

ACADEMIC WRITING CHALLENGES OF UNDERGRADUATES IN A MALAYSIAN PRIVATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Academic writing is considered a challenging task among university undergraduates, especially for second language (L2) learners who do not speak English as their mother tongue. The main aim of this research is to find out the academic writing difficulties among undergraduates in a Malaysian University and the factors that cause these difficulties. The study employed the mixed methods research design. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data with 150 participants who responded to the questionnaire and nine undergraduates participated in the interviews. The findings show that the academic writing difficulties undergrads encountered are due to various aspects of vocabulary, coherence, and paraphrasing. These difficulties arise mainly due to the weak command of the English language, interference of the mother tongue, lack of writing practices, the techniques engaged in the teaching of academic writing, and the medium of instruction.

Keywords: *academic writing difficulties, coherence, paraphrasing, vocabulary*

INTRODUCTION

English language is the main language or medium of instruction for most universities around the world. The challenges in academic writing are not only confined to Malaysian undergraduates but also for international undergraduates who come to pursue higher education in Malaysia (Singh, 2016). According to Azizi (2018), academic writing is an essential skill that undergraduates need to acquire as it plays a vital role in their fields of studies. One of the challenges faced by university undergraduates in academic writing is the influence of their mother tongue as they tend to translate directly from their first language to English. They also have negative perceptions of academic writing as English is not their first language and some even lack motivation in learning the language. This can result in low second language (L2) proficiency in writing. Lack of useful feedback from lecturers could also be one of the reasons (Singh, 2016). Undergraduates had little exposure to academic writing and needed more guidance to complete the writing task (Al-Mukdad, 2019). But the lecturer comments undergraduates receive are not constructive for enhancing their writing skills. Besides, they also have insufficient opportunities for academic practice writing in class (Akhtar et al., 2018). Hence, academic writing is considered a challenging task for undergraduates whose first language is not English (Sedigheh et al., 2018). However, they need to be proficient in it to produce writing that can demonstrate their critical thinking and understanding in their field of study. For all the above reasons, there is a need to conduct a study on academic writing difficulties faced by both the Malaysian and foreign undergraduates in Malaysia to find out the problems and factors that cause the above-mentioned problems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vocabulary is essential in second language learning. Having sufficient vocabulary enables us to express our thoughts or communicate effectively in the spoken or written form (Rohmatillah, 2014). Undergraduates are required to master vocabulary knowledge to enhance their writing skills especially in academic writing where precise word choice is essential. If they possess a wide range of vocabulary, they can use a variety of words to express themselves or give their views clearly (Zhai, 2016). A research conducted by Xiao and Chen (2015) revealed that vocabulary was the main problem in academic writing among Chinese undergraduates in China. The undergraduates possessed limited vocabulary and they used the same words repeatedly. These constraints resulted in their inability to express certain ideas clearly in writing. Thus, they resort to searching for the words in their first language and choosing the one that is similar to the English words

(Cennetkusu, 2017) But this was normally inappropriate to the context of their writing. Ye (2013) discovered that the influence of mother tongue in writing will result in poor diction among undergraduates. A Chinese word can have various meaning in English and undergraduates tend to translate directly from their mother tongue. Incorrect use of vocabulary will occur if undergraduates fail to choose the precise meaning of the word. In another study, AlMarwani (2020) found that undergraduates had low motivation towards writing due to the lack of vocabulary knowledge, causing them to have difficulties in expressing their ideas. Meanwhile, Ashraf et al. (2020) point out that lack of reading habits is the reason why undergraduates had limited range of vocabulary. People read to write, and write to read. Hence, undergraduates are encouraged to read widely to improve their academic writing. This view is supported by Atayeva et al. (2019), as reading, for them, helps enrich vocabulary by discovering new words and learning how they are used in sentences.

Another factor that affects academic writing is cohesion and coherence. They play a crucial part by connecting the sentences and making the paragraph coherent so that the text is well-organized and comprehensible. Alharbi (2017) found that Saudi undergraduates have difficulties in using suitable cohesive devices and in writing coherently. Masadeh (2019) discovered the same issue faced by undergraduates and believed that insufficient training in using cohesive devices was one of the causes of the problem. The undergraduates did not realise the importance of using cohesive devices. Masadeh (2019) suggested that lecturers provide more guidance to undergraduates and expose them to more English writing. Faradhibah and Nur (2017) also found that undergraduates could not state main ideas clearly while Abdel (2010) mentioned that the lack of exposure to authentic English writing would result in having less or little knowledge on the use of cohesive devices. Further studies by Cekiso et al. (2016) and Buckingham (2008) also show that undergraduates experienced difficulty in forming coherent paragraphs, especially writing introduction and conclusion. The introduction written was incoherent and readers could not identify the main ideas conveyed. Supporting sentences were poorly written as they did not link with the topic sentence. Cekiso et al. also discovered that the conclusion written was not connected to the topic or title. Similarly, Sukma (2019) found out that the undergraduates could not write proper introduction, body paragraphs and conclusion for argumentative text. Apart from not being able to express main ideas appropriately, the explanation was unclear and the comments or suggestions were inadequate.

Paraphrasing is considered one of the most challenging skills for L2 English learners as they need to have good comprehension skills to be able to rephrase sentences using their own words. Thadphoothon (2019) studied the

paraphrasing difficulties of English-major undergraduates in Thailand and discovered that the three main challenges are due to vocabulary, syntax and the ability to comprehend the text. Undergraduates are unable to rephrase the sentences if they do not understand the text fully. Badiozaman (2014) also found paraphrasing difficulties among Malaysian English as Second Language (ESL) learners, believing that the main reason was the low competency in L2. Even though some learners were able to understand the meaning of the text, they still found it difficult to paraphrase what they read. Hence, they spent a long time in the drafting stage, such as, finding the suitable synonyms to replace the original words, combining several major points in a sentence, excluding irrelevant words, and changing the word order. It was also difficult for learners to rewrite the text while keeping the intended meaning conveyed by the original author. In addition, according to Hayuningrum and Yulia's (2012) research, they found that learners' difficulties in paraphrasing is due to the lack of paraphrasing practices and the inability to differentiate between quotations and paraphrasing. Undergraduates were not given feedback from lecturers, and this resulted in the undergraduates applying the wrong technique of translation to paraphrasing.

Factors of Academic Writing Challenges

Academic writing requires undergraduates to have a high English language proficiency level. They need to know various language aspects such as vocabulary, grammar and morphology and know how to apply the knowledge they have learned in writing (Barkaoui, 2007). Rahman and Hassan (2019) investigated the academic writing difficulties of Bangladeshi undergraduates in a Malaysian university through survey research and they found that weak English foundation is one of the factors that affected undergraduates' writing. Another study by Jeyaraj (2018) also shows that weak foundation could limit undergraduates' ability in using the correct vocabulary especially for those who do not speak English as the first language. Moreover, Alharbi (2017) states that lack of reading could also be one of the factors that affected academic writing among undergraduates. Poor reading habit and being trapped in the vicious cycle of reading that is, poor readers do not like to read because it is difficult. As they do not like to read, they do not read and as they do not read, they continue to struggle. This could make writing critically more difficult for them.

The negative transfer from the first language (L1) to second language (L2) also affects academic writing among university undergraduates. The undergraduates with poor English language proficiency tend to rely on their L1 in L2 writing (He & Niao, 2015). They will use the L1 writing styles or strategies in academic writing and this could result in the incorrect use of

grammar, vocabulary and organization of the text. Chinese undergraduates prefer to state their main ideas at the end of the paragraph as a conclusion after providing the arguments or supporting details whereas English writing often states the major points at the beginning of the paragraph (He & Niao, 2015). Moreover, Shi (2015) found out that negative transfer from L1 affects the use of correct grammar and syntax. The common mistakes committed by undergraduates are the wrong word order, misuse of verbs and tenses, omission of articles, misuse of conjunctions, and writing complex sentences (Shi, 2015).

According to Langan (2008), writing skill requires a lot of practice. The more one writes, the better one becomes. This shows the importance of practising writing for undergraduates, especially those with English as their second language. A study by Afrin (2016) to find out the problems faced by non-English undergraduates in Bangladesh revealed that undergraduates rarely practise writing at home and view writing as a task performed only in school. From the teachers' perspectives, they believed that undergraduates lack writing practices because undergraduates were more focused on their major and less on enhancing their writing skills. This finding echoes that in a study by Sağlamel and Kayaoğlu (2015) and another by Belkhir and Benyelles (2017). Similarly, Singh (2019) and Noriah et al. (2012) also state that additional writing courses organized by university could help undergraduates to develop better writing techniques and provide more opportunities for practising academic writing.

Srichanyachon (2012) states that feedback from teachers is crucial for L2 undergraduates in improving their writing skills. Undergraduates are able to benefit from the comments given by teachers and learn from their mistakes after realising the errors they made in writing. Feedback not only guide undergraduates in improving their writing accurately but also increase undergraduates' motivation especially when the feedback is positive. Singh (2016) studied the academic writing difficulties among international graduates in Malaysia by conducting focus group interviews with 70 graduate undergraduates to find out the challenges faced by them in academic writing. The researcher discovered that one of the reasons is that undergraduates did not receive feedback from lecturers after submitting their assignments and some of the feedbacks focused on the language aspect only. Constructive feedback was not provided by lecturers for undergraduates to improve their weaknesses in writing and it would be difficult for undergraduates to improve if they do not know the mistakes they made (Pineteh, 2014). Another study by Giridharan and Roboson (2011) also highlighted the importance of feedback in helping undergraduates to improve their writing as it helps them to become more aware of the mistakes they frequently make and to enhance their writing skills.

On the other hand, Agbayahoun (2016) conducted a study to find out the effects of feedback on undergraduates' writing and how undergraduates perceived the feedback from teachers. He discovered that most of the undergraduates could not understand the comments written by teachers and he suggested that teachers use simple language for undergraduates to understand the comments.

Essay structure and ideas development can also affect the writing skills. Storch (2009) investigated the development in second language writing of undergraduates who had been studying in an English medium university for one semester. The researcher discovered that undergraduates' writing skills had improved after one semester and the improvement was mostly on the structure and ideas development. They were able to write more coherent paragraphs and use less informal words or expressions in their writing. However, there was no indication for the improvement in terms of grammatical accuracy and academic vocabulary. Storch (2009) states that this was because of the short duration as undergraduates only studied for one semester and there was no feedback provided for undergraduates to improve their weaknesses. Cosgun and Hasırcı (2017) investigated the effect of English as a medium of instruction on undergraduates' proficiency in Turkey by employing longitudinal pre-test and post-test experimental design. They found that undergraduates showed improvement in reading and listening skills as they had more exposure to the English language. However, there was no clear evidence on the improvement in writing abilities because the pre and post writing scores had no significant changes. Phuong and Nyugen (2019) studied 136 sophomores' perception about English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) classes in a university in Vietnam. The findings showed that EMI classes provided more opportunities and exposure for undergraduates to learn English. Apart from gaining more vocabulary knowledge, undergraduates also agreed that they had improved in the four English skills, which are reading, listening, speaking and writing, with the first two recording better improvement compared to speaking and writing. Besides, for undergraduates who are less proficient in English, they faced problems with understanding the lectures in EMI classes mainly due to the lack of vocabulary knowledge, poor listening abilities, and not understanding the terminologies or concepts in English in their main programme of study.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This research employed explanatory sequential mixed methods research design where the researcher will first collect the quantitative data, analyse

and interpret them before conducting interviews to collect the qualitative data (Creswell, 2014). Mixed methods research can provide a deeper understanding in this study as both numbers and words can add precision and meaning to answer the research questions as well as forming concrete and sufficient evidence to support the findings (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Subsequently, interviews were conducted to strengthen the quantitative data after the survey was successfully carried out.

Sampling & Participants

The sample size consists of 150 participants for the first and second research question which aligns to Roscoe's (1975) view that a sample size between 30 and 500 are appropriate for most studies. Meanwhile Guest et al. (2006) suggested that 6 to 12 interviews are sufficient for a qualitative research. Besides, Hennink et al. (2017) also believe that the code saturation can be achieved in the first nine interviews. Hence, nine participants were selected for the one-to-one interview. The participants were undergraduates from the Faculty of Social Science and Liberal Arts in a Malaysia private university comprising of undergraduates from General Studies, English language and Communication, Mass Communication, and Psychology. All the participants are third-year Malaysian undergraduates. Coding for interview data for Participant 1 is P1 and the other participants are P2 to P9 respectively.

Data Collection and Procedure

The questionnaire used for research question one (RQ1) was adapted from Abdel (2010) and Rahmayani (2018). It is to identify the academic writing difficulties of undergraduates at a private university in Malaysia. The questionnaire adapted from Al-Khasawneh (2010) was used to collect data for the second research question (RQ2). It aims to find out the factors causing academic writing difficulties among undergraduates. It consists of nine questions and the data were collected using a 5-point Likert-scale that ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The data was collected via an online questionnaire (Google Form) that was distributed to both local and international undergraduates (Refer to Table 1 to Table 5 for the questions in the questionnaire).

The interview questions were developed based on the questionnaire results (Refer to Appendix A). The semi-structured interviews were conducted online through Zoom and Microsoft Teams. The researcher chose the semi-structured interview because it is more flexible and the researcher can ask follow-up questions to collect more in-depth data (Kallio et al., 2016; Easwaramoorthy & Zarinpoush, 2006). The interviews were also conducted one-to-one with the respondents to make them comfortable in expressing

their views (Creswell, 2012). The audio data were saved and recorded. The instruments were validated by a lecturer before conducting the research.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS version 26. The research construct consists of three main categories: vocabulary, cohesion and coherence, and paraphrasing. Each category was measured using 5 point Likert-scale that range from (1) very easy to (5) very difficult. The percentages were calculated and the median was used to find out the central tendency for each item in the questionnaire. For the qualitative data, the audio data were transcribed into written text. Thematic analysis was applied to analyse the data by identifying the common themes from the transcription (Caulfield, 2020).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

RQ 1: What are the academic writing challenges faced by undergraduates in a Malaysian Private University?

- (a) Vocabulary plays an important part in writing and having an extensive vocabulary helps undergraduates to convey their ideas or messages clearly because they know how to use the words in different contexts (Rohmatillah, 2014). Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for each item in the vocabulary section.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Vocabulary

		V.E	E.	N.	D.	V.D	T.D	Median
	N	2	27	42	66	13	79	
	%	1.3	18	28	44	8.7	52.7	4
Proper use of academic vocabulary	N	6	21	27	71	25	96	
	%	4	14	18	47.3	16.7	64	4
Proper use of phrases	N	10	62	38	34	6	40	
	%	6.7	41.3	25.3	22.7	4	26.7	3
Antonyms	N	25	64	30	26	5	31	
	%	16.7	42.7	20	17.3	3.3	20.6	2
Synonyms	N	23	65	29	28	5	33	
	%	15.3	43.3	19.3	18.7	3.3	22	2

* V.E.=Very easy; E=Easy; N=Neither; D=Difficult; V.D.=Very difficult; T.D.=Totally difficult; N=Number of respondents; %=Percentages

Based on Table 1, it was found out that using appropriate academic vocabulary is the most challenging aspect as 64% of the respondents reported that it was difficult or very difficult (Median=4). In addition, 52.7% of them rated difficult or very difficult (Median=4) as they also found it hard to find the appropriate vocabulary in expressing ideas. On the other hand, most undergraduates reported easy for the proper use of phrases, antonyms, and synonyms, with 26.7% reporting it difficult or very difficult for phrases, 20.6% for antonyms and 22% for synonyms. These findings are in line with Xiao and Chen's (2015) study in which they found that vocabulary is one of the main issues that undergraduates encountered in academic writing.

(b) Cohesion is the use of transition words in connecting sentences for readers to understand the meaning between sentences (Suwandi, 2016). Without the proper use of cohesive devices, the whole passage would be disorganised and it would be incomprehensible to readers. Table 2 (next page) presents the descriptive statistics for the cohesion section.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Cohesion

		V.E	E.	N.	D.	V.D	T.D	Median
Proper use of Conjunctions	N	57	56	16	20	1	21	2
	%	38	37.3	10.7	13.3	0.7	14	
Proper use of References	N	57	47	20	18	8	26	2
	%	38	31.3	13.3	12	5.3	17.3	
Proper use of Substitutions	N	23	58	34	33	2	35	2
	%	15.3	38.7	22.7	22	1.3	23.3	
Proper use of vocabulary	N	15	64	38	29	4	33	2
	%	10	42.7	25.3	19.3	2.7	22	
Proper use of Ellipsis / omission of unnecessarily words	N	13	67	31	34	5	39	2
	%	8.7	44.7	20.7	22.7	3.3	26	
Understanding the different uses of cohesive ties to achieve consistency in the written text	N	8	70	37	28	7	35	2
	%	5.3	46.7	24.7	18.7	4.7	23.4	2
Appropriate transition of ideas between sentences	N	10	71	26	36	7	43	2
	%	6.7	47.3	17.3	24	4.7	38.7	

* V.E.=Very easy; E=Easy; N=Neither; D=Difficult; V.D.=Very difficult; T.D.=Totally difficult; N=Number of respondents; %=Percentages

From Table 2, only a small number (refer to Median) of undergraduates encountered cohesion problems in academic writing. The results could suggest that the majority of the undergraduates have sufficient knowledge on the use of different kinds of transition words in linking the sentences or whole paragraph to create a coherent and unified text. Findings of this study contradict those of previous studies conducted by Masadeh (2019), Alharbi (2017), Farahibah and Nur (2017), and Abdel (2010) .

(c) Coherence is the organisation of ideas in a way that fulfills the communicative effect of the whole passage (Siregar, 2014). However, the use of cohesive devices in writing does not guarantee that the text is coherent as the ideas or context of the passage need to be connected for readers to easily understand the ideas and relationship between the sentences or paragraph. Table 3 shows the summary statistics for each item in the coherence section.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Coherence

		V.E	E.	N.	D.	V.D	T.D	Median
Expressing one main idea per paragraph	N	12	79	26	29	4	33	2
	%	8	52.7	17.3	19.3	2.7	22	
Writing an appropriate supporting sentence per paragraph	N	12	76	30	26	6	32	2
	%	8	50.7	20	17.3	4	21.4	
Writing an appropriate concluding sentence in the last paragraph	N	12	89	26	16	7	23	2
	%	8	59.3	17.3	10.7	4.7	15.4	
Linking introduction and conclusion	N	14	81	26	17	12	29	2
	%	9.3	54	17.3	11.3	8	19.3	
Linking ideas between sentences per paragraph	N	15	81	32	18	4	22	2
	%	10	54	21.3	12	2.7	14.7	
Linking ideas between paragraphs	N	10	81	31	23	5	28	2
	%	6.7	54	20.7	15.3	3.3	18.6	
Writing an appropriate introduction for your thesis or assignment as a whole.	N	2	35	26	75	12	87	4
	%	1.3	23.3	17.3	50	8	58	
Writing an appropriate conclusion for your thesis or assignment as a whole.	N	2	31	41	59	17	76	4
	%	1.3	20.7	27.3	39.3	11.3	50.6	

* V.E=Very easy; E=Easy; N=Neither; D=Difficult; V.D=Very difficult; T.D=Totally difficult; N=Number of respondents; %=Percentages

The results in Table 3 indicate that writing coherently was a problem for most undergraduates. The results are in line with the study by Alharbi (2017) that found most undergraduates had difficulties maintaining coherence for the whole text.

(d) Paraphrasing is one of the essential skills that undergraduates need to acquire especially in academic writing where they need to rewrite or rephrase other researchers' ideas and views in different syntactic and lexical structures (Thadphoothon, 2019). Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for every item within the paraphrasing scale.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Paraphrasing

		V.E	E.	N.	D.	V.D	T.D	Median
Changing structure of ideas in paraphrasing text	N	4	20	27	71	28	99	4
	%	2.7	13.3	18	47.3	18.7	65.7	
Changing words in paraphrasing text	N	2	27	26	72	23	95	4
	%	1.3	18	17.3	48	15.3	63.3	
Changing word orders in paraphrasing text	N	13	61	31	43	2	45	3
	%	8.7	40.7	20.7	28.7	1.3	30	
Changing sentence structures in paraphrasing text	N	21	66	30	23	10	33	2
	%	14	44	20	15.3	6.7	22	
Understanding on the criteria of good paraphrasing and the correct procedure in paraphrasing	N	15	60	36	30	9	39	2.5
	%	10	40	24	20	6	26	

* V.E=Very easy; E=Easy; N=Neither; D=Difficult; V.D=Very difficult; T.D=Totally difficult; N=Number of respondents; %=Percentages

As can be seen from Table 4, most undergraduates face difficulties in retaining the original meaning using their own words. Of the respondents, 65.7% reported as difficult or very difficult in changing the structure of ideas (Median=4) and changing words in paraphrasing text was reported as the second highest (63.3%) for difficult or very difficult (Median=4). However, 44% of them found it easy to change the sentence structure while 40.7% rated easy for "changing word orders". Lastly, only 26% of them had difficulties in understanding the criteria of good paraphrasing and the correct paraphrasing procedure. Badiozaman (2014) states that poor English proficiency is the reason that causes undergraduates to encounter paraphrasing problems in academic writing because undergraduates required

a longer time to find the appropriate words in replacing the original words used by the authors. In addition, lack of paraphrasing practices could also be one of the factors (Hayuningrum & Yulia, 2012).

RQ2: What are the factors that caused academic writing challenges faced by undergraduates in a Malaysian Private University?

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for Factors of Academic Writing Challenges

		S.D	D.	N.	A.	S.A.	T.A	Median
Using mother tongue in English classes	N	2	12	19	78	39	117	4
	%	1.3	8	12.7	52	26	78	
Teachers' low proficiency in English	N	9	47	35	40	19	59	3
	%	6	31.3	23.3	26.7	12.7	39.4	
Lack of opportunities to practice English academic writing	N	2	11	19	74	44	118	4
	%	1.3	7.3	12.7	49.3	29.3	78.6	
Lack of effective techniques in teaching English	N	0	10	19	97	24	121	4
	%	0	6.7	12.7	64.7	16	80.7	
As a second language learner	N	1	6	42	70	31	101	4
	%	0.7	4	28	46.7	20.7	67.4	
Medium of instruction	N	0	6	42	64	38	102	4
	%	0	4	28	42.7	25.3	68	
Weak English foundation	N	1	5	18	44	82	126	5
	%	0.7	3.31	12	29.3	54.7	84	
Lack of academic writing course in educational institutions	N	2	10	29	79	30	109	4
	%	1.3	6.7	19.3	52.7	20	72.7	
Mother tongue available using (L1 Language)	N	0	12	35	76	27	103	4
	%	0	8	23.3	50.7	18	68.7	

* S.D.=Strongly Disagree; D=Disagree; N=Neither; A=Agree; S.A.=Strongly Agree; T.A.=Totally Agree; N=Number of respondents; %=Percentages

Table 5 above shows percentages of the respondents' views towards the factors that resulted in the difficulties encountered in academic writing.

(a) Weak English Foundation: Data from the interview revealed that most undergraduates stated that the weak foundation in the English language is the main factor for their academic writing difficulties. Two respondents stated that weak foundation can affect undergraduates' abilities in using the relevant and appropriate vocabulary in writing as well as writing coherent sentences.

P3: Weak English foundation will normally come with poor vocabulary and weak in making a sentence. Undergraduates with weak English foundation will facing difficulties in using appropriate vocabulary in their academic writing. Yes, it will affect me because weak in sentence construction will cause the sentence unable to be written coherently.

Furthermore, six participants stated that being a second language learner of English affected their ability in writing academic text because of the limited vocabulary and opportunities to practice using English to speak or write.

P2: Yes, I think will affect my academic text. I lack of sufficient vocabulary during my writing.

This indicates that language proficiency plays an important role in academic writing. Undergraduates who are less proficient or fundamentally weak in English will encounter more challenges due to limited vocabulary and weak grammar. This concurs with Jeyaraj's (2018) view that a weak command of the English language causes limited vocabulary and failure to use a wide variety of words in expressing their views.

Another participant mentioned that the lack of reading habits is the reason for having poor vocabulary and she said she had to use google translate in writing academic text. This finding is in line with the findings by Ashraf et al. (2020) that found that reading plays a significant role in writing as reading helps to develop comprehension skills, vocabulary, and linguistic competencies. This is also supported by Atayeva et al. (2019) as reading can help in selecting the appropriate words in writing. Undergraduates with little exposure to English text not only lack vocabulary knowledge but also are unfamiliar with the sentence structure in English. Likewise, Alharbi (2017) states that reading academic sources improves academic writing ability as undergraduates will be more familiar with the writing style of academic writing and learn how to structure ideas in the paragraph to produce a coherent text with the highest communicative effect. Therefore, it cannot be denied that reading plays a significant role in undergraduates' writing.

(b) Influence of Mother Tongue: According to the interview data, it was found that participants tend to use their mother tongue in academic writing. Translating from mother tongue to English will result in errors in writing as the vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure of English are different from another language. One of the participants mentioned that she normally resorted to translating words from her first language to English when writing, resulting in sentences that differed in meanings from the intended meanings in English.

P2: This is because I tend to translate the language directly. But somehow, the grammar in Mandarin and English are totally different.

P4: I tend to translate words from my mother tongue to English.

Sometimes, the meanings are generally similar but not exactly the same. These findings are in accord with Zhao (2019), who states that undergraduates tend to use word-for-word translation from their mother tongue to English in writing when they have limited vocabulary knowledge. The words are translated literally but the meanings are not exactly the same, and this could result in the wrong word choice.

(c) Lack of Writing Practice: In order to write good academic writing, undergraduates need the knowledge of using accurate grammar, vocabulary, and cohesive devices to achieve unity in paragraphs. Without sufficient writing practice, undergraduates are unable to apply what they have learned in writing (Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007). Responses gathered from the interview showed that participants agreed that the lack of academic writing practice was one of the factors causing weak academic writing. From the extract below, Participant 3 said that if undergraduates lacked writing practices, they were unable to know the proper way of constructing sentences, paraphrasing, discussing main ideas and providing supporting sentences.

P3: If people have less opportunities to practise English academic writing, they have less knowledge in relation to the technique of making sentence, paraphrasing sentence, expressing their ideas and giving appropriate supporting sentences.

This is in agreement with Belkhir and Benyelles (2017), who believe that lack of writing practices is one of the causes of academic writing difficulties. They suggested that undergraduates should familiarize themselves with more essay writing activities to enhance their writing skills. Afrin (2016) also discovered that because non-English major undergraduates in Bangladesh did not write outside the classroom, this could be the reason why they encountered many problems in their academic writing.

(d): Teaching Techniques: According to participants from the interview, they agreed that teachers who were proficient in English and possessed effective teaching techniques were important for undergraduates to receive the accurate information and gain more understanding in their courses.

The participants also believed that teachers need to give more writing practices and provide feedback for undergraduates to correct their mistakes. Teachers also need to explain the lecture clearly for undergraduates to fully understand the concepts that they are learning.

P8: If the teaching method is more hands-on, that would be better as the undergraduates get all the practice they need and with the feedback from teachers, they can learn more and correct their mistakes as soon as possible.

According to Singh (2016), undergraduates were unable to know the areas that they needed to improve on when the lecturers did not provide any comments on their writing. Giridharan and Roboson (2011) commented that feedback from lecturers was necessary for helping undergraduates to improve their overall writing skill. Agbayahoun (2016) also said that other than pointing out the errors, undergraduates also wanted more constructive comments about the content of their writing. The above indicates that the comments given to undergraduates would have positive impacts on their writing in producing better quality work.

(e) Medium of Instruction: Based on the interview responses, it was revealed that the medium of instruction also has an impact on undergraduates' academic writing. Participant 5 stated that misunderstanding of the instructions in writing would occur if undergraduates were not familiar with the medium of instruction used in class.

P5: If undergraduates are unfamiliar with the medium of instruction, then they will face the problem in misunderstanding the instructions in writing.

P3: Medium of instruction able to affect undergraduates in writing academic because student able to learn new vocabulary from the conversation or presentation. Besides, student will become familiar with the sentence structure of English language.

These findings are consistent with Phuong and Nyugen's (2019) study in which they found that undergraduates who were less competent in English would have difficulties in understanding the lectures because of poor listening competency and have insufficient vocabulary in comprehending the lectures. The medium of instruction can provide more exposure for the undergraduates in learning a language. Participant 3 stated that the undergraduates can widen their repertoire of new vocabulary and be more familiar with the sentence structures of English from the conversation or presentation in class.

In addition, Phuong and Nyugen (2019) also found that undergraduates gained more English vocabulary knowledge during English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) classes because of the exposure to more English language interactions which result in improvement in the overall proficiency. Storch (2009) also found that undergraduates had better performance in writing in terms of structure and ideas development after studying in an English-medium university for one semester. Their writings were more coherent and fewer informal expressions were noted. On the other hand, a study conducted by Cosgun and Hasircı (2017), shows that English as the medium of instruction helps improve listening and reading but there is no clear evidence on enhancing undergraduates' writing skills.

CONCLUSION

Generally, our study found that most undergraduates encountered academic writing challenges with more than half of them having problems with choosing the right vocabulary, using academic vocabulary correctly, and expressing their ideas. However, most undergraduates found it easy to use the correct cohesive devices and were able to link the ideas between sentences or paragraphs to achieve coherence in writing, and this contradict related literature of academic writing.

The study also revealed that the academic writing challenges among undergraduates were mainly due to the weak foundation in the English language, the interference of the mother tongue, lack of writing practices, and poor quality of teaching. The findings indicated that the undergraduates'

weak foundation in the English language affected their ability to use the correct vocabulary and grammar, and construct coherent sentences. It was also observed that the lack of reading habits was the reason for having a limited vocabulary and being unfamiliar with the writing style of academic writings. Furthermore, the interference of mother tongue was common among undergraduates as they tended to translate directly from their first language into the English language, and this had led to inappropriate use of words, grammar, and sentence structures. In addition, the lack of writing practices also contributed to poor quality writing. Consequently, undergraduates were unable to develop or improve their writing techniques and improve their writing skills. They also felt that the quality of teaching also affected their writing skills as they were unable to know their weaknesses or mistakes as the lecturers did not provide feedback to them.

Implications

Undergraduates need to realize their weaknesses in writing and take initiative to improve their writing skills so that they are able to produce a reasonably good piece of writing that is clear and comprehensible. They are encouraged to develop reading habits to gain more vocabulary and to read academic journals or articles to be familiar with the style of academic writing.

At the same time, lecturers are recommended to pay more attention to undergraduates' writing challenges and give more opportunities for undergraduates to practise writing. The institutions where the lecturers are affiliated with may need to develop a stronger English pedagogy to manage better the challenges faced by undergraduates with English as a second language. Providing more guidance and constructive feedback is vital for undergraduates to improve and enhance their writing abilities. Lecturers can also engage differing and effective teaching techniques to help undergraduates improve their competencies in the English language. Organizing and providing more writing courses or workshops may help English-as-second-language undergraduates to have more experience with academic writing as a way to improve their academic writing proficiency.

Recommendations

It is hoped that this study is able to contribute to the understanding of the academic writing challenges among university undergraduates in Malaysia. Studying the factors of academic writing difficulties is important in helping undergraduates to improve their writing abilities and finding the strategies for undergraduates to write quality academic text. Several recommendations can be recommended for future research on academic writing among undergraduates in Malaysia. Since the sample size for this study is only 150

participants and less than 10 undergraduates have participated in the semi-structured interviews, a larger sample size is recommended for both questionnaires and interviews. Besides, this study mainly focused on undergraduates from one university and, therefore, further studies can be conducted among undergraduates from different faculties and different universities so that the results are more generalizable to the whole population. Furthermore, the study has discussed the academic writing challenges from undergraduates' perspectives and it is suggested that future research can be done by conducting interviews with lecturers or professors to better understand how the educators perceive the academic writing challenges of undergraduates. In addition, the strategies in improving academic writing can also be discussed to provide solutions for both undergraduates and lecturers in helping them to enhance their writing skills.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional committee.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants in the study.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Research Question 1

1. Why do you think that using appropriate vocabulary is a challenging task in academic writing?
2. What are the reasons that cause students to struggle when writing a reference list in academic writing?
3. Why do you think that writing a suitable introduction and conclusion for your thesis or assignments is difficult?
4. How do you learn to paraphrase? Do you receive any guidance from lecturers when paraphrasing English text?
5. Why is it difficult when you have to paraphrase a text?

Research Question 2

1. In your opinion, how does weak English foundation causes academic writing difficulties? Does it affect you to write coherently?
2. Do you think that using mother tongue in English classes will interfere in your academic writing? Why?
3. In your opinion, how does using mother tongue in English classes affect students in writing academic text?
4. Does being a second language learner of English affect your ability to write academic text? Why?
5. How does the medium of instruction affect students in writing academic text?
6. Students who lack of opportunities to practice English academic writing often encounter difficulties in academic writing. What is your opinion about this?
7. Why the lack of academic writing courses in educational institutions causes students to face academic writing difficulties?
8. How does the teaching method affect students in writing academic text?
9. Do you think that teachers' low proficiency in English affect your academic writing? Why?