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From Words to Worries: Understanding Academic Writing Problems of University Students
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Abstract

Through this qualitative study the researchers investigated the causes of academic writing problems that undergraduate students at Shah Abdul Latif University Ghotki campus face. The research question in this regard was: What are the causes of the problems that affect students' academic writing? The sample of the study included 20 undergraduate students from the mentioned locale. The data was collected through focus groups and analyzed using thematic analysis informed by Flower and Hayes' (1981) cognitive process model of writing. Through analysis, it was found that the key causes included: lack of reading interest, low motivation, outdated teaching methodologies, insufficient feedback, limited practice and overreliance on memorization. These factors were responsible for disrupting planning, translating and reviewing stages resulting in writing deficits. Ultimately, idea generation, coherence, cohesion, and grammar proficiency of the students were affected because of these factors. The findings of the study suggest that there is a need for pedagogical reform and enhancement of EFL writing instruction. Future research studies could explore intervention strategies in diverse contexts.

Keywords: Academic Writing Problems, Causes, Thematic Analysis, EFL, Cognitive Process Model

1. Introduction

Academic writing is an essential skill that university students must master in order to excel in their academics. As a part of academia, students have to express their ideas in the form of essays, reports, research papers etc. at various academic platforms. Various research studies have highlighted the role and challenges of academic writing in second language acquisition (SLA) and writing pedagogy (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Hyland, 2003). In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context like Pakistan, EFL learners encounter significant challenges that not only affect their academic growth but also professional growth in the long run. Therefore, this study, which is situated in rural setting of the Sindh province in Pakistan, aims to explore the causes of academic writing challenges that the students at Shah Abdul Latif University Ghotki campus face. The study, specifically, explores the answer to the following research question: What are the causes of the problems that affect the students' academic writing?

It was persistently observed that university students were struggling to produce well-structured and coherent academic write-ups. In addition to this immediate cause, this study was built on an earlier quantitative study that revealed specific problems that included: sentence formation errors, punctuation deficiencies, subject-verb agreement, vocabulary limitations and lack of

ideas (Rind, Shahriar, & Memon, 2020). Even though these are the documented issues, there are limited studies where qualitative methods have been employed to investigate pedagogical and personal causes, specifically in contexts that are considered under-resourced EFL contexts. The findings of the study highlight the symptoms; however, the causes remain unexplored. Therefore, through this research study the researchers aim to explore these causes, which shall add to the growing EFL writing discourse in understudied regions like Pakistan. This qualitative approach-based study prioritizes depth over breadth by employing Flower and Hayes' (1981) cognitive process model. With this, the focus groups shall help to uncover, in detail, the various complexities that affect students' writing abilities.

2. Literature Review

Development of Writing Skills and Approaches

Writing, being a productive language skill, requires strategic manipulation of linguistic elements (Coe & Gutierrez, 1981). Product-based method and process-based method are the approaches that are employed to teach writing skills. The former approach focuses on structural accuracy (Pincas, 1982); however, the latter approach emphasizes iterative stages: planning, revising and drafting (Hedge, 1998; Whit and Arndt, 1991). It is essential to provide adequate exposure of these approaches, otherwise it can result in expressive limitations and organizational weakness in writers. These approaches are productive unlike the traditional methodologies like Grammar Translation or Audio-lingual methods. According to Larsen-Freeman (2000), for such traditional methodologies, rules and repetition are beyond writer's fluency. This stifles writers' development, specifically their creative and communicative development in writing until and unless there is addition of practical application.

Therefore, shifting to modern pedagogies could address the longstanding EFL writing deficits. In this regard, self-directed learning can play an effective role in improving writing skills among EFL learners in Pakistan. And, to achieve this, EFL instructors need to tailor their lessons considering modern pedagogical approaches.

Writing Problems and Their Causes

The major or common challenges that the students face in writing include verb usage, spelling, syntax, grammar and sense-making (Marzano. 1982; Flower, 1979). They often face these challenges, for they consider writing as an unstructured activity (Flower & Hayes, 1977). Additionally, it is essential to provide students with feedback from time to time so that they can track their progress and eliminate the challenges that they face in writing. In this regard, Ur (1996) and Brown (1932) have highlighted the importance of feedback as it plays a pivotal role in skill development; however, absence of feedback in the process of learning could demotivate students. With this, ineffective delivery also affects the process of learning

Recent studies exploring the cause of writing challenges have reinforced the insights mentioned above. For instance, Weng et al. (2024) underlines that peer feedback enhances EFL learners' judgement and appreciation of writing. The results of the study have shown that AI-generated feedback outperforms traditional methods employed to improve argumentative writing. Therefore, to support students in their development, it becomes essential to explore and implement innovative avenues.

Academic Writing in Pakistan

There are various factors that have been affecting teaching and learning in Pakistani EFL context. The factors including unqualified instructors, outdated pedagogical practices, limited resources and large class size are a few to mention. The Higher Education Commission (HEC), in this regard, has taken the steps like scholarships and publications to mitigate these challenges (Higher Education Commission, 2009). Despite these steps, old and traditional teaching pedagogies still

persist in majority of the rural areas in Pakistan. Students in these areas face the challenges related to vocabulary, punctuation, the use of tenses and ambiguity in while learning English. The same has been highlighted in the broader context by Hyland (2003). The researchers highlighted that these issues occur mainly because of insufficient language input, mother tongue interference as well as in the context where there is more emphasis on memorization over boosting and inculcating creativity among learners (Ellis, 2006; Littlewood, 1981).

3. Methodology

Research Design

The design of the study is qualitative in nature. It has been chosen to get an in-depth perspective of the learners for better understanding of the cause of the challenges that undergraduate students face in academic writing. Importantly, as the study is exploratory in nature, the qualitative design enables the researchers to capture subjective experiences of the learners and to identify from the learners' perspective what could be the contextual factors that have been affecting their academic writing skills.

Participants

The locale of the study is Shah Abdul Latif University Ghotki campus. It is situated in district Ghotki, Sindh, Pakistan. The population, therefore, is the undergraduate students at the campus. For this particular study, a sample of 20 participants was purposefully selected. It is a representative sample of the population, as it includes students from different departments and diverse gender backgrounds. Diversity is essential in a research study as it ensures that the study captures varied perspectives. It was ensured that the participants were enrolled in English medium programs at the university and that they had, at least, completed one course in English academic writing.

Data Collection

In this study, semi-structured focus group interviews were used as a tool to collect data from the participants. The participants were divided into four groups, each containing five participants. The discussion during the interviews lasted 50 to 60 minutes. These discussions were tape-recorded for the purpose of analysis. It is essential to mention that these recordings took place after consenting the participants of the study. The discussions were mainly done in English, but the participants were free to share any idea in Urdu or Sindhi if they found anything difficult to express in English. The open-ended questions which were asked during the discussions included: "How do your teachers support your writing development?" and "What do you think prevents you from writing effectively?"

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Before the data was collected, the participants were given a detailed briefing regarding the purpose of the study. Afterwards, they were asked to provide written consent if they agreed to take part in it. They were assured that the data collected from them shall be secure and confidential. Moreover, they were informed that if they wanted to withdraw at any time from studying, they were free to do so. Their identity was anonymized with the help of coding. The participants were coded like (P1, FG01). "P" refers to the participant with its number and "FG" refers to Focus group and its serial number.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was followed for the analysis of the data. It was further guided by cognitive model of writing proposed by Flower and Hayes (1981). In this model, writing is conceptualized as a three-stage interrelated model that includes: planning, translating and reviewing. Planning refers to generation and organization of ideas, "translating" refers to conversion of ideas into text and by "reviewing" it means to evaluate and revise the

write-ups. During the analysis, the interview transcripts were manually coded with the codes that were inductively derived from the data, for instance, “lack of feedback,” “memorization focus” etc. These codes were further mapped with the stages which matched them. For examples, “translation deficits from outdated methods,” and “impaired planning due to lack of reading” were mapped with cognitive stages. In order to finalize the process, the generated themes were reviewed for consistency so that they reflected the causes of writing problems.

Results

The exploration of the causes of academic writing challenges resulted in six primary themes that disrupted planning, translating and reviewing stages of the writing process. The six primary causes that have been identified are: lack of reading and interest, insufficient feedback, limited practice, outdated teaching methodologies, overreliance on memorization and low motivation. A detailed presentation of the direct quotes is provided in the following sections, supported with a figure representing themes and a bar graph showing the frequency of themes across focus groups.

Issues Related to Understanding Academic Writing

Participants expressed varied and often vague understandings of academic writing, reflecting challenges in the planning stage. Different participants explained the concept differently. According to P1 (FG01), “Academic writing means we have to use big words and avoid slangs.” P11 (FG03) said, “In academic writing you have to stick to one point.” P9 (FG02) mentioned, “It’s about formal language, I think.” P8 (FG02) linked it to specific format as he said, “It is like an article in the newspaper.” P17 (FG04) claimed, “We can even use our own jargons if it’s formal.” Such vague and limited conceptualization of academic writing among these students reflect limited instructions vis-à-vis academic conventions. Undoubtedly, such situation hinders effective generation of ideas. According to P16 (FG04), “This type of writing is very formal writing where the writer must avoid the use of jargons but need to use academic words.” P17 (FG04) added, “It is the writing which is done in institutions and the one who is writing must use own jargons of the field because it is formal type of writing.” The responses given by the participants clearly reflect mixed opinions: some claim it to be formal writing, whereas the others had some vague generalizations regarding it. Although the students were taught academic writing last semester, most of them reflected that they just had rough ideas regarding its nature and its application.

Views on Structure of a Paragraph

The students had the basic knowledge regarding the structure of paragraph; however, they were found struggling with how to apply that knowledge to develop a paragraph. It was an issue at translation stage. P1 (FG101) defined a paragraph, “A collection of sentences that makes sense.” P6 (FG02) explained, “We must start a paragraph with a quote at the start.” P6 (FG02) also admitted that it was difficult to remember quotes and that students forget to do that when they are writing a paragraph. Both P7 (FG02) and P8 (FG02) mentioned the role of topic sentences and what could be the length of a paragraph; however, P7 (FG02) confessed, “I don’t remember to use topic sentences in my paragraphs.” P6 (FG02) shared the concern, “Teachers don’t check our work.” The same concern was shared by P15 (FG03), “No one corrects us.” The participants highlighted the lack of feedback in writing. Further, P14 (FG03) said, “We just memorize paragraph examples, not write them.” P8 (FG02) said, “A paragraph, structurally, is a combination of three components: a topic sentence, a group of supporting sentences and finally a concluding sentence, all these make up a well-structured paragraph.” Another important reason behind not writing a well-structured paragraph was shared by one of the participants in this FG. P7 (FG02) mentioned, “I was writing essays and paragraphs earlier, but I was not given

any feedback on my writeups. This really disappointed me, and I left writing as there was no other individual available to check them.” P13 (FG03) also claimed, “When I was not given any feedback on my writing, it demotivated me. I asked my teachers and they were so busy that they did not give me time. I could see that they had the whole class to teach, and we were more than 30 students in the class.” Another participant mentioned a very different account that showed the overreliance on memorization. P14 (FG03) said, “Till this day, I am unable to write a well-structured paragraph on my own. This is because we were never taught how to write a paragraph. Our teachers used to give us four to five paragraphs that we memorized to write in the exams. When it was the exam day, we were given a choice to write on any one paragraph out of three topics. That is why I cannot write on any paragraph which I have not memorized.” This practice shows how memorization can hinder the development of students’ writing skills. Undoubtedly, the students lack creative skills and that is just because of overreliance on memorization rather than the emphasis on developing their writing skills.

Views on Writing an Essay

Varied views were expressed by the participants regarding the structure of essays. However, it is important to mention that they cited practical barriers which affect all cognitive stages. P3 (FG02) expressed it in this way, “We have the knowledge regarding writing an essay, we know how we must follow the proper format to write it, but when we appear in exams, we get pressurized due to time limits. Because of this pressure, we start putting random ideas related to the topic. Whatever comes to our mind, we just put that on the paper in the form of sentences.” This quote clearly shows that the students prefer drafting to the process and the structure of writing. The leading cause, in this context, appears to be time pressure which affects their academic writing performance. In addition to this, the students mentioned that they lack practice in writing, which has become one of the leading causes affecting their writing skills. P15 (FG04) mentioned, “We read a lot about the structure and the process of essay writing, but we do not practice it: sometimes we lack interest, other times, we do not have any mentor to properly guide us.” This quote shows the importance of practice in developing students’ academic writing skills, specifically essay writing skills. Therefore, the students must be encouraged to write by providing them with proper guidance as per the format and by making them follow the writing process. Again, P15 (FG03) emphasized the role of feedback (lack of feedback) that is central to motivating them to write. The participant said, “Teachers refuse to check our writings when we ask them to correct it. Our teachers tell us that they have the whole class to teach, therefore, they cannot check every individual essay or paragraph: they are there to teach the whole class but providing feedback to everyone is very challenging for them.”

Reasons Behind Lack of Cohesion and Coherence

The participants linked the lack of cohesion and coherence to various factors. These deficits are tied to reviewing stage. P1 (FG01) pointed towards teacher pedagogy, “They don’t teach us how to link ideas.” P6 (FG02) attributed it to personal habits. The participant said, “I don’t read books, so I don’t know how to connect ideas in my writing.” P11 (FG03) has a different reason for this, “We don’t get a chance to write and practice.” In addition to all these factors, one of the participants, P16 (FG04), said, “Old teaching methods bore us, so we don’t care about linking.” This clearly indicated the case of low motivation due to traditional and old teaching methods, resulting in a cycle of disengagement. The participants also mentioned that they did not properly brainstorm; they did not develop outlines before attempting to write their essays or paragraphs. This can be verified from what P18 (FG04) admitted, “I just keep writing the ideas that I recall and never brainstorm before writing. I write the first idea, wait to recall the next one and when I have the next thought, I add it after the previous sentence that I wrote, and this continues till I

feel that I have met the word limit. This is how the cycle of writing goes on when I have to write something." P16 (FG04) added, "I like to write in a creative manner. I avoid following the writing process. Once I was in examination hall, I decided to follow writing process. I experienced that I was the only student left behind as I could not complete my task in the given time. That day I decided not to follow the process as it is very time-taking process." This indicates that when a student does not follow the process of writing, specifically if one's writeup lacks brainstorming, it results in unstructured writeups lacking integration of academic writing conventions and proper formats. The responses by the participants also show that they are more into completion of the task on time than completing the task in an effective manner. Hence, lack of planning is one of the potential causes affecting overall coherence and cohesion in writing.

Reasons Behind the Lack of Ideas

One of the key causes behind the lack of ideas is lack of reading. Students lack ideas and that hinders them brainstorm while they are planning to write their essays or any other writeups. Most of the participants shared this concern. P2 (FG01) admitted, "I do not read enough and that is what I think the reason behind the issue." P7 (FG02) mentioned, "I do not read at all." P18 (FG04) said, "I do not find any book in the library that could be interesting for me. I even do not know how to select a book: I do not have such exposure." P12 (FG03) pointed, "Classes are so boring, I lose interest in thinking." Another participant pointed out, "I cannot get time to read because of assignments and the workload that I have here at the university. Completing assignments takes all of our time," the participant further added, "another reason that I do not read is that the language written in the books is very difficult for me to understand." These quotes show that though lack of reading is one of the reasons behind the lack of ideas, this itself is caused by extra assignments and extra workload that students are given during semesters. Moreover, it was also found that the students' reading comprehension skills are not covered at the school level, which makes it difficult for them to read and understand books on their own. P15 (FG03) said, "When we were at the school level, our teachers used to teach us in an understandable manner. They made us to read the text aloud and were translating it for us, so it was easy for us to understand it." It clearly indicates that there has been emphasis on Grammar Translation Method (GTM) than on developing students' reading skills, which would have made them independent readers.

Reasons Behind Grammar and Proficiency Problems

Grammar and proficiency issues, rooted in the translating stage, were traced to outdated methods and feedback gaps. P3 (FG01) complained, "We learn grammar rules, not how to write," and P8 (FG02) added, "We use old books that don't help." P13 (FG03) noted, "No one corrects our mistakes," and P17 (FG04) said, "Teachers don't guide us on errors." P4 (FG01) highlighted interference, "Urdu habits come in my writing," and P19 (FG04) linked it to motivation, "I lose interest because it's hard." P16 (FG04) mentioned, "Our teachers did not teach us the basic rules that could guide us to use these grammar concepts in our writing." Further, there were some participants who later admitted that though they were taught grammar and structure, they never practiced them as they were very boring for them. Another interesting phenomenon was mentioned by one of the participants reflecting the use of outdated teaching methods being still applied in the classrooms. P15 (FG03), "We were taught grammatical rules in our own native language. We have no idea where we can apply those rules. It was like remembering the rules and correcting some sentences. This is what the main purpose of learning the rules has been for us." This statement clarifies that the students are being taught the grammatical rules in terms of theory, however the practicality or application of the rules is missing. This could only be possible if students were provided with practice material which was missing in the classrooms. P18 (FG04)

shared this concern, “We were only verbally taught these concepts and we did not do any exercise after the teachers taught us the concepts.” This indicates that the lack of practice material after teaching any concepts is also a potential cause that leads to grammar related problems in students’ writing.

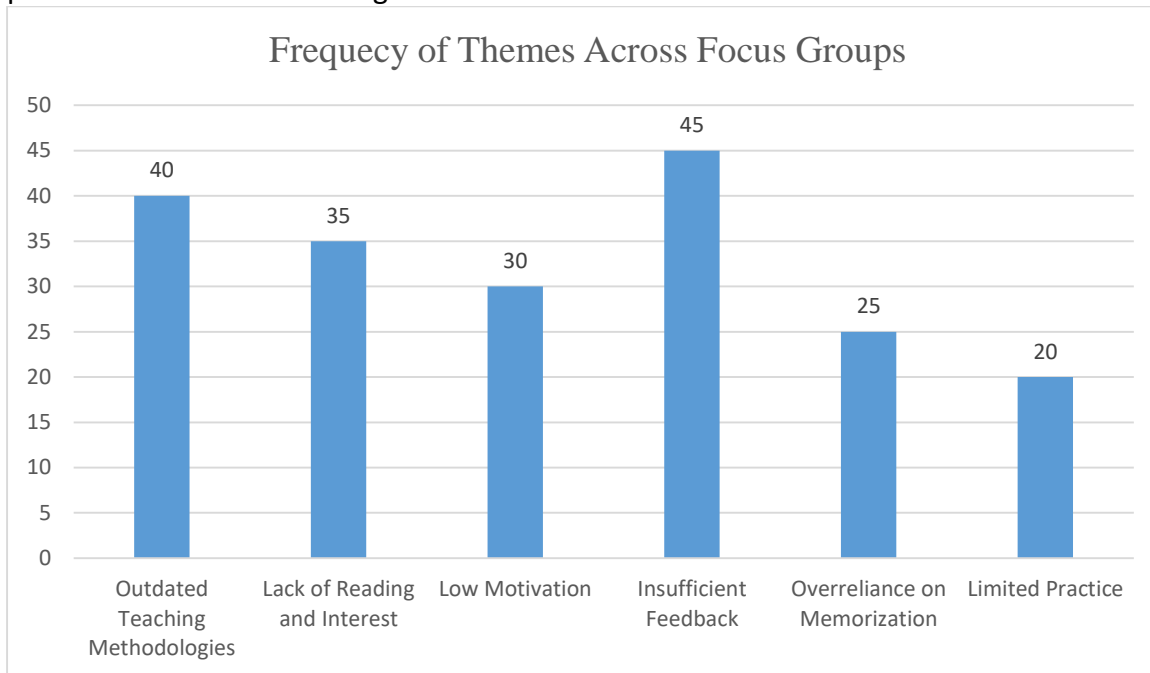


Fig 1: The bar graph displays the percentage of focus group mentions for each theme (e.g., 45% for insufficient feedback, 40% for outdated teaching methodologies), based on the number of times each cause was cited across the four groups.

Theme	Cognitive Stage	Representative Quote	Participant (Group)
Outdated Teaching Methodologies	Translating	“We learn grammar rules, not how to write”	P3 (FG01)
Lack of Reading and Interest	Planning	“I don’t read enough to get ideas”	P2 (FG01)
Low Motivation	All Stages	“Old teaching methods bore us”	P16 (FG04)
Insufficient Feedback	Reviewing	“No one corrects our mistakes”	P13 (FG03)
Overreliance on Memorization	Translating	“We just memorize paragraph examples”	P14 (FG03)
Limited Practice	All Stages	“We don’t get a chance to write”	P11 (FG03)

Table 1: Summary of Themes and Representative Quotes by Cognitive Stage

5. Discussion

The causes identified through participant quotes align with existing literature and are illuminated by Flower and Hayes' (1981) cognitive process model. Outdated teaching methodologies (Larsen-Freeman, 2000) and reliance on memorization disrupt the translating stage, as seen in P3’s (FG01) remark about learning rules over writing. Insufficient feedback (Ur, 1996), evident in P13’s (FG03) frustration with unchecked work, hinders reviewing, while lack of reading (P2, FG01) and low motivation (P16, FG04) impair planning. The bar graph and table reinforce these patterns, with insufficient feedback (45%) and outdated methods (40%) emerging as the most cited issues,

reflecting systemic pedagogical challenges. In Pakistan, resource scarcity (Lagerberg, 1995) amplifies these issues.

The small sample (20 students) and single campus focus limit generalizability, a common constraint in qualitative research. The reliance on self-reported data may also introduce bias. Future studies could expand the sample or test interventions like peer feedback (Rotsaert et al., 2024) or AI tools (Li et al., 2025) to address these gaps.

6. Recommendations and Implications

To address these causes, the following strategies are proposed:

- **Pedagogical Shift:** Implement process-based teaching with regular, constructive feedback, supported by Li et al.'s (2025) evidence on AI efficacy.
- **Resource Enhancement:** Promote reading programs and digital tools to enrich planning and idea generation.
- **Teacher Training:** Equip educators with modern methodologies to move beyond memorization.
- **Practice Opportunities:** Encourage regular writing tasks to strengthen translating and reviewing skills.

Implications

These findings extend Flower and Hayes' (1981) model by linking motivational and contextual factors to cognitive writing stages, offering a framework for EFL curriculum reform. Improved writing skills could enhance academic success and employability, particularly in Pakistan's evolving higher education landscape.

7. Conclusion

This study provides a detailed examination of the causes of academic writing problems among EFL undergraduates at Shah Abdul Latif University Ghotki campus. Through a qualitative lens and Flower and Hayes' (1981) cognitive framework, it highlights how outdated teaching, limited resources, and personal factors disrupt the writing process. The recommendations offer practical pathways for educators, while the implications underscore the need for broader research to refine these insights.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

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