

International EFL Learners' Perceptions about Factors Leading to English Academic Writing Difficulties in a Private University in Malaysia

Han Songjin

1001438985@student.ucsiuniversity.edu.my

UCSI University Malaysia

*Mansour Amini

mansour@usm.my

Universiti Sains Malaysia

Minder Kaur Singh

minder@ucsiuniversity.edu.my

UCSI University Malaysia

Saber Alavi

saber_payap.ac.th

Payap University Thailand

Mozhgan Ghassemiazghandi

mozhgan@usm.my

Universiti Sains Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Academic writing, as the most crucial skill needed for EFL learners, is challenging for the international students in Malaysia. Such difficulties among university students appear to affect EFL learner's academic performance as compared with that of native language users. This study aims to investigate the perceived difficulties in English academic writing among international undergraduate students in a private university in Malaysia and the reasons causing the difficulties. The study enjoyed an embedded mixed-method design. The qualitative data was collected by semi-structured interviews whereas the quantitative method was collected by questionnaire-based survey. A total of 348 participants participated in the survey in two rounds of data collection within 2 years. The qualitative data played a primary role, and the quantitative data had a supportive role to obtain comprehensive information. The findings revealed that the participants faced difficulties in their academic writing in terms of lexico-structural (insufficient English vocabulary, making more spelling and grammar mistakes), logical organization (making coherent and cohesive writing, making outlines and expressing their own ideas clearly), content (writing clear thesis statement and topic sentence, and difficulty in using examples for illustration), and finding-and-citing (finding related sources and making in-text citation). These difficulties were attributed to external factors (few opportunities to practice the English language, L1 influence, medium of instruction, and the status of the English language) and internal factors individuals' weak English foundation, low English proficiency and lack of practice in English writings). Based on the findings, implications were drawn for EFL students and instructors.

Keywords: English academic writing; external factors; internal factors; international undergraduate students; writing difficulties.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has transformed into a popular education destination where many international students from different countries are targeting Malaysia as their ultimate education hub. Malaysian universities use English language as a medium of instruction in their higher education system because English language is a dominant second language in Malaysia (Yap, Adeela Abu Bakar, Amini, & Rafik-Galea, 2018). Likewise, private universities in Malaysia admit a large group of international students such as Middle Eastern and Mainland Chinese students, and a small group of African and Japanese students. These groups of international students bring diversity in language, culture, and education background (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). Therefore, a good proficiency level in English language is essential for international students to handle the various academic demands successfully in Malaysian Universities.

Writing, as one of the essential academic skills which can indicate whether international students possess English language proficiency up to the required standard plays a significant role in academia (Amini, Amini, & Naseri Maleki, 2019). Students need to have an acceptable command of English proficiency and linguistic knowledge to express and organize their ideas clearly in their writings. Besides that, students follow the formal academic writing style in producing specific academic writing genres, such as essays, summaries, critical reviews, research reports, and dissertations (Dudley-Evans, & St. John, 1998). All these academic writing genres are necessary tasks for students to complete in the academic contexts. As a complex process, academic writing can be both challenging for EFL students and activate their critical thinking skill (Yap & Amini, 2020). Academic writing in English is a complex practice for international students as it requires international students to read a lot of materials and to reach a certain level of proficiency in English Language (Paul & Elder, 2006; Arkoudis & Tran, 2007; Singh, 2016).

Most of the previous studies only focused on the English academic writing difficulties of one group of participants. For instance, one study conducted by Chen and Xiao (2015) aimed at exploring English academic writing difficulties among Chinese students in China. Yuen and Mussa (2015) investigated English academic writing difficulties of Iraqi students in a Malaysian University. Abdulkareem (2013) conducted a research about analyzing academic writing difficulties among Arab postgraduate students in a Malaysian University. Hence, the respondents of the present study were chosen from more than one group of international students. In her investigation of academic writing difficulties in a university, Al-Mukdad found that students perceived all aspects of academic writing as difficult (Al-Mukdad, 2019). Writing is considered challenging even for ESL learners where they are expected to acquire a variety of linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural competencies to learn this skill (Hussain, 2017; Mantasiah et al., 2019; Tonapa et al., 2018). Uba and Souidi (2020) in their research, found that the majority of the participants expressed having problems in generating and organizing ideas. Additionally, several previous studies conducted analysis of English academic writing difficulties of graduate students and postgraduate students. There is a dearth of literature on research conducted on English academic writing difficulties of international undergraduate students in Malaysia (Singh, 2019). Thus, the present study investigates EFL undergraduate learners' difficulties and the reasons for such difficulties in English academic writings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since academic writing is a type of communicative conduct, creating a successful piece of writing is a complicated process as it requires language proficiency including lexico-structural, logical organization, and content, as well as the writer's logical thinking and reasoning skills

to be organized in addition to the great deal of practice and formal training (Wong, Tan, & Amini, 2019).

The Characteristics of Academic Writing

A good academic writing must contain the main idea or ideas in the contents accurately arranged in a logical pattern with the use of examples and arguments illustrating and supporting the main points. Moreover, creating a clear distinction between the writer's ideas and those the writer has brought in from other authors and acknowledging all the sources and references is a key component of good academic writing. Academic writing should be plain and simple with correct grammar, spelling and punctuation should be used correctly and are acceptable (Bailey, 2017; Min & Amini, 2018).

Approaches in Learning English Academic Writings

Throughout the history of teaching and learning EFL/ESL, writing skill has greatly depended on the dominant psychological and linguistic theories with one pillar being the product theory and the other process theory. These could help EFL or ESL learners to develop the stages in English academic writings. Product theory refers to product-based approach, which is described as "a traditional approach in which students are encouraged to mimic a model text, usually presented and analyzed at an early stage" (Gabrielatos, 2002, p.5). However, the process theory is related to the writing process of how the learners compose a text. In accordance with this view, writing is a "non-linear, exploratory, and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning" (Zamel, 1983, p. 165). In other words, the process writing helps students to brainstorm the ideas in their minds and generate ideas before starting to write. After that, the process writing requires students to write drafts or outlines for their academic papers. Then, students could give their drafts or outlines to other students or lecturers, to receive some feedback on them. Last, students revise their writings based on the feedback. Thus, pre-writing, drafting, evaluating, and revising are four procedures or techniques that help students to improve their writings through the writing process.

English Academic Writing Difficulties for International Students

International students who learn English as a foreign language usually experience difficulties with grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure. These difficulties cause international students to have challenges in expressing clear ideas and organizing arguments in English academic writings. Similarly, this could affect delivering their other assignments because they lack language proficiency, linguistic knowledge and writing skills (Phakiti, & Li, 2011; Paltridge, 2002). For example, Mousavi and Kashefian (2011) identified English academic writing difficulties experienced by graduate Iranian students in a Malaysian University (UKM). The findings showed that they had academic writing difficulties in content and structure. They faced difficulties in writing academic content, such as in the sections of introduction, literature review and conclusion. In addition, they also experienced difficulties in structure, such as creating a logical flow and a cohesive text.

Related Studies

These studies focused on investigating the difficulties that international students faced in English academic writings, also exploring the reasons that cause these difficulties in English academic writings.

Several studies were conducted on difficulties that international students faced in English academic writings in the Malaysian context and abroad. Al-Khasawneh and Maher (2010) aimed to investigate the academic writing problems of the Arab postgraduate students of the college of business at University Utara Malaysia. Al Fadda (2012) explored English academic writing difficulties among 50 Arab postgraduate students at King Saud University in Riyadh. Abdulkareem (2013) explored academic writing problems faced by 85 Arab postgraduate students in University Technology Malaysia. Yuen and Mussa (2015) investigated academic writing difficulties among 30 Iraqi international postgraduate students in a Malaysian University. Chen and Xiao (2015) investigated English academic writing difficulties among 285 Chinese undergraduate students in a China University. Al Badi (2015) investigated academic writing difficulties of 20 international postgraduate students at Sydney University in Australia. Singh (2016) investigated difficulties faced by 70 international masters level students in a Malaysian Public University. Cennetkusu (2017) analyzed academic writing challenges among 65 international graduate students in US University. Ravichandran, Kretovics, Kirby, and Ghosh (2017) explored the academic writing challenges experienced by 15 international graduate students in the United States. Based on these studies, the difficulties experienced by international students in their English academic writings could be placed into four categories. The first category is lexico-structural difficulties, such as vocabulary, spelling, and grammar. The second category is logical organization difficulties, such as expressing ideas, linking ideas, paraphrasing, keeping cohesive and coherent paragraphs. The third category is content difficulties which included writing clear thesis statements, writing introduction and conclusion part. The last category includes difficulty in making citation and reference, and difficulty in selecting related sources.

Al-Khasawneh and Maher (2010) indicated that Arab postgraduate students believed their English academic writing problems were caused by their weak English foundation, the influence of their mother tongue, few opportunities to practice English, low self-motivation towards English, and the method of teaching English in their home countries. Mustafa, Kirana, & Bahri (2017) stated that two reasons that caused difficulties in English academic writing were Arabic language as a means of instruction and the non-native teachers of English in their home countries. Yuen and Mussa (2015) reported that ultimate factors that caused Iraqi postgraduate students having difficulties in academic writings were the use of Arabic language in English classes, fewer to no opportunities for them to practice their English, ineffective methods of teaching English, and insufficient practical English writings and weak English foundation. Al Badi (2015) revealed that the main factors were low language proficiency and different education backgrounds.

Rahman and Hassan (2019) conducted a survey-based study with 38 participants to find out the academic writing difficulties encountered by Bangladeshi students at University Utara Malaysia (UUM). They found that the influencing factors; using Bangla language, teacher's low proficiency, lack of opportunities, method of teaching, second language learner, medium of instruction, weak foundation, lack academic writing course, availability of mother tongue, lack of teacher's interest) had significant impact on academic writing difficulties of Bangladeshi students at UUM.

Al-Zubaidi (2012) conducted an inquiry-based study with large cohorts of Arab postgraduate students studying at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) International Campus Kuala Lumpur. In his paper he tried to address the main language problems faced by Arab

postgraduate students in their academic writing in English. In this study he listed, different academic culture, poor attitude towards writing, Academic writing conventions, Critical thinking, Cultural Difficulties, and Lack of writing skills as the main challenges faced by Arab postgraduate students.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the present study was adapted from Al-Khasawneh and Maher (2010). The 12 difficulty items were grouped into four general categories: content difficulties, finding-and-citing difficulties, logical organization difficulties, and lexico-structural difficulties. Moreover, the ten reasons for English academic writing difficulties based on participants' self-perception were explored. The reasons were grouped into two general categories of internal and external factors. The internal factors involved weak English foundation, self-motivation towards English, less confidence in using English, low English proficiency, and lack of practice in English writing. Whereas the internal factors were individualistic, the external factors are far less under the individuals' control and have an impact on the internal factors. The external factors are 'few opportunities to speak English', 'status of English language', 'influence of mother tongue', 'method of teaching English', and 'medium of instruction' (Al-Khasawneh & Maher, 2010).

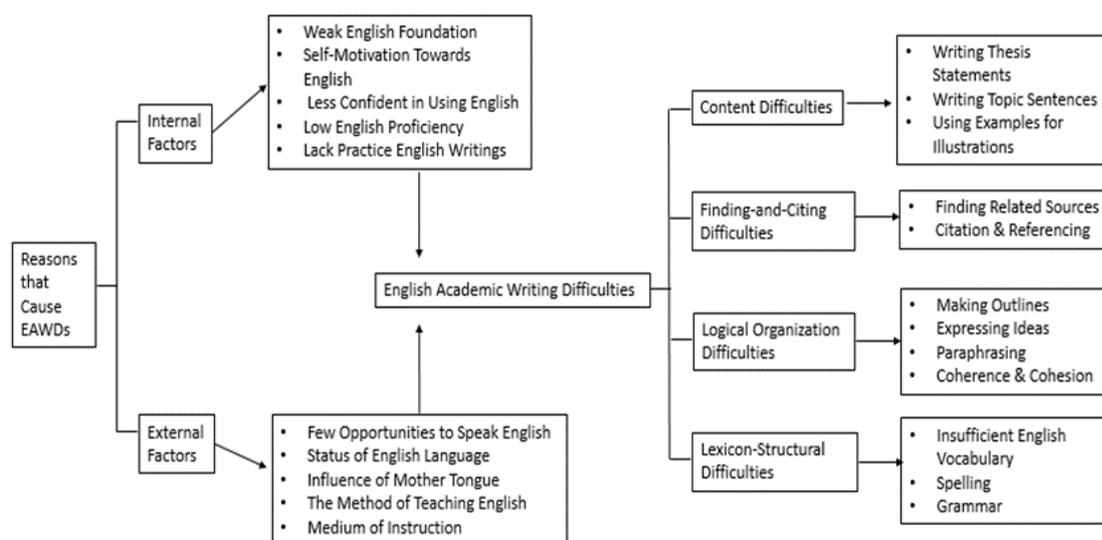


FIGURE 1. Conceptual Framework

METHOD

Research Design

Embedded mixed method design was used to collect qualitative and quantitative data and to have one form of data as supportive, i.e., supplementing the other form of data (Creswell, 2012). Based on the objectives, the qualitative method was used to collect primary data at first, and then the quantitative method was used to collect supportive data. The purpose of using embedded mixed-method in the present study, is because qualitative method permits an in-depth exploration of a few individuals, whereas quantitative provides the opportunity to gather data from a large number of people and generalize results, and provides a better understanding of the research problem and question than either method by itself.

Sampling

The sampling method was stratified random sampling method, where participants were selected from ten different (Creswell, 2012). According to Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009), stratified sampling method can be used in mixed-method research, which focuses on sampling techniques where the units that are investigated are based on the random and homogeneous selection of the participants from different groups (strata). For the qualitative sampling, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted among 14 participants (nine males and five female) selected purposively. For the quantitative sampling, survey questionnaires were administered onsite among 334 undergraduate students, in a private university in Malaysia in 2018 (n=100) and 2019 (n=224). In order to maintain the homogeneity of the data, since the data were collected separately in two rounds, the same inclusion criteria of faculty and field, gender, year of study (first, second, third, or fourth) were taken into account in the second round of data collection. The reason for opting for the second round of data collection was insufficient number of completed questionnaires in the first round (n=100). For this limitation of the present study, the quantitative data is only considered supplementary or supportive for the qualitative data to draw more valid and reliable conclusions.

Instrument

Two instruments were used in this study to collect the data, semi-structured interviews, and survey questionnaires. The interview questions and survey questionnaires were adapted from the Al-Khasawneh and Maher (2010) to explore the potential difficulties faced by postgraduate international students in academic writings and the causes that lead to these academic writing difficulties. In the present study, the interview consisted of two parts: the first part of the interview consisted of 12 questions which focused on investigating the difficulties in English academic writings as perceived by respondents; the second part of the interview comprises of ten questions which focuses on exploring the reasons that lead to these English academic writing difficulties. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: the first part was about demographic information; the second part covered the difficulties in English academic writings, while the third part were on the reasons behind those difficulties in English academic writings. A five-point Likert scale was used in the second and the third parts of the survey questionnaires. The following scale was used in the second part of the questionnaire: Never=1, Seldom=2, Sometimes=3, Often=4, Almost always=5. The third part had the following scales: Strongly Disagree=1, Disagree=2, Neutral=3, Agree=4, and Strongly Agree= 5.

Data Collection Procedure

In the beginning, the researcher transcribed the answers from 14 interviews and then used thematic analysis to code and categorize the transcriptions. Then, each difficult item in English academic writings and each reason behind those English academic writing difficulties were tabulated into a table and calculated into frequencies and percentages. At the third stage, the researcher entered the data from the survey questionnaires into the SPSS. Next, each difficult item in English academic writing and each reason behind those English academic writing difficulties were converted into mean, standard derivation, and percentage. Once the findings from qualitative and quantitative data were summarized, answering the two research questions are the next step.

Data Analysis

The data were divided into two types of qualitative and quantitative. This study used face-to-face interviews to collect the qualitative data. In addition, the quantitative data were used to analyze the mean and SD of each difficulty item in English academic writings through SPSS version 25.

Results

The responses from the interviews and questionnaire were analyzed through thematic analysis and statistical analysis, respectively. Out of 14 interviewees, five were between 25-30 years old and nine were between 20-25 years old. Six were in their third year, four in the second year, three in the first year and only one was in the fourth year of their study.

Analysis of Qualitative Data

The researcher analyzed the interview data into 2 main parts based on the research objectives. In the first part of the interview, the focus is to analyze the difficulties in English academic writings among 14 respondents. There were four main categories of difficulties in English academic writings, which include *content difficulties*, *finding-and-citing difficulties*, *logical organization difficulties*, and *lexical-structural difficulties*.

Content Difficulties

In English academic writings, thesis statement usually appears in the introduction part, which illustrates the central point of the research paper, academic essay etc. In this section, a total number of 14 respondents were asked in the interviews if they find it difficult to write thesis statements in English academic writings. The results showed that among 14 respondents, the majority (10 respondents) expressed their concern over the difficulty of the thesis statement writing and other respondents had no difficulty in forming a thesis statement.

Writing Topic Sentence

Out of 14 respondents' answers, eight respondents expressed that it is difficult for them to write topic sentences for paragraphs in English academic writings. However, six respondents responded that it is easy to write topic sentences for paragraphs in English academic writings.

Using Examples for Illustration

Only five of the respondents explained that they face difficulties in using examples for illustration in English academic writings. However, nine respondents "had no difficulty to use examples doing English academic writings".

Finding-and-Citing Difficulties

Two themes from the interview data were grouped under the general category of finding-and-citing difficulties: "*finding related sources and referencing*". In English academic writings of the participants, finding sources or materials related to the specific subject or research paper can be difficult, especially when finding the reliable sources. After the process of finding

related sources, citing the related sources is the only way to strengthen or support our personal voice and argument in English academic writings.

Finding Related Sources

Seven respondents expressed that they face difficulties in finding related sources for English academic writings. However, seven respondents found it easy to look for related sources for English academic writings.

Referencing

In this section, it was found that most of interviewees were required to use APA style for their English academic writings, and only two students from Medicine faculty used Harvard style in their English academic writings. Three respondents explained that they find it difficult to cite their references in using APA style and Harvard style for English academic writings. However, 11 respondents who expressed that using APA style to cite is easier in English academic writings, because they used the software to generate it.

Logical Organization Difficulties

Based on the interview analysis, four themes identified and grouped under the general category of logical organization difficulties, that includes *making outlines*, *expressing ideas*, *paraphrasing*, and *maintaining coherence & cohesion*.

Making Outlines

Twelve respondents explained that they face difficulties in making outlines for their English academic writings, such as making an outline coherent, making key points in the outline, creating new ideas in the outline. However, only two respondents found it easy to make outlines for their English academic writing.

Expressing Ideas

Nine respondents expressed that they face difficulties in expressing their own ideas in English academic writings, because of their limitation in English vocabularies and language barriers in English Language. Five respondents stated that expressing their own ideas in English academic writings is not a problem for them since they “had learnt English at a young age”.

Paraphrasing

Thirteen respondents explained that they face difficulty in paraphrasing, such as in finding synonyms for vocabularies, keeping the same meanings or content with the original sources, and understanding the meaning given by the sources. One respondent said that she does not find it difficult to paraphrase in her English academic writings due to her “higher English language proficiency”.

Twelve respondents found it difficult to make their English academic writings coherent and cohesive. It was only easy for two respondents to maintain coherence and cohesion in their English academic writings.

Lexico-Structural Difficulties

Three themes were identified and grouped under the general category of lexico-structural difficulties consisting of *insufficient English vocabulary*, *spelling*, and *grammar*. Firstly, having sufficient English vocabulary is one of the vital factors in achieving good English academic writing skills. This helps writers to use different varieties of English words to express their thoughts clearly. Secondly, using correct spelling and grammar can ensure that what you write is correctly comprehended in English academic writings. So, the three themes are discussed as follows:

English Vocabulary

Ten respondents expressed that they do not have sufficient English vocabulary for writing academically. However, 4 mentioned have sufficient English vocabulary for writing academically.

Spelling

Twelve respondents mentioned that they have spelling difficulties in their English academic writings. The other two, did “not have any spelling difficulties in their English academic writings”.

Grammar

Nine respondents indicated that they face grammar difficulties in their English academic writings, such as using prepositions, tense aspects, and the usage of verbs depending on the different tenses used in the sentences. However, five respondents “could use correct grammar in their English academic writings”.

The findings from the first part of the interview showed that the most difficult category that respondents faced in English Academic Writings (EAWs) is logical organization difficulties which involve three greatest difficulty aspects, i.e., paraphrasing (92.9%), coherence and cohesion (85.7%), and making an outline (85.7%). The second most difficult category is lexico-structural difficulties, such as spelling difficulty (85.7%), followed by content difficulties, such as writing thesis statement (71.4%). The frequency and percentage of each difficulty item are tabulated in Table 1.

TABLE 1. The frequency and percentage of difficulties in EAWs

| General Difficult Categories in EAWs | Difficult Items | Difficult | Not Difficult | N=14 |
|---|----------------------------------|------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| Content Difficulties | Writing Thesis Statement | 10 (71.4%) | 4 (28.6%) | 14 (100%) |
| | Writing Topic Sentence | 8 (57.1%) | 6 (42.9%) | 14 (100%) |
| | Using Examples for Illustrations | 5 (35.7%) | 9 (64.3%) | 14 (100%) |
| | Finding Related Sources | 7 (50%) | 7 (50%) | 14 (100%) |

| | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|------------|-----------|
| Finding-and-Citing Difficulties | Referencing | 3 (21.4%) | 11 (78.6%) | 14 (100%) |
| Logical Organization Difficulties | Making Outline | 12 (85.7%) | 2 (14.3%) | 14 (100%) |
| | Expressing Ideas | 9 (64.3%) | 5 (35.7%) | 14 (100%) |
| | Paraphrasing | 13 (92.9%) | 1 (7.1%) | 14 (100%) |
| | Coherence and Cohesion | 12 (85.7%) | 2 (14.3%) | 14 (100%) |
| Lexico-Structural Difficulties | English Vocabulary | 10 (71.4%) | 4 (28.6%) | 14 (100%) |
| | Spelling | 12 (85.7%) | 2 (14.3%) | 14 (100%) |
| | Grammar | 9 (64.3%) | 5 (35.7%) | 14 (100%) |

The percentage of each general difficult category was calculated and tabulated in Table 2. The two most difficult categories were logical organization difficulties (82.2%) and lexico-structural difficulties (73.8%).

TABLE 2. The percentage of each difficult category in EAWs

| General Difficult Categories | Difficult (%) |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|
| Content Difficulties | 54.7% |
| Finding-and-Citing Difficulties | 35.7% |
| Logical Organization Difficulties | 82.2% |
| Lexico-Structural Difficulties | 73.8% |

Analysis of the Reasons behind EAWDs in Qualitative Data

In the second part of the interview, the focus was to analyze the reasons behind these difficulties. As extracted from the interviewees' responses there were two main categories of factors that led to these difficulties in English academic writings; labelled here as *internal factors* and *external factors*.

Internal Factors

Five reasons consisting of *weak English foundation*, *self-motivation*, *less-confident*, *English proficiency* and *lack of writing practice* were identified. The reasons are discussed as follows:

Weak English Foundation

All 14 respondents stated that the difficulties they encountered in English academic writings are caused by their weak English foundation.

Self-motivation

Five respondents stated they have low self-motivation towards English, and they agreed that it is the reason that cause their difficulties in English academic writings. However, nine respondents expressed that they have "high self-motivation towards English".

Lack of Confidence in Speaking English

Six respondents expressed that they have low confidence in speaking English with others. This leads to the negative impact as they "avoid using English in spoken or written forms". Eight respondents stated they have "high confidence in speaking English to others". They stated that it is not related to the difficulties they encounter in English academic writings.

Twelve respondents mentioned that their low general English proficiency level is the reason for them to face some difficulties in English academic writings. However, two respondents expressed that they have been learning English at a young age, and this factor did not affect them much.

Lack of English Writing Practice

Ten respondents stated that the difficulties they encounter in English academic writings is because they lack practicing English writings before.

External Factors

Five themes were identified and converted into the general category of external factors. The five themes were related to the limitations in their home countries, which involved *less opportunities to speak English, status of English Language, influence of mother tongue, method of teaching English Language, and medium of instruction*. These reasons are discussed as follows.

Less Opportunities to Speak English

Eleven respondents explained that they had less opportunities to speak English in their home countries, which led to their difficulties in EAWs. However, three respondents mentioned because they had opportunities to speak English in their home countries, such as attending international schools before, and they used English to communicate with the foreigners, as a result they faced less difficulties in English writing.

Status of English Language

Thirteen respondents explained that the status of English language in their home countries is the reason causing them difficulties in English academic writing. One respondent mentioned that he had been through English language system in schools in his home country and for that he faced less difficulties in English academic writing.

Mother Tongue Influence

Eleven respondents elaborated on the influence of mother tongue as the reason causing them difficulties in English academic writing as the different grammatical structure of the two languages. It was specifically causing difficulty for them when they translated their thoughts from their mother tongue into English in English academic writings. However, three respondents believed their difficulties in English academic writings were not related to their mother tongue influence.

Method of Teaching English

Eight respondents mentioned the method of teaching English language in their home countries as the reason which caused them difficulties in English academic writing. However, six respondents believed their difficulties in English academic writings were not related to the method of teaching English language in their home countries.

Six respondents emphasized that the medium of language used in their home countries is the reason causing them difficulties in English academic writing. This is because the medium of language instruction was in their mother tongues and even in English courses, the teachers used both their mother tongue and English Language to teach, which led to the students' low proficiency in English Language generally, and particularly in English academic writing. Eight students who went to private institutions in their home countries believed the medium of instruction does not lead to difficulties in English academic writing.

In sum, external factors have slightly a higher percentage (70%) than internal factors (67.1%). Three major factors with a higher percentage in the external factors, such as the status of English language in their countries (92.9%), few opportunities to speak English (78.6%), influence of mother tongue (78.6%), caused difficulties in English academic writing. Among the internal factors, three major factors which received a higher percentage, such as weak English foundation (100%), low English proficiency (85.7%), and lack of practice in English writings (71.4%). The frequency and percentage of each reason is tabulated in Table 3.

TABLE 3. The frequency and percentage of reasons for internal and external factors

| General Categories | Reasons | Frequency and percentage |
|--------------------|---|--------------------------|
| Internal factors | Weak English Foundation | 14 (100%) |
| | Low Self-motivation towards English | 5 (35.7%) |
| | Less Confident in Using English Language | 6 (42.9%) |
| | Low English proficiency | 12 (85.7%) |
| | Lack of Practice in English Writings | 10 (71.4%) |
| External factors | Few opportunities to Speak English Language | 11 (78.6%) |
| | Status of English language | 13 (92.9%) |
| | Influence of Mother Tongue | 11 (78.6%) |
| | The method of Teaching English Language | 8 (57.1%) |
| | Medium of Instruction | 6 (42.9%) |

The external factors have slightly a higher percentage (70%) than the internal factors (67.1%). The percentage of each general reason category was calculated by adding all the reasons and dividing by their numbers.

TABLE 4. The percentage of each general category

| General Category | Cause (%) | Not Cause (%) | Total |
|------------------|-----------|---------------|-------|
| Internal factors | 67.1% | 32.9% | 100% |
| External factors | 70% | 30% | 100% |

Analysis of Quantitative Data

A survey was conducted among table 4 undergraduate international students to investigate the difficulties and perceived factors.

Analysis of English Academic Writing Difficulties in Quantitative Data

Table 5 shows the mean, percentage, and SD of each difficulty item and each category. The findings show the percentage of all "general difficulties" categories range between just under 60%-70%. The percentage of "all difficult" category range from 59.8% to 66.8%. The greatest
 eISSN: 2637-0360

difficulty category was lexico-structural difficulties (66.8%), followed by finding-and-citing difficulties (65.2%), logical organization difficulties (65%), and content difficulties (64%).

TABLE 5. Descriptive statistics of difficulties in English academic writing

| General Difficulties Categories | Difficult items | N | Min. | Max. | Mean | % | SD |
|--|--|-----|------|------|-------------|--------------|------|
| Content Difficulties (64%) | Difficulty in writing thesis statements | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 9.01 | 64% | 3.54 |
| | Difficulty in writing topic sentences | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 8.41 | 60.4% | 3.37 |
| | Difficulty in using examples for illustrations | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 8.45 | 60.6% | 3.20 |
| Finding-and-Citing Difficulties (65.2%) | Difficulty in finding related sources | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 8.48 | 60.8% | 3.47 |
| | Difficulty in referencing | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 9.21 | 65.2% | 4.07 |
| Logical Organization Difficulties (65%) | Difficulty in making outlines | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 8.45 | 60.6% | 3.23 |
| | Difficulty in expressing ideas | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 8.31 | 59.8% | 3.47 |
| | Difficulty in paraphrasing | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 9.01 | 64% | 3.60 |
| | Difficulty in maintaining coherence and cohesion | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 9.18 | 65% | 3.64 |
| Lexico-Structure Difficulties (66.8%) | English vocabulary difficulty | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 9.48 | 66.8% | 3.60 |
| | Spelling difficulty | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 9.51 | 57% | 3.84 |
| | Grammar difficulty | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 9.81 | 58.8% | 3.80 |

Analysis of the Reasons behind English Academic Writing Difficulties

Table 6 shows the mean, percentage and SD of each general category and each reason for having EAWDs. The findings indicate that the category of external factors obtained a slightly higher percentage than the category of internal factors, which revealed 68.76% and 71.64% respectively.

TABLE 6. Descriptive statistics of reasons for English academic writing

| General Categories | Themes | N | Min | Max. | Mean | % | SD |
|---------------------------|--|-----|------|------|--------------|--------------|------|
| Internal Factors (68.76%) | Weak English Foundation | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 9.68 | 68% | 4.24 |
| | Self-Motivation | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 10.02 | 70% | 3.90 |
| | Low Confidence in Using English Language | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 9.31 | 65.8% | 4.47 |
| | Low English Proficiency | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 9.18 | 65% | 3.57 |
| | Lack of Practice in English Writings | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 10.85 | 75% | 4.37 |
| External Factors (71.64%) | Few Opportunities to Practice English | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 10.18 | 71% | 3.77 |
| | Status of English | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 9.81 | 68.8% | 4.27 |
| | Influence of Mother Tongue | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 10.78 | 74.6% | 4.20 |
| | Method of Teaching English Language | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 10.38 | 72.2% | 3.90 |
| | Medium of Instruction | 334 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 10.28 | 71.6% | 3.70 |

Summary of Findings from Qualitative and Quantitative Data

This section summarizes the results from the analysis of qualitative and quantitative data which are obtained from the interview and survey, respectively.

TABLE 7. The percentage of general difficult categories in EAWs from qualitative and quantitative data

| General Difficult Categories | Interview (%) | Survey (%) | Average |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|--------------|---------|
| Content Difficulties | 54.7% | 51.7% | 53.2 % |
| Finding-and-Citing Difficulties | 35.7% | 53% | 44.4% |
| Logical Organization Difficulties | 82.2% | 52.4% | 67.3% |
| Lexico-Structural Difficulties | 73.8% | 57.5% | 65.7% |

TABLE 8. The percentage of internal and external factors causing English academic writing difficulties

| Categories of Reasons | Interview (%) | Survey (%) |
|-----------------------|---------------|------------|
| Internal factors | 67.1% | 58.8% |
| External factors | 70% | 61.6% |

Based on the findings, the most common difficulty that participants face in English academic writings are logical organization and lexico-structural difficulties. The percentages of logical organization difficulties were 82.2% and 52.4% for interview and survey, respectively. Subsequently, in table 7 the percentage of lexico-structural difficulties showed 73.8% and 57.5% for interview and survey, respectively. As for the category of logical organization difficulties, the findings indicated that the difficulties that participants face in English academic writings consist of *making outline, expressing ideas, paraphrasing, maintaining coherence and cohesion*. In the category of lexico-structural difficulties, the findings also indicated that the participants had difficulties in English academic writings in *English vocabulary, spelling, and grammar*. Next was content difficulties from interview and survey, 54.7% and 51.7%, respectively.

In a nutshell, the reasons behind difficulties in English academic writing among the participants comprise of two main categories: external and internal factors. The two factors have similar percentages from the interview and survey results. However, the external factors presented in table 8 (70% and 61.6% for interview and survey results, respectively) were higher than internal factors (67.1% and 58.8% for interview and survey results, respectively).

CONCLUSION

Logical organization and lexico-structural difficulties were found as the most common English academic writing difficulties among undergraduate students in a private university in Malaysia. For the logical organization difficulties, the two major difficulties stated by the respondents were paraphrasing and maintaining coherence and cohesion. For the lexico-structural difficulties, three major difficulties stated by respondents were insufficient English vocabulary, spelling, and using correct grammar. On the other hand, the least frequent difficulty category was the content difficulties. For the content difficulties, the participants reported that they had more difficulty in writing thesis statements rather than writing topic sentences and using examples for illustrations. It was found that the students had more difficulty in finding related sources rather than making references (in-text citation & bibliography), as they stated generating references by using a software as a solution to this difficulty. This was also supported by the findings from the survey.

The results from this study are consistent with the findings of Al-khasawneh and Maher (2010) on English academic writing problems faced by international postgraduate students in University Utara Malaysia, as in both studies it was found that participants faced lexico-structural difficulties, which were related to vocabulary, spelling, and grammar. Yuen & Mussa, (2015) research on English academic writing difficulties among international postgraduate students in University Kebangsaan Malaysia supports the findings of the present

study as well as both the studies reported that the most common difficulties in English academic writing are insufficient vocabulary, making grammar mistakes, and inability to paraphrase.

The findings of the present study were partially consistent with Mustafa's (2013) study in University Technology Malaysia in the role of grammatical structure, and with Abdulkareem's (2013) finding on insufficient English vocabulary and expressing own ideas as the most difficulties among international postgraduate students. The present study revealed that the participants faced more difficulties in lexico-structural aspect and maintaining coherence and cohesion rather than expressing ideas.

The participants in his study found it challenging to maintain coherence and cohesion which is in line with the findings of Singh (2016) in University Sains Malaysia, concluding that the major difficulties that international students experienced in academic writings were related to inability to express their own ideas well, writing coherently and cohesively, using appropriate vocabulary, grammar, and citing, which are also supported by with the findings of the present study.

Internal factors and external factors caused international undergraduate students to face difficulties in English academic writings. Among internal factors, the frequently mentioned reasons were "weak English foundation", "low English proficiency level", and lack of practice in English writings. As for the external factors the two main reasons were "the status of English language" and "influence of mother tongue", as English language was not necessarily having to be used in their countries, giving them less opportunities to "practice".

Therefore, there are five major reasons that caused the participants of this study to face difficulties in English academic writing were weak English foundation, low English proficiency level, lack of practice in English writings, status of English language in their home countries and influence of their mother tongue. Al-khasawneh and Maher's (2010) also found that participants with weak English foundation are affected by the status of English language in their countries, and students' motivation towards English. Finally, English language teaching methods in the home countries, the medium of instruction, and lack of English writing practice were other reasons stipulated by the participants for their difficulty in academic writing. As supported by Yuen and Mussa, (2015), it can also be concluded that the main perceived reasons for difficulties in academic writing were lack of writing and reading practice, and lack of sufficient academic writing courses in their home countries, i.e., their "poor" background knowledge of writing in English.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study may have implications for positive educational change at individual level and at organizational level. At the individual level, the results of this study may contribute to the international students, especially to the freshmen international students as they are the beginning stage of learning academic writing. International students could identify their weaknesses and deficiencies in English academic writing and tackle the specific English academic writing difficulties based on the type of difficulties introduced in this study. This will help them to improve their writing skills and academic performances, and possibly their overall academic performance as any kind of assignment usually involves writing. Likewise, instructors could understand their students' writing learning needs more thoroughly, which could assist them to design lesson plans, and class activities more effectively based on their students' writing difficulties and the reasons for those difficulties. Conducting a needs analysis could also contribute to this purpose in terms of identifying the writing difficulties and addressing them individually or holistically based on the class context and types of learners. It is also suggested for identifying the type of learners Visual, Audio, and Kinesthetic (VAK) survey is utilized. Educators and policy makers in different EFL learning contexts could use

eISSN: 2637-0360

the findings of this study to design more effective English language curriculum and programmes.

Another implication of this research could be in terms of methodological considerations. Since this study enjoyed a mixed methods research design in the collection and analysis of the data, and the findings of the study using this design were found mostly consistent with those of the previous studies, this research approach could be recommended for future research about similar topics. Other types of mixed methods design such as explanatory and exploratory sequential mixed methods research design is also suggested to be utilized for this purpose.

Furthermore, with an emphasis on the significance of consistent teacher training and development, the findings of this study may also have an impact on raising the awareness towards the identified difficulties of the students particularly in the private education institutions in Malaysia where English is usually the medium of instruction. Further studies can be conducted using a bigger sample size and from other public education sectors where English is taught as a foreign language in Malaysia. In addition, further comparative studies can be carried out on the difficulties between Malaysian and international students in English academic writing.

REFERENCES

- Abdulkareem, M. N. (2013). An investigation study of academic writing problems faced by Arab postgraduate students at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). *Theory & Practice in Language Studies*, 3(9), 1552–1557.
- Al Badi, I. A. H. (2015). Academic writing difficulties of ESL learners. In *The 2015 WEI international academic conference proceedings* (Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 65-78).
- Al Fadda, H. (2012). Difficulties in academic writing: From the perspective of King Saud University postgraduate students. *English Language Teaching*, 5(3), 123-130.
- Al-Khasawneh, F. M. S., & Maher, S. (2010). Writing for academic purposes: Problems faced by Arab postgraduate students of the college of business, UUM. *ESP World*, 9(2), 1-23.
- Al-Mukdad, S. (2019). Investigating English academic writing problems encountered by Arab International University students. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 9(3), 300-306.
- Al-Zubaidi, K. O. (2012). The academic writing of Arab postgraduate students: Discussing the main language issues. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 66, 46-52.
- Amini, D., Amini, M., Naseri Maleki F. (2019). Investigating noticing in narrative writing tasks and its effect on EFL learners' writing performance. *Applied Research on English Language* 8(3), 365-382.
- Arkoudis, S., & Tran, L. T. (2007). International students in Australia: Read ten thousand volumes of books and walk ten thousand miles. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 27(2), 157-169.
- Bailey, S. (2017). *Academic writing: A handbook for international students*. Routledge.
- Carroll, J., & Ryan, J. (2005). *Teaching international students: Improving learning for all*. London: Routledge.
- Cennetkuşu, C. N. (2017). International students' challenges in academic writing: A case study from a prominent U.S. university. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 13(2), 309-323.
- Chen, X., & Xiao, G. (2015). English academic writing difficulties of engineering students at the tertiary level in China, 13(3), 259–263.
- Creswell, J. (2012). *Educational research* (4th ed.). Boston: Pearson Education.

- Dudley-Evans, T., & St John, M. J. (1998). *Developments in English for specific purposes: A multi-disciplinary approach*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Gabrielatos, C. (2002). EFL writing: product and process. *ERIC*, 1-15.
- Hussain, S. S. (2017). Teaching Writing to Second Language Learners: Bench-marking Strategies for Classroom. *Arab World English Journal*, 8(2), 208–227.
- Mantasiah, R., Yusri, Y., Syaputra, A. F., Angreany, F., Hasmawati, H., & Anwar, M. (2019, December). Assessing Mistake Potential in Writing German Passive Sentences (An Approach of Language Error Analysis). In *Seminar Nasional LP2M UNM*.
- Min, W. & Amini, M. (2018). Pragmatic presuppositions in Chinese skin-whitening advertisements. *The Journal of Social Sciences Research, Special Issue 6*, 1105-1110.
- Mousavi, H. S., & Kashefian N. S. (2011). Academic writing problems of Iranian postgraduate students at National University of Malaysia (UKM). *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 23(4), 593-603.
- Mustafa, F., Kirana, M., & Bahri, S. (2017). Errors in EFL writing by junior high students in Indonesia. *International Journal of Research Studies in Language Learning*, 6(1), 38-52.
- Paltridge, B. (2002). Academic literacies and changing university communities. *Revista canaria de estudios ingleses*, (44), 15-28.
- Paul, R. & Elder, L. (2006). *Critical thinking: Tools for taking charge of your learning and your life (2nd Ed.)*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson/Prentice Hall.
- Phakiti, A., & Li, L. (2011). General academic difficulties and reading and writing difficulties among Asian ESL postgraduate students in TESOL at an Australian university. *RELC Journal*, 42(3), 227-264.
- Rahman, M., & Hasan, K. (2019). Academic writing difficulties of Bangladeshi students at a higher institution in Malaysia. *Journal of Research and Multidisciplinary*, 2(2), 145-171.
- Ravichandran. S., & Kretovics. M., & Kirby. K., & Ghosh. A. (2017) Strategies to address English language writing challenges faced by International graduate students in the US. *Journal of International Students*, 7(3), 764-785.
- Singh, M. K. M. (2016). An emic perspective on academic writing difficulties among international graduate students in Malaysia. *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies*, 16(3), 83-96.
- Teddle, C., & Tashakkori, A. (2009). *Foundations of Mixed Methods Research: Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches in the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Tonapa, Y., Anwar, M., & Mantasiah, R. (2018). Analisis Kesalahan Penggunaan Deiksis dalam Karangan Sederhana Bahasa Jerman. *Eralingua: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Asing dan Sastra*, 2(1).
- Uba, S. Y., & Souidi, N. M. (2020). Students' Writing Difficulties in English for Business Classes in Dhofar University, Oman. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 9(3), 86-97.
- Wong, D. S.N., Tan, W.Y., & Amini, M. (2019). Violation of Grice's Maxims in Malay-English translations of Si Tanggang and Sang Kancil dan Buaya. *JARDCS*, 11(5), 1196-1201.
- Yap, S.C.W., & Amini, M. (2020). Secondary world infrastructures and Storyworld of The Little Prince novella, *PERTANIKA*, 28 (1), 175-189.
- Yap, S.C.W., Adeela Abu Bakar, Amini, M., & Rafik-Galea, S. (2018). Problems and solutions in English translations of Malay short stories. *The Journal of Social Sciences Research, Special Issue 6*, 1158-1166.
- Yuen, C. K., & Mussa, I. H. (2015). Academic writing difficulties of Iraqi postgraduate students in Malaysia. *International Journal of Education and Research*, 3(6), 25-34.

INSANIAH: Online Journal of Language, Communication, and Humanities

Volume 6 (1), April 2023

Zamel, V. (1983). The composing processes of advanced ESL students: Six case studies.
TESOL Quarterly, 17, 165–187.