

AN INVESTIGATION STUDY OF ACADEMIC WRITING PROBLEMS
FACED BY ARAB SPEAKING POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITI
TEKNOLOGI MALAYSIA (UTM)

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I dedicate this thesis to my parents. Without their patience, understanding, support, and most of all love, the completion of this work would not have been possible.

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the academic writing problems encountered by Arab speaking postgraduate students at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). There are two research questions of this study. The first question involved the identification of mistakes that Arab speaking postgraduate students commit in academic writing at UTM. The second question dealt with the problems Arab speaking students' perceived in academic writing. The data for the study were collected through distributing a set of questionnaires and writing task. The respondents of this study were 85 Arab speaking postgraduate students who come from different Arabic countries like Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Libya, Palestine, and Syria who enrolled for the academic session of 2012/2012. A snowballing technique was used to determine the samples of this study. A set of the questionnaires were distributed to 80 of the respondents to reveal their opinions towards the causes of academic writing problems. Another 5 students were given a writing task which was to write two short paragraphs regarding their fields of works. The students' writing was sent to an expert of English language to identify the mistakes made by the students. The results of their writing revealed that they made mistakes in sentence structure (53.8%), vocabulary (30.7%), and expressing their ideas (7.6%). The students also expressed their opinions with different levels of agreement regarding the causes of their academic writing problems. They expressed their opinions as being high when asked about vocabulary items (mean = 1.5) but the other questions resulted in mean scores that ranged from moderate to low, which indicate that they do not have much problems in academic writing. The findings of the study nevertheless could be used to recommend effective teaching approaches to teach academic writing that are currently used by English language teachers and specialists.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidik masalah penulisan akademik yang dihadapi oleh pelajar pasca ijazah petutur Bahasa Arab di Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). Terdapat dua persoalan dalam kajian ini. Persolan kajian yang pertama melibatkan mengenalpastian kesalahan yang dilakukan oleh pelajar pasca ijazah ini dalam penulisan akademik mereka. Soalan kajian yang kedua ialah berkenaan persepsi mereka mengenai punca masalah yang mereka hadapi dalam penulisan akademik. Data untuk kajian ini dikumpul melalui satu set soal selidik dan tugas penulisan. Responden kajian ini ialah 85 orang pelajar pasca ijazah yang bahasa pertuturannya adalah Bahasa Arab dari pelbagai negara seperti Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Libya, Palestine, dan Syria yang telah mendaftar pada sesi akademik 2011/2012. Teknik 'snowballing' telah digunakan untuk mendapatkan sampel bagi kajian ini. Soal selidik telah diedarkan kepada 80 orang pelajar untuk mendapatkan pandangan mereka mengenai punca masalah penulisan akademik. Lima orang pelajar lagi telah diberikan tugas menulis dua perenggan pendek mengenai bidang kerja mereka. Tugas penulisan tersebut diserahkan kepada pakar Bahasa Inggeris untuk menentukan kesalahan yang dilakukan. Hasil penulisan mereka menunjukkan mereka melakukan kesalahan dalam struktur ayat (53.8%), perbendaharaan kata (30.7%) dan penyampaian ide (7.6%). Pelajar tersebut juga melahirkan tahap persetujuan yang berbeza mengenai punca masalah penulisan akademik mereka. Persepsi mereka adalah tinggi mengenai punca masalah perbendaharaan kata (min = 1.5), tetapi punca masalah yang lain adalah dari tahap sederhana kepada tahap rendah yang mana ini menunjukkan mereka tidak mempunyai banyak masalah dalam penulisan akademik. Hasil dapatan kajian ini walaubagaimana pun boleh digunakan untuk mencadangkan pendekatan pengajaran yang berkesan dalam kalangan guru dan pengkhusus Bahasa Inggeris untuk tujuan pengajaran penulisan akademik.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Academic writing plays an essential role in learning a foreign language. Non-native speakers of the English language should be familiar with writing processes, elements, and features like formality, objectivity, and complexity in order to use the language precisely and accurately.

English language educators may support and improve students' performance towards academic writing by providing the suitable methods and strategies of English writing, increasing students' competency in learning and acquiring new styles of writing, and encouraging students to practice writing as a daily process to enhance their knowledge and perceptions towards academic writing. Students may success in their writing by depending upon their understanding to perform their writing and approaching the writing features. Academic writing requires students to

be familiar with the types of academic writing such as descriptive, narrative, and illustrative, approaches such as process, genre, and product, while strategies of academic writing focuses on giving feedback, using critical thinking, and paraphrase the sentences in their own writing.

Sophie (2010) clarified that academic writing has an influence on Arab speaking postgraduate students' achievements in English writing as it focuses on issues that support the knowledge development of Arab students enabling them to adopt valuable learning processes. Similarly, it is important for learners to develop and enhance their knowledge and perceptions towards academic writing.

Abdulwahed, S (2010) pointed out that English writing affords students the opportunity to think critically and provides the motivation to learn certain aspects of academic writing like using effective word expressions and strong vocabulary. Moreover, academic writing involves certain features like critical thinking and self-expression that students should receive during the courses they attend like IEC or IELTS. These courses allow students to practice the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) through activities such as tutorials, daily quizzes, and final examinations.

Academic writing has some strategies that can be developed to increase students' writing skills such as cognitive skills and deep level thinking that involve knowledge and cognition of learners. Hanley (1995) focused on cognitive and metacognitive processes for monitoring and controlling mental process as they involve the conscious mind and develop the control required to think in order to minimize the number of academic writing mistakes.

Furthermore, Zamel (1983) stated that learners may uncover effective ideas during the writing process in order to accurately use the language during academic writing activities.

1.2 Background of Study

Academic writing is one of the most interesting and important topics to be studied especially among postgraduate students because it reveals their needs and challenges they face in doing research. Thaiss & Zawacki (2006) defined academic writing as a term that fulfills and meets the purposes of education in colleges, universities, and institutions related to the use of academic writing features like paraphrasing, strong vocabulary, and organized paragraphs.

Hansen & Halliday (1985) proposed that students should be familiar with aspects of academic writing aspects like cohesion, paraphrasing, and critical thinking. The students offered different perspectives towards using cohesion in academic writing stressing consistency of a verb tense, and enabling a text to be understood through an awareness in academic writing features. Lauren & Judith (1991) illustrated the use of cohesion in academic writing that has become a common and effective way to enhance the ability of students to organize paragraphs. Coherence can be described as the main element and feature in English academic writing. Coherence deals with expressing the topic and the major points of discussion.

Halliday, McIntosh, & Stevens, (1984) clarified the use of Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT) in addressing and stressing the teaching of vocabulary items in writing. For example, teachers should focus on using cassette

recorders and try to read dialogues for their students but this will not provide them with the necessary native speaker model. So, the dialogues will be designed by the teacher and students as well by using audio-lingual method to increase the motivation to learn vocabulary.

Spatt (1999) mentioned that there are other aspects of academic writing which must be studied and mastered such as organizing paragraphs by using a strong style of word structures, paraphrasing, and appropriate conjunctions. There also certain aspects involve the use of certain steps which must be followed by students such as understanding and summarizing the passage before writing, eliminating and breaking up long sentences or changing them, and using synonyms to express the same meaning.

Non-native speakers of the English language should be familiar with strategies that contain elements of critical thinking, such as using their own ideas and expressions, and demonstrating their understanding of the author's ideas by expressing these ideas in their own words. Besides, most English educators consider paraphrasing as the most successful and valuable procedure to reduce the problems and mistakes that many Arab students commit when doing their research.

Arab speaking students make mistakes in writing a simple paragraph related to punctuation marks, vocabulary, and grammatical aspects due to the inappropriate ways and methods used. In Iraq, students make mistakes in academic writing in organizing the paragraphs related to punctuation marks and grammatical aspects. The students have difficulties in expressing and generating new ideas when they write simple essays or research papers.

Iraqi students participated in a Fulbright Scholar Program which offers courses related to fulfilling the requirements of the English language in order evolve

the education in Iraq universities. For example, in Basra University, especially at the College of Art, the students practice some courses related to Fulbright scholarship program like TOEFL and IELTS. Also, these courses are designed to enhance students' motivation, knowledge, and experiences in the use of English in order to develop institutional relationships between American and Iraqi universities. Thus, these courses may increase student proficiency in dealing with certain features like managing online libraries, and engaging with appropriate methods.

Arabic students face challenges in dealing with academic writing activities such as lacking new ways to approach information and acquiring academic writing features, the methods and textbooks are inadequate, the persons in charge of teaching English as a second language (ESL) do not have accurate and proven methods to enhance and motivate the students towards improving their academic writing. For instance, at UTM (Universiti Teknologi Malaysia), postgraduate students experience many tasks related to English language proficiency. The students at the Language Academy faculty try to improve their performance in academic writing in order to determine their ability to successfully complete their proposal and theses/dissertation. The faculty includes two types of subjects students have to take during their study. The first subject is academic communication for postgraduates (1) that involves the ability of students to summarize and paraphrase various journals. The second subject is academic communication for postgraduates (2) that deals with summarizing and organizing paragraphs according to conjunctions and paraphrasing. Moreover, the two subjects consist of 3 credits but they are not included as a requirement of the university. The most important thing for students is to attend and complete the assignments. Thus, students have to summarize and paraphrase paragraphs related to journals in order to help them avoid the correct their writing mistakes.

The faculty concentrates on delivering other courses related to academic writing to increase student proficiency in writing paragraphs with effective sentence structures, grammatical aspects, and the use of critical thinking to emphasize their

efforts in passing academic writing preparation exams. In an interview conducted with one of the lecturers in the faculty of Language Academy in UTM, the lecturer said that the students have many difficulties in understanding and coping with the essential elements of English academic writing. Besides, most students have no experiences with language skills as they lack the proficiency in communicating and writing. For better use of academic writing, students have to use accurate and strong vocabulary, which requires students to deal with spelling, using synonyms in vocabulary, and strong sentence style structures in academic writing.

The challenge of academic writing can be considered as the main struggle that lecturers face. These challenges are related to the lack of students' evaluation work, and the misuse of guidelines for assessing writing instructions. Also, some of the challenges involve mechanical issues such as spelling and grammar mistakes. Students misunderstand the use of writing skills because the materials used in the academic writing discipline are different from their personal experiences. Also, the challenges of academic writing among students can be related to the disciplines of writing like management, understanding, and communication.

Students in many cases misunderstand and have difficulties comprehending the way academic writing instructions are given by non-native English speakers. In addition, the academic writing guidelines and instructions are not appropriate to their level, making implementation difficult. Fawwaz & Ahmed (2007) identified a series of problems related to students' thinking in managing tests designed to improve their academic texts such as the use of cohesion aspects, weak connection among the words, and the lack in producing certain types of disciplines in academic writing.

1.3 Statement of Problem

The study examines academic writing procedures to reveal the problems that Arab speaking postgraduate students face. Also, the study deals with the mistakes that Arab speaking postgraduate students make in writing short paragraphs regarding their fields of work

Most students commit many mistakes related to sentence structure. For Instance, grammatical mistakes are in syntactical as well as in organizing new word expressions as most of the instructions given in Arabic and because the teacher is a non-native speaker. Rabab'ah (2001) stated that the lack of communication among Arab students in dealing with all four language skills is due to inappropriate resources and the weaknesses in context that are given to these students.

Arab students face many problems when paraphrasing. For example, students are incapable of using their own words or reformat sentences based on their own critical thinking, and reorganize sentences to be more effective academically. Other problems encountered by Arab students are interfering of their native language (Arabic language). The difference occurs between Arab students and native speakers of English language, who have diverse writing styles, abilities, and backgrounds. Arab students are incapable of organizing the functions of writing, the process of reading to writing, and then the interfering of Arabic language (L1) with the second language (L2) that prevents the use of critical thinking and the process of paraphrasing in making new word structure based on their own perspectives without changing the meaning of the words.

The interfering of the Arabic language as clarified by Yorkey (1974) is that the main feature of Arabic is the word order overuse by non-English speakers. Ibrahim (1983) pointed out that Arab students use Arabic for speaking and writing.

This causes many problems in translating literacy to English language structures like using fault prepositions, word order, and punctuations. Furthermore, lecturers and university divisions have to establish effective strategies for the discipline of academic writing to prevent these challenges

Accordingly, the university has to take the responsibility of identifying adequate and successful strategic plans in order to emphasize the process of effective academic writing. Hence, lecturers should assess the process of academic writing that includes assessment, needs, and development in order to achieve desirable learning outcomes.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

- 1 To investigate the type of mistakes that Arab students commit in academic writing at UTM.
- 2 To investigate the problems that Arab students face in academic writing academic writing at UTM.

1.5 Research Questions

The questions of this study are:

- 1- What are the mistakes that Arab students commit in academic writing at UTM?
- 2- What are the problems faced by Arab students in academic writing at UTM?

1.6 Significance of Study

The significance of this study is to investigate the mistakes and problems that Arab students face in academic writing. This study focuses on the challenges and mistakes encountered by Arab students in order to compile suggestions, solutions and recommendations for future research.

The study also deals with the interfering of Arabic (L1) with English (L2) that most Arab students face when writing such as translating and explaining their ideas. This study is a crucial issue to be dealt with as it reveals the problems that Arab students face when writing especially the lack of methods and the ways of teaching English academic writing.

The present study also describes and focuses on certain procedures designed to emphasize certain approaches and strategies in order to increase students' writing skills and perceptions by enhancing their writing proficiency to meet their needs and to provide guidelines for future work.

1.7 Scope of Study

The scope and aim of the study will uncover and determine the problems of academic writing that Arab students face in academic writing.

The procedure of the study will be measured and analyzed via the distribution of a set of questionnaires including 22 closed-ended questions used to provide a positive feedback, develop a good strategy, or modify a useful technique for future work. Moreover, the present study can be employed to get a desirable outcome from the respondents, who are coming from Arab countries such as Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Libya and Palestine. These respondents are pursuing their Master and PH.D degree in computer science, civil engineering, and education are taking some courses related to academic writing in the Language Academy at the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM)

1.8 Limitations of Study

In this study, a few limitations need to be addressed. For instance, writing tasks should focus on writing more than two paragraphs to reveal and identify

students' mistakes in academic writing. In addition, more studies need to be done which focus on developing certain techniques in order to overcome academic writing problems.

Furthermore, the duration of the study should be long enough to obtain valid data and to give the students more time to carefully read the instructions pertaining to the task in order to better reveal their abilities in academic writing. Also, another limitation of this study is the unequal distribution of the participants that may affect the results during the descriptive statistics. In other words, the study also limits itself by investigating the problems of academic writing among Arab speaking postgraduate students and the types of mistakes committed in writing.

In addition, it would be very useful to construct various practices related to academic writing in order to motivate students to improve their writing. Besides, the instruments used in this study could be developed and enhanced to obtain more and better evidence and solutions to overcome the problems of academic writing for future work.

1.9 Operational Definition of Terms

There are many terms that are used in this study to get the best outcomes and to help the researcher in his study. These terms are as follows

1.9.1 Academic Writing

English academic writing refers to a term that fulfills the purposes of education in colleges, universities, and institutions by using paraphrasing, strong vocabulary, and organized paragraphs.

Academic writing involves implementing knowledge and skills in order to build up students' comprehensive writing activities and to increase their academic writing skills. Tarnopolsky (2005) mentioned that academic writing is creative writing that aims to develop ideas and critical thinking in the target language.

1.9.2 International Students (Arab Speaking Postgraduate Students)

International students in this study are Arab speaking postgraduate students. They are taking their master and Ph.D. degrees and they come from Arabic countries.

The students practice their mother tongue (Arabic language) in speaking and writing. Thus, the study will determine the main problems behind committing certain mistakes in writing related to the interfering of Arabic with English (L2) that occur during certain academic writing tasks.

1.9.3 Common Mistakes in Academic Writing

In this study, the common mistakes of academic writing that students commit may include grammatical aspects, weaknesses in vocabulary, punctuation marks, or conjunctions. Kambal (1980) mentioned three types of mistakes that Arab students committed in Sudanese university including verb phrase, verb formation tense, and subject-verb agreement. In addition, he condensed these mistakes into five categories related to grammatical aspects like tense sequence, tense substitution, tense maker, deletion, and confusion of perfect tenses.

1.9.4 Problems of Academic Writing

The study focuses on the problems of academic writing that Arab students face. Also, academic writing problems could be the result of how information is conveyed through academic writing, the interference of Arabic language (L1) that prevents the effective use of academic English writing, or the lack of motivation in learning new and effective methods or materials related to academic writing.

Silvia (1992) stated that there are several factors related to academic writing problems like adopting new styles of professional academic writing and essay writing problems in organizing the parts of the paragraphs. Rabab'ah (2003) identified certain problems of academic writing related to formal communication such as acquiring a less than comprehensive understanding about academic writing as delivered by Arab teachers, the lack of opportunities in learning English because the only way to practice the English language is when native speakers come as tourists to visit the Arab world. Abbad (1988) proposed that the main reason behind the problems of academic writing faced by Arab students are inappropriate teaching and learning methods. These methods and ways are inadequate for the process of

academic writing because the students are unable to generate or create their own words using critical thinking processes.

1.10 Conclusion

This study presents the important aspects of academic writing to reveal the mistakes that Arabic students commit and the problems they face in order to provide some recommendations for further research.

The study also involves the main problems that Arabic speaking students face in academic writing. The main challenge of Arab students is learning to write writing academically in English and to improve their efficiency regarding the effective use of strong ideas and critical thinking in English. In addition, the main focus of this study will be on the interfering of the Arabic language (L1) on some aspects of the English language (L2). This problem can be characterized as the most challenging in academic writing because Arab students use weak language in describing and summarizing their own ideas related to the interference of Arabic language (L1) with English language (L2).

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