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Exploring Factors Influencing Students' Challenges in Academic Writing: A Qualitative Analysis Based on Student Perspectives

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Abstract
Writing proficiency poses significant challenges for learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Foreign Language (EFL), particularly at the tertiary level where academic essay writing is a requirement. This study delves into the factors contributing to students' difficulties in an Academic Writing course, as perceived by the students themselves. Employing qualitative methods, including open-ended questionnaires and interviews, data were collected from 25 students enrolled in an Academic Writing class for repeaters in the English Language Education Program at a university in Hanoi. Thematic analysis of the responses revealed two main categories of factors influencing students' writing challenges: internal and external. Internal factors encompassed issues such as self-motivation, self-confidence, lack of knowledge, and feelings of pressure, while external factors included the teaching style of instructors, classroom environment, instructional materials, and various aspects of the writing process. The findings of this research aim to assist educators in developing effective teaching strategies for Academic Writing courses, with the goal of alleviating students' difficulties and enhancing their writing proficiency.

1. Introduction

Writing proficiency is widely recognized as one of the most formidable obstacles facing learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Foreign Language (EFL), particularly at the tertiary level where academic writing demands are high. The intricacies of academic essay composition often prove daunting for students, leading to frustration and hindered progress in their educational pursuits. Understanding the factors that contribute to students' difficulties in academic writing is crucial for educators seeking to provide effective support and instruction in this area.

This study aims to explore and analyze the multifaceted challenges encountered by students enrolled in Academic Writing courses, focusing on their perceptions of the factors influencing their writing difficulties. By adopting a qualitative approach, incorporating open-ended questionnaires and interviews, this research delves into the internal and external elements that shape students' experiences in academic writing classrooms.

The investigation centers on a cohort of 25 students enrolled in an Academic Writing class for repeaters within the English Language Education Program at a university in Hanoi, during the Semester I of the 2022/2023 academic year. Through meticulous analysis of the participants' responses, this study identifies and examines the internal factors such as self-motivation, self-confidence, knowledge gaps, and pressure, as well as external factors including teaching styles, classroom environments, instructional materials, and writing processes.

The findings of this research endeavor seek to offer valuable insights to educators and instructors, aiding them in the development of targeted teaching techniques and strategies tailored to address students' difficulties in Academic Writing courses. By addressing these challenges effectively, educators can facilitate a more conducive learning environment, thereby empowering students to enhance their writing proficiency and succeed academically.

2. Literature review

2.1 The Definition of Academic Writing:

Academic writing encompasses a diverse range of genres and styles employed within educational contexts, characterized by its formal tone, structured organization, and adherence to disciplinary conventions (Murray, 2016) [8]. It serves as a means of scholarly communication, facilitating the exchange of ideas, arguments, and research findings among academics and students across various disciplines (Swales & Feak, 2012) [2]. Academic writing is distinguished by its emphasis on critical analysis, evidence-based reasoning, and engagement with existing scholarly literature (Hyland, 2004) [3]. Moreover, it often involves the integration of sources through citation and referencing, reflecting a commitment to intellectual integrity and ethical scholarship (Howard, 1999) [9].

2.2 Difficulties in Academic Writing:

Academic writing presents a myriad of challenges for students across various educational contexts. These difficulties can arise from linguistic, cognitive, affective, and contextual factors, hindering students' ability to effectively communicate their ideas in written form. Some of the key difficulties encountered in academic writing include:

Language Proficiency: Limited proficiency in the language of instruction poses a significant barrier for many students. Non-native speakers, in particular, may struggle with vocabulary selection, grammar, syntax, and idiomatic expressions, impacting the clarity and coherence of their writing (Silva, 1993) [1].

Understanding Academic Conventions: Academic writing encompasses specific conventions and formats that may be unfamiliar to students, such as citation styles, academic tone, and disciplinary norms (Swales & Feak, 2012) [2]. Navigating these conventions requires students to develop a deep understanding of scholarly discourse, which can be challenging, especially for novice writers.

Critical Thinking and Analysis: Academic writing often requires students to engage critically with complex ideas, theories, and arguments. Developing analytical skills to evaluate and synthesize information from various sources demands cognitive effort and intellectual rigor (Hyland, 2004) [3].

Organization and Structure: Crafting well-structured and logically coherent essays requires students to organize their thoughts effectively and present arguments in a clear and cohesive manner (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996) [4]. Poor organization can confuse readers and undermine the credibility of the writer's arguments.

Research Skills: Academic writing frequently involves integrating evidence from scholarly sources to support arguments and claims. Students must possess research skills to locate relevant sources, critically evaluate their credibility, and effectively incorporate them into their writing (Ferris, 2003) [5].

Time Management: Balancing academic writing assignments with other academic and personal responsibilities can be challenging for students. Procrastination, poor planning, and unrealistic expectations regarding the time required for writing tasks can lead to rushed and subpar work (Yancey, 2009) [6].

Fear of Evaluation: The fear of criticism and evaluation by peers and instructors can inhibit students' willingness to take risks and express their ideas freely in writing. This fear of judgment may stem from past negative experiences or a lack of confidence in one's writing abilities (Flower & Hayes, 1981) [7].

Revision and Editing: Effective revision and editing are essential components of the writing process, yet many students struggle to revise their work critically and identify errors in grammar, punctuation, and style (Ferris, 2003) [5]. Without proper revision, writing may lack clarity, coherence, and precision.

Obviously, the difficulties in academic writing are multifaceted and encompass linguistic, cognitive, affective, and contextual dimensions. Overcoming these challenges requires students to develop a range of skills, including language proficiency, critical thinking, research proficiency, time management, and self-efficacy in writing. Effective support and instruction from educators, coupled with consistent practice and feedback, are essential for helping students navigate the complexities of academic writing and succeed in their academic endeavors.

2.3 Causes of Writing Challenges:

Cognitive Factors:

Writing proficiency is closely linked to cognitive processes such as language processing, working memory, and executive functioning. Individuals with deficits in these cognitive domains may experience difficulties in generating ideas, organizing thoughts, and expressing them coherently in written form (Graham & Harris, 2000) [12]. Additionally, difficulties in spelling, grammar, and syntax can also be attributed to underlying cognitive impairments (Berninger & Winn, 2006) [10].

Socioeconomic Factors:

Socioeconomic status (SES) has been identified as a significant predictor of writing achievement. Children from low-SES backgrounds often have limited access to resources such as books, educational materials, and parental support, which can hinder their development of writing skills (Purcell-Gates, 2002) [19]. Furthermore, disparities in access to quality education and literacy-rich environments contribute to the persistent achievement gap in writing between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Graham & Perin, 2007) [14].

Motivational Factors:

Motivation plays a crucial role in writing performance and persistence. Students who lack intrinsic motivation or have negative attitudes towards writing may exhibit avoidance behaviors and procrastination (Graham et al., 2013) [15]. Moreover, external factors such as teacher feedback, peer evaluation, and assessment practices can influence students' motivation and engagement in writing tasks (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000) [17].

Language Factors:

For individuals learning a second language or with language-based learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia), writing difficulties can stem from challenges in mastering linguistic conventions and syntax (Graham & Hebert, 2011) [13]. Differences in language proficiency, vocabulary knowledge, and syntactic complexity between languages can also impact writing performance (Cumming et al., 2005) [11].

Environmental Factors:

The writing process is influenced by environmental factors such as classroom dynamics, instructional practices, and technological resources. Effective writing instruction that

incorporates explicit teaching of writing strategies, scaffolding support, and opportunities for meaningful writing experiences can mitigate writing difficulties (Graham *et al*., 2012) [16]. Additionally, access to assistive technologies and accommodations for students with disabilities can enhance their writing productivity and independence (MacArthur *et al*., 2010) [18].

After all, writing difficulties arise from a complex interplay of cognitive, socioeconomic, motivational, language, and environmental factors. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that considers individual differences, socio-cultural contexts, and systemic barriers. Future research should continue to investigate the nuanced relationships between these factors and explore innovative interventions to support individuals with writing difficulties across diverse populations and settings.

3. Methodology
Context of the Study
The research was conducted within the framework of an Academic Writing course at the end of Semester I, 2022/2023, within the English Language Education Program at a university located in Hanoi. The study encompassed a total of twenty-five students.

Participants
Participants in this study comprised students from the English Language Education Program who were enrolled in the Academic Writing course as repeaters during Semester I, 2022/2023. The twenty-five students represented various academic batches, including 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022.

Data Collection Instruments
Qualitative data collection techniques were employed for this study, drawing upon methodologies outlined by Gay *et al*. (2006). Specifically, the study utilized open-ended questionnaires and an interview protocol to gather insights from the participants.

Data Collection Procedures
Data collection commenced with the distribution of open-ended questionnaires at the conclusion of class sessions. The questionnaire comprised six inquiries aimed at identifying factors contributing to students' difficulties in Academic Writing. To ensure clarity and mitigate misunderstandings, both the questionnaire and subsequent interviews were conducted in the participants' native language.

Subsequently, follow-up interviews were conducted to elucidate participants' responses from the questionnaires. These interviews adopted a semi-structured approach, allowing participants to articulate their perspectives while enabling researchers to delve deeper into specific issues.

Data Analysis Procedures
The collected data underwent thematic analysis. Upon completion of the questionnaires, researchers coded the data and identified overarching themes. Participants who provided unique insights in the questionnaires were selected for individual interviews. These interviews were documented through note-taking and audio recording, with subsequent transcription of audio recordings.

4. Findings and Discussion
The findings of the study were organized into three primary categories: general challenges encountered in Academic Writing, internal and external factors contributing to these challenges, and strategies employed by students to address difficulties in Academic Writing. These findings were thoroughly discussed in the subsequent sections, providing insights into the perceptions and experiences of students in the Academic Writing class.

General Problems in Writing
The findings of this study revealed a spectrum of challenges encountered by students in academic writing, primarily revolving around mechanical issues. Among these, grammatical problems emerged as a prominent issue, affecting 16 out of 25 students. Participant 4, for instance, expressed difficulties in determining appropriate grammar and coping with unfamiliar vocabulary, which is integral to academic writing.

Similarly, vocabulary-related challenges were reported by 12 out of 25 students. Participant 15 highlighted struggles in selecting academic vocabulary, impacting their comprehension of articles containing foreign terms. Additionally, Participant 25 noted difficulties in identifying suitable conjunctions due to the elevated academic language utilized in the course.

Structural concerns were also prevalent, with Participant 21 admitting to feeling perplexed by the formal writing requirements and finding it arduous to grasp the rules of academic writing. Notably, the transition from writing in their first language (L1) to the second language (L2) posed significant hurdles, particularly in idea development, content contextualization, and adherence to academic writing conventions.

Internal and External Factors Contributing to Writing Problems
Internal and external factors played pivotal roles in students' writing difficulties, influencing their performance and engagement. Internal factors encompassed self-motivation, self-confidence, knowledge gaps, and feelings of pressure. For instance, Participant 1 expressed apprehension about articulating ideas smoothly due to grammar concerns, indicating a lack of motivation exacerbated by language barriers.

Participant 17 echoed similar sentiments, citing a lack of experience in academic writing and difficulties with vocabulary and grammar as contributing factors to their unease. These responses underscored the interconnectedness of confidence levels, knowledge acquisition, and motivation in shaping students' writing experiences.

Moreover, participants such as Participant 22 struggled with initiating writing tasks, grappling with the multitude of writing aspects and feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of grammar rules. This highlights the importance of establishing a clear writing purpose and employing pre-writing strategies like brainstorming, as advocated by Alves (2008), to enhance organization and motivation.

Participants also articulated feelings of pressure, particularly regarding word count requirements and idea development. Participant 3, for instance, felt overwhelmed by the expectation to produce lengthy essays and formulate coherent ideas, reflecting the strain induced by academic demands on novice writers.

External factors, including teaching methodologies, classroom dynamics, and available resources, further compounded students' writing challenges. Participant 20 cited a lack of background knowledge and low English proficiency as external factors hindering their writing process, highlighting the pervasive impact of language proficiency on various language skills.

This study elucidates the multifaceted nature of students' difficulties in academic writing, spanning grammatical intricacies, vocabulary acquisition, structural nuances, and broader internal and external factors. By acknowledging and addressing these challenges, educators can devise targeted interventions to enhance students' writing proficiency and foster a conducive learning environment conducive to academic success.

Table 1: Summary of Internal Factors

Internal Factors	Description
Self-Motivation	Students' intrinsic drive and initiative in engaging with writing tasks and overcoming obstacles.
Self-Confidence	Students' belief in their abilities to effectively communicate ideas and navigate academic writing conventions.
Lack of knowledge	The apprehension associated with crafting a theme, grappling with grammar and vocabulary, experiencing a shortage of ideas, and encountering challenges in selecting appropriate conjunctions.
Feeling of under pressure	Refining an essay according to the teacher's input, facing the task of composing thousands of words, and struggling with the process of expanding on ideas.

In addition to internal factors, external elements significantly contribute to students' writing challenges. Four key external factors emerged from the data: the teacher's teaching style, classroom atmosphere, materials, and aspects of writing.

Participant 6 articulated feelings of discomfort and difficulty adapting to academic writing, attributing the challenge partially to the teacher's instructional methods. This sentiment was echoed by Participants 5 and 7, who expressed frustration with unclear explanations and a perceived lack of engagement from the teacher.

Ambiguous instructions and inconsistent expectations further exacerbated students' writing difficulties, as noted by Participants 4 and 24. The discrepancy between assigned tasks and subsequent directives left students feeling confused and unprepared, hindering their progress in academic writing.

The teacher's role as a facilitator was highlighted as crucial in addressing students' needs and providing necessary guidance. However, ineffective facilitation can impede students' learning experiences and exacerbate writing challenges.

Moreover, the classroom atmosphere emerged as a significant external factor influencing students' writing performance. Participant 2 highlighted the impact of class timing on their engagement, noting that lessons during sleepy hours hindered their ability to concentrate and engage effectively.

Research by Listyani (2018) supports the notion that classroom environment and timing significantly affect learning outcomes, emphasizing the importance of fostering a conducive learning environment to facilitate student engagement and motivation.

Furthermore, the materials utilized in academic writing instruction, particularly reading materials such as journals and articles, were identified as external factors contributing to students' difficulties. Participants 15, 16 and 19 expressed struggles with comprehending the academic language used

in these materials, highlighting a disconnect between students' proficiency levels and the complexity of the texts.

The rigid rules and academic context inherent in academic writing further compounded students' challenges, as noted by Participant 18. Unlike other writing genres that afford more flexibility, academic writing imposes stringent requirements, necessitating adherence to formal structures and academic conventions.

External factors, including teaching styles, classroom dynamics, instructional materials, and writing contexts, exert significant influence on students' writing experiences and performance. Addressing these factors requires a multifaceted approach that promotes effective communication between teachers and students, fosters a supportive learning environment, and aligns instructional materials with students' proficiency levels and learning needs.

Table 2: Summary of External Factors

External Factors	Description
Teacher's Teaching Style	Pedagogical approaches and instructional methods employed by the teacher, which may impact students' understanding and engagement.
Classroom Atmosphere	Environmental factors such as class timing and atmosphere that influence students' concentration, motivation, and learning outcomes.
Materials	The quality and suitability of instructional materials, including reading materials, assignments, and writing prompts.
Aspects of Writing	The inherent characteristics and demands of academic writing, such as formal structures, academic language, and adherence to conventions.

By addressing these external factors and adopting strategies to mitigate their impact, educators can create an enabling environment that empowers students to overcome writing challenges and achieve academic success.

Student's Efforts in Handling Difficulties in Academic Writing

Despite encountering numerous challenges, the majority of student participants demonstrated proactive efforts in addressing their difficulties, reflecting a keen awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. Out of the 25 participants, 22 successfully implemented strategies to manage their writing challenges, while the remaining 3 participants were still in the process of finding effective solutions.

Participants employed a variety of tactics to overcome obstacles, tailored to their individual needs and preferences. Common approaches included:

Reading related articles: Participants 1, 7, 9, 15, and 21 engaged in extensive reading to enhance their understanding of academic writing conventions and subject matter.

Consulting dictionaries: Participants 2, 10, 12and 14 utilized dictionaries to clarify unfamiliar vocabulary and grammatical structures, facilitating comprehension and accuracy in their writing.

Seeking guidance from teachers and peers: Participants 3, 5, 16, and 20 sought assistance from instructors and classmates, leveraging collaborative learning opportunities to refine their writing skills and solicit feedback.

Utilizing technology: Participants 11, 13 and 15 leveraged digital tools such as the internet, Grammarly, and plagiarism

checkers to streamline the writing process, improve language accuracy, and ensure academic integrity.

Learning from writing templates: Participant 17 utilized writing templates provided by instructors as a framework for structuring their written assignments, aiding in organization and coherence.

Additionally, some participants engaged in active writing practice (Participant 18) and sought respite from writing-related stress through relaxation techniques (Participant 19), underscoring the importance of self-care in maintaining motivation and productivity.

These efforts were deeply influenced by students' individual preferences and emotional states, with some participants expressing comfort in collaborative settings while others preferred solitary work. This diversity in approach is reflective of the multifaceted nature of learning styles and underscores the importance of personalized learning experiences.

Despite initial challenges, many participants reported tangible improvements in various aspects of their writing, including idea development, academic vocabulary usage, grammar proficiency, and paraphrasing skills. Moreover, participants noted a boost in confidence and a diminished fear of writing, signaling positive progress and increased self-efficacy in academic writing tasks.

In conclusion, students' proactive efforts and resilience in addressing writing challenges highlight the effectiveness of personalized strategies tailored to individual learning needs. By fostering a supportive learning environment and providing targeted resources and guidance, educators can empower students to navigate academic writing tasks with confidence and proficiency.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study shed light on the multifaceted nature of students' difficulties in academic writing, encompassing both internal and external factors. From grammatical intricacies to classroom dynamics and instructional materials, students encounter a myriad of challenges that impact their writing experiences and performance.

Despite these obstacles, student participants demonstrated resilience and initiative in addressing their writing difficulties. Through a variety of strategies such as reading, seeking guidance, leveraging technology, and engaging in self-care, students exhibited a proactive approach to overcoming obstacles and enhancing their writing skills.

Importantly, the diverse array of strategies employed by participants underscores the individualized nature of learning and the importance of personalized approaches in addressing students' unique needs and preferences. By fostering a supportive learning environment, providing targeted resources, and promoting collaborative learning opportunities, educators can empower students to navigate academic writing tasks with confidence and proficiency.

As students continue to refine their writing skills and build upon their successes, it is essential for educators to remain attentive to their evolving needs and challenges. By embracing a learner-centered approach and cultivating a culture of continuous improvement, educators can empower students to thrive academically and realize their full potential in the realm of academic writing.

6. References

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