

## Academic Writing Difficulties Encountered by University EFL Learners

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**ABSTRACT:** *The present study was conducted with the aim to discover the major difficulties encountered by some university students in academic writing. It also aimed to find out the factors that hinder their academic writing skills. 36 students majoring in English at the Faculty of Education, University of Benghazi took part in this study. A questionnaire with 25 items was utilized to answer the stated research questions. The data analysis revealed that both graduate and undergraduate students have some problems in academic writing such as choosing the appropriate academic words, difficulty in developing a thesis statement, organizing ideas, and writing coherent paragraphs. These challenges were influenced by a lack of resources followed by a low English language proficiency and a lack of writing practice opportunities. It is hoped that the findings of this research would provide great benefits to the instructors of the English language and curriculum designers to address the writing difficulties that might be encountered by learners of English.*

**KEYWORDS:** writing difficulties, academic writing, university students,

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### INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a formal style of writing used by university students, instructors, and researchers. It is different from everyday writing as it has certain features, a specific format, uses more academic words, and complex sentences, and the argument is logically progressed taking into consideration the audience for whom it is written. Moreover, the language used in academic writing should be clear and precise to ensure that the reader can easily understand the meaning and avoid any bias or ambiguity (Pratiwi,2016; Fadhel ,2019).

Academic writing is a common method of assessing students at the university level, where students are expected to do different written assignments and conduct research, meanwhile, it is not an easy task for many students to acquire (Al-Marwani, 2020). At the university level, students should be able to generate their ideas and organize their writing into paragraphs that are logically linked and smoothly developed. That is, they should do some reading about the topic, write a clear outline, decide what should be written in the introduction, how would the main body be developed, and state a strong conclusion. Moreover, academic writing should be based on documented evidence not on the writer's personal views or opinions. Therefore, students need to develop their research skills, summarizing and paraphrasing information, and using a direct quotation with an accurate referencing system (Abdulkareem, 2013). Based on what has been introduced above, it can be inferred that effective academic writing appears to be very important for every university student as most of the assessment methods used in higher

education are focusing not only on the quality of information, but also on how it is presented (Dudu & Subanda 2012; Mubarak, 2017)

### **Statement of the Problem**

Due to the difficulty of mastering academic writing, many students face a great challenge in acquiring this skill and consequently failed to obtain a passing grade (Al Mubarak, 2017; Fadhel,2019). This applies to some Libyan university students who are struggling in doing the written work they are assigned by their instructors according to the required standards. Through the researcher's supervision of some graduation projects conducted by final year university students, it has been noticed that some of them are facing various difficulties when they are asked to produce a coherent piece of writing. These difficulties may occur because of different factors such as ineffective methods of teaching, lack of time devoted to teaching writing skills and maybe lack of resources.

### **Aims of the study**

This study aims to explore the challenges encountered by some of the English language students at the Faculty of Education, Benghazi University when they write in English, and to shed light on the factors that may cause such difficulties. It also aims to propose ways to help them master the skills of academic writing.

### **Research questions**

This study intends to answer the following questions:

- What are the main academic writing difficulties encountered by Libyan undergraduate EFL learners?
- What are the reasons that affect Libyan undergraduate EFL learners' academic writing skills?

### **Significance of the study**

It is expected that the findings of this study would provide great benefits to the instructors of the English language and curriculum designers to address the writing difficulties that might be encountered by learners of English. The results can also help English students to realize the difficulties they may encounter so that they can deal with them as effectively as possible.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Academic writing Difficulties**

After reviewing a number of studies, it became clear that the problem of acquiring the skills of academic writing is not limited to the Libyan university students, but other students in other parts of the world are facing the same issue as well. For example, (Dudu & Subanda, 2012) investigated the nature of academic weaknesses among undergraduate university students in Zimbabwe. Five hundred and fifty students and fifteen lecturers took part in the research. Document analysis, interviews, and a questionnaire were used for data collection. The results discovered different challenges that prevented students from being able to perform the written assignments according to the standards. For instance, "students had problems with spelling, misuse of parts of speech, lack of subject-verb agreement, poor punctuation, failure to cite sources, and redundancy". Similarly, Al Fadda (2012) studied the challenges faced by some

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postgraduate students at King Saud University and found that writing a coherent paragraph, differentiating between compounds and modifiers, and avoiding grammatical mistakes in their writing are the most striking challenges. Another study was carried out by Abdelkarim (2013) who investigated the common problems faced by some Arab-speaking students at the University of UTM in Malaysia. The findings indicated that sentence structure, vocabulary, and expressing ideas are on top of the mistakes made by the participants. In another study conducted by Al-Khairy (2013) on several higher education students showed that the inability to choose the appropriate academic words, incorrect punctuation, linguistic and grammatical errors are the main source of difficulties encountered by the students. He added that, some students generate their thoughts and ideas in their mother tongue then translate them into the English language which made their writing vague and incoherent. According to Al-Mubarak (2017) articles, punctuation, prepositions, irregular verbs, weak expressions, consistency paralleled structure, and use of verb tense are the major difficulties faced by English second language students in academic writing within the University of Al-Imam Al Mahdi. Likewise, Aldabbus (2017) analysed the nature of challenges experienced by some Bahraini Teachers College students in acquiring reading and writing skills. Twenty-two students in the Foundation Program at the (BTC), during the academic year 2015/2016 participated in the research. The findings revealed that mechanics of writing, lack of organization and outlining their ideas were among their weaknesses in writing.

Other difficulties have been identified by Raza (2015) in a related study. These are associated with the lack of summarizing a text or paraphrasing it accurately, determining whether a quotation is required or not, plagiarism, as well as a lack of knowledge in documenting sources within the text in a scientific way. On the other hand, Al-Samadani (2010) claimed that the difficulty of academic writing is not limited to linguistic and grammatical problems, but there are some other challenges such as writing a good thesis statement, developing, organizing, revising, and finally editing it to ensure an effective, error-free piece of writing.”

### **Reasons behind these difficulties**

There is no doubt that there are various causes behind the difficulties and challenges encountered by university students in academic writing as shown in previous research. For instance, Aldabbus (2017) listed a number of reasons that could hinder the acquisition of writing skills. On top of them is the L1 interference (different writing direction, no capitalization, different sentence structure, different adjective order, different spelling system, and different use of articles). He added that insufficient time for learning and practicing writing in class is another significant reason. Similarly, Altaeb, (2018) argued that students are usually taught how to write sentences, paragraphs, and essays theoretically and then they are asked to practice writing them at home as homework. Most of the students don't bother themselves doing their homework and directly resort to the internet for cut and paste. Al-Khairy (2013) claimed that the lack of clarity in the instructions provided by the instructors was one of the reasons for the low level of academic writing among students. Inappropriate feedback provided by instructors was found to be another important reason behind the challenges faced by university students in academic writing. Altaeb, (2018) & Fadhel, (2017) stated that providing students with negative feedback makes them fear writing and expressing their thoughts and stick only to the words and expressions they always use in order to avoid making mistakes. This, in turn, kills the creativity of the students and restricts them to use the vocabulary and

sentences they have mastered to avoid negative teacher reactions. However, to overcome these difficulties and facilitate the process of acquiring academic writing skills, researchers have suggested various remedial measures such as, encouraging students to do a lot of extensive reading, look at good examples of academic writing, practice writing, in addition to adhering to the instructors' advice and feedback (Alfaki, 2015; Fareed & Ashraf, 2016; Al-Marwani, 2020).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a quantitative approach to discover the writing challenges and the reasons that hinder the development of academic writing skills among Libyan undergraduate students in the Faculty of Education, Benghazi University. Having reviewed the related literature in the field of teaching English as a foreign language in general, and writing in particular, it was found that a questionnaire could be the best data collection tool that can be used in this study to obtain the necessary data. A questionnaire with 25 items was utilized to answer the following research questions: (1) what are the most striking difficulties faced by some Libyan undergraduate EFL learners in academic writing? (2) what are the factors that affect Libyan EFL learners' academic writing skills? The questionnaire was divided into 2 categories, possible academic writing difficulties and reasons behind the difficulties encountered by university students in mastering academic writing skills.

### **Participants**

The sample consisted of 36 participants majoring in English at the Faculty of Education, University of Benghazi. They were 26 undergraduates who have already completed the course of Academic Writing, and 10 graduates, who had taken the same course, were applying for the Master Programme in Education which will start next September. 35 of the participants were female and only one male.

### **Data Collection**

The 35 copies of the Questionnaires were distributed through lecturers in classes, but only 24 copies were returned. And other 20 copies were sent electronically on WhatsApp to individuals, but only 12 copies were answered. So a total of 36 copies of the questionnaires returned and all data that were captured by the questionnaire were computed and tabulated.

### **Data Analysis**

To determine the degree of response of the study sample to the study questionnaire, for each of its items, and to determine the length of the level category that will be adopted to compare the average responses to it based on the following equation, (the upper limit of the response (5) – the lower limit of the response (1)) / the number of levels (5) ) = (5 – 1) / 5 = 0.8 and the categories are as follows:

Table 1 shows the weighted average, alternatives, and levels according to the five-point Likert scale.

Table 1

A weighted average of the five points Likert scale	Alternatives	Level
From 1 to 1.80	Strongly disagree	Very low
>1.80 to 2.60	Disagree	Low
> 2.60 to 3.40	Neutral	Medium
> 3.40 to 4.20	Agree	High
> 4.2 to 5	Strongly agree	Very high

The first goal is to identify the difficulties that the participants faced and their possible causes. To achieve this goal, the weighted arithmetic means and standard deviation of the responses of the sample members were extracted and compared with the arithmetic mean of the five-point Likert scale, and their effectiveness was also determined.

## POSSIBLE DIFFICULTIES THAT THE PARTICIPANTS ENCOUNTERED

### Graduates perceptions

The first goal is to identify the most striking difficulties faced by the participants in academic writing. The following table shows the weighted arithmetic averages and standard deviations of the study questionnaire statements on the difficulties and their effectiveness according to the responses of graduate participants.

Table 2 Possible Academic writing Difficulties

No	Possible Academic writing Difficulties	Mean	Standard Deviation	Ranking according to the effectiveness	Level
1	I have difficulty in deciding how to start my writing	1.8	0.84	Fourteenth	Very low
2	I have difficulty in coming up with good thesis statement	2,2	0.622	Eighth	Low
3	I have difficulty in developing thesis statement	2.6	0.711	Second	Medium
4	I have difficulty in generating thoughtful ideas	2.2	0.844	Nineth	Low
5	I have difficulty in organizing my ideas	2.3	1.566	Sixth	Low
6	I have difficulty in writing coherent paragraphs	2.5	1.08012	Fourth	Medium
7	I have difficulty in writing strong conclusion	2.3	1.3444	Seventh	Low
8	I have difficulty in summarizing ideas taken from other sources	2.6	2.488	Third	Medium
9	I have difficulty in paraphrasing ideas taken from other sources	2.4	1.377	Fifth	Low
10	I have difficulty in determining whether a quotation is required or not.	1.9	0.988	Thirteenth	Low
11	I have difficulty in documenting sources	2	0.888	Eleventh	Low
12	I have difficulty in avoiding plagiarism	2.2	2.4	Tenth	Low
13	I have difficulty in choosing the appropriate academic words	2.7	1.1222	First	Medium
14	I have difficulty in using mechanics of writing (spelling, punctuation, and capitalization)	2	2	Twelfth	Low
15	I have difficulty in using grammar correctly (word classes, subject-verb agreement, forms of singular and plural)	1.6	1.1555	Fifteenth	Very low

It is clear from the previous table that the average sample responses ranged between (2.7 as a maximum and 1.6 as a minimum) with standard deviations that ranged between (1.566 and

0.622), and the ranking of the questionnaire statements was determined according to their effectiveness and level. As it is shown in table 2 above, the ranking of the statements was as follows:

Statement thirteen, "*I have difficulty in choosing the appropriate academic words*", was the most effective challenge from the viewpoint of the graduate participants. Then came statement three, "*I have difficulty in developing thesis statement*", in the second position. Statement eight, "*I have difficulty in summarizing ideas taken from other sources*", ranked third. And Statement six, "*I have difficulty in writing coherent paragraphs*", occupied fourth position. The effectiveness of the fore mentioned statements would be very moderate since all of them fall within the medium level. The rest of the questionnaire statements (9, 5, 7, 1, 2, 4, 10, 11, 12, 14, and 15) constituted little or no challenge in academic writing for the graduate participants as they all fall within either low or very low level.

### Undergraduate perceptions

To answer the first research question, the weighted arithmetic means and standard deviation of the responses of the participants were extracted and compared with the arithmetic mean of the Likert five-point scale, and their effectiveness was determined, as shown in table 3 below.

Table 3 shows the weighted arithmetic averages and standard deviations of the study questionnaire statements on possible difficulties and their effectiveness according to the responses of the undergraduate participants.

Table 3 Possible Academic writing Difficulties

No	Possible Academic writing Difficulties	Mean	Standard Deviation	Ranking according to effectiveness	Level
1	I have difficulty in deciding how to start my writing	2.73	1.084	Fourth	Medium
2	I have difficulty in coming up with good thesis statement	2.80	1.281	Third	Medium
3	I have difficulty in developing thesis statement	2.92	1.273	First	Medium
4	I have difficulty in generating thoughtful ideas	2.34	1.595	Thirteenth	Low
5	I have difficulty in organizing my ideas	2.92	1.513	Second	Medium
6	I have difficulty in writing coherent paragraphs	2.65	1.275	Eighth	Medium
7	I have difficulty in writing strong conclusion	2.26	1.004	Fifteenth	Low
8	I have difficulty in summarizing ideas taken from other sources	2.69	1.421	Sixth	Medium
9	I have difficulty in paraphrasing ideas taken from other sources	2.53	1.538	Tenth	Low
10	I have difficulty in determining whether a quotation is required or not.	2.73	1.164	Fifth	Medium
11	I have difficulty in documenting sources	2.30	1.059	Fourteenth	Low
12	I have difficulty in avoiding plagiarism	2.69	1.421	Seventh	Medium
13	I have difficulty in choosing the appropriate academic words	2.65	1.275	Nineth	Medium
14	I have difficulty in using mechanics of writing (spelling, punctuation, and capitalization)	2.42	0.973	Eleventh	Low
15	I have difficulty in using grammar correctly (word classes, subject-verb agreement, forms of singular and plural)	2.42	1.893	Twelveth	Low

It is clear from table 3 that the average sample responses ranged between (2.92 as a maximum and 2.26 as a minimum) with standard deviations that ranged between (1.273 and 1.004), and the ranking of the statements was as follows: statement three occupied the first place as the most effective challenge according to the viewpoint of undergraduate participants, yet it was

at a medium level. Then came statement five in the second place followed by statement two which came third. The statements one, ten, eight, twelve, six, and thirteen ranked consecutively from fourth to the ninth rank in terms of effectiveness and level compared to the arithmetic averages of the Likert five-scale, and the ranking of these statements came at the average level, while the rest of the items (4, 7, 9, 11, 14 and 15) were in low level.

### **Possible reasons behind the challenges faced by the participants**

#### **Graduates perceptions**

To answer the second research question which is "what are the reasons behind the difficulties that the Libyan students encounter"

With regard to the possible causes of the challenges, the arithmetic averages, standard deviations and their degree of effectiveness were also calculated, as in the following table:

This table shows the weighted arithmetic averages and standard deviations of the study questionnaire statements on the possible causes or reasons and their effectiveness according to the responses of the graduate participants.

**Table 4 Possible reasons behind the difficulties in learning academic writing**

No	Possible reasons behind the difficulties in learning academic writing	Mean	Standard Deviation	Ranking according to effectiveness	Level
1	Insufficient number of academic writing courses	3.4	2.488	Eighth	Medium
2	Ineffective academic writing courses	3.2	1.955	Nineth	Medium
3	Inappropriate teaching methods used by instructors	3.2	1.511	Tenth	Medium
4	Lack of writing practice opportunities	4	1.333	Third	High
5	Ineffective feedback provided by instructors	3.6	1.822	Fifth	High
6	Ineffective assessment system used by instructors	3.5	1.388	Sixth	High
7	Low English language proficiency	4.1	0.766	Second	High
8	Reliance on L1 in generating ideas which results in weak writing	3.8	2.177	Fourth	High
9	Lack of resources (books, articles, audio & visual facilities, online websites)	4.3	1.566	First	Very high
10	Lack of learners' motivation	3.5	2.277	Seventh	High

It is clear from the previous table that the average sample responses ranged between (4.3 as a maximum and 3.2 as a minimum) with standard deviations that ranged between (1.566 and 1.511), and the order of the items was as follows:

In the following analysis the statements of the questionnaire were ranked according to their effectiveness in the point view of the participants. In terms of importance and level compared to the arithmetic averages of the Likert five-points scale, those statements which came at the high level constituted the most effective causes or reasons. Statement nine "*Lack of resources (books, articles, audio & visual facilities, online websites)*" ranked first at a very high level. Then statement seven "*Low English language proficiency*" came second. The third most effective statement was "*Lack of writing practice opportunities*". Statement eight "*Reliance on L1 in generating ideas which results in weak writing*" ranked fourth. Then came statement five "*Ineffective feedback provided by instructors*" which was in the fifth position. Statement

six "*Ineffective assessment system used by instructors*" ranked sixth. Then came statement ten "*Lack of learners' motivation*" in the seventh ranking. As for the rest of the statements (1, 2 and 3), they were at the average level.

### Undergraduate perceptions

With regard to the causes of these difficulties, the arithmetic averages, standard deviations and their degree of effectiveness were also calculated, as in the following table:

Table 5 Possible reasons behind the difficulties in learning academic writing

No	Possible reasons behind the difficulties in learning academic writing	Mean	Standard Deviation	Ranking according to effectiveness	Level
1	Insufficient number of academic writing courses	2.6	1.686	Nineth	Medium
2	Ineffective academic writing courses	3.0	1.673	Fifth	medium
3	Inappropriate teaching methods used by instructors	2.6	2.141	Tenth	medium
4	Lack of writing practice opportunities	3.1	1.306	Fourth	Medium
5	Ineffective feedback provided by instructors	3.2	1.304	Third	Medium
6	Ineffective assessment system used by instructors	2.9	1.833	Sixth	Medium
7	Low English language proficiency	2.8	1.386	Seventh	Medium
8	Reliance on L1 in generating ideas which results in weak writing	2.8	1.066	Eighth	Medium
9	Lack of resources (books, articles, audio & visual facilities, online websites)	3.3	1.581	Second	Medium
10	Lack of learners' motivation	3.7	1.864	First	High

It is shown in the above table that the average sample responses ranged between (3.7 as a maximum and 2.6 as a minimum) with standard deviations that ranged between (1.864 and 2.141), and the order of the items was as follows: Statement ten "*Lack of learners' motivation*", which was the most effective reason behind the challenges, occupied the first position at a high level according to the point view of the undergraduate participants. Based on this table, it can be seen that the statements nine, five, four, two, six, seven, eight, and one ranked consecutively from second position to the ninth rank. In terms of effectiveness and level compared to the arithmetic averages of the Likert scale, the ranking of these statements fall at the average level according to the viewpoint of the participants and their experiences.

## DISCUSSION

From the graduate participants' viewpoint, the findings of the research indicated that the most difficult aspect they encounter in academic writing is choosing the appropriate academic words. The same issue was mentioned by other researchers in different contexts (Al-Khairi, 2013; Al-Mubarak, 2017; Aldabbus, 2017). This could be due to the lack of academic words that students know. Difficulty in developing a thesis statement and organizing ideas were categorized as the second biggest challenges for undergraduate students. This could be due to the fact that students didn't have enough background knowledge about the topic and a lack of practice in writing a clear outline before developing the thesis statement. In addition, the results showed that summarizing ideas taken from other sources was the dominant aspect for the graduate



students, followed by writing coherent paragraphs. For undergraduate students, difficulty in coming up with a good thesis statement and deciding how to start writing was among the significant challenges they face in academic writing. These results are in line with what was shown by many researchers which confirmed that what was mentioned above is one of the most important sources of difficulties that students face in academic writing (Al-Samadani, 2010; Raza, 2015). On the other hand, the findings revealed that both graduate and undergraduate students have little or no challenge in using grammar and mechanics of writing such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. This contrasts with what was discovered by several studies which confirmed that grammar and mechanics of writing are the major obstacles affecting the quality of the students' written assignments (Mubarak, 2017; Abdelkarim, 2013; Al Fadda, 2012). Perhaps the nature of the challenges that the participants face in academic writing reflects the teaching methods used by their professors which focus on accuracy rather than the process of writing.

When it comes to the reasons that led to the above-mentioned challenges, the data demonstrated that lack of resources (books, articles, audio & visual facilities, online websites" ranked first at a very high level, followed by low English language proficiency". Then lack of writing practice opportunities" was the most striking reason that hindered graduate students from mastering academic writing. Although lack of motivation and ineffective feedback provided by instructors were cited by undergraduate students as the main reasons behind their academic writing weaknesses, they agreed with graduate participants that lack of writing practice opportunities and lack of resources (books, articles, audio & visual facilities, online websites) were among the factors that did not help them acquire the academic writing skills. This is in line with what was found by other researchers (Aldabbus, 2017; Fadhel, 2017; Altaeb, 2018)

## CONCLUSION

The current study investigated the challenges that university students encounter in academic writing and the possible reasons behind those challenges. A quantitative approach was utilized to conduct the study. 10 graduate and 26 undergraduate students took part in the study. A questionnaire with 25 items was used to collect the necessary data. The findings revealed that both graduate and undergraduate students have some problems in academic writing. Choosing the appropriate academic words, difficulty in developing a thesis statement and organizing ideas, and writing coherent paragraphs were the most significant challenges, whereas using grammar and mechanics of writing have a little negative impact on their academic writing. It can be inferred that the method of teaching which mainly focuses on the end product and lack of practice were the main reasons behind those challenges.

To help students master better academic writing skills, instructors should encourage students to do a lot of reading to enrich their academic vocabulary. Give more attention to the process of writing including planning, writing, drafting, revising, and editing (Brown, 2001). More practice opportunities should be created, and constructive and timely feedback should be provided. It is also advised that students should become aware of their weaknesses and how to rely on themselves to improve their academic writing skills. Finally, it is hoped that the findings of this research would provide great benefits to the instructors of the English language and curriculum designers to address the writing difficulties that might be encountered by

learners of English. However, the findings of the study can be generalized to the students of English as a foreign language, but only within the scope of the study due to the sample's small size

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