measurable data and the interviews give explanatory information about the causes of academic writing problems.

3.3. Academic Essay Writing Task

To assess the students' writing proficiency and to identify the most common types of errors, a writing proficiency task, which was an academic essay, was used. The students were given the subject matter 'Problems in my City and their Solutions' and were asked to write an essay on this in a stipulated time.

3.4. Vocabulary (5 Marks)

Vocabulary was assessed through the range of words, their accuracy and appropriateness of words used. Essays which demonstrated a good range of suitable academic vocabulary and minimal errors were awarded higher marks. The first language interference that resulted from the first language errors was deduction of marks because of limited vocabulary and repetition, poor choice of words and lexical errors.

3.5. Coherence and Cohesion (5 Marks)

This element rated the logical progression of thoughts, development of argument, and good use of cohesive devices like transition signals and connective words. Essays that were well organized and flow of ideas were well known and scored higher, and irrelevant ideas and failure to follow a logical flow was marked down.

3.6. Sentence Structure (5 Marks)

Sentence structure was evaluated based on grammatical correctness, diversity and complexity of sentence structure. Marking was given higher in essays that had developed

and diversified structures of sentences. The subject/verb agreement, incorrect use of tenses, sentence fragments and run on sentences and word order were the errors which were deducted marks.

3.7. Paragraph Development (5 Marks)

The development of paragraphs was paid attention to the arrangement and system of ideas. Essays that have clear topic sentences, well-developed details in support and reasonable organization of ideas scored higher. In paragraphs which were not united, coherent or organized, marks were deducted.

3.8. Mechanical Accuracy (5 Marks)

Mechanical accuracy was assessed on accuracy of spelling, punctuation, capitalization and format. Essays that were minimally machine error scored higher and frequent errors were scored lower.

All the scores in each category were analyzed systematically to determine general trends of the challenges in academic writing among students with various language backgrounds. The errors were also analyzed in terms of their frequency and types, to gain a deeper insight into their root causes and to draw pedagogical conclusions.

3.9. Semi-Structured Interviews

A semi-structured interview was used to explore the factors that led to the problems experienced by the first-year students in academic writing from different linguistic background. The results indicate that first language interference, limited vocabulary, problems in teaching and lack of writing practice all have a negative effect on students' writing ability especially for the students of the Punjabi language. The essay analysis and interviewing techniques were added into the study, aiming at increasing the validity of the study as it revealed the errors in writing and the reasons for such errors in academic writing.

3.10. Procedure

The study was performed in a well-organized and systematic way to guarantee the validity, reliability and authenticity of data collection procedure.

3.11.

Preliminary Stage

Sampling of the colleges was done with their consent and permission. Students had 40–50 minutes to write an essay on “Problems in My City and their Solutions” which was evaluated on vocabulary, grammar, coherence, paragraph development and mechanical accuracy.

Semi-structured interviews of 15 to 20 minutes were also conducted which included probing the linguistic background, exposure to English and writing practices of students to gain insight into the causes for students' academic writing difficulties. The qualitative data was analysed thematically to gain insight into common challenges of writing.

Scoring and data analysis:

Pre-determined analytic scoring rubric was used to evaluate the essays written by first year college students and evaluated five main elements of academic writing:

- Vocabulary – 5 marks
- Coherence and Cohesion -5 marks.
- Sentence Structure – 5 marks
- Paragraph Development – 5 marks
- Mechanical Accuracy – 5 marks

The frequency and severity of errors in the essays of students were the basis to score each element. A score was given higher when the essay has correct grammar, proper use of vocabulary, is well organized and with a minimum of mechanical mistakes. On the other hand, erroneous answers were more and more severe thus yielding low scores.

As the researcher was the only person who evaluated the research, the scores were taken as final to be used in the analysis. The acquired quantitative data based on the scoring rubric were systematically analyzed to discern the trends of academic writing challenges. The results were also supported by qualitative data in the form of the interview data and it was possible to have a complete understanding of the findings by triangulating the data.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Quantitative Data Analysis

The scores of the final essay and the types of errors (grammatical, lexical, syntactic, organizational and mechanical) were put into the SPSS program to analyze them statistically. The summarized overall writing performance of students and the most common patterns of errors that occurred were summarized using descriptive statistical tools, such as mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage.

Moreover, comparative analysis was done to investigate the difference in performance in essays and distribution of errors between the Urdu speaking and Punjabi speaking students. This discussion allowed the research to conclude on whether the linguistic background was a major factor that affected the performance of students in their academic writing, and their patterns of errors. The statistical data that it presented gave a clear statistical picture of the most prevalent writing problems in first-year college students.

3.2. Qualitative Data Analysis

The information gathered during the semi-structured interviews was analyzed based on a thematic analysis method to understand the root causes of the writing challenges found during the analysis of the essay. Data were systematically coded and categorized into major themes which were first-language interference, pre-exposure to English, learning experiences in classrooms, practice in writing and instructions support.

This thematic analysis has enabled drawing of recurrent trends in the perceptions and experiences of the students in respect to academic writing. The qualitative results were able to add to the quantitative results by explaining the reasons as to why such challenges arise. The combination of the two datasets was helpful to have a more profound and detailed picture of the academic writing issues of students that represent various linguistic groups.

3.3. Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles aimed at the protection of human rights and the protection of the dignity of the subjects. The goal and intent was clearly outlined and there was no compulsion to participate, and the participant could opt out at any time, without any consequences. Personal information was not collected (for confidentiality) and all information was anonymous and used for academic purposes. All participants gave informed consent. Ethical considerations with regard to informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary participation were also observed by providing a comfortable and non-threatening environment for data collection that enables the participants to give honest responses. The methodological framework was discussed in this chapter which was used to investigate academic writing problems of first-year Urdu and Punjabi-speaking students. The data collection methodology employed was mixed methods (essay writing task and semi-structured interviews). The essays were evaluated using an analytic rubric which included the following areas: vocabulary, sentence structure, coherence, paragraph development, and mechanical accuracy. Descriptive statistics and Independent Samples t-test were used to analyze quantitative data and thematic analysis was used for interview data to determine the major causes of writing problems.

Overall, both methods gave a clear and comprehensive picture of the writing issues that students faced with their writings and gave some implications for enhancing writing instruction in linguistically diverse classrooms.

3.4. Results

This chapter will outline the findings of the data analysis that was done to research the performance of students with various linguistic backgrounds in terms of academic writing. The main aim of this analysis is to contrast the Punjabi/Urdu speaking students in various aspects of writing such as mechanical accuracy, cohesion, sentence structure, paragraph writing and vocabulary. Firstly, descriptive statistics was calculated to give a summary of the performance of students in each writing component. These statistics cover mean scores, standard deviation and standard error that assist in comprehending central tendency, variability and reliability of the data. The mean score comparison provides an idea of the relative performance of both groups whereas the standard deviation gives us an idea of the consistency of the scores of the students in the two groups.

3.5. Mechanical Accuracy

The result of mechanical accuracy shows that students of Urdu language outscored the Punjabi language students ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.743$) ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.088$) students, respectively. This means that Urdu speakers have better grammar, punctuation and spelling abilities. The performance of the Punjabi-speaking students was also more diverse, and there was more consistency of accuracy in writing among Urdu-speaking students.

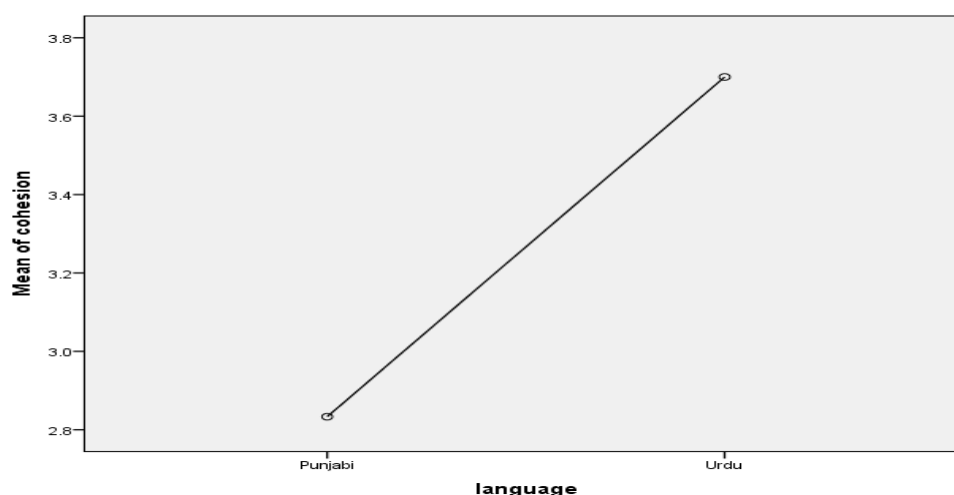


Fig 1: Comparison of Punjabi and Urdu-speaking students in mechanical accuracy Cohesion

In the Urdu-speaking students, cohesion was found to be higher compared to the students who speak the Punjab language in the case of cohesion ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.877$ vs. $M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.147$). Involves more connectivity, logic and organization in Urdu language.

Compared to the Urdu-speaking students, some of the students of Punjabi language were also performing with more differences, while Urdu speaking students were performing more cohesively in their writing.

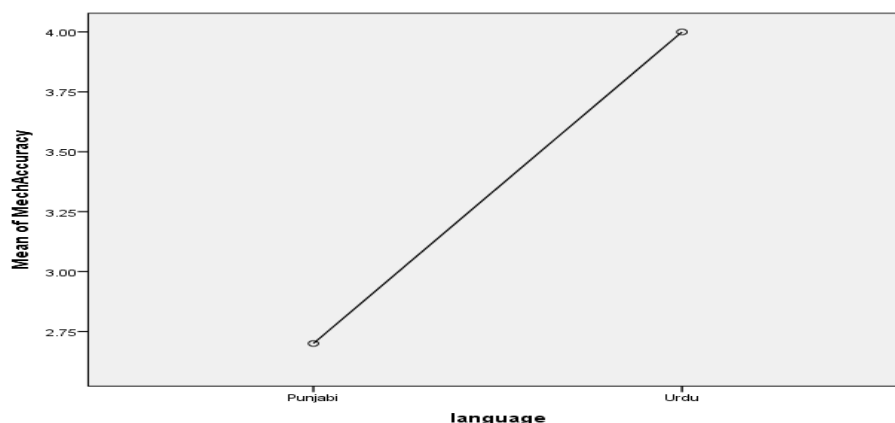
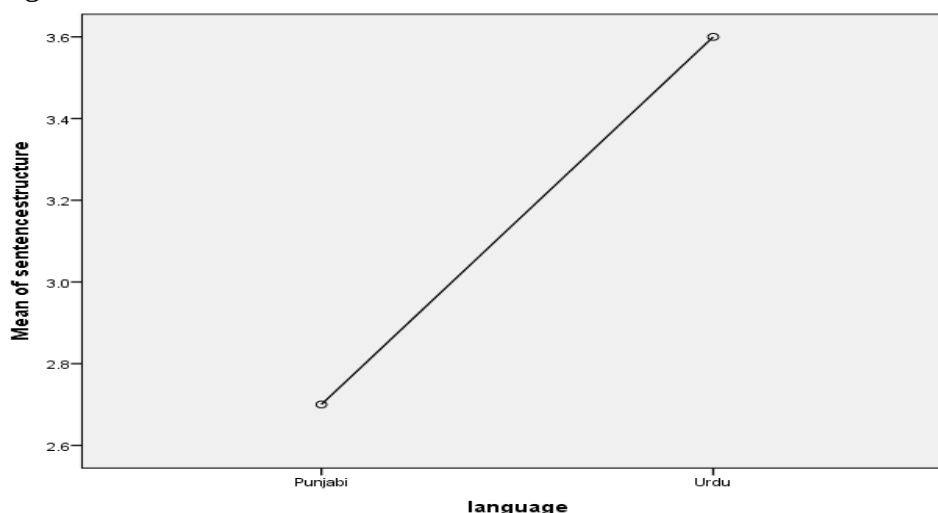


Fig 2: *Comparison of Punjabi and Urdu-speaking students in cohesion***Sentence Structure**

It was found that the performance of the students of Punjabi ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 0.988$) was less than the students of Urdu ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.814$) in the case of sentence structure. This indicates that Urdu speaking students have better control over sentence construction, grammar, syntactic and sentence formation, and they write more correctly and better constructed sentences. In the case of Punjabi speaking students, there is lower performance level and higher variability in sentence construction which shows that there is an inconsistencies in the construction of correct sentences. Urdu speaking students, on the other hand, are more uniform and consistent. Overall, the findings suggest that sentences are a relative difficulty area for Punjabi speaking students as compared to Urdu speaking students.

**Fig 3:** *Comparison of Punjabi and Urdu-speaking students in sentence structure***Paragraph Development**

The differences between the two groups are evident in the results obtained in the writing of paragraphs. Punjabi-speaking students ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.196$) scored lower than Urdu-speaking students ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.785$). This implies that Urdu students are able to present ideas more coherently in a paragraph, they are able to present topic sentences, supporting ideas and provide logical flow. Overall, there is greater variation among the performance of the Punjabi-speaking students and there are some inconsistencies in the students' paragraph organization skills. The students from Urdu-speaking community however have a lower standard deviation and standard error and hence the performance is more consistent. It can be concluded that Urdu speaking students can write paragraphs well as compared to the Punjabi speaking students.

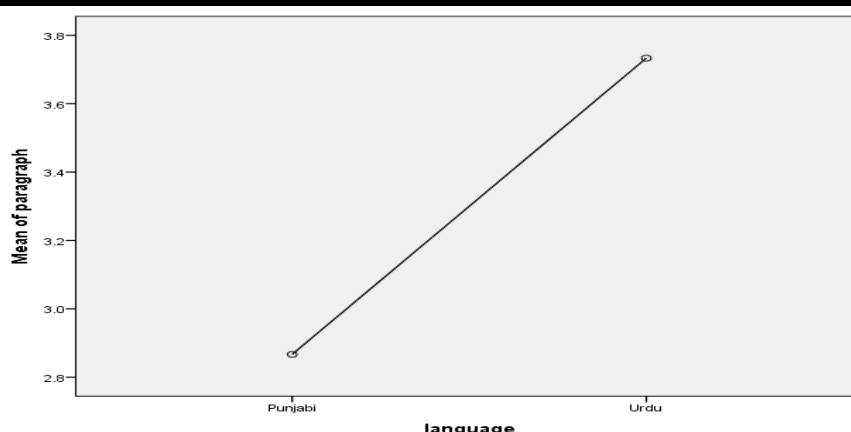


Fig 4: Comparison of Punjabi and Urdu-speaking students in paragraph development

Vocabulary

Results for the vocabulary are clearly different for the two groups. Punjabi-speaking students ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.221$) scored lower than Urdu-speaking students ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.794$). In other words, Urdu speaking students have better words, which enable them to use ideas more easily and effectively. The higher the standard deviation the more variable the group is, indicating that the students in the Punjabi group have a wide range of vocabulary knowledge. The Urdu speaking students, however demonstrate a more consistent performance with a lower standard deviation and standard error. Overall, the findings suggest that the Urdu learners were more successful and stable in their performance in vocabulary skills.

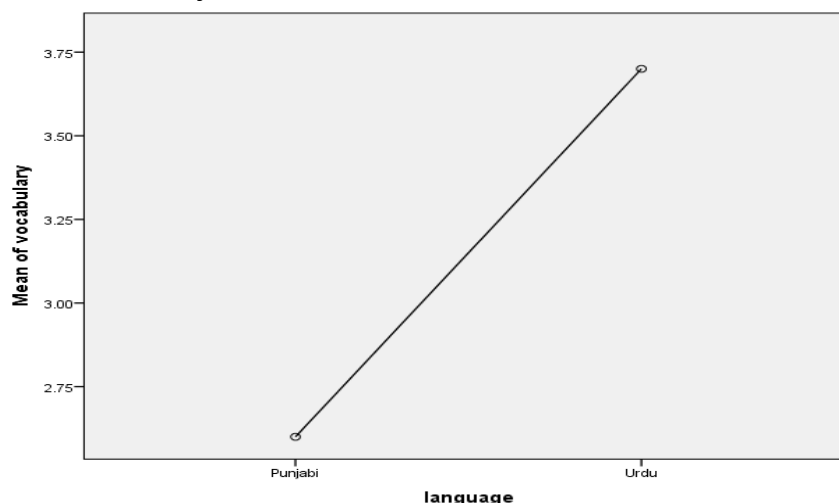


Fig 5: Comparison of Punjabi and Urdu speaking students in vocabulary

The descriptive analysis revealed that there existed significant difference between the level of writing of the Punjabi and Urdu speaking students. In the case of vocabulary, sentence structure, cohesion, paragraph development and mechanical accuracy, the mean scores of Urdu speaking students were higher than those of other students indicating that

their writing proficiency was better than the other students. This was because the performance of the Punjabi speaking students was not satisfactory and was not consistent.

The results of the overall study show that it is important to consider the language background that can impact students' writing skills when they write in the context of academic writing and that a certain style of instructional support is needed for linguistically diverse students.

Independent samples t-test

In the present study, the difference between two students Punjabi and Urdu has been compared in five different aspects of academic writing mechanical accuracy, cohesion, construction of sentences, paragraph writing and vocabulary using independent samples t-test. The components chosen were selected on the basis that they enable to evaluate the students' academic writing skills comprehensively ranging from the linguistic level to the level of the discourse. Before conducting the inferential analysis, all the assumptions for an independent samples t-test were explored.

For this purpose Levene's test (also known as equality of variance test) was applied to examine the homogeneity of variance between the two groups. All the variables in the study met the assumption as shown by the results of the Levene's test ($p > .05$). Therefore, an interpretation of the results of an independent samples t-test with equal variances seemed fitting. This facilitated the comparisons made between Punjabi and Urdu students as valid and sound.

The results showed that the mean difference between the two groups of students (Punjabi $M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.08$, and Urdu $M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.74$) was statistically significant, $t(51.22) = -5.41$, $p < .001$. This outcome indicates that the grade 12 Urdu students' performance in grammatical, punctuation, capitalization and spelling (mechanical aspects of writing) has been much superior compared to English students. However, the accuracy of Punjabi students was comparatively low in basic writing mechanics which means that overall writing skill was not developed in these students which may have an impact on their overall academic performance.

In terms of cohesion, a statistically significant difference was also observed between Punjabi students ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.15$) and Urdu students ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.88$), $t(58) = -3.29$, $p = .002$, with a mean difference of -0.87 . This discovery indicates that Urdu students were more effective in the organization of ideas in a logical connected manner. They were seen to write sentences with greater transition and have more cohesive devices within writing (conjunctions and linking words) in their writing tasks. There were, however, relatively low levels of cohesion and sense of cohesion among the Punjabi students, pointing to difficulties in maintaining coherence and cohesion in the text.

For sentence structure, the results indicated a significant difference between Punjabi students ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 0.99$) and Urdu students ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.81$), $t(58) =$

-3.85, $p < .001$, with a mean difference of -0.90. It means that, Urdu students had a stronger ability to apply the syntactic structure and the ability to produce syntactically correct and divers sentence structures. The language of the sentences set up by the Punjabi students, in comparison was lacking, possibly because they did not have enough practice in writing sentences in the formal academic style or simply because they were not aware of the conventions of formal academic writing. The difference between Punjabi students ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.20$) and Urdu students ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.79$) was also statistically significant in the area of paragraph writing, $t(58) = 3.32$, $p = .002$ with a mean difference of -0.867. The results showed that Urdu students were more skillful in organizing paragraphs in which they have supporting details and conclusion and have clear sentences. However, students of the Punjabi language did not appear to be able to arrange lengthy writings that make sense either. Likewise, with respect to the usage of words, the mean difference between the Punjabi students ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.22$) and Urdu students ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.79$) was statistically significant at $t(49.83) = -4.14$, $p < .001$. It shows that Urdu speaking students' academic lexicon was gradually becoming more and more suitable than that of Punjabi speaking students. The use of appropriate word choice in their writing was observed at a higher level for academic writing of all students as compared to the writing of the Punjabi students where students lacked vocabulary and less precise word use skills that will lead to poor understanding and quality of writing.

The following table presents the result of the independent sample t-test:

Table 1: *Independent t-test*

Variable	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> -value	Mean Difference
Mechanical Accuracy	-5.41	51.22	.001	-1.30
Cohesion	-3.29	58	.002	-0.87
Sentence Structure	-3.85	58	.001	-0.900
Paragraph	-3.32	58	.002	-0.867
Vocabulary	-4.14	49.83	.001	-1.10

Considered collectively, these results indicate that the groups are not just different in discrete areas, but in a very wide area of writing skills, such as mechanical accuracy, cohesion, sentence structure, paragraph writing, and vocabulary. The repeated trend of high scores indicates that there are systematic disparities between the groups, which can be explained by other factors like language background, level of exposure to education or level of proficiency in writing. These findings give a solid empirical foundation on how to discuss and interpret these findings in regard to the research goals of the study.

3.6. Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data was obtained through semi-structured interviews and in-depth information was gathered on the academic writing problems of first year college students with Urdu/Punjabi linguistic background. There were issues reported by the students in various aspects of academic writing: writing of introduction, vocabulary problems, grammar, sentence structure, paragraph organization, spelling/punctuation, and understanding the directions of the assignment. Lots of the participants also indicated that they were lacking in confidence when writing in English, because they were afraid of making grammar mistakes.

Others students reported difficulties with word usage and their formal academic language and this impacted their writing. Some participants reported that they previously had the ideas in their native language, then translated them into English (and often failed to translate them correctly, or not at all); however, now they translate the ideas into a different language. Pupils also reported that communicating their ideas clearly was also a challenge in English, even when they had an idea for them. Additionally, many participants indicated problems with paragraph cohesion, coherence, and/or organization. Furthermore, the findings of the study showed that students' exposure in English was less than optimal and they were not given opportunity to practice their academic writing. There was no feedback given for some participants to improve their ability to write by the teachers. Some emphasized the need for more experience with writing and proper guidance for writing to be more confident and accurate in writing academically. Overall, the qualitative findings indicate that the first-year college students' academic writing is being positively affected by their linguistic heritage, significant amount of English exposure and lack of formal academic writing instruction.

The findings of the interview answers of the Urdu and Punjabi speaking students indicated various difficulties related to academic writing such as lack of vocabulary, grammatical mistakes and problems in sentence and paragraph formation. The first language translation approach was used by many students and this negatively influenced the accuracy and fluency of the students' writing. Low confidence, fear of making mistakes, teacher feedback and understanding of academic writing conventions were also identified as significant factors. Overall results revealed the language and teaching

deficiencies, as well as the necessity of vocabulary enrichment, lessons on grammar and regular feedback to enhance students' academic writing skills.

4. Discussion

The current paper examined the academic writing difficulties of first-year college students of different linguistic backgrounds, i.e., Punjabi and Urdu speaking. The results showed that there were statistically significant differences between the two groups in the most important elements of academic writing such as sentence structure, use of vocabulary, cohesion and coherence, development of paragraph and mechanical accuracy. On the whole, the findings suggest that the language background is a significant factor that can affect academic writing performance of students in the English as a Second Language (ESL) setting. These results can be viewed in terms of Interlanguage Theory (1972) by Selinker that states that second language learners acquire a transitional language system that is conditioned by the first language. The mistakes that are seen in writing of learners are indications of this stage, wherein students use L1 structures when writing English but their writing incorporates grammatical errors, lack of syntactic control, and are not written in a target-like structure. In the same manner, the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957) states that it is the contrast between the first and second language that leads to learning problems. The sentence structure, word order and use of lexemic between Punjabi and Urdu and English differ, and these structural dissimilarities are replicated in the writing of students, especially on grammar and cohesion with systematic errors of L1 transfer.

The quantitative results of the independent samples t-test were able to validate the significant differences between the Punjab and Urdu-speaking students in all parts of writing. The most frequent patterns of challenge were as follows; sentence structure, restricted vocabulary use, poor cohesion and coherence, poor paragraph development, and mechanical and grammatical errors. Punjabi speaking students were found to have a relatively lower sentence building and grammatical accuracy. These trends indicate that writing problems are not accidental but rather there are systematic relationships between writing problems and the linguistic background and L1 transfer. These results are further supported by the qualitative findings which indicate that limited exposure to English language, absence of writing practice, using translation languages and high language transfer effects are the main cause of writing problems among the students. Students are more likely to use the rules of their native language when creating English sentences, and this has an impact on the clarity, structure, and use of lexicon.

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that first year college students are facing a lot of difficulties in academic writing because of the lack of prior exposure of the students to academic writing and insufficient academic writing preparation in higher secondary level. The problem areas for many participants became difficulties with the

formal requirements of academic writing such as cohesion and coherence, mechanical accuracy, paragraph writing, vocabulary and sentence structure. The results are consistent with the results of previous studies that found students' writing often lacked in the transition from school writing to academic writing (Bacha, 2012; Can, 2009). Both Lea and Street's studies centered on university students, but the present study revealed similar writing related difficulties among the college level learners. The Academic Literacies Theory gives a suitable context to this finding, because it suggests that students' writing practices are influenced by social, contextual and disciplinary expectations. Where students' previous education has not been well-prepared to meet the demands of academic writing, it is clear that adjusting one's writing to follow academic conventions is challenging for these students (Lea & Street, 2006).

Furthermore, language difficulties were also found to be a significant problem which affected students' academic writing. The participants encountered problems with grammar, word recognition, sentence writing, and ability to clearly communicate ideas which negatively impacted on their confidence and writing performance. The results of this study correspond with the earlier study conducted by Weaver (2006) and Ariyanti & Fitriana (2017) who found that academic writing skills were difficult to be mastered by students whose first language was not English. The previous studies have mainly focused on the university students while the current study identified similar problem areas among the first year college students. The Academic Literacies framework also corroborates the study results by highlighting that language abilities are only part of the picture in academic writing competence, as students' educational experiences and their understanding of academic discourse practices also play a role (Lea & Street, 2006). Based on this, the study recommends that support and guidance in academic writing should be provided for students to overcome language problems and academic conventions problems.

The study also emphasizes on the importance of socio-economic status (SES) in students' language learning experiences. Students at English-medium private schools are mostly from wealthy families, while Urdu-medium public schools cater to students from poorer families are noted. This difference in SES affects the quality of exposure to English and also the quantity. Learners from higher SES backgrounds have more opportunities for English input in school and at home in the media and through various resources, thus facilitating their development of English. Students from lower social economic status backgrounds on the other hand, have less exposure, primarily confined to the formal classroom teaching. Consequently, there are significant differences in literacy outcomes and language proficiency between learners due to differences in socio-economic statuses (Farukh & Vulchanova, 2015).

Pedagogically, the results indicate that better-organized and specific teaching in academic writing is required. Best strategies involve direct teaching of sentence structure,

paragraph, and academic word usage, as well as, guided practice, and frequent feedback. The use of process based writing instruction, peer and teacher scaffolding and collaborative learning activities can also assist students to develop coherent and accurate academic writing skills. Vocabulary development and less dependence on L1 with time can also be achieved by exposure to authentic English materials.

On the whole, the quantitative and qualitative findings are consistent and show that language background is an important factor affecting academic writing performance of first-year college students. The variations in the Punjabi and Urdu speaking learners can be largely attributed to Nonetheless, regardless of the useful results, the study has some limitations. This sample size was based on a small group of first-year college students, which can be a limitation to generalization. It concentrated only on the Punjabi and the Urdu speaking learners and not on other language people. The research was also cross-sectional, therefore, collecting data on an occasion and not on a developmental time frame. Further, the qualitative data was also limited and more detailed ways like a qualitative interview or classroom observation would yield more information. Finally, the paper affirms that linguistic background has a notable influence on academic writing performance of students and the need to incorporate linguistic awareness in ESL instructional practices in order to effectively overcome writing difficulties in students. The transfer of language, structural difference between the two languages and the lack of exposure to academic English and the Punjabi speaking students have a relatively higher difficulty in the major writing aspects.

The findings of the present work confirm the previous studies on the areas of academic writing problems such as grammar, vocabulary, sentence and cohesion for first year college students. Earlier research has also demonstrated that linguistic background is a critical determinant of students' writing in the L2 context (in multilingual and second language contexts).

The present study does shed a more nuanced light on these difficulties, however, by demonstrating that the nature of the difficulties is relatively consistent with the literature, but the magnitude and the clustering of them are different for students with different linguistic backgrounds. Some students may have a higher level of vocabulary ability and have lower level of accuracy in grammar, others may have a higher level of accuracy in grammar and lower level of vocabulary ability. Thus, the academic writing issues do not appear to be identical, but different based on the different levels of linguistic exposure, the previous academic background and language transfer effects.

The present study, therefore, builds on previous research that in most of its studies confirms the existence of academic writing difficulties among first year students but does not focus on contextual differences and intra-group differences, which are not adequately described in previous studies.

4.1. Limitation

The study has, however, some limitations even in the beneficial effects that it achieved. A small sample of first-year college students was used for this sample size, thus limiting the ability to generalize. It concentrated only on the Punjabis and the Urdu speaking learners and not on other language people. The research was also cross-sectional, therefore, collecting data on an occasion and not on a developmental time frame. Second, the qualitative data was also limited and a more detailed method such as a qualitative interview, or classroom observation would allow for more information. Last but not at least, the paper confirms that linguistic background plays a significant role in students academic writing performance and the importance of having linguistic awareness in ESL instructional practices to overcome the writing difficulties that students encounter in academic writing.

5. Recommendations

According to the results, it is suggested that academic writing support should be offered to first-year students with the specific focus on these students related to their various linguistic backgrounds. Teaching writing should not be based on grammar but instead on skills with higher orders like organization, coherence and critical thinking. Colleges ought to also implement foundation or bridging courses to enable students to adapt to the academic writing requirements in college. Moreover, the practice of regular feedback and writing should be included in the classroom activities as well. The curriculum developers are also invited to incorporate the elements of academic writing in different subjects. Further studies in the area should focus on the attitudes of teachers and look at the best instruction strategies to use to cater to the needs of linguistically diverse students.

5.1. Implications

The findings of this research study have implications for pedagogy and practice. They imply that teaching academic writing should not be taught as a homogenous group of students, but must take into consideration linguistic diversity and the diverse educational backgrounds of students. The study revealed that it is not only about grammatical correctness but that students have issue with the higher order writing skill. That means that there should be more accommodating and accommodative methods of teaching in universities. Furthermore the findings are applicable in that sense that there is need of early intervention in the school to college transition period. On the whole, the research helps to develop a deeper comprehension of the impact that linguistic diversity has on the development of academic writing

6. Conclusion

The study finds that the linguistic background has a significant impact on the academic writing of first year college students. It also points to significant teaching-

learning implications, such as explicit teaching of writing, enhancing opportunities for writing, and sensitivity to students' language backgrounds as a factor in classroom instruction. The study does, however, have its limitations in that with regard to the sample size and only concentrating on writing skills. The present study looks at the problem of academic writing by first-year college students with varying linguistic backgrounds and explores why, how, and what implications of these first-year college students' academic writing. Academic writing is regarded as one of the most important skills in higher education in which students are expected to clearly, formally, and logically communicate their thoughts. In first year students, however, there are problems in developing academic English writing skills because of the various background of language, educational experience and language exposure. The purpose of the study was to examine how a student's language background affects his/her academic writing ability in college and to determine the difficulties of the students in the process of writing in English.

Mixed methods research design was used for collecting both quantitative and qualitative information. The quantitative data were collected by the students' structured writing test and analyzed by independent samples t-test among the students of various linguistic groups. To gain insights into students' experiences and perceptions of academic writing, qualitative data was gathered from open-ended answers. The results showed that there were differences among students in terms of their academic writing skills, such as sentence structure, vocabulary, cohesion and coherence, paragraph development, and mechanical accuracy, among others, depending on their linguistic background. The major causes of students' writing difficulties identified in this study were language transfer, inadequate exposure to English, and inadequate writing practice.

The study results show that the academic writing of first year college students is significantly affected by their linguistic background. It also emphasizes significant pedagogical implications, such as the necessity of explicit instruction in writing, more opportunities for students to practice writing, and an awareness of students' linguistic background in the classroom. However, the study has drawbacks in terms of sample size and only examines writing skills.

The study is conclusive in that first year college students with different linguistic backgrounds have different kinds of writing problems in college. These are primarily about grammar, word choice, and the clear organization of ideas and the conventions of academic writing (including tone, structure and referencing). There are several factors that underlie the problems students experience in their studies, such as the differences in their previous learning, limited experience with academic English, and the influence of the first language on students' abilities to clearly express ideas in written form. The overall pattern indicates that students with reduced academic writing experience and knowledge of English

academic writing may experience greater challenges in producing a well structured and effective academic text.

From a pedagogical perspective, the results indicated that it would be beneficial to offer more pedagogic support and skill-based pedagogies. The key components of academic writing, such as the ability to generate paragraphs, construct a thesis and coherence in writing, must be explicitly taught to teachers. Feedback should be given on a regular basis, both positively and negatively, in a constructive manner and should center upon the students' weaknesses within the teaching and learning process. In addition, writing support interventions such as workshop, remedial intervention and guided practice activities are effective in improving students' writing skills. Engaging in peer review activities and collaborative writing assignments will allow students to learn from one another and be more at ease. Last but not least, the application of student-centered, linguistically sensitive teaching and learning academic writing may contribute significantly to resolving the problems mentioned above and to improve students' academic writing skills.

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