Research Article

Academic Writing Difficulties Among EFL Kurdish Undergraduates: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Article Info	Abstract
	Mastering writing in a foreign language remains one of the most formidable challenges for language learners. This study mainly seeks to elucidate the diffi-culties Kurdish English-majoring undergraduates encounter in academic writing. Although academic writing is a pivotal skill demonstrating students' ability to communicate ideas effectively and engage in critical thinking, EFL students often encounter significant difficulties in this domain. Utilizing thematic analysis, this investigation employed a qualitative method and used one-on-one interviews with 10 university instructors. The findings revealed that students' challenges pre-dominantly stem from linguistic, cultural, and psychological factors. Further, the difficulties were caused by the impact of educational background and psychological and motivational barriers, in response, instructors have proposed solutions including targeted instruction and practice, expanding vo-cabulary stock and the necessity for Feedback. This article discusses the implications of these findings for teaching and learning academic writing in the EFL Kurdish context and provides seminal recommendations for future research.

1. Introduction

Writing is widely regarded as a challenging skill to acquire and instruct as it transcends a mere cognitive task. It is considered a sophisticated mental process that necessitates careful thought, discipline, and concentration (Grami, 2010). Research on academic writing has been essential for teaching English to non-native speakers of the language. One possible explanation for this could be that academic writing becomes increasingly important as students advance in their studies. This study aims to identify the challenges that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students have when it comes to academic writing and the potential contributing factors at undergraduate studies.

Despite the essential role of academic writing in educational contexts, a significant number of EFL

learners encounter challenges that hinder their ability to express themselves clearly and academically. According to Al-Mubarak (2017), articles, punctuation, prepositions, irregular verbs, weak expressions, consistency paralleled structure, and use of verb tense are the major difficulties faced by students in academic writing. Addressing these difficulties is crucial for both students seeking improvement in writing skills and educators targeting to enhance instructional methodologies. This study proposes to understand why students struggle with these fundamental language aspects in the context of formal academic writing and offer practical strategies to empower individuals to express their ideas with clarity and confidence within the academic context. There is a notable research gap in terms of comprehensive investigations into the underlying factors contributing to these difficulties in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The present study therefore seeks to fill this gap by delving deeper into the subtle aspects of academic writing challenges faced by EFL learners, with a focus on identifying specific factors that may intensify these difficulties and proposing targeted solutions for improved pedagogical practices. Additionally, this study explores various factors contributing to EFL learners' challenges in academic writing, including linguistic, cognitive, and psychological aspects.

Studying academic writing difficulties is important because it sheds light on the difficulties students have while trying to express themselves clearly and academically. Abdulkareem (2013) demonstrates the essential impact academic writing has on second language learners' development. Similarly, by identifying the particular difficulties such as problems with vocabulary, grammar, and organization, focused plans of action and reliable resources can be created. In addition, this study is important for students who want to get better at writing as well as for teachers who want to improve their methods of instruction. To this end, a deeper comprehension of academic writing challenges assists in the development of feasible solutions that enable students to confidently and clearly express their thoughts in academic contexts. As such, this study aims to investigate the specific challenges that undergraduate students face in academic writing, particularly in terms of grammar, spelling, vocabulary use, and organization. Therefore, by interviewing professional teachers of academic writing, adopting appropriate procedures and tools will allow students to improve their writing skills. The overall objective is to help improve teaching strategies and the availability of writing techniques for this particular population. The study specifically addresses the following research questions:

1.   What challenges do EFL learners confront in academic writing?

2. What are the underlying factors that potentially contribute to the difficulties faced by EFL learners in academic writing?

3. What are the most effective strategies to overcome academic writing difficulties among EFL Kurdish learners?

2. Review of Literature

Academic writing is a type of writing that is formal and systematic, containing study, analysis, interpretation, and discussion, and is frequently intended to advance knowledge in a specific field (Bailey, 2014). Academic writing is also one of the most challenging skills for many EFL students to learn worldwide. Unlike other types of writing, academic writing is a cognitive process and an intellectual result, demanding linguistic competence, practice, and cognitive effort (Al Fadda, 2012). It differs significantly from general writing in its structure, purpose, and conventions. While general writing may simply record information, academic writing requires coherent organization of ideas, critical analysis, and evidence-based argumentation (Barasa, 2024; Gurung, 2022). After reviewing several studies, it became evident that undergraduate students in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq are not the only ones struggling to develop their academic writing abilities; students worldwide face similar challenges. This literature review aims to identify the key challenges faced by EFL students in academic writing. It explores potential strategies for overcoming these difficulties and discusses the implications for teaching and learning.

2.1. Difficulties in Academic Writing

Writing, particularly academic writing, presents significant challenges for EFL learners. Al Mubarak (2017) conducted a study using a descriptive method to gain deeper insights into the challenges students face in academic writing. He emphasized that academic writing is a challenging skill to master, and many students struggle to develop adequate proficiency, often impacting their academic performance, as noted by Oshima and Hogue (2006). Abdulkareem (2013) confirms that academic writing has a fundamental impact on learners' progress in a second language. Likewise, Grabe and Kaplan (1996) believed that writing never comes instantly; it requires effort and practice. Mastery of academic writing skills is often correlated with consistent practice and refinement of techniques.

EFL students face a range of challenges in achieving proficiency in academic writing (Tsai & Shang, 2010), and students may experience anxiety when asked to write in English because they are concerned about making mistakes with vocabulary and grammar. Research on academic writing difficulties extends

beyond grammatical and linguistic challenges. Students often struggle with organizing their ideas, developing coherent thesis statements, and refining their drafts through effective revision and editing processes (Chokwe, 2013). Moreover, Hyland (2013), in his book, Second Language Writing, highlights that many EFL students struggle with sentence structure and vocabulary use, which are key components of academic writing. He explains that learners often find it difficult to construct complex sentences and use appropriate academic vocabulary, which in turn affects the clarity and sophistication of their written work (Hyland, 2013). Likewise, Mustafa and Shahab (2024) found that students made several grammatical, spelling, and capitalization errors. They also reported that the students struggled to write effective introduction and conclusion paragraphs in their academic writing tasks. Although students happen to commit these academic writing mistakes, they also commit various types of errors in the use of the English article system such as substitution, omission, and addition (Omar & Saeed, 2024).

Hairul (2023) highlights difficulties in developing writing ideas, grammar, and understanding feedback among EFL students in West Kalimantan, indicating these challenges adversely affect their essay quality. Batubara and Fithriani (2023) report that Indonesian students struggle primarily with language, structure, and content, while also noting issues related to self-efficacy and motivation. Similarly, Aldabbus and Almansouri (2022) find that students at the University of Benghazi encounter difficulties in selecting appropriate vocabulary, thesis development, and organizing ideas, exacerbated by low language proficiency and limited writing practice.

2.2. Psychological Barriers in Academic Writing

Psychological barriers, such as writing apprehension, low self-esteem, and anxiety, are significant factors hindering EFL students' ability to succeed in academic writing. As Dörnyei (2005) emphasizes, these emotional factors restrict students' motivation and engagement in language acquisition. Writing apprehension, for instance, arises when students feel overwhelmed by the task of writing in a second language, fearing mistakes in grammar or vocabulary use. This fear of failure can significantly hinder students from expressing themselves freely and may even lead to avoidance of writing tasks (Hyland, 2013). Al-Mubarak (2017) further suggests that negative feedback exacerbates this issue, making students hesitant to take risks or experiment with more advanced structures, as they fear criticism or failure. These psychological barriers can profoundly impact students' writing fluency, coherence, and willingness to revise their drafts, ultimately stalling their academic progress.

Moreover, Altaeb (2018) claims that the fear of making mistakes, especially after receiving negative feedback, restricts students' creativity and ability to express their ideas confidently. This creates a cycle where students continually hold back from making linguistic improvements, further limiting their growth as writers. Therefore, addressing writing apprehension and providing a supportive, constructive environment is essential for improving EFL students' academic writing skills.

2.3. Cognitive Barriers in Academic Writing

In addition to psychological factors, cognitive barriers, such as cognitive load and L1 interference, play a significant role in academic writing challenges for EFL learners. Cognitive load refers to the mental effort required to process and integrate new language rules and ideas. Sweller's (1988) Cognitive Load Theory explains that excessive mental demands can overwhelm students, resulting in slower learning and reduced writing performance. When students are required to simultaneously manage multiple language structures—such as vocabulary, grammar, and syntax—they may struggle to produce coherent and fluent writing. This cognitive overload is particularly evident in EFL learners, who must juggle both the content of their writing and the complex demands of second-language grammar and sentence structure.

Moreover, L1 interference significantly complicates the writing process for EFL students. Krashen's (1984) "Monitor Theory" suggests that interference from the first language can lead to errors in L2 production. Kurdish learners, for example, often face difficulties due to the syntactic and morphological differences between Kurdish and English. Kurdish typically follows a Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) structure, while English uses a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) structure. This mismatch leads to frequent syntactic errors as students apply their L1 structures when writing in English (Muhammed, 2017). Additionally, Kurdish relies more heavily on bound morphemes, whereas English uses more free morphemes that can stand alone as words (Amin, 2017). These differences result in mistakes in word formation and grammatical errors when students try to apply English grammar rules.

Furthermore, the cognitive challenge posed by these differences in syntax and morphology adds significant cognitive load, as learners must constantly shift between their L1 and L2 rules. This cognitive burden can inhibit students' ability to produce high-quality academic writing, especially when they are unfamiliar with English academic conventions and structures.

2.4. Cultural and Contextual Factors

Although substantial research has examined the challenges EFL learners face in academic writing,

less attention has been given to the impact of cultural and contextual factors. This gap in the literature limits understanding of how cultural differences shape academic writing challenges. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) emphasized the underexplored role of these factors, particularly in non-Western contexts like Asia. Exploring how different cultural educational systems and pedagogical approaches influence writing difficulties can guide the development of more culturally sensitive instructional strategies and targeted interventions to support EFL learners. In this regard, EFL students often perceive various cultural impacts on their writing, including organizational structure, argumentation, and voice (Bhowmik et al., 2021). Furthermore, high-context and low-context cultures shape writing patterns in significant ways. For example, low-context culture affects both English and Chinese compositions of EFL learners, with the former emphasizing directness and clarity, while the latter may involve more indirect communication styles (Zou, 2019). These cultural distinctions not only influence how students approach academic writing but also affect their ability to adapt to the expectations of Western academic environments. Therefore, an understanding of these cultural influences is essential in developing pedagogical strategies that account for diverse cultural norms and enhance students' academic writing skills.

2.5. Strategies to Overcome Difficulties

Researchers have offered various recommendations to assist learners in overcoming these difficulties and improving their writing. One common recommendation is instruction that incorporates practice, as teaching learners the principles of academic writing is most effective when paired with opportunities to apply those principles through practical exercises. Hayes (2012) emphasizes the importance of practice to internalize writing skills taught in instructional settings. Similarly, Kochubei (2021) highlights that regular, stage-by-stage work on academic writing promotes the development of critical thinking and analytical skills. Creating logical outlines, organizing information effectively, and focusing on text cohesion and coherence can further enhance essay quality. In addition to instruction and practice, feedback is another essential component for improving learners' academic writing skills, it helps them discover their areas of weakness and better understand difficult concepts. Additionally, it plays a crucial role in addressing these difficulties, with students generally preferring varied feedback types including corrections, comments, and suggestions (Rofik et al., 2023). Kileri and Listyani (2021) addressed that, student perceptions of teacher feedback vary, with some viewing it positively and others negatively. To enhance academic writing skills, researchers recommend scaffolded feedback approaches (Almarwani, 2020). In addition, expanding vocabulary stock

is a fundamental strategy for overcoming academic writing difficulties faced by EFL learners. A robust vocabulary allows students to convey complex ideas, engage with academic texts more effectively, and express themselves with clarity and precision. Academic writing poses significant difficulties for EFL learners, with vocabulary limitations being a key issue and students struggle with choosing appropriate academic words, developing thesis statements, organizing ideas, and writing coherent paragraphs, (Aldabbus & Almansouri, 2022; Mustafa et al., 2022). Finally, understanding these difficulties and effective strategies can positively impact the learning process and help students improve their academic writing skills and increasing their confidence in tackling complex literacy tasks across disciplines.

2.6. Theoretical Framework

This research draws upon Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) (Sweller,1988) and sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978). CLT implies that academic writing is a cognitively demanding activity and that students frequently struggle with these tasks since their working memory can only manage a limited amount of information at once. Language difficulties may cause EFL learners to have a higher cognitive load, which makes it more difficult for the students to master academic writing's form and content. Likewise, Sociocultural Theory offers insights into how the first CLT emphasizes learners' social and cultural settings, such as their educational background, exposure to academic discourse, and interactions with peers and instructors, all have an impact on how well they develop their academic writing abilities. The Affective Filter Hypothesis of (Krashen, 1984) argues that learners' emotional states such as anxiety, motivation, or confidence can greatly impact their ability to acquire and produce language. Finally, the process writing approach divides writing into stages: prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. Writing is seen not as a product but as a process where a model of writing as a problem-solving process has been laid out by Flower and Hayes (1981). It included planning, transferring thoughts into text, and reviewing what was written.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This research utilized a qualitative research design to investigate academic writing difficulties among EFL Kurdish undergraduate learners in universities in the Kurdistan Region. The purpose of selecting this approach is to explore the experiences and perspectives of participants in-depth, allowing for a rich understanding of the underlying factors contributing to these difficulties. Moreover, after reviewing relevant literature on teaching writing, and English as a foreign language more generally, it was determined that one-

on-one interviews would be the most effective method for gathering the necessary data needed for this study. In addition, using semi-structured interviews encouraged participants to share their experiences. This approach is a key feature of qualitative research, as it not only provides flexibility to explore unexpected themes but also captures the complexity and context of participants' experiences.

3.2. Participants

This study involved ten English teachers, including two women and eight men, from two nationalities: Kurdish and American. The participants were chosen based on their experience and expertise in teaching academic writing. Specifically, all participants held either master's or doctoral degrees and had a minimum of two years of university-level teaching experience. Their ages ranged from 28 to 61, providing a broad spectrum of perspectives. Three of the participants were teaching at a private university, while the remaining seven were from two different public universities in the Kurdistan Region. These universities were selected because they volunteered to participate. While these are not the only universities in the region, their inclusion supports the research objectives by offering insights from institutions with well-established English programs and ensuring a variety of institutional contexts. On the other hand, the gender distribution wasn't balanced, this was not an intentional decision. The selection prioritized academic qualifications and teaching experience over gender balance. However, this imbalance may limit the generalizability of the findings.

Including teachers from both Kurdish and American backgrounds allowed the study to capture both local and international perspectives on teaching academic writing. Additionally, these demographics align with the study's objective of investigating academic writing difficulties in a context incorporating diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. The participants' expertise was determined based on their academic qualifications (master's or doctoral degrees) and their teaching experience of at least two years at the university level.

3.3. Data Collection Procedures

To collect data for this study, we obtained formal permission to work with the English Departments of three universities within the region. Specific criteria guided the selection of these universities to ensure alignment with the research objectives. The institutions included one private university and two public universities, chosen to represent a diverse range of institutional contexts and to provide valuable insights into the academic writing difficulties faced in both public and private higher education settings.

These universities were specifically selected for their well-established English programs and their faculty's willingness to participate voluntarily in the study. While they do not encompass all universities in the region, their inclusion was deliberate, as they are known for their experienced faculty and robust English departments. The letter was designed to provide this assurance to the respondents as well as appeal to the lecturers to spare their valuable time for an in-depth interview. This recruitment strategy aimed to gather insights from experienced Kurdish university lecturers who have extensive involvement in teaching EFL students, academic writing courses, in particular. Their perspectives are essential for understanding the academic writing difficulties faced by learners. Additionally, to prepare the participants for the interviews, the participants were given an information sheet about the purpose of the study, a consent form, and the interview questions asked during the interviews, and provided with information on ethical considerations. To maintain the anonymity of their responses, we detailed how the data collected would be managed and safeguarded. Each participant provided informed consent before the interview. We informed them that they could discontinue the interview at any point they wish. Finally, the collected data was kept protected and prepared for data analysis. Recorded interviews were transcribed using the audio recordings, stored in a safe place and were prepared for the purpose of the analysis.

Moreover, this section aims to provide an overview of the framework and procedure for conducting the interviews. The focus is on explaining how the interviews were designed, structured, and carried out to address the research questions, an eleven-item semi-structured interview protocol was developed to specifically explore the research questions outlined in this study. It included demographic questions. The first four questions focused on demographic details, including participants' age, gender, qualifications, and teaching experience. These questions, while more structured and standardized, were included to provide a foundational understanding of the participants' backgrounds. This demographic context was critical for analyzing how individual characteristics, such as years of teaching experience or educational qualifications, might influence their responses to the research questions. Seven items were specifically designed to address the two main research questions of the study. The logic in the choice of using a semi-structured interview protocol was to allow the teachers, who possess extensive knowledge and experience, to have a platform to share their insights and provide a deeper understanding of how their expertise was applied and how it evolved throughout their teaching process. To ensure diverse perspectives and accommodate practical considerations, two data collection tools were utilized: face-to-face interviews and WhatsApp.

The decision to employ these methods was driven by a combination of practical constraints, participant preferences, and the research objective of creating a flexible and inclusive data collection framework, Face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants who were available for in-person meetings, allowing for richer, immediate interaction and enabling deeper exploration of the research questions. On the other hand, the participants who opted to respond via WhatsApp due to scheduling conflicts or geographical distance, which made in-person meetings impractical. To ensure consistency in the depth and quality of data collected through these two methods, specific measures were taken. The same semi-structured interview protocol was used for both Face-to-face and WhatsApp interviews, ensuring that all participants were asked the same core questions. For WhatsApp interviews, participants were encouraged to provide detailed responses, and those who responded with voice messages were prompted to elaborate where necessary. These voice messages were then transcribed and analyzed in the same manner as the recorded face-to-face interviews. Additionally, telephone interviews were conducted with some participants and the interviews were recorded. To address the potential differences in the richness of data collected from face-to-face and WhatsApp responses, the analysis ensured an equitable representation of themes and patterns across both formats. Transcriptions were carefully reviewed to maintain depth and coherence, while triangulation validated the findings by comparing insights from both methods, minimizing biases and enhancing the study's credibility. This approach allowed for a more inclusive dataset, capturing diverse perspectives while maintaining analytical consistency and validity.

3.4. Data Analysis

To analyze the qualitative data, we utilized thematic analysis that follows a systematic six-step process (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Before commencing the data analysis, all interviews were transcribed and reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy and prevent any errors, then analyzing the data started through employing the six steps of thematic analysis. Moreover, to address differences in the richness of data between face-to-face interviews and WhatsApp responses, this study employed strategies to ensure consistency in analysis. Face-to-face interviews, with their added depth from non-verbal cues, were meticulously transcribed to capture contextual nuances, while concise WhatsApp responses were supplemented with follow-up questions for clarity and completeness. The initial step involved familiarization, during which the interview data were thoroughly read and comprehended. Subsequently, coding was conducted, wherein the interview content was accurately extracted and systematically labelled with relevant codes

representing key concepts. The next phase involved generating themes, wherein related codes grouped to form overarching topics. Subsequently, themes went thorough review and refinement to ensure coherence with the research questions. Following this, each theme was precisely defined and named to capture its essence. Finally, the findings were translated into a comprehensive written report. In the present study, the identified themes provided a clear understanding of the academic writing difficulties faced by undergraduate EFL students.

Additionally, the researchers preferred to employ reflexive thematic analysis to examine the interview data gathered following the ten key semi-structured interviews. A common method for identifying themes and patterns in a set of qualitative data is reflexive thematic analysis.

4. Findings

In this section, through interviews with lecturers, we identified several difficulties EFL learners face in academic writing. Additionally, we explored strategies recommended by lecturers to address these difficulties and enhance EFL learners' writing proficiency. Based on the results from the thematic analysis, EFL learners notably face numerous difficulties in academic writing. Our findings revealed that several themes and subthemes were identified. As such, the themes are difficulties in EFL academic writing, factors influencing these difficulties and effective strategies for overcoming writing difficulties. The sub-themes of difficulties in EFL academic writing are language proficiency difficulties, first language interference, cultural and educational influences, and complicated writing process stages. On the other hand, the sub-themes of factors influencing these difficulties are psychological barriers, lack of motivation, and the impact of educational background. Moreover, the sub-themes of effective strategies for overcoming writing difficulties identified various opportunities. These were organized into specific difficulties and distinct themes as potential solutions to address the issues. The key solutions include the need for instruction and practice, the necessity of feedback, and the expansion of vocabulary.

4.1. Difficulties in EFL academic writing:

The difficulties faced by EFL learners in academic writing can be categorized into four sub-themes: language proficiency difficulties, first language interference, cultural and educational influences, and complicated writing process stages as discussed in the following sections.

4.1.1. Difficulties in Language Proficiency

Language proficiency difficulties emerged as a prominent theme across the interviews. According to the findings of this study, these difficulties constitute the most significant difficulties in achieving academic writing proficiency among undergraduate students. The findings show that students often struggled with mechanical aspects of writing, particularly grammar issues like using incorrect verb tenses and misplacing parts of speech. Lecturers also pointed out the influence of students' first language on their English writing, which led to spelling mistakes and a limited vocabulary. Together, these difficulties highlighted three main areas of difficulty: vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. Limited vocabulary made it hard for students to express more complex ideas, while grammatical and syntactic errors disrupted the clarity and flow of their writing. Addressing these interconnected difficulties is essential to help students improve their overall writing proficiency and produce more accurate and coherent academic work. Addressing these problems, Participant 10 stated that:

> "English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners often encounter various difficulties in academic writing, stemming from differences in linguistic structures, cultural backgrounds, and educational systems. These are some common difficulties with examples: Grammar and Syntax: example: Incorrect use of verb tenses, such as using present tense when past tense is required, or vice versa. For instance, "Yesterday, I am going to the library" instead of "Yesterday, I went to the library". Vocabulary: example: Limited vocabulary may lead to the use of less precise or inappropriate words. For instance, using "big" instead of "significant" or "contribute" instead of "enhance"

In addition, another statement mentioned by Participant 2, highlighted several common academic writing difficulties, specifically "Noting the transposition of parts of speech, spelling errors, and the use of incorrect tenses."

4.1.2. First Language Interference:

Learners frequently transfer grammar rules from their L1 to their L2, especially when the languages differ greatly. It can be addressed that Kurdish language rules generally differ greatly from English language rules which results in mistakes in areas like word order and tense, which are frequent difficulties for students whose native tongue has a distinct syntactic system. To add to this, some of the EFL learners' errors are committed by misusing grammatical rules of singular and plural markers, and they seem not to

be able to differentiate between them properly. The factor of L1 influence can explain this. Moreover, Participants 1 and 9 reported the following:

Participant 1 shared: "The problem can be first language intrusion, not thinking in English, thinking in the first language and resorting to translation" In addition, participant 9 added "Over-implementing and generalizing the first language rules and syntactic structures in the use of the second or Foreign language writings."

This indicates that differences in language interference could make difficulties for learners and learners will restore themselves to their first language to express their ideas. Moreover, differences in word order (SOV in Kurdish vs. SVO in English), and tense usage, the Kurdish language does not use articles ("a," "an," "the") in the same way English does, often causing Kurdish learners to omit them or use them incorrectly, Kurdish has different rules for pluralization additionally does not have as many tense distinctions as English.

Besides, L1 can have a positive or negative impact, especially on vocabulary and grammar. Positive impact can, on the one hand, aid in the learning of a second language, such as English. Conversely, though, it can impede English language acquisition and result in mistakes. By examining the instructor's ideas, it becomes evident that EFL learners face significant difficulties in academic writing due to the influence of their first language and the complexity of English grammatical structures.

4.1.3. Cultural and Educational Influences

Understanding the writing difficulties faced by EFL learners requires considering the influence of their cultural and educational backgrounds. as illustrated by Participant 5:

"It is dependent on the country background of the EFL learner. In Kurdistan, for example, the concepts of capitalization and punctuation are foreign. This causes some issues in writing acquisition. Another common issue is the understanding of paragraph structure (e.g., main idea, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences). Along with this, the focus on one main idea in a paragraph is often hard to learn, but this could also be said of native English learners."

By examining this opinion, it can be concluded that the cultural and educational context significantly influences EFL learners' difficulties in academic writing. Specifically, differences in linguistic conventions, such as punctuation and capitalization, and the structure of written discourse contribute to these difficulties.

4.1.4. Complicated Writing Process Stages

Analysis of the responses provided by the study participants highlights key difficulties in the writing process. The findings reveal that most EFL learners face significant difficulties in various stages of writing, including planning their writing, drafting coherent texts, and revising their work effectively. Throughout the writing process, EFL students encounter numerous difficulties, particularly during the planning, drafting, and revision phases. Instructors emphasize the difficult nature of academic writing, focusing especially on the difficulties of planning. It was reported that the stages of writing can be condensed into three stages of writing, i.e., planning or prewriting, drafting, and revising. The difficulties encountered at each stage of academic writing contribute significantly to the overall complexity of the process. Participants frequently reported that the inability to systematically generate and organize ideas undermines the coherence of their final written product. Besides, it highlights it as a common difficulty in academic writing experiences. Participant 2 pointed out that:

"Planning seems to be the most difficult. The understanding that taking the time to play. Will not only result in higher quality, more coherent writing but also make the writing process easier"

Similarly, Participant 3 expressed: "Planning is the most difficult phase and that is due to the brainstorming and many disordered ideas in the mind of the learner in which he/she cannot decide what to choose and how to do it."

Additionally, compounding the overall struggle, Participant 2 articulated, "In my opinion, all three aspects prove challenging for EFL learners. Still, I can say that planning is the hardest and most challenging since they lack good training on it."

On the other hand, another teacher added to this opinion that:

"Planning is a definite challenge. To get a student to break down a general premise into three or four smaller aspects is very hard to do. Giving them a written paper and asking them to find the three subsections within can be done because something tangible is in front of them. But give them a general concept or an abstract idea to write about. For example, the potential for job creation in their hometowns and they lack the skill to break down that concept into manageable pieces."

Ultimately, according to the data collected, 7 out of 10 lecturers think that planning is the most challenging phase in academic writing because effective planning is crucial for successful writing.

4.2. Factors Influencing These Difficulties

Several factors hinder the learning of EFL students in academic writing as discussed below. These include psychological barriers, lack of motivation, and the impact of educational background on their skills and experiences. Each of these factors is explored to understand their role in shaping learners' writing difficulties.

4.2.1. Psychological Barriers

The qualitative data analysis reveals that most of the participants in the interviews shared the view that psychological factors are among the reasons for EFL learners' difficulties in academic writing. These barriers include self-esteem issues of low confidence whereby the students' fear of making mistakes decreases their ability to fully engage in the writing processes as pointed out by Participant 8:

"A lot of learners struggle with the fear of making mistakes. They're nervous about getting things wrong or being judged, and that anxiety can make them hesitant to take risks when they're writing. Additionally, instead of expressing themselves freely, they might play it safe and end up with writing that feels a bit flat or overly cautious."

Besides, Participant 9 stated that: "Psychological factors such as self-esteem and confidence are a great factor for having difficulties". The observation made by Participants 8 and 9 on students' fear of making mistakes and the unwillingness to take risks is similar to the phenomenon known as 'writing apprehension,' Addressing this requires a supportive learning environment where students feel safe to make mistakes and receive constructive feedback. Encouraging a growth mindset, where mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning and improvement, can help students build confidence and reduce anxiety.

On the other hand, Participant 5 noted that "Due to anxiety, students often feel unwilling to revise, edit, and proofread their writing and by this, I think they miss the opportunity for improvement". Revising, editing, and proofreading are crucial steps in the writing process that allow students to refine their ideas, correct errors, and enhance the overall quality of their work. However, for many EFL learners, the fear of finding numerous mistakes during revision can be overwhelming.

Ultimately, Examining the qualitative data reveals that psychological factors, such as fear of making mistakes, low self-esteem, and anxiety, significantly contribute to the academic writing difficulties faced by EFL learners. These difficulties hinder students' engagement in the writing process and prevent them from improving.

4.2.2. Lack of Motivation

Furthermore, learners' ability to write well in English can be poorly affected by literal issues with translation and an oversimplification of native language rules resulting from the influence of their first languages and cultural backgrounds. These difficulties are further compounded by a lack of motivation to engage in learning and writing. Students who lack enthusiasm for writing often find it difficult to grasp fundamental writing skills and maintain consistent effort. As a result, their development in academic writing is hindered this was highlighted by Participant 4 "The biggest issue is lack of motivation to learn. Those who desire to learn are very capable of acquiring the skill". The lack of motivation highlights the need for targeted strategies to build confidence, incentives, and a positive approach to academic writing in a second language.

4.2.3. The Impact of Educational Background

The educational background of learners significantly impacts their ability to develop in a second language. Many EFL learners struggle with various aspects of academic writing due to their diverse educational experiences. Students from educational systems that emphasize multiple-choice exams over writing tasks often face difficulties constructing coherent essays or paragraphs as was highlighted by Participant 2

> "Because, in our country, where we write in our mother tongue, writing is less important, and the government gave more importance to multiple choice type of exam. So, students have reduced their ability to write, which has made them unable to write in foreign languages or a second language."

A similar sentiment was echoed by Participant 2, noting:

> "Writing is not emphasized compared to multiple-choice tests. As a result, students might not develop strong writing skills, and their ability to write well in foreign or second languages may also be affected by this lack of emphasis on writing in their mother tongue."

Considering that, students study mainly for multiple-choice tests, they consequently lose the ability to structure their work, think critically, and express their opinions and arguments in a written form. Similarly, multiple-choice examinations are designed to test students' knowledge of the content under review, the kind of knowledge that is rote knowledge rather than critical thinking skills which are vital in writing. on the other hand, it offers limited feedback.

4.3. Suggestions to Overcoming Writing Difficulties

Numerous significant strategies have been proposed to be effective solutions that students have in

their writing. These strategies are divided into three key classifications that are the need for instruction and practice, the necessity for Feedback and expanding vocabulary as found below.

4.3.1. The Need for Instruction and Practice

Complete and organized instruction is essential for improving students' performance in academic writing, additionally, Overcoming academic writing difficulties requires deliberate practice, Through consistent, targeted practice and instruction, students can gradually overcome these difficulties and enhance their overall writing abilities as reported by Participant 3:

"My recommendations are for both the teachers and learners, for the teacher should explain the steps of writing in a very clear way, for the learner should practice writing drafts before submitting the final version of the assignment."

Also, participant 7 addressed that: "Practice, practice, practice. Exercises that require using the skills needed from planning to drafting to revising." By examining these ideas, it becomes clear that a structured approach combined with persistent practice is key to achieving proficiency in academic writing.

4.3.2. Necessity of Feedback

Based on the results of the data feedback is a crucial component in overcoming the difficulties that students have in their academic writing, and it will help them to identify the areas of weakness and helping students understand complex concepts, improve themselves and correct errors, Participant 4 added: "Offer constructive feedback on assignments, highlighting both strengths and areas for improvement. Moreover, specific comments can guide students in making targeted revisions". Thus, a structured approach to providing feedback can significantly enhance students' academic writing skills and foster their overall growth.

4.3.3. Expanding Vocabulary

A rich vocabulary allows students to express their ideas more effectively, and students can go beyond the basic language to convey complex thoughts this will make learners writing more engaging and professional, participant 10 added that "memorizing as much advanced vocabulary items as possible makes better writing" While participant 2 noted the importance of "Daily teaching them formal vocabularies and the way they are used in a context for any subject". Thus, incorporating advanced vocabulary into daily learning practices is essential for enhancing the quality and effectiveness of students' academic writing.

The primary goal of this contribution was to investigate the difficulties that English as a foreign language (EFL) learners have when they write academically and any underlying causes that may be involved

in these struggles in the context of Kurdistan. This section explains the primary results of students' writing difficulties. Besides, the study's findings revealed that the participants highlighted the most significant difficulties and factors of the challenges facing students studying in Kurdistan. Despite these difficulties, there are numerous ways to overcome these difficulties.

5. Discussion

The primary goal of this contribution was to investigate the difficulties that EFL learners have when writing academically and any underlying causes that may be involved in these struggles in the context of the Kurdistan Region. To this end, this section explains the primary results and compares the current study's findings and those of past research on students' writing difficulties. The findings of the study revealed that the participants highlighted significant difficulties facing students studying in Kurdish universities in the Kurdistan Region. Despite these difficulties, there were numerous ways suggested to overcome these difficulties.

The study's findings highlighted a common struggle among students which is handling grammatical rules, limited vocabulary and issues with syntax. Additionally, depending on the perspectives of the lecturers who participated in the present study, it was revealed that students' most frequent problems while writing are incorrect verb tense usage and transposing parts of speech. Lecturers addressed the impact of L1 interference on EFL writing difficulties, spelling errors, and limited vocabulary, among other difficulties. The same problem was brought up by other academics in various contexts, and numerous studies have proven that writing mechanics and grammar are the main issues influencing students' writing quality. These researchers are the ones who pointed up similar difficulties (Al Fadda, 2012; Al-Khairy, 2013; Mubarak, 2017; Mustafa & Shahab, 2024). The current study also addresses that the results of this study contrasted with the findings of Aldabbus and Almansouri (2022) who addressed in their study findings that both graduate and undergraduate students have little or no difficulties in using grammar and mechanics of writing such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization.

Another issue that students have is the impact of L1 on EFL writing difficulties and not thinking in English. Additionally, applying and extending the grammatical rules and sentence structures from the first language to writing in the second or foreign language. The Kurdish language has differences in word order (SOV in Kurdish vs. SVO in English), and tense usage where the Kurdish language has five tenses: combined present/future, past simple, past continuous, present perfect, and the far past/past perfect. While the

English language has 12 tenses. In contrast, the Kurdish language does not have as many tense distinctions as the English language, particularly in expressing perfect and continuous aspects, the Kurdish language does not use articles ("a," "an," "the") in the same way English does, often causing Kurdish learners to omit them or use them incorrectly. According to Karim and Nassaji (2013), to communicate their thoughts, students usually go back to using their native tongue. When a learner's proficiency in the target language is insufficient, they may turn to their L1 to communicate their ideas. The same result was found by (Ellis, 2008; Gass & Selinker, 2001; Odlin, 1990). They argue that learners' native language structures can significantly influence their L2 output, leading to errors that reflect their first language grammar and vocabulary.

On the other hand, understanding the writing difficulties faced by EFL learners requires considering the influence of their cultural and educational backgrounds. This perspective was poignantly illustrated by Participant Number 5, This observation highlights that the cultural and educational context significantly influences EFL learners' difficulties in academic writing. Specifically, differences in linguistic conventions, such as punctuation and capitalization, and the structure of written discourse contribute to these difficulties. it becomes evident that EFL learners from backgrounds where written conventions differ significantly from those in English may struggle more with academic writing tasks. The same results were addressed by Rezig (2015) EFL learners' cultural and educational backgrounds shape their academic writing abilities, as textbooks do not provide enough opportunities to discuss or explain cultural concepts. In contrast to this (zheng, 2013) mentions that the cultural and educational backgrounds of Chinese and Korean EFL learners do not significantly affect their ability to structure English argumentative essays, though their content is still influenced by cultural factors.

Additionally, most of the lecturers stated that another difficulty in academic writing is in the phases of the writing process, as addressed by Graham (2006). The process is typically divided into three key stages: planning, drafting, and revising. According to Graham (2006), planning includes organizing ideas and deciding on the structure of the writing. Based on the findings, seven out of ten lecturers stated that planning is the most difficult phase in academic writing. The learners must brainstorm ideas, organize his/her thoughts, research and finally start with the drafting phase (Graham & Perin, 2007). The results of this study also indicated that the participants declared that planning is the most difficult and challenging face that students struggle with. According to Kellogg (2008), planning requires writers to generate and organize content, which is cognitively demanding and often the most difficult part of the writing process.

This agrees with the findings presented by past researchers (e.g., De Smedt & Van Keer, 2014; Graham & Perin, 2007; Kellogg, 2008) who found that planning remains the most challenging stage for second or foreign language writers who often struggle to arrange their ideas logically and develop a coherent structure before moving on to drafting. Therefore, the findings mentioned above are in contrast with the research carried out by Ferris (2011) that addresses L2 writers who often experience difficulty during the revision process because they lack the metacognitive awareness, and the techniques required to recognize and fix their mistakes. This leads to a superficial revision process that prioritizes surface-level adjustments over greater structural or content-related changes.

Other researchers regard drafting as the most challenging stage in writing and they are in contrast with the findings of this study, stating that drafting presents substantial difficulties for writers who are writing in L2 because it is difficult to turn ideas into cohesive words and writers often struggle with translating abstract concepts into written language. Moreover, they show that the drafting stage entails producing textual output by applying the conceptual plan, involving syntactic encoding and lexical retrieval. For L2 writers who must balance linguistic competency with the cognitive load of precise and logically structured text, these can be extremely difficult (Bhatia, 2004; Hayes, 2012; Kellogg, 1999).

This study also revealed other internal factors that may be related to the difficulties EFL learners experience in writing. Available data proved that different factors may contribute to problems and psychological issues and lack of motivation, such as anxiety, low self-esteem and lack of motivation affected the learning ability of EFL learners in engaging in academic writing. Several participants addressed that fear of making mistakes, low confidence, and unwillingness to revise or edit are common difficulties students during academic writing face. Therefore, psychological factors have been widely recognized as difficulties in language learning and these results are in line with the body of research on the influence of psychological aspects on language acquisition. According to Dörnyei (2001) and Dörnyei (2005), learners' performance and involvement in language acquisition can be severely restricted by anxiety and low self-esteem. This fear can show up as a reluctance to take creative risks or revisionary changes in academic writing. This observation presented in this study about students' fear of making mistakes and the unwillingness to take risks is similar to the phenomenon known as 'writing apprehension,' as defined by Daly and Mille (1975) where overly cautiousness in writing could result from the fear of being judged. This fear may prevent one from expressing oneself creatively or writing as effectively.

Interestingly, although motivation is usually mentioned as being essential to language learning (Gardner, 1985), it was highlighted that the lack of motivation to learn is a significant issue and students who lack motivation frequently find it difficult to learn the fundamentals of writing and do not make the consistent effort necessary to advance their writing abilities. On the other hand, people who are driven and eager to learn are said to be better suited to pick up the talent. Previous studies indicate that many educators and academics believe that motivation determines L2 success or failure (Dörnyei & Hadfield, 2014; Ollero Ramírez, 2017). The finding also echoes the previous study by Dörnyei (2001), where motivation directly influences students' ability to persist with challenging language tasks and their willingness to engage in frequent practice. According to his research, motivated learners are more likely to tackle complex writing assignments, leading to improved writing skills over time. Additionally, intrinsic motivation, such as personal interest in language learning, has a stronger positive impact on writing proficiency compared to extrinsic motivation. Therefore, this suggestion is in contrast with a recent study that pressed that motivation may not even be the most important component when it comes to writing performance, as mentioned by Myhill et al. (2023), whereas motivation is an important factor, it may not be the sole predictor of writing success, as linguistic proficiency, cognitive strategies, and personal characteristics influence writing performance.

The study's findings highlighted the impact of educational background as another primary factor that can be involved in EFL students' struggles with academic writing. Based on the results of this qualitative analysis, the influence of educational systems on students' ability to write academically is significant. The differences in writing abilities between EFL students can frequently be attributed to their educational experiences. Besides, the results revealed that writing is considered less important than multiple-choice questions. As such, students have reduced their writing practice. Additionally, in many countries where educational assessments emphasize multiple-choice tests as the most important type of assessment overwriting, the students may fail to produce coherent texts. Similarly, focusing on multiple-choice exams impedes students' writing abilities since they will lack effective writing strategies, particularly when composing properly organized essays in foreign languages. This is in agreement with the findings presented by past researchers such as (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; McNamara, 2018), addressing that the emphasis on multiple-choice tests often means less emphasis on writing, which can lead to shortages in students' ability to compose coherent texts. Additionally, similar results were reported by Stanger-Hall (2012), Multiple-

choice exams hinder critical thinking in classes compared to a mixed exam format with constructed-response questions.

When it comes to suggestions by the instructors to overcome these issues by learners and assist them in accelerating their quality of writing, various recommendations were offered during the interviews. The need for instruction and practice is one of the most repeatable recommendations among the lecturers, and they suggested that effective instruction provides the foundational knowledge and techniques that learners need, while practice allows learners to apply these skills and refine them. Thus, although instruction establishes the groundwork, students can refine their skills through consistent, focused practice, which adds significance to the concepts. Hayes (2012) emphasizes in his work the need for practice for internalizing writing skills that are taught in an instructional setting. Similar findings were also noted in a study conducted by Wingate (2011), which emphasized that instruction alone, without sufficient practical application, could lead to passive knowledge, in which learners understand the material but are unable to apply it in writing.

On the other hand, to improve students' writing skills, EFL lecturers introduced the necessity for feedback. The results show that feedback is essential for students to overcome the difficulties they face in their academic writing since it can help them discover their weaknesses and better understand challenging concepts. The same result was found by Hattie and Timperley (2007), highlighting feedback will help students understand their strengths and areas for improvement. Therefore, this suggestion is in contrast with Suskie's (2004) study, which points out that feedback itself is not a panacea and that how well students use it and how well it is incorporated into the broader learning process, determining how effective it is at improving learning. Finally, expanding vocabulary is another suggestion for improving students' performance in academic writing. Lecturers highlighted that rich vocabulary allows students to express their ideas more effectively, and students can go beyond the basic language to convey complex thoughts. Moreover, the positive impact of a rich vocabulary on writing skills is supported by existing research. For instance, Snow (2010) and Nation and Nation (2001) found that a well-developed vocabulary significantly contributes to writing proficiency. These findings underscore the importance of vocabulary expansion as a key strategy for enhancing students' academic writing abilities.

To sum up, findings from this research contribute to academic writing in public and private universities in the context of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). They provided insights into common writing

issues and the fundamental factors that might be involved in the difficulties that EFL university students encounter when producing academic writing. Universities in KRI, both public and private, should view these difficulties as a crucial teaching aspect and decide what steps are required to improve students' academic writing. They are essentially supposed to present strategies for strategic writing that can be used successfully.

6. Conclusion

This study has illuminated the intricate difficulties faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in the academic writing process within the context of Kurdistan. Through comprehensive interviews with lecturers, it has become evident that EFL learners encounter significant difficulties, including language proficiency issues, first language interference, and cultural and educational influences. Additionally, the writing process itself presents substantial difficulties, particularly during the stages of planning, drafting, and revising.

The thematic analysis of this study highlights several core difficulties: inadequate vocabulary, grammar, and syntax issues, coupled with the complexities of English language structures influenced by the learners' first language, particularly Kurdish. The impact of cultural and educational backgrounds further complicates students' ability to master academic writing, as they face unfamiliarity with conventions such as punctuation and paragraph structure. Furthermore, psychological factors, including low self-esteem, fear of making mistakes, and lack of motivation, significantly hinder students' academic writing performance. These difficulties impede engagement with the writing process, affecting overall learning outcomes. The influence of the educational system, particularly the emphasis on multiple-choice assessments over writing tasks, exacerbates the problem, as it diminishes the development of critical writing skills.

Despite these difficulties, the study has identified several effective strategies that can help mitigate these issues. The need for comprehensive instruction, consistent practice, and constructive feedback emerged as essential solutions. Encouraging learners to expand their vocabulary, engage in continuous practice, and receive targeted feedback can significantly improve their writing proficiency.

Ultimately, the findings highlight the importance of creating a supportive learning environment where students feel encouraged to take risks, express themselves freely, and grow from their mistakes. By addressing the difficulties identified in this study and implementing the suggested strategies, EFL learners in

Kurdistan can enhance their academic writing skills, thereby overcoming the difficulties of effective communication in a second language.

7. Limitations and Future Research

As this study makes significant contributions to the academic writing difficulties of EFL Kurdish undergraduates, it is important to note some essential limitations as opportunities for future research considerations. In the first place, this study focused on a particular context, such as the Kurdistan Region in Iraq which limits its being universal. Nonetheless, this regional particularity gives the base to conducting future comparative research in various linguistic and cultural contexts. Second, although the sample of ten lecturers provided qualitative data that was rich in detail, it only shows a small part of the whole population and therefore may limit generalizability. However, this limitation implies the possibility of other large-scale studies capable of proving and generalizing these findings regarding problems that have been identified. Additionally, although qualitative data collection through interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of individual experiences, integrating quantitative methods could enhance the findings. Apparent limitations therefore become possibilities for further research and thus the study becomes more significant since it opens a field that needs to be looked at in depth.

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