

A Study of Academic English Writing Challenges among University-Level ESL Learners in Pakistan

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Abstract

In the context of Pakistan's higher education system, English functions primarily as a second language and serves as the medium of instruction in most universities. Consequently, academic English writing is considered a fundamental skill for undergraduate students. However, many students face considerable challenges in developing effective academic writing proficiency. Drawing on Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and previous research, academic writing is viewed as a socially mediated process that develops through interaction, guidance, and exposure to appropriate academic practices. Previous studies have highlighted various difficulties faced by ESL learners in academic writing; however, there remains limited research focusing specifically on undergraduate students in Pakistan. At the university level, students are expected to produce well-structured academic texts such as essays, reports, and research assignments, yet many struggle due to inadequate preparation at the school level and limited familiarity with academic conventions. The key challenges faced by Pakistani undergraduate students include lack of awareness of academic writing norms, limited language proficiency, restricted vocabulary, and weak grammatical control. In addition, students often experience difficulty in organizing ideas logically, maintaining coherence and cohesion, and developing arguments critically. Cultural differences in rhetorical styles and prior reliance on rote memorization further hinder their ability to produce analytical and original written work. Communication barriers between teachers and students also contribute to limited feedback and insufficient practice opportunities. These challenges indicate the need for effective instructional strategies to improve students' academic writing skills. Teacher guidance, peer interaction, and continuous feedback play a crucial role in enhancing writing proficiency. Encouraging collaborative learning and providing structured writing support can help students gradually develop confidence and competence in academic English writing. Therefore, it is essential for educators in Pakistani universities to adopt appropriate pedagogical approaches and English language learning strategies to address these issues and facilitate students' success in academic writing.

Keywords: English Learning Challenges; Academic Writing; University-Level ESL Learners

Introduction

As globalization continues to expand, the mobility of students across educational systems has become a prominent feature of higher education worldwide. In the context of Pakistan, English serves as a second language and remains the primary medium of instruction in most universities, which places significant demands on students' academic language proficiency. While global trends indicate increasing international student movement, similar challenges are observed among Pakistani undergraduate students who must cope with academic requirements in English. Large-scale educational developments have emphasized the importance of English proficiency for academic success (Ministry of Education, 2022; Institute for Statistics, 2023). In Pakistan, scholars have also highlighted that English language competence is crucial for students' academic and professional advancement, yet many learners struggle to meet these expectations (Shamim, 2008; Tariq Rahman, 2002). Previous research has identified a wide range of challenges faced by learners in English-medium education, including cultural, psychological, and academic difficulties (Holliman et al., 2022; Parnter, 2022; Zhai Xiuwen, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). In the Pakistani ESL context, these challenges are equally evident at the undergraduate level, where students often demonstrate limited proficiency in academic literacy skills, particularly reading and writing (Li & Han, 2023). Studies in Pakistan have similarly reported that learners face significant barriers in writing due to inadequate linguistic competence, lack of exposure to authentic academic practices, and insufficient training in writing conventions (Fareed et al., 2016; Nawab, 2012). Furthermore, limited understanding of academic culture and expectations hinders students' ability to adapt to university-level academic demands (Chi, 2023; Ching et al., 2017).

Research also indicates that students' difficulties in academic writing are closely linked to prior educational practices. In many contexts, including Pakistan, the dominant examination-oriented system emphasizes rote memorization rather than critical thinking and analytical writing skills (Group, 2022; LLC, 2020, 2021, 2022). This results in students entering universities with underdeveloped academic writing abilities. Pakistani scholars have similarly argued that traditional teaching methods fail to equip learners with the necessary skills for effective written communication in English (Siddiqui, 2007; Gillani, 2011). Although improvements in language instruction at earlier stages can support academic success, research focusing specifically on undergraduate ESL learners remains limited, indicating a clear gap (Insight, 2021; Liu & Pell, 2019; Mbous et al., 2022; Xu, 2021). Moreover, the integration of technology and online learning platforms has introduced new dimensions to language learning, requiring students to adapt to digital modes of instruction and communication (Nguyen et al., 2021). In Pakistani universities, students are increasingly exposed to both traditional classroom teaching and online learning environments, which demand higher levels of autonomy and language competence. However, many learners struggle to meet these expectations due to limited digital literacy and insufficient academic language skills. While academic writing challenges in English-medium contexts have been widely investigated (Cennetkusu, 2017; Scott et al., 2020), there remains a lack of research focusing specifically on Pakistani undergraduate students operating within combined or evolving instructional environments. Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to explore and analyze the academic English writing challenges faced by Pakistani undergraduate ESL students. The central research question guiding this study is: What are the major academic English writing challenges encountered by undergraduate students in Pakistani universities within an ESL context? Investigating these challenges will contribute to a deeper understanding of students' language learning experiences and support the development of more effective pedagogical strategies to enhance academic writing skills in Pakistani higher education.

Literature Review

The literature on academic English writing and language learning presents a theoretically grounded and empirically rich understanding of how learners develop writing proficiency within complex educational contexts, particularly in ESL undergraduate settings such as those in Pakistan. Foundational perspectives are largely informed by sociocultural theory (SCT) and experiential learning theory (ELT), both of which offer critical insights into language acquisition processes. SCT, as proposed by Vygotsky (1978), emphasizes the centrality of social interaction, mediation, and cultural context in cognitive development, particularly through the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), where learners progress with the guidance of more knowledgeable others. Language, in this framework, functions as a primary mediational tool that shapes thinking and learning processes (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014; Swain et al., 2015). This perspective is highly relevant in Pakistani undergraduate ESL classrooms, where collaborative learning, peer interaction, and teacher scaffolding significantly influence students' academic writing development. Similarly, Kolb's experiential learning theory (Kolb et al., 1984; Kolb, 2014) conceptualizes learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This model aligns closely with academic writing development, where students learn through drafting, feedback, revision, and reflective practices (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Morris, 2019). In Pakistani universities, experiential learning is increasingly promoted through assignment-based pedagogy, presentations, and peer review practices, which facilitate the development of writing competence in ESL learners.

Within contemporary higher education, blended learning environments—integrating face-to-face and digital instruction—have become increasingly prominent, bringing both opportunities and challenges. The literature indicates that such environments require students to develop strong time management skills and the ability to navigate diverse learning materials across multiple platforms (Yao, 2019; Boelens et al., 2018). These challenges are particularly evident in Pakistani undergraduate contexts, where students often come from varied educational backgrounds with limited exposure to digital learning tools. The shift between online and offline modes demands technological adaptability and digital literacy, which are not uniformly developed among learners (Ramalingam et al., 2022; Ramalingam et al., 2023). Furthermore, reduced immediacy of feedback in online settings can delay clarification of misunderstandings, thereby affecting learning outcomes. From the instructors' perspective, maintaining student engagement and interaction in blended environments remains a significant pedagogical challenge, especially in language classrooms where real-time communication is essential (Zhang-Wu, 2018; Maulida et al., 2022). In Pakistan, these issues are compounded by infrastructural limitations and varying access to technology, although recent studies emphasize the growing importance of digital competence and institutional support in enhancing blended learning effectiveness (Shamim, 2008; Hussain et al., 2017). The concept of “digital natives” (Prensky, 2010) is also critically examined, as familiarity with technology does not necessarily translate into academic digital literacy, necessitating structured support systems (Spiegel, 2021).

Academic English writing itself is widely recognized as a cognitively demanding and socially situated activity that requires mastery of linguistic, rhetorical, and disciplinary conventions (Zhang & Zhan, 2020; Scott et al., 2020). For ESL learners, including Pakistani undergraduate students, this process is further complicated by limited language proficiency, particularly in grammar, vocabulary, and sentence construction (Asaad & Shabdin, 2021; Akbary, 2017). Empirical studies in Pakistan reinforce these findings, highlighting that students frequently struggle with coherence, cohesion, and academic vocabulary, which adversely affects their writing quality (Fareed et al., 2016; Ahmad, 2016). Additionally, insufficient reading practices hinder exposure to academic discourse structures, limiting students' ability to develop effective writing strategies (Sang, 2017;

Gu, 2017). In the Pakistani context, this issue is often linked to examination-oriented educational systems that prioritize rote learning over critical reading and analytical skills (Nawab, 2012; Siddiqui, 2007). Cultural and educational backgrounds also play a significant role, as students transitioning from teacher-centred schooling systems may lack the autonomy and critical thinking skills required for academic writing (Tang et al., 2018). This is consistent with Pakistani studies that report students' dependence on teachers and limited engagement in independent learning practices (Gillani, 2011; Rahman, 2002). Moreover, motivational factors significantly influence writing performance, as low confidence and limited exposure to authentic communication contexts reduce students' willingness to engage in writing tasks (Irwin, 2019; Tuomainen, 2016; Riasat & Ghani, 2018). Overall, the literature demonstrates that academic English writing challenges are multifaceted, encompassing linguistic, cognitive, cultural, and technological dimensions. In Pakistani undergraduate ESL contexts, these challenges are further intensified by systemic issues such as limited resources, traditional pedagogical practices, and insufficient emphasis on communicative competence. However, the integration of sociocultural and experiential learning perspectives, along with the effective use of blended learning strategies, offers significant potential to address these challenges. By fostering collaborative learning, enhancing digital literacy, and promoting critical engagement with language, educators can better support students in developing academic writing proficiency. This underscores the necessity for context-sensitive research and pedagogical interventions that respond to the specific needs of ESL learners in Pakistan while aligning with global developments in language education.

This study employed a multiple case study design, as proposed by Yin (2014), to explore the academic English writing challenges faced by undergraduate ESL students in Pakistani universities within a blended learning environment. The use of a multiple case study approach is particularly suitable for educational research as it allows for an in-depth and contextualized understanding of individual learner experiences while also enabling cross-case comparisons (Yin, 2014). In the Pakistani undergraduate context, where students come from diverse linguistic and educational backgrounds, this method facilitates a comprehensive exploration of the complexities involved in learning academic writing in English. The study adopted purposive sampling, following the guidelines of Merriam (2009), to select a small yet information-rich sample. Consistent with the recommendations of Yin (2014) and Eisenhardt (1989), three undergraduate ESL students were deliberately selected to allow for detailed data collection and analysis. The selection criteria included variation in gender, language proficiency levels (ranging from lower-intermediate to upper-intermediate), and academic performance (from fair to good). The participants were enrolled in English-related courses at a Pakistani public university and were chosen based on their willingness to participate, along with recommendations from their course instructors. This ensured that the sample adequately represented diverse learner experiences within the undergraduate ESL context in Pakistan. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which are widely used in qualitative research to gain detailed insights into participants' experiences. Each interview consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit responses related to students' academic writing challenges and learning experiences. The interview protocol was reviewed to ensure its validity and relevance. Each session lasted approximately 30–40 minutes and was conducted in a language comfortable for the participants (Urdu/English mix), allowing them to express their views clearly. With participants' consent, two interviews were audio-recorded, while detailed field notes were taken for the third participant who preferred not to be recorded. This approach ensured ethical compliance and respected participant preferences while maintaining data richness. The collected data were transcribed and, where necessary, translated into English for analysis. Thematic analysis was employed following Braun and Clarke (2006), enabling the identification, organization, and interpretation of recurring patterns within the data. The analysis

process involved careful reading of transcripts, initial coding, and the development of themes related to academic writing challenges. To enhance the credibility and validity of the findings, member checking was conducted, where participants reviewed the transcribed data for accuracy (Creswell, 2014). This step ensured that the interpretations accurately reflected participants' perspectives. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. Data excerpts were systematically labeled to indicate their sources, such as interview recordings or field notes. For example, labels like (P1, I1) and (P2, I2) were used for recorded interviews, while (P3, FN) referred to field notes. This systematic organization of data ensured clarity, transparency, and reliability in the presentation of findings. Overall, this methodological approach provided a rigorous and contextually grounded understanding of academic English writing challenges among Pakistani undergraduate ESL students in blended learning environments.

The findings

The findings of this study, analyzed through NVivo, reveal that *communication* emerged as the most frequently recurring theme among Pakistani undergraduate ESL students, indicating its central role in shaping their academic English writing experiences within a blended learning environment. The responses of the participants highlight that students face multiple, interrelated challenges, including language proficiency limitations, unfamiliarity with academic conventions, cultural differences, communication barriers, and technological difficulties. These findings reflect the complex realities of Pakistani university classrooms, where students often transition from traditional schooling systems into more demanding academic and digital learning environments. One of the most prominent issues identified was limited language proficiency, which significantly affects students' academic writing performance. Many participants reported difficulties in using appropriate vocabulary, constructing grammatically accurate sentences, and maintaining an academic tone in their writing. One respondent said, *"I still struggle with vocabulary and grammar, and sometimes my teacher cannot understand what I mean because of my mistakes."* This indicates that basic linguistic limitations continue to hinder clarity and coherence in writing. Another respondent said, *"Even when I try to write good sentences, my teacher says my writing is not academic enough, and I don't understand why."* This reflects a deeper issue where students are unable to differentiate between general English and academic discourse. Similarly, a participant highlighted challenges in reading academic texts by stating, *"There are many difficult words in articles, and I cannot fully understand them, so it becomes very hard to write assignments."* These responses demonstrate that limited vocabulary, weak grammatical control, and lack of exposure to academic language significantly constrain students' writing abilities in the Pakistani ESL undergraduate context.

Another major challenge identified was students' unfamiliarity with academic norms, particularly referencing, citation styles, and plagiarism. Many participants expressed confusion regarding formal academic requirements. One respondent said, *"My marks were reduced because I did not follow proper referencing style, but I was never taught this before."* This suggests a gap between prior educational experiences and university expectations. Another participant said, *"I find it difficult to understand plagiarism because sometimes I use others' ideas to support my writing, but still it is considered wrong."* This highlights a lack of conceptual understanding of academic integrity. A third respondent expressed frustration by stating, *"These formatting rules are very confusing and difficult to follow."* Such responses indicate that Pakistani undergraduate students often enter university without adequate training in academic writing conventions, which negatively impacts their performance and confidence.

Cultural differences also emerged as a significant factor influencing students' academic writing and comprehension. Participants reported difficulties in understanding culturally embedded content in academic materials. One respondent said, *"Even if I understand the words, I cannot*

understand the context or background of the topic.” This reflects a disconnect between students’ local experiences and the global or Western contexts often present in academic texts. Another participant stated, *“Sometimes examples in books are based on foreign cultures, and I cannot relate to them, so it becomes difficult to write about them.”* This suggests that cultural unfamiliarity limits students’ ability to interpret and critically engage with academic content. Additionally, one respondent linked this issue with language proficiency by stating, *“My English level also affects my understanding of cultural ideas.”* These findings indicate that linguistic and cultural challenges are closely interconnected in shaping students’ academic writing experiences in Pakistan.

Communication barriers were also identified as a critical issue, particularly in blended learning settings where interaction is divided between online and face-to-face modes. One respondent said, *“I cannot properly communicate with teachers and classmates because online classes are limited and interaction is less.”* This reflects reduced opportunities for meaningful engagement. Another participant highlighted scheduling and accessibility issues by stating, *“Sometimes I cannot contact my teacher when I need help, especially outside class time.”* In addition, lack of confidence further restricts participation, as one respondent said, *“I feel shy to ask questions because I am not confident in my English.”* These responses suggest that both structural and psychological factors contribute to communication gaps, which in turn affect students’ ability to seek clarification and improve their writing skills. Technological challenges also played a significant role in shaping students’ learning experiences. Participants reported difficulties in adapting to digital tools and managing online learning platforms. One respondent said, *“Using new software is difficult for me, and it takes time to learn.”* Another participant stated, *“Sometimes internet issues disturb my classes and assignments.”* This highlights infrastructural limitations common in the Pakistani context. Additionally, practical issues such as typing skills were also mentioned, as one respondent said, *“My typing speed is slow, so it takes me more time to complete assignments.”* These challenges indicate that while technology is an essential component of blended learning, students often lack the necessary digital literacy and resources to use it effectively.

Largely, the findings reveal that Pakistani undergraduate ESL students face a combination of linguistic, academic, cultural, communicative, and technological challenges in developing academic English writing skills. These issues are deeply interconnected and reflect broader systemic gaps in prior education, institutional support, and digital readiness. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that integrates language development, academic writing training, cultural awareness, interactive pedagogy, and technological support to enhance students’ learning outcomes in Pakistani universities.

Discussion

This study critically examines the challenges faced by Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners in developing academic English writing skills within a blended learning environment. The findings highlight a multidimensional set of issues, including language proficiency limitations, lack of familiarity with academic conventions, cultural differences, communication barriers, and technological adaptation challenges. These findings are consistent with established theoretical frameworks such as Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and self-regulation models (Oxford, 2011, 2017; Zimmerman, 2002), which emphasize the importance of interaction, context, and learner autonomy in language development. Language proficiency remains a central concern, influencing students’ ability to construct grammatically accurate and academically appropriate texts. In line with Maulida et al. (2022), students at varying proficiency levels demonstrate different types of linguistic difficulties, particularly in vocabulary use, syntactic structures, and academic style. This suggests the need for differentiated pedagogical strategies and targeted language support (Matiso, 2023; Zhang & Zou, 2022) in Pakistani universities to address diverse learner needs effectively.

Another significant issue is students' unfamiliarity with academic norms, including referencing, citation styles, and formatting requirements. Consistent with Sang (2017), students tend to focus more on content rather than adhering to formal academic conventions. This reflects a gap in academic literacy and highlights the importance of explicitly teaching these conventions. Educators must adopt a more structured approach to integrating academic writing skills into the curriculum, encouraging learner autonomy as proposed by Oxford (2012). Cultural differences further complicate the academic writing process. As supported by Parnter (2022) and Berry (2005, 2007), students often struggle to interpret and produce texts that align with global academic discourse due to differences in rhetorical patterns and educational backgrounds. In the Pakistani ESL context, this necessitates culturally responsive teaching practices that bridge the gap between local and international academic expectations. Communication barriers in blended learning environments also significantly affect learning outcomes. According to Vygotsky (1978), interaction is fundamental to cognitive development; however, limited real-time engagement, technological constraints, and student anxiety hinder effective communication. These findings align with Guo and Asmawi (2023), emphasizing the need for improved teacher-student and peer interaction strategies to enhance engagement and learning. Finally, technological challenges highlight the critical role of digital literacy. Despite being familiar with technology, students often lack the skills required for its effective academic use (Prensky, 2010; Spiegel, 2021). This underscores the importance of institutional support, training, and the development of self-regulation strategies (Oxford, 2011, 2017; Zimmerman, 2002) to help students navigate blended learning environments successfully.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners face complex and interconnected challenges in academic English writing within blended learning contexts. Key issues include linguistic limitations, insufficient knowledge of academic conventions, cultural mismatches, communication difficulties, and technological barriers. These challenges collectively hinder students' academic performance and overall language development. The findings emphasize the need for a comprehensive pedagogical approach that integrates language development, academic literacy, cultural awareness, and digital competence. Teachers should adopt differentiated instruction, explicitly teach academic writing conventions, and create interactive learning environments that promote communication and collaboration. Additionally, institutions must provide adequate technological support and training to enhance students' digital literacy. Although this study offers valuable insights, its limited scope suggests the need for further research across diverse Pakistani universities using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Future studies should aim to develop practical, context-specific strategies to improve academic writing skills and support ESL learners more effectively. Addressing these challenges is essential for fostering academic success and preparing students for participation in the global academic community.

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