

# A Systematic Review of the Challenges and Solutions of ESL Students' Academic Writing

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**Abstract**— Research studies on ESL writing are more interested in providing operational writing strategies for academic writing. However, there are not many studies on challenges faced by students and their solutions. The main aim of this paper is to provide a systematic literature review of academic writing studies which focused on investigating students' academic writing challenges and their solutions. The papers used in this study were published from 2010 until 2019. A systematic search of literature proposed in this paper employs the exploratory approach for identifying and evaluating twenty-seven articles published in the authentic Journals. The themes of the review are divided into two categories, one which is related to ESL Malaysian students and another category is regarding non-Malaysians, this is due to the context of the study which will be conducted in Malaysia and therefore a review of studies done on Malaysian student academic writing is justified. The review shows there is a broader context of ESL students' academic writing challenges and factors influencing students' academic writing skills. In addition, as mentioned above, the review clearly shows the highlight of previous studies was on strategies which help improve students writing skills. As a conclusion, the review signifies that there are three major enormous challenges faced by ESL students in academic writing, such as teaching methods, students' attitude towards English, and language ability. And the solutions to the challenges are to employ active learning English language teaching methods, for example, Task-Based learning (TBL), Blended learning, Collaborative learning and cognitive approach, in teaching writing.

**Keywords:** academic writing challenges, ESL academic writing, ESL teachers, students' attitudes, teaching Strategies.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Writing is a complicated and significant skill in language production. It is involved to develop design idea, captured mental demonstrations of knowledge and practice with subjects [6]. According to [3], ESL students are expected to develop their academic writing skills through formal instructional situations. Academic writing includes a comprehensive, dynamic procedure with the particulars and principles of a discipline [8]. In addition, [7] point out that academic writing procedure involves "intimate connection between the ability to write well and the ability to think well". Moreover, [4], stresses that tertiary level students' ability in sustaining arguments and producing ideas to write in English

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for academic purposes is essential for academic success. This eventually results in academic writing challenges which have been connoted to students learning and it is not an easy skill to be accomplished specifically in a second language. Academic writing skill requires a continuous practice to develop and overcome writing challenges by students. This paper aims to highlight academic writing challenges and ESL teaching strategies for developing students' academic writing skills.

## II. OBJECTIVES

The aims of this paper are twofold:

- To investigate major academic writing challenges encountered by ESL students.
- To examine teaching strategies that help improve students' academic writing skills.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The current study applies the exploratory approach to review the literature on ESL students' academic writing challenges and teaching strategies' that used as solutions. Twenty-seven articles on academic writing challenges and solutions from different levels of education were reviewed. Fourteen articles were on studies related to Malaysian ESL students' challenges while the other thirteen articles were on studies related to Non-Malaysian ESL students, for example, students from Bangladesh, Korea, Iran, Oman, Pakistan, Indonesia, Thailand, Saudi Arabia, India, Palestine, Canada, South Africa, Australia, and Taiwan. From the literature review, the major academic writing challenges and solutions were categorised accordingly and the focus was on the effects faced by students. The literature review was conducted in three phases. In the first phase, Malaysian and Non-Malaysian students' academic writing challenges at different educational levels were examined. Secondly, it determined different teaching strategies used as solutions in academic writing lessons. Lastly, it highlighted teaching strategies that successfully help ESL students develop their academic writing skills.

## IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Writing is proven to be the most difficult task for ESL students and this is the main reason for ESL students to have negative attitudes and perceptions towards English writing [10]. Negative attitudes and lack of motivation can lead to obstacles in learning a language. The findings from the literature review show that most ESL students face challenges



in writing in terms of clarity, coherent, lack of writing practice, lack of student motivation, errors in tenses, mechanics, conditionals and S-V agreements and more aspects of writing skill such as proper use of grammar, conventions, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and some of the basic and initiating aspects of writing [1]. In addition, they have a limited variety of vocabulary, poor spelling, and weak sentence structure [9]. The three major academic writing challenges reported by the previous studies are students' negative attitudes towards academic writing, language difficulties, and effects of teachers' teaching methods in the academic writing class [2]. Figure 1 illustrates the challenges in academic writing faced by Malaysian and non-Malaysian students.

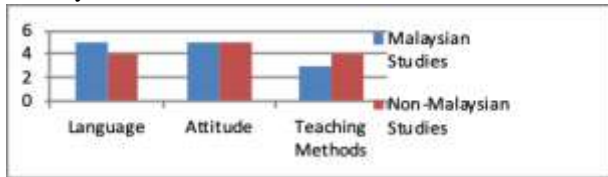


Figure 1. Academic writing challenges

As shown in Figure 1, the major difficulty faced by Malaysian and Non-Malaysian students in academic writing is language inaccuracy. 39% of ESL students encounter problems with grammar, coherency, development of writing while 38% have a negative attitude towards English. Students' negative attitude towards academic writing is due to anxiety, apprehension, lack of beliefs and lack of motivation. Institutional and family background, fear of exam and examination system, religious and cultural differences have some effects on self-expression and can lead to unmotivated and unhappy environment. 23% of the articles analysed focused on the teaching methods used by teachers to provide students with a better learning environment. There was a great difference between the teaching method used in Malaysia and abroad. The literature review clearly shows that that traditional teaching method is a huge hurdle and teachers are not willing to practice new teaching strategies outside Malaysia. Educators in Malaysia, on the other hand, are enthusiast to implement new teaching methods and in addition the Malaysian education policies are very supportive to new ideas of teaching styles and strategies. Figure 2 shows the teaching strategies used by Malaysian and Non-Malaysian teachers in teaching academic writing skills.

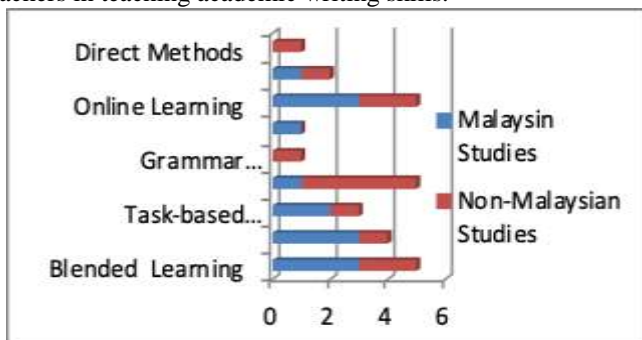


Figure 2. Teaching strategies

The literature shows that most ESL teachers in Asia use a combination of traditional teaching and online teaching methods. In Malaysia, English teachers use some advanced teaching approaches for example blended learning,

collaborative learning, HOTS and Brain Storming. This shows that the Malaysian education system encourages teachers to use a combination of CLT approach and online teaching methods. However, teachers in other developing countries are still using traditional teaching methods, for example, Grammar Translation Method (GTM) and Direct Method. The reason for not agreeing to change methods is due to cultural and social norms. It is important to note that the review clearly shows Task-Based Learning, Blended Learning, Collaborative and cognitive approaches can be employed to develop ESL students' writing skills (refer to Figure 3).

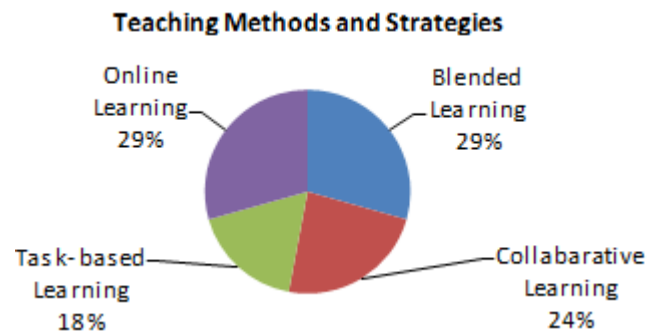


Figure 3. Teaching strategies and academic writing challenges solutions

Figure:3 shows four teaching methods which help in developing academic writing skills among ESL students. Previous studies focused on writing practice to develop academic writing skills. Blended learning and online learning teaching methods provide students' supplement writing assignments. These teaching methods are preferable for writing classes and 29% in use to develop writing skills. Task-based and collaborative learning involve students in multiple activities for extra writing practice. These teaching approaches provide students extra writing activities and assignments which help students enhance their academic writing skills. This study investigates academic writing challenges faced by ESL students and teaching methods which are frequently used in ESL classes.

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper highlights the challenges in academic writing that ESL students faced and some possible solutions. Writing is a composite skill that demands both mental and physical activity. Having said that, [5] suggest that it is pivotal for ESL students to spend time to develop their writing skills. Lack of academic writing practice is considered a basic cause of negative attitudes and writing challenges to Malaysian and Non-Malaysian students. In addition, language teachers do not have sufficient time to provide opportunities for writing practice in class and the result is students are lack of language competency which then affects their writing skills. The findings of previous studies suggest teachers to use Blended Learning (BL) method in teaching writing because it provides students with multiple writing practices online and offline. Secondly, collaborative learning and Task-Based methods are

able to transform students' attitude and overcome their apprehensions towards writing lessons. In sum, this review shed some lights on the academic writing challenges, students' negative attitude towards academic writing and followed by some suggestions for teachers to overcome the challenges.

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