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Evacuation of Difficulties and Challenges for Academic Writing in ESL Learning

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This study explores the challenges encountered by 60 ESL undergraduate students across four universities in Lahore in their written compositions. Through a comprehensive analysis, the study identifies prominent issues hindering effective academic writing. The investigation reveals notable concerns, including coherence deficits between sentences and paragraphs, limited lexical choices, Subject-Verb Agreement and Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement errors, and punctuation inconsistencies. Aligning with prior research, these findings underline the significance of these linguistic aspects in shaping the quality and clarity of written work. The study underscores the importance of a multifaceted approach in addressing these challenges. It emphasizes the need for instructional interventions that integrate strategies for enhancing coherence, expanding vocabulary, reinforcing grammar rules, and refining punctuation accuracy. By recognizing the interconnectedness of these writing facets, educators can foster a more holistic development of writing skills among ESL undergraduates. The implications of this study resonate beyond the academic realm, equipping students with enhanced communication abilities that transcend educational boundaries and prepare them for effective engagement in a broader societal context.

Introduction

The English language holds significant importance in today's global society, serving as a vital tool for communication, business, academia, and more. Often referred to as a "global lingua franca," English acts as a common language, bridging the gap between people of diverse linguistic backgrounds (Lee, 2018). This unifying role is particularly crucial in an era of heightened globalization, where interactions between cultures, nations, and individuals have become commonplace. The vast expanse of the internet and media is predominantly in English. With major sectors of the entertainment industry, including Hollywood, churning out content mainly in English, this language has a profound influence on global pop culture. Additionally, in the world of business and economics, English has emerged as the default language. From multinational corporations to international conferences, English is the mainstay, making proficiency in the language a valuable asset for job opportunities and professional growth (Kalinowski et al., 2019).

On the academic front, many of the top-ranked journals, conferences, and research publications are in English. This means that scholars and researchers globally often need to engage with English content to be part of the international academic discourse. The realm of tourism and travel also leans heavily on English. As an unofficial language for tourists, it's commonly used in various travel destinations, enhancing travelers' experiences and facilitating easier interactions. In the corridors of diplomacy and international relations, the importance of English

remains paramount. It's one of the official languages of institutions like the United Nations and is widely used in various international summits and gatherings. Technological advancements further underscore the value of English (Abdelrady & Akram, 2022). Social media enhances academic motivation and achievement (Ramzan et al., 2023). With much of software programming, tech manuals, and digital platforms using English as a primary or secondary language, it continues to be at the forefront of the digital age (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023; Akram et al., 2021).

Hence, enhancing one's proficiency in the English language, especially honing skills in academic writing at the undergraduate level, becomes imperative. Possessing such a command over the language not only aids in advancing research activities but also in broadening the scope of scholarly endeavors within the educational establishments of Pakistan (Mahboob, 2017). This increased proficiency can pave the way for a more robust academic discourse, fostering a culture of rigorous research and collaboration that can elevate the standards of education in the country (Sadia et al., 2021). Consequently, adopting a meticulous and progressive approach to mastering the nuances of academic English can substantially elevate the writing capabilities of novices. This advancement is particularly salient when considering the intricacies of academic discourse and the deep contemplation about the established norms of the domain. Writing with a critical lens isn't merely an optional skill in the world of higher education; it's a fundamental necessity. As Hyland (2009) astutely pointed out, in a vast majority of academic compositions, the emphasis often leans more towards a thorough analysis and evaluation of the topic at hand, rather than just delivering a direct and simplistic overview.

Conversely, the paramount concern within the realm of English language proficiency revolves around the presence of multiple difficulties and challenges. These encompass factors such as the presence of inadequately trained educators and limited resources, as highlighted in Akram's study (2020). Language speaking anxiety, as established by Akram et al. (2019), further compounds this issue, potentially impeding students' linguistic development. An additional contributing factor is the absence of comprehensive professional development initiatives for teachers, as illuminated by Akram and Yang's research (2021). Collectively, these difficulties and challenges converge to impede the cultivation of a robust English language proficiency level among students.

Expanding further on the multifaceted components of writing, one can't overlook the integral role played by the four major linguistic realms—grammar, reading, writing, and vocabulary. Each of these components, when finely honed, contributes immensely to the overall academic achievements of students. Izatullah et al. (2022) underscored this interconnectedness by highlighting the profound correlation between these linguistic elements and the ensuing academic performance of learners. Such insights further emphasize the importance of nurturing these skills, not only for the sake of effective writing but for holistic academic success.

In the realm of higher education, academic writing tasks require a deep-seated critical literacy. This is essential for both synthesizing varied data and substantiating a particular theory. However, a notable majority of students' grapple with these tasks. The root of their struggle often lies in the lofty expectations set by their educators. Teachers should be mindful enough to play an active role (Javaid et al., 2023). These teachers frequently operate under the presumption that students should have already acquired and honed their academic writing skills during earlier educational phases, guided by their previous language instructors. This assumption places students in a precarious position, leading many of them into a whirlpool of confusion, as highlighted by Fitriani and Sabarniati (2021). Language skills are affected by anxiety (Javaid et al., 2023) and social support helps in growing academically (Maqbool et al., 2021) whereas classroom enjoyment improves learning (Ramzan et al., 2023).

Contrastingly, Mumtaz (2021) shifted the focus to a more solution-oriented approach. He emphasized the pressing need for students at the University of Education, Lahore to augment their vocabulary. Vocabulary used in speeches influences (Ramzan et al., 2023). By dedicating ample time to practice and vocabulary enhancement, students can articulate their ideas more lucidly, thereby catering more effectively to their readers. ESL students face trouble in pronouncing vowels (Ikramullah et al., 2023). Yet, the overarching scenario remains grim for ESL learners. They often find themselves ensnared in a mental quagmire, largely stemming from linguistic difficulties and challenges. Considering this prevailing scenario, it's essential to probe deeper into the crux of the issue. The study at hand seeks to unearth the genuine reasons underpinning learners' subpar performance. More than just identifying the gaps, it aims to discern what skills students genuinely require, the pedagogical methods best suited to impart these

skills, and the most effective strategies to bolster their academic writing prowess. In light of this, the present study is guided by the subsequent objectives:

1. To explore undergraduate students' viewpoints on the difficulties and challenges they face in academic writing skills.

2. To provide recommendations that might address the academic writing issues encountered by undergraduate students

Methods

Participants and Procedure

With the support and guidance of experienced teachers, the primary researchers embarked on an academic endeavor to understand the writing capabilities of ESL students. To do so, these students were given an intriguing assignment: they were asked to pen down an event from their lives that they found particularly memorable or impactful. This approach was chosen as personal narratives often allow students to express themselves more freely, bringing to light their linguistic strengths and areas for improvement. The study was rigorous in its methodology. A substantial number of writing samples were collected, precisely from 60 ESL students. These participants hailed from four renowned universities, ensuring a diverse but academically inclined group. The choice of these universities and the students within them was not random. Instead, purposive sampling was employed. This method was selected as it allows the researcher to specifically choose participants based on certain criteria (Campbell et al., 2020), thereby ensuring that the samples are relevant and meet the study's specific needs.

Once the narratives were collected, the crux of the research began. Each piece of writing was meticulously analyzed. The goal was not just to identify errors or mistakes, but to delve deeper into understanding the root causes of the difficulties and challenges these students faced. This wasn't merely an exercise in correction, but an exploration into the nuances of language learning and the specific difficulties encountered by ESL learners in academic writing contexts. By undertaking such a comprehensive study, the intention was to generate insights that could assist educators in developing more effective teaching strategies tailored for ESL students. The hope is that by addressing these unique difficulties and challenges head-on, we can create a more inclusive and effective educational environment for all learners.

Results

After conducting a thorough examination, several prominent academic writing difficulties and challenges were discerned within the student's writing samples. Five predominant issues have been identified, each posing significant obstacles to effective communication and expression.

1. Lack of Coherence and Cohesion

The foremost concern that emerged from the evaluation of student writing is the glaring lack of coherence and cohesion observed both within sentences and paragraphs. The absence of a logical and seamless flow hinders the reader's ability to comprehend and follow the intended message. This deficiency is prominently visible at the levels of both individual sentences and broader paragraph structures. The lack of a cohesive thread between ideas disrupts the narrative's natural progression, impeding the reader's grasp of the intended content.

As an imperative aspect of effective academic writing, coherence demands that ideas be presented in a manner that facilitates smooth transitions between sentences and paragraphs as well and cohesion is determined by the linkage of textual structure in discourse. Achieving coherence involves employing suitable transitional devices, thereby forging meaningful connections and allowing thoughts to unfold logically. In addressing this challenge, students can employ techniques such as establishing clear topic sentences, utilizing appropriate conjunctions, and strategically placing transitional phrases to guide the reader through their written discourse. Thus, fostering an enhanced sense of coherence stands as a pivotal stride toward bolstering the overall quality of students' academic writing endeavors.

2. Lexical Choices

Upon comprehensive analysis, a secondary concern that surfaced during the assessment of student writing pertains to the inadequacy in their lexical choices. This deficit in employing a diverse range of vocabulary not only

impacts the sophistication of their writing but also influences the clarity and precision of their conveyed ideas. The utilization of a restricted range of words and phrases results in a repetitive and monotonous tone, diminishing the overall richness of their prose.

Masterful writing necessitates the adept utilization of a broad spectrum of vocabulary. This facilitates the articulation of nuanced concepts and allows for the precise conveyance of thoughts and arguments. By embracing an expanded lexicon, students can imbue their work with a heightened level of sophistication, engaging readers with a diverse array of terms and expressions.

To ameliorate this concern, students are encouraged to actively engage with language resources, such as dictionaries and thesauruses, to uncover synonyms and alternative word choices that aptly capture the intended meanings. Moreover, a meticulous review of their writing can aid in identifying instances where vocabulary repetition occurs, thereby enabling the replacement of redundant terms with more fitting alternatives.

In summation, addressing the deficiency in lexical choices is integral to fostering an elevated caliber of student-authored compositions. By embracing the richness of language and diversifying their vocabulary arsenal, students can elevate the quality of their writing, enhancing its impact and resonance.

3. Subject-Verb Agreement

An additional noteworthy concern that has surfaced during the comprehensive analysis of compositions crafted by students involves the intricate realm of Subject-Verb Agreement errors. These grammatical missteps, although sometimes inconspicuous, wield considerable power in shaping the effectiveness of written communication.

Subject-Verb Agreement hinges on the grammatical congruency between a subject and its corresponding verb. When this alignment falters, the harmony within a sentence is disrupted, impeding the reader's seamless comprehension. Such errors can manifest in instances where the number or person of a subject does not correspond accurately with the accompanying verb. It is crucial for students to recognize that mastering the Subject-Verb Agreement entails a meticulous understanding of grammatical rules. By discerning the singular-plural distinction and appreciating the nuances of different verb forms, students can rectify these errors, fortifying the structural integrity of their sentences.

Through diligent proofreading and an investment in grammar resources, students can refine their command over the Subject-Verb Agreement. This commitment, in turn, contributes to the cultivation of polished and professional writing that effectively conveys ideas without grammatical hindrances. In conclusion, addressing the intricacies of Subject-Verb Agreement errors contributes to the refinement of students' writing capabilities. This endeavor not only demonstrates linguistic competence but also elevates the clarity and precision of their compositions, fostering a more impactful connection with their readers.

4. Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement

Another noteworthy issue that has surfaced during the thorough analysis of student-generated compositions delves into the realm of Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement errors. These grammatical missteps, though at times inconspicuous, yield substantial power in shaping the efficacy of written communication. The foundation of the Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement lies in ensuring the harmonious relationship between pronouns and their antecedents—those nouns to which the pronouns refer. When this synchronization falters, the fluidity within a sentence suffers, impeding the reader's seamless understanding. These errors manifest when the gender, number, or person of a pronoun diverges from its corresponding antecedent.

Students must grasp that mastering the Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement necessitates a meticulous comprehension of grammatical principles. By recognizing gender neutrality, ensuring plural pronouns align with plural antecedents, and maintaining consistency in the third-person perspective, students can rectify these errors, fortifying the structural integrity of their sentences. By undertaking conscientious proofreading and engaging with grammar resources, students can refine their command over the Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement. This endeavor not only showcases linguistic prowess but also heightens the lucidity and precision of their compositions, fostering a more impactful connection with their readers.

To conclude, addressing the intricacies of Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement errors significantly contributes to the refinement of students' writing prowess. This undertaking exemplifies linguistic adeptness and augments the clarity of their compositions, establishing a more resonant rapport with their readership.

5. Punctuation

Yet another pivotal concern that has surfaced during the meticulous evaluation of compositions authored by students delves into the realm of punctuation problems. These issues, while occasionally subtle, wield a substantial influence in shaping the effectiveness of written communication. The realm of punctuation encompasses a diverse array of marks, each serving distinct purposes in delineating sentence structure, indicating pauses, and clarifying meaning. Errors in punctuation can lead to ambiguity, disrupt the flow of thoughts, and potentially alter the intended message.

Recognizing the significance of mastering punctuation, students are urged to develop a thorough understanding of punctuation rules. This involves employing appropriate punctuation marks, such as commas, semicolons, colons, and dashes, to enhance the structure and coherence of sentences. The correct placement of these marks ensures that ideas are conveyed with precision and that the reader can navigate the content effortlessly. By committing to meticulous proofreading and engaging with grammar guides, students can refine their command of punctuation. This endeavor showcases not only grammatical proficiency but also augments the overall readability and impact of their compositions, fostering a more profound connection with their audience.

In conclusion, addressing the intricacies of punctuation problems plays a pivotal role in elevating students' writing prowess. This pursuit not only showcases linguistic mastery but also heightens the clarity and eloquence of their compositions, facilitating a more compelling engagement with their readers. Recognizing and understanding these issues is crucial for students to refine their writing skills. Teachers and peer reviewers can play a pivotal role in pointing out these errors to help students become better writers.

Discussion

The analysis reveals significant writing difficulties and challenges within student-authored compositions, encompassing various linguistic and grammatical aspects. These difficulties and challenges have a substantial impact on the overall quality of written assignments. To understand these findings in relation to prior research, it is crucial to examine their alignment with existing literature and the resulting implications for proficient academic writing. By identifying these persistent issues, educators and institutions can develop targeted strategies to enhance students' writing skills. Addressing linguistic and grammatical obstacles through tailored interventions, such as workshops or writing support services, could lead to improved academic performance. Moreover, these insights emphasize the need for a comprehensive approach to writing education, encompassing not only subject matter but also language proficiency. Ultimately, bridging these gaps can empower students to convey their ideas more effectively and foster a higher level of scholarly communication.

The identified absence of coherence within both sentences and paragraphs corresponds with findings from earlier research that underline the crucial role of logical progression in effective writing (Toba & Noor, 2019). Scholars have consistently highlighted coherence's impact on aiding reader comprehension and sustaining their interest (Fareed et al., 2016). This current observation serves to reiterate the importance of offering students instruction in crafting narratives that flow cohesively. Educators should emphasize the strategic deployment of transitional devices and appropriate structuring techniques to enhance the overall coherence of their written work. By addressing this aspect, educators can equip students with a valuable skill that not only improves their writing but also bolsters their ability to communicate ideas clearly. This finding underscores the need for a balanced approach in writing education, focusing not only on content but also on the structural and linguistic elements that contribute to coherent and impactful expression.

Likewise, the issues highlighted concerning lexical choices in the analysis resonate with concerns previously outlined in research (Sumner et al., 2016). The presence of a restricted vocabulary not only curtails the depth of expression but also obstructs the seamless conveyance of ideas. Existing scholarly works underscore the evident link between a robust lexicon and the overall caliber of writing. It is noteworthy that encouraging students to broaden their

vocabulary by engaging with diverse linguistic resources corresponds with well-established pedagogical advice (Frankenberg-Garcia, 2018). Facilitating exposure to a wide array of words and phrases through reading, vocabulary-building exercises, and language-related activities can empower students to articulate their thoughts more precisely and articulately. By addressing these lexical challenges, educators can guide students toward more nuanced and effective communication, ultimately contributing to their growth as adept and confident writers.

The difficulties observed in Subject-Verb Agreement and Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement errors illuminate intricate linguistic nuances extensively explored in linguistic studies. These errors underscore the indispensability of establishing a robust grammar foundation. Earlier research consistently reinforces the notion that a proficient command of grammatical structures significantly enhances both coherent and precise writing (Alfaki, 2015). Recognizing this, the integration of comprehensive grammar instruction into writing curricula stands as a crucial pedagogical pursuit. Non-native English students do subject-verb agreements in academic writing (Ramzan et al., 2023). By addressing these specific linguistic difficulties and challenges, educators can equip students with the tools to effectively navigate and manipulate language, ensuring their written expression is accurate and fluid. Moreover, fostering an understanding of such grammatical intricacies can instill a sense of linguistic confidence in students, further motivating them to engage in thoughtful and articulate written communication (Yoon, 2016). Thus, these findings emphasize the perpetual relevance of grammar education in nurturing adept writers.

Furthermore, the punctuation issues identified align closely with well-established literature that underscores the vital importance of accurate punctuation in conveying precise meaning and facilitating seamless readability (Habibi et al., 2017). Scholars across various studies have consistently highlighted the pivotal role of punctuation in clarifying syntactic relationships within sentences and guiding the reader's overall comprehension (Suliman et al., 2019). The findings from this analysis thus reinforce the enduring relevance of proper punctuation in effective written communication. By addressing these punctuation difficulties and challenges, educators not only help students avoid misunderstandings arising from misplaced or missing punctuation marks but also foster a greater mastery of the mechanics of language. Encouraging students to appreciate punctuation as a tool for precision and coherence can empower them to craft more polished and impactful writing. In essence, these insights affirm punctuation's indispensable contribution to enhancing the quality and clarity of written work.

In summary, the outcomes of the current study are in harmony with the existing body of literature, reinforcing the significance of coherence, lexical variety, grammatical precision, and proficient punctuation in the realm of academic writing. These identified difficulties and challenges closely mirror established pedagogical viewpoints, further emphasizing the requirement for specific interventions aimed at bolstering students' writing proficiencies. By tailoring instructional methods to align with the insights drawn from both this study and earlier research, educators hold the potential to empower students in effectively tackling these hurdles and generating compositions that are refined and influential. Through a cohesive approach that integrates these key aspects, students can be better prepared to confront the complexities of writing and to communicate their ideas with clarity and impact. Ultimately, this synthesis of findings and pedagogical strategies paves the way for a more enriched and comprehensive approach to writing education.
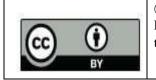
Conclusions

This study sheds light on difficulties and challenges within student writing and emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to address them. The identified lack of coherence between sentences and paragraphs underscores the importance of seamless transitions to guide readers through a logical progression of ideas. Concurrently, the limited lexical choices highlight the significance of a diverse vocabulary in fostering nuanced expression. These findings collectively underscore the need for educators to integrate transitional techniques and encourage lexical exploration to enhance student writing quality.

Furthermore, the study reveals the impact of grammatical errors in Subject-Verb Agreement and Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement, emphasizing the vital role of grammar in maintaining sentence integrity. The study's illumination of punctuation problems reinforces the role of accurate punctuation in clarifying meaning. A synthesis of these insights calls for a holistic pedagogical approach that combines grammar instruction, coherence-building strategies, vocabulary enrichment, and punctuation precision. By implementing such an approach, educational

institutions can equip students with the skills necessary for effective communication and expression in both academic and real-world contexts.

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