

Improving the Academic Writing Essays of EFL Libyan Students: Observational Case Study on the Faculty of Languages and Translation at Al-Zytuna University

Dr. Gharnasa Hadia — Faculty of Languages and Translation — University of Al-Zytuna

Abstract:

This observational case study focused on improving the academic writing essays of Libyan students in the English department on the Faculty of Languages and Translation at Al-Zytuna University. The study aimed to investigate the difficulties and problems that students face in academic writing and to suggest ways to improve their writing skills. The study used qualitative data collection methods, including classroom observations and essay writing analysis. The findings of the study showed that students encountered difficulties in information collection, idea organization, and communication. They also lacked knowledge of different types of essays, paragraph organization, and coherence. The study provides implications for academic writing instruction and highlights the need for further research with a larger group of students.

Key words: *Academic writing, EFL students, Writing skills, Classroom observations, Essay analysis*

المخلص :

هدفت الدراسة الى تحسين كتابة المقالات الأكاديمية للطلاب الليبيين في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية اللغات والترجمة جامعة الزيتونة. كما عمدت إلى التعرف على الصعوبات والمشكلات التي يواجهها الطلاب في الكتابة الأكاديمية واقتراح طرائق لتحسين مهاراتهم الكتابية. واستخدمت الدراسة أداة جمع البيانات النوعية بما في ذلك الملاحظات الصفية وتحليل كتابة مقالات الطلاب . أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن الطلاب واجهوا صعوبات في جمع المعلومات وتنظيم الأفكار و التواصل. كما أنهم يفنقرون إلى المعرفة بأنواع مختلفة من المقالات وتنظيم الفقرة والتماذك. توفر الدراسة الآثار المترتبة على تعليمات الكتابة الأكاديمية وتسלט الضوء على الحاجة إلى مزيد من البحث مع مجموعة أكبر من الطلاب.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

الكتابة الأكاديمية ، متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، مهارات الكتابة ، الملاحظات الصفية ، تحليل المقال.

1. Introduction

The importance of academic writing skills for students in higher education and highlights the challenges that students,

particularly those from non-native English-speaking countries, face in academic writing. The study aims to investigate the specific difficulties and problems that Libyan students encounter in academic writing and provide effective solutions to improve their writing skills. (Nenotek, Tlonaen & Manubulu, 2022; Dema 2020).

Difficulties in academic writing can arise from various factors. Firstly, limited English proficiency plays a significant role in hindering students' ability to express themselves effectively in writing. When students lack a strong command of the language, they struggle to convey their ideas clearly and coherently.

Secondly, a lack of exposure to academic writing can impede students' development of the necessary skills and strategies for effective writing. Without being exposed to various academic texts and writing styles, students may find it challenging to grasp the conventions and expectations of academic writing.

The third contributing factor is limited access to resources, such as academic journals and writing guides. When students have restricted access to these valuable sources of information and

guidance, they face difficulties in conducting in-depth research and crafting well-informed arguments.

Furthermore, a lack of motivation can greatly impact students' engagement in the writing process. When students feel demotivated and disinterested, they are less likely to invest time and effort in honing their writing skills, leading to subpar academic outcomes.

Lastly, the importance of regular writing practices cannot be underestimated. By engaging in consistent writing exercises and assignments, students can improve their writing abilities and build confidence in their academic writing endeavors.

Addressing these factors is crucial for enhancing students' academic writing skills and promoting their overall success in their studies. (Hamp-Lyons & Heasley, 2006).

By addressing these difficulties and providing effective solutions, the study aims to contribute to improving the academic writing skills of Libyan students. Enhancing students' writing skills can help them achieve their academic and professional goals, which

are critical for their future success. (Al-Kufaishi & Al-Mahdawi, 2019 ; Swales & Feak, 2012).

1.1. Research Questions

The researcher conducted this study to answer the following four research questions.

1. What difficulties and problems do Libyan students face in academic writing?
2. What are the factors contributing to these difficulties and problems?
3. What are effective strategies to improve the academic writing skills of Libyan students?
4. How can explicit instruction, feedback, peer review, and scaffolding techniques be used to enhance academic writing instruction for Libyan students?

2. Literature Review

Academic writing is an essential skill for students in higher education, particularly for those pursuing academic and professional careers. However, non-native English-speaking

students often face challenges in developing effective writing skills due to language barriers, cultural differences, and limited exposure to academic writing. This literature review examines the challenges faced by non-native English-speaking students in academic writing and explores effective strategies for improving their writing skills. (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013).

One of the primary challenges facing non-native English-speaking students in academic writing is limited English proficiency. Students may struggle with language barriers that hinder their ability to express themselves effectively in script. Studies have shown that language proficiency is strongly associated with writing proficiency (Al-Kufaishi & Al-Mahdawi, 2019). For example, Kuo (2014) found that students with higher English proficiency levels produced higher quality essays compared to those with lower proficiency levels. (Al-Kufaishi & Al-Mahdawi, 2019).

Another challenge faced by non-native English-speaking students is a lack of exposure to academic writing. Many students may be unfamiliar with the conventions and

expectations of academic writing and lack the necessary skills and strategies for effective writing. (Badger & White, 2000).

In addition to limited English proficiency and lack of exposure to academic writing, non-native English-speaking students may also face challenges in information collection, idea organization, coherence, and communication (Cheng & Zhang, 2021). For example, students may struggle with collecting and synthesizing information from multiple sources or organizing their ideas into a coherent argument. Furthermore, non-native English-speaking students may lack access to resources that could help them improve their writing skills. These resources include academic journals, writing guides, and feedback from instructors and peers. Limited access to these resources can restrict students' ability to access the necessary information and guidance for academic writing. Therefore, it is essential to provide students with opportunities for feedback and peer review. (Yusof, AbManan & Alias, 2012).

Finally, non-native English-speaking students may lack motivation and the need for more writing practices. Many students may feel discouraged by their lack of progress and

need more opportunities to practice writing and receive feedback on their work. Techniques, such as providing students with templates and outlines, can be effective in helping students overcome challenges in academic writing (Kuo, 2014).

In conclusion, non-native English-speaking students face several challenges in academic writing, including limited English proficiency, lack of exposure to academic writing, difficulties in information collection, idea organization, coherence, and communication, limited access to resources, and lack of motivation. To address these challenges, effective strategies for improving academic writing skills include explicit instruction, feedback, peer review, scaffolding techniques, and providing more opportunities for writing practice and access to resources. By adopting these approaches, instructors can help non-native English-speaking students improve their academic writing skills and achieve their academic and professional goals. (Kuo, 2014)

3. Methodology

The study used qualitative data collection methods to investigate the difficulties and problems that Libyan students face in

academic writing. The study employed classroom observations and essay writing analysis as data collection techniques. Seven Libyan students studying in the English department during autumn and spring terms in 2023 academic year at Al-Zytuna University were selected as participants through convenience sampling. The data collection process lasted more than three months, during which one academic class per week for two hours was observed.

Additionally, each student submitted two essays: one for the mid-term exam and one for the final exam. These essays were analyzed to observe the students' improvement and changes in their writing skills over the course of the study. The analysis focused on identifying the specific difficulties and challenges that the students faced in academic writing, such as information collection, idea organization, coherence, and communication.

The qualitative data collected through classroom observations and essay writing analysis were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved identifying and categorizing patterns in the data to identify common themes and issues related to academic writing difficulties. The study aimed to provide a

comprehensive understanding of the challenges facing Libyan students in academic writing and to suggest ways to improve their skills. The use of qualitative data collection methods allowed for an in-depth exploration of the experiences and perspectives of the participants, providing valuable insights into the challenges they face and the strategies that may be effective in improving their academic writing skills. (Cheng, J. H., Cheng, Y. S., & Wang 2016).

4. Findings

The findings of the study indicated that Libyan students faced several difficulties in academic writing, specifically in information collection, idea organization, and communication. The students had limited knowledge of different types of essays, paragraph organization, coherence, and transition signals. They also lacked the ability to connect sentences and paragraphs coherently, resulting in writing that was difficult to follow and understand.

One of the primary factors contributing to these difficulties was limited English proficiency. The students struggled to express

themselves effectively in writing due to language barriers. Additionally, many students lacked exposure to academic writing, which hindered their ability to develop the necessary skills and strategies to write effectively. Limited access to resources, such as academic journals and writing guides, was also identified as a significant challenge. (Hyland, 2003).

The study also found that the students lacked motivation and the need for more writing practices. Many students expressed frustration with their writing abilities and felt discouraged by their lack of progress. They also felt that they needed more opportunities to practice writing and receive feedback on their work. (Alnefaie, 2023).

Overall, the findings of the study highlight the significant challenges facing Libyan students in academic writing. By identifying these problems, the study provides valuable insights into the areas that need improvement to help students develop effective script services. The study's findings suggest that addressing language barriers, providing more exposure to academic writing, and offering more resources and opportunities for writing practice and feedback could be effective ways to

improve the academic writing skills of Libyan students. (Lee, 2010).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study found that seven undergraduate Libyan students in the English department at Al-Zytuna University encounter significant difficulties in academic writing. The difficulties can be attributed to a range of factors, including limited English proficiency, lack of exposure to academic writing, and limited access to resources. These factors hindered the students' ability to write effectively, resulting in writing that was unclear, disorganized, and difficult to follow. To address these challenges, the study suggests that explicit instruction, feedback, peer review, and scaffolding techniques can be effective in improving students' academic writing skills. Explicit instruction can help students develop a better understanding of the different types of essays, paragraph organization, coherence, and transition signals. Feedback and peer review can provide students with valuable insights into script strengths and weaknesses and help them identify areas for improvement. Scaffolding techniques, such as providing students with

templates and outlines, can also assist students in organizing their ideas and writing more coherently. Overall, the study highlights the importance of addressing the challenges facing Libyan students in academic writing. By identifying these difficulties and suggesting effective strategies for improvement, the study provides valuable insights into the steps that can be taken to support students' development of effective academic writing skills.

The research conducted by the author has taken place at Al-Zytuna University's department of Languages and Translation, where the author is a lecturer of Libyan students assigned in this department. As a result, the author has recognized the problems and difficulties faced by non-native English-speaking students in academic writing. The aim of the research is to improve their academic writing essays. It is noteworthy that this study is the only observational study conducted in the context of the English department faculty of languages and translation of Azzaytuna University, to the best of the author's knowledge. Therefore, experimental studies should be conducted to evaluate certain types of writing methods for non-native English-speaking students.

6. Implications

The implications of the study are significant for academic writing instruction in the English department at Al-Zytuna University. The findings suggest that instructors should focus on providing explicit instruction, feedback, peer review, and scaffolding techniques to improve students' academic writing skills. Explicit instruction can help students develop a better understanding of the different types of essays, paragraph organization, coherence, and transition signals. Feedback and peer review can provide students with valuable insights into their writing strengths and weaknesses and help them identify areas for improvement. Scaffolding techniques, such as providing students with templates and outlines, can also assist students in organizing their ideas and writing more coherently. (Straub, 1997; Li & Zhu 2020).

In addition, the study highlights the need for further research with a larger group of students to generalize the findings. Conducting further research can help to identify the specific challenges faced by Libyan students in academic writing and develop more effective strategies for addressing these

challenges. This research can also identify the impact of various instructional techniques in improving academic writing skills in this population.

Overall, the implications of the study suggest that academic writing instruction in the English department at Al-Zytuna University should focus on developing effective strategies for addressing the challenges faced by students. This can include providing explicit instruction, feedback, peer review, and scaffolding techniques, as well as conducting further research to improve academic writing instruction for Libyan students.

7. Limitations

1. Sample size: The study may have a small or limited sample size, which could affect the generalizability of the findings. The results may only be applicable to the specific group of students who participated in the study.
2. Generalizability: The study was conducted at Al-Zytuna University, which is a specific institution with its own unique characteristics. The findings may not be representative of other universities or educational contexts. (Crewell, 2013).

3. Research design: The study might have employed a specific research design, such as a quantitative or qualitative approach, which could have limitations in capturing the complexity of academic writing instruction. Different research designs could yield different results.
4. Time constraints: The study might have been conducted within a limited timeframe, which could impact the depth and breadth of the findings. Longitudinal studies or studies with extended observation periods could provide more comprehensive insights. (Merriam & Tisdell 2015).
5. External factors: External factors beyond the scope of the study, such as individual differences among students, prior writing experiences, and socio-cultural backgrounds, could influence the outcomes. These factors should be considered when applying the study's findings.
6. Subjectivity: The assessment of students' academic writing skills might be subjective, as it relies on the judgments and interpretations of the instructors or researchers. Inter-rater reliability measures might not

have been explicitly addressed. (Miles, Huberman, & Saldan, 2013).

7. Cultural context: The study was conducted in a specific cultural context (Libyan students at Al-Zytuna University), and the findings may not be applicable to students from different cultural backgrounds. Cultural factors can significantly impact writing styles and preferences.
8. Publication bias: The study might not have considered or included all relevant literature or perspectives due to publication bias or limitations in accessing certain sources. This could impact the comprehensiveness and validity of the study's conclusions. (Peng & Zhang, 2021).

References

- 1– Alnefaie, M., (2023). Comparison Study: The Impact of Lecturer's Feedback on EFL Students' Essays: International Education Studies; 16, 139 – 206.
- 2– Al-Kufaishi, S., & Al-Mahdawi, S. (2019). The relationship between language proficiency and writing performance: A case study of Iraqi EFL students. *International Journal of Instruction*, 12(1), 817–832.

- 3– Badger, R., & White, G. (2000). A process genre approach to teaching writing. *ELT journal*, 54(2), 153–160.
- 4– Cheng, J. H., Cheng, Y. S., & Wang, Y. J. (2016). The effect of online peer feedback on EFL students' writing performance. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society*, 19(4), 192–204.
- 5– Cheng, X., & Zhang, L. J. (2021). Teacher written feedback on English as a foreign language learners' writing: Examining native and nonnative English-speaking teachers' practices in feedback provision. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 629921.
- 6– Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.
- 7– Dema, K. (2020). Problems in Students' Academic Writing. *Journal of Education and Practice*, (11) 18, 34–40.
- 8– Hamp-Lyons, L., & Heasley, B. (2006). *Study writing: A course in written English for academic purposes*. Cambridge University Press.
- 9– Hyland, K. (2003). *Second language writing*. Cambridge University Press.

- 10- Kuo, I. C. (2014). Effects of a genre-based approach on writing development in an EFL context. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 25, 55-69.
- 11- Lee, I. (2010). Research into practice: Written corrective feedback. *Language Teaching*, 43(3), 391-410.
- 12- Li, L., & Zhu, W. (2020). Written corrective feedback: A meta-analysis of its effects on L2 writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 49, 100787.
- 13- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.
- 14- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2013). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook*. Sage publications
- 15- Nenotek ,S. A., Tlonaen., Z. A., & Manubulu., H. A. (2022) .Exploring University Students' Difficulties in Writing English Academic Essay. *Al-Ishlah: Journal of Pendidikan*.14, 909-920.
- 16- Paltridge, B., & Starfield, S. (Eds.). (2013). *The handbook of English for specific purposes*. John Wiley & Sons.

- 17- Peng, J. E., & Zhang, L. J. (2021). The effect of L1 use on L2 writing: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 52, 100745.
- 18- Straub, R. (1997). Students' reactions to teacher comments: *An exploratory study. Research in the Teaching of English*, 91-119.
- 19- Swales, J. M., & Feak, C. B. (2012). *Academic writing for graduate students: Essential tasks and skills*. University of Michigan Press.
- 20- Yusof, J., Ab Manan, N. A., & Alias, A. A. (2012). Guided peer feedback on academic writing tasks using Facebook notes: *An exploratory study. Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 67, 216-228