

Research Article

EFL Academic Writing Challenges among First Year Students: Evidence from North and East Syria

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History	The focus of this study was to explore English writing challenges faced by Alsharq University undergraduates in North and East Syria. A qualitative study was conducted for data collection using semi-structured individual interviews with 5 undergraduates. Conducting thematic analysis, the present study found that students need help in academic writing due to limited vocabulary, frequent grammatical errors, and sentence structure issues. They needed help with organizing ideas and adhering to academic writing conventions. The study's findings also revealed that different solutions were proposed, including enriching vocabulary through extensive practice, revising drafts to identify and correct errors, seeking peer support, and incorporating instructor feedback. These strategies were identified as key methods for improving the student's writing skills. The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the specific barriers English language learners face in English writing. Limitations and future research suggestions are discussed in the article.
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1. Introduction

Academic writing is probably counted as the hardest skill for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners and even for native speakers of English language (Alimohammadi & Nejadansari, 2014; Almasi & Tabrizi, 2016). Tawfeeq and Abbas (2018). English teaching for undergraduates in Syrian universities was deeply influenced by the aftermath of the ongoing civil war which began in the year 2011. The conflict has disrupted educational infrastructure, leading to the displacement of students, and negatively affecting the quality of education. Half of the population has been displaced and 350,000 people have been killed since 2011 (UN News, 2021; UNHCR, 2021). In the wake of this conflict, discussions about educational reform have emerged, intending to modernize teaching methods and curricula. However, the implementation of such reforms remains challenging due to ongoing instability and the need for substantial resources

and training for educators. Access to educational resources has significantly diminished due to the conflict, with libraries, textbooks, and online journals becoming harder to come by. Northeast Syrian (NES) universities, like Alsharq University in Raqqa, tried to overcome this issue by providing a better teaching environment for its students.

However, there are still certain challenges that students face in learning. English writing, for example, remained hard to grasp for learners, which they find to be a complex skill to learn. This challenge made undergraduates in the aforementioned university struggle tremendously to improve their writing skills. This led to many problems in their writing attempts and affected their overall written output negatively. Writing across the curriculum can help students and educators with academic literacy and communication skills (Defazio et al., 2010). Moreover, academic writing plays a vital role in “socializing students into the discourse of subjects and disciplines in universities” (Pineteh, 2014). Academic writing differs from other forms of writing as it is an intellectual product and a cognitive activity (Al Fadda, 2012). It is necessary to research the difficulties students face in their endeavors to produce academic writing because this will provide some proposed remedies for this serious issue. The data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews and were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis. This study is significant in that it is the first empirical study at Alsharq University attempting to explore undergraduates’ writing difficulties and suggest possible solutions to improve the skills among undergraduates. Therefore, this study specifically addresses the following two research questions:

What are the academic writing difficulties undergraduates at Alsharq University face?

What are the solutions to improve the writing skills of undergraduates at Alsharq University?

2. Literature Review

Writing well is a challenging task for many students, particularly those who learn English as a foreign language. English writing requires not only the mastery of linguistic skills but also the ability to organize thoughts coherently and convey ideas effectively. Several studies have explored the obstacles in English writing that students face in different contexts and at various levels of education. These obstacles often stem from a combination of linguistic, cognitive, and educational factors that hinder students’ progress.

For example, Bulqiyah et al. (2021) investigated post-secondary students’ views on the writing difficulties of essays in Indonesia. Their research revealed that the students encountered numerous problems, such as limited vocabulary, a lack of ideas, and low motivation. These issues were significant barriers to

their ability to produce quality academic writing. Bulqiyah et al. (2021) suggested that instructors play a crucial role in addressing these challenges. They recommended providing more guidance to help students navigate their writing tasks, offering constructive feedback to enhance their skills, and encouraging students to build confidence and interest in writing.

Similarly, the difficulties students face in English writing are not limited to the linguistic elements of the language. They also extend to challenges related to research skills, such as conducting library research and paraphrasing. Paraphrasing, in particular, can be a complex task for students because it requires them to read, comprehend, and rewrite ideas in their own words. This process often results in grammatical mistakes and inaccuracies, as students may struggle to convey the intended meaning accurately. Al Badi (2015) highlighted that paraphrasing is a common source of difficulty for students and emphasized the need for explicit instruction to improve their paraphrasing skills.

Moreover, Sabarun (2019) examined the writing difficulties experienced by EFL learners in Saudi Arabia. His study identified several key issues, including challenges in generating and organizing ideas, using appropriate vocabulary and grammar, and adhering to the conventions of academic writing. These difficulties significantly impacted students' ability to write effectively. To address these challenges, Sabarun (2019) proposed several instructional strategies, such as collaborative learning activities, peer feedback sessions, and genre-based instruction. These approaches aimed to provide students with opportunities to develop their writing skills in a supportive and interactive learning environment.

Despite the growing body of research on English writing difficulties, there is a noticeable gap in the literature concerning the specific challenges faced by Syrian students, particularly in the context of Alsharq University in NES. Students enrolled in English courses at this university are expected to produce well-structured and coherent academic texts, such as essays, reports, and research papers. However, these students may face various obstacles due to their unique linguistic, educational, and cultural backgrounds. These challenges include limited exposure to English, insufficient preparation in academic writing, and the influence of their native language on their writing practices. Addressing these issues is essential to support the students in achieving their academic goals.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the problems in English writing that first-year students face at Alsharq University. By identifying the specific difficulties encountered by these students, the study seeks to provide insights that can inform teaching practices and curriculum design. To achieve

this objective, the study adopted the six steps of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). These steps include transcribing the data, coding the text, searching for themes, reviewing the identified themes, defining and naming the themes, and ultimately writing the report. This methodological approach ensures a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the data, leading to meaningful findings that can contribute to the improvement of English writing instruction at the university.

2.1. Writing Difficulties

The challenges of academic writing are often rooted in the intricate nature of writing skills (Alfaki, 2015). Instructors frequently express concerns about the inadequacies in knowledge and skills essential for academic writing among non-native English speakers (Al Fadda, 2012). Therefore, educators must assess the specific challenges their students encounter, as noted by Lee (2005), enabling both personal development and targeted support for students in overcoming these obstacles. Kobayashi and Rinnert (2008) assert that the development of students' writing skills is influenced by various factors. A significant contributor to students' inefficiency in writing is often a lack of motivation (Alfaki, 2015; Rabab'ah, 2003). Al-Khasawneh (2010) identifies various barriers inhibiting the development of student's writing skills, highlighting that sufficient vocabulary is crucial for academic success. This finding is consistent with Abdulkareem's (2013) research, which indicates that Syrian students experience specific challenges related to vocabulary and sentence structure in academic writing. Additionally, Al-Khasawneh emphasizes the importance of grammar in effectively conveying messages, aligning with Alfaki (2015), who also identifies grammar, sentence structure, and word choice as significant hurdles in academic expression. Similarly, Mustafa and Shahab (2024) concluded that university students make various grammatical mistakes, spelling, and capitalization errors. As highlighted by Omar and Saeed (2024), university students also make other types of mistakes in their writing including the use of the English article system such as substitution, omission, and addition. Consequently, it can be inferred that difficulties in academic writing stem from linguistic deficiencies alongside negative student attitudes, leading to "negativities and misconceptions" about the writing process (Pineteh, 2014). Mastery of morphology, lexicon, and syntax is essential for producing quality writing, as full proficiency in these areas is fundamental (Barkaoui, 2007). Abdulkareem (2013) contends that students struggle with paraphrasing due to insufficient language proficiency. Interestingly, half of the participants in Al Badi's study noted that they must exert considerable effort to select a topic and

substantiate it with appropriate literature. Al-Khasawneh (2010) also identifies challenges in organizing ideas, while Al Murshidi (2014) posits that generating ideas can be a barrier to students' progress in writing. As a result, limited proficiency often impedes their ability to express ideas effectively.

2.2. Possible Solutions to Writing Problems

Many students have developed strategies to mask their writing weaknesses, often avoiding situations where their deficiencies might be exposed until they are compelled to demonstrate their skills. This approach, however, delays the identification and resolution of their challenges, which can have long-term academic consequences. The role of teachers is crucial in addressing these issues, as Isaacson (1996) emphasizes: "Providing careful feedback reinforces newly learned skills and addresses recurring problems." Effective feedback not only helps students improve but also enables them to reflect on their performance and take corrective actions. Identifying students' specific writing challenges through comprehensive assessments is a critical first step in crafting effective interventions. Assessments allow teachers to understand the root causes of students' struggles, whether they stem from limited vocabulary, grammatical issues, poor organization, or a lack of critical thinking skills. By diagnosing these problems early, educators can tailor their instructional strategies to meet the unique needs of their students.

One of the most effective ways to overcome writing difficulties is through continuous and deliberate practice. Writing is a skill that improves over time with consistent effort. Students must actively engage in the writing process, which includes generating ideas, planning, drafting, and revising. These stages are interdependent and require students to think critically and organize their thoughts coherently. Teachers play a pivotal role in guiding students through this process by providing structured activities and exercises that target each stage. Feedback is an integral part of the writing process and serves as a bridge between teaching and learning. Teachers are encouraged to offer timely and constructive feedback at every stage of the writing process, as this helps students understand their strengths and weaknesses. Barkaoui (2007) highlights the importance of such feedback in fostering students' mastery of writing techniques and promoting learning autonomy. When students are equipped with the skills to evaluate and improve their own writing, they become more independent and confident writers.

Furthermore, incorporating collaborative learning strategies, such as peer review and group writing activities, can enhance students' writing skills. Peer review sessions allow students to give and receive

feedback, encouraging them to critically evaluate their own and others' work. This not only improves their writing but also develops their analytical skills. Similarly, group writing tasks provide opportunities for students to brainstorm ideas, share knowledge, and learn from their peers. Technology can also be a valuable tool in addressing writing difficulties. Writing software and applications, such as grammar checkers, plagiarism detectors, and digital writing platforms, can provide immediate feedback and support students in refining their work. These tools complement traditional teaching methods and make the learning process more interactive and engaging.

The current study contributes to the existing body of research on writing difficulties by shedding light on the most significant challenges faced by Alsharq University undergraduate students in academic writing from their perspective. By understanding these challenges, educators can develop targeted interventions to address them effectively. The study also offers practical solutions, such as integrating writing workshops, providing individualized support, and fostering a culture of writing practice within the university.

In conclusion, addressing writing problems requires a multifaceted approach that involves teachers, students, and institutional support. Through continuous practice, effective feedback, collaborative learning, and the use of technology, students can overcome their writing difficulties and achieve academic success.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This research was conducted employing a qualitative approach, which aimed at exploring the writing experiences and challenges of English language learners (ELLs) in an academic context. The present study specifically explores the difficulties ELLs face in academic writing in English; their writing processes, as recommended by Nunan (2010), are more appropriate for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the nature of a problem, strategies, and the perceived benefits of writing in English. This study employed semi-structured interviews as the primary method for data collection. The interviews provide an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives on their writing experiences. What follows is a detailed description of participants, data collection, and data analysis procedures.

3.2. Participants

The participants in this study were five English Language Learners (ELLs) enrolled in various courses at Alsharq University, comprising three females and two males. They were selected through purposive

sampling to ensure alignment with the research objectives outlined in the introductory section. The participants were chosen for their diverse linguistic backgrounds, levels of language proficiency, and active engagement in language courses, which made them relevant to exploring the research questions. The selection aimed to represent a balanced perspective of gender and varying course types to capture a comprehensive understanding of the teaching methods employed. The participants were approached in their respective classrooms, where they were invited to participate in the study. They were provided with detailed information regarding the study's aim, procedures, and ethical considerations, including confidentiality and anonymity. The rationale for including these specific participants was to gain insights into the unique experiences and challenges faced by ELLs in this academic context. All participants provided verbal consent before the interviews were conducted.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

To collect the qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were employed to gather insights into the writing experiences and challenges faced by English language learners in an academic context. The interviews were designed to explore participants' perspectives in depth regarding their writing challenges, and the strategies they follow to overcome them. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in quiet and comfortable classrooms at Alsharq University. Each interview was recorded using a digital voice recorder.

The interview questions were written by the researchers and through reviewing the literature to elucidate a comprehensive understanding of students' difficulties related to writing possible recommendations to overcome academic writing difficulties. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, and a total of five English language learners enrolled in different courses at the university were interviewed. They were contacted in classrooms and informed about the study's aim, procedures, and ethical considerations, providing their oral consent before participating in the study.

3.4. Data Analysis

This study presents the outcome of the interviewees' responses related to the challenges of English language academic writing among undergraduate students at Alsharq University. It followed the six steps of thematic analysis as described by Brown and Clark, (2006): transcription, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. Initially, the data were meticulously examined through multiple readings to achieve a comprehensive understanding. Subsequently, key statements reflecting unique concepts were identified, leading to the creation of initial codes. The themes that

encapsulated the essence of these codes were established, highlighting significant patterns that illustrated the participants' experiences relevant to the research questions. Continuous review of the transcripts was conducted to ensure accuracy in theme identification, organized through comparison, reflection, and careful examination of the codes. After theme verification, an agreement was achieved to define and name the emerging themes through splitting, eliminating, and identifying based on the actual quotes from the transcripts. The final step involved writing the analysis report. This approach fostered an enhanced understanding of the collected data, resulting in more accurate and valid conclusions. The results of the qualitative data provide a nuanced understanding throughout the analysis and reporting process. Anonymity was utilized to maintain the confidentiality of the interviewees.

4. Findings

In this section, through interviews with the participants, we were able to identify several academic writing challenges they face. The findings of the present study also report fruitful recommendations for enhancing the students' academic writing skills.

4.1. Academic Writing Challenges

ELLs faced several challenges that impacted their writing quality. The most prominent issue was the lack of vocabulary, particularly academic vocabulary, which hindered their ability to express ideas clearly and accurately. Additionally, the ELLs struggled with generating new ideas, which could be attributed to their limited exposure to academic topics and genres. Another difficulty was maintaining coherence between sentences, likely due to a lack of practice with the linguistic and rhetorical tools necessary for logical and cohesive sentence structures. The findings of this qualitative study revealed several academic writing difficulties among undergraduate students. For example, the lack of vocabulary that most of the participants reported. Participant 1 articulated: "I have difficulties in having the right vocabulary to use in my academic writing". Likewise, Participant 2 reported: "The main difficulty in my academic writing assignment is vocabulary that I often face".

Our findings showed that another aspect of academic writing difficulties that students faced was generating new ideas. That said, they usually face having new ideas in their mind when they attempt to write their academic pieces. For instance, Participant 3 commented: "I face difficulties in generating new ideas when I try to write in English". Among the other participants, Participant 1 reported: "I know that I always face difficulty in finding suitable ideas to write in my academic writing pieces and this makes my writing

poorer”. However, Participant 2 commented: “Generating ideas is not that big difficulty when I have the right vocabulary to express my ideas in my writing”.

The results of the study also reveal that most undergraduate students have writing difficulties in creating coherence and cohesion when they try to produce academic writing in their university studies. To support this, Participant 1 noted: “I have always faced the difficulty of connecting ideas and sentences smoothly to make my writing coherent”. Among other participants, Participant 3 stated: “I often face difficulty in coherently ordering sentences”.

4.2. Possible Solutions to Improve Academic Writing

Regarding solutions to improve the quality of academic writing among university undergraduate students, our analysis showed that the students shared their thoughts on how they can improve their academic writing skills when they attempt to write. Most of the participants shared that they outline their essays based on what they learned from their instructor. For example, Participant 1 shared: “I always outline my essay according to what I have learned from my instructor”. Moreover, Participant 3 commented: “I use a blank sheet to outline my essay in a draft, then write according to what my instructor taught me”, and Participant 5 also articulated: “I follow my instructor's guidelines, starting from the introduction, body and conclusion”.

5. Discussion

The present study investigated the undergraduates’ academic writing difficulties and possible solutions to overcome such writing difficulties. The findings showed several academic writing difficulties including a lack of vocabulary and this aligns with past research results identifying vocabulary as a critical challenge for ELLs in academic writing (Ferris, 2009; Hyland, 2014). The findings also revealed that university students in the context of this study face challenges in developing ideas when they attempt to produce academic pieces. Past research has concluded similar findings. For example, this finding is consistent with the literature, emphasizing the need for ELLs to receive more guidance in developing relevant ideas for academic tasks (Grabe & Kaplan, 2014; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Our findings also share insights into other academic writing difficulties such as writing in a coherent way which makes the students’ writing more challenging. Similar findings in the past have been reflected in studies that highlight ELLs’ struggles with coherence and cohesion, making their writing pieces poor (Barkaoui, 2007; Lillis & Curry, 2010).

The findings indicated that ELLs employed various processes and strategies to overcome their writing

difficulties. A common strategy was outlining their ideas, which helped the students organize their thoughts and focus on one central topic. They followed a clear structure of introduction, body, and conclusion, as taught by their instructors. This reflects the principles of the process approach to writing, which stresses the importance of planning and outlining as fundamental steps in writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Also, ELLs used strategies such as finding and organizing ideas, which were directly connected to outlining. They sourced ideas from various platforms and arranged them logically, which corresponds with literature suggesting that ELLs benefit from using diverse resources to enhance and generate their ideas and organization skills (Grabe & Kaplan, 2014; Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

The most common benefit reported by the ELLs was an improvement in their English language and vocabulary skills. Writing assignments motivated them to expand their vocabulary and apply it more effectively. This belief that writing improves language proficiency is supported by previous studies, which show that writing enhances vocabulary skills and fosters motivation in ELLs (Ferris, 2009; Hyland, 2003). Furthermore, the act of writing provided them with valuable practice in constructing better sentences, which, in turn, improved their overall language competency. Another benefit of outlining in writing. This follows the process approach to writing, which emphasizes the importance of planning and outlining as key steps in the writing process (Flower & Hayes, 1981). The most common strategy that the ELLs used was finding and organizing ideas, which was related to the process of outlining. They also used the outline to arrange their ideas in a logical order. This finding agrees with the literature that suggests that ELLs need to use various sources and strategies to find and organize their ideas for their writing tasks (Grabe & Kaplan, 2014; Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

The most common benefit that the ELLs gained from writing in English was improving their English language and vocabulary skills, which stimulated them to write and learn more. The ELLs believed that writing helped them to learn new words, to use them correctly, and to write better sentences in English. This finding follows the literature that indicates that writing can enhance the language and vocabulary skills of ELLs and that it can also foster their motivation and interest in learning English.

6. Conclusion

This qualitative study delved into the writing challenges faced by students at Alsharq University. Through semi-structured interviews with five ELLs, we identified four key themes: vocabulary constraints,

idea generation struggles, coherence issues, and effective writing strategies. ELLs grappled with insufficient academic vocabulary, making precise expressions challenging. Additionally, generating fresh ideas and maintaining coherence within essays posed hurdles. However, ELLs who embraced outlining and valued feedback demonstrated improved writing outcomes. Surprisingly, consistent writing practice enhanced language skills and motivated some students. Moving forward, we recommend further research in specific contexts, larger sample sizes, and diverse data collection methods to support ELLs' writing development. Practical suggestions for both ELLs and instructors can enhance writing skills in academic contexts.

7. Limitations and Future Work

The study has some limitations that need to be addressed in future research. One of the limitations is the small sample size, which limits the generalizability and representativeness of the findings. The study only involved five ELLs who were enrolled in different courses at Alsharq University, and who may not reflect the views and experiences of the whole students of ELLs at Alsharq University. Therefore, the findings of the study should be interpreted with caution and verified with larger and more diverse samples of ELLs in different contexts and disciplines. Another limitation is the use of a single data collection method, which limits the validity and reliability of the findings. The study only used semi-structured interviews as the data collection method, which may not capture the full and rich picture of the writing difficulties of the ELLs at Alsharq University. The interviews may also be subject to bias and error, such as the interviewer's influence, the participant's response, or the transcription's accuracy. Therefore, the findings of the study should be supported by other data collection methods, such as observations, questionnaires, or documents.

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Declaration of Competing Interest: The authors declare that they have no known competing of interest.

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