

## **Academic Writing Difficulties of Iraqi Postgraduate Students in Malaysia**

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### **Abstract**

Iraqi postgraduate students, who come to pursue their higher education in Malaysian universities, more often than not have a low competency level in English leading to their inability to write academically. This dire situation is attributed partly to Arabic being used on a daily basis in all domains of life except in the English language classroom in Iraq and partly to the Iraqi education system which does not teach academic writing specifically. Consequently, these students encounter numerous challenges when they are asked to write academic essays. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the academic writing difficulties faced by Iraqi postgraduate students studying in Malaysian universities. A survey and an interview were employed in the data collection. The findings revealed that the students had both language and organization problems. The former was a lack of vocabulary, making excessive grammatical mistakes and the inability to paraphrase while the latter included poor referencing, weak organization and weak expression of ideas.

**Key words:** Academic writing; Iraqi EFL students; postgraduate writers; Malaysian universities; writing difficulties.

### **1.0 Introduction**

English in countries of the Middle East is considered a foreign language that is taught only in schools and universities as a subject usually for three to four hours a week or as a medium of instruction in some disciplines such as engineering and economics. Arabic language is mostly used on a daily basis in other contexts rather than the academic one. Consequently, Arab postgraduate students who pursue their higher education in Malaysian universities often have a low competence level in their English language proficiency (Yuen & Nisreen, 2014). This weakness has caused Iraqi EFL postgraduates students in Malaysian universities a lot of problems when they are instructed to write their academic assignments such as critical reviews, paraphrasing exercises, summaries, term papers and theses in English during their course of study where a high standard of academic writing competence is required (Rabab’ah, 2001). This predicament is compounded by the fact that the students have not been taught academic writing or attended such workshops prior to enrolling in an English language master’s programme.

According to the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, its education system is course-based even for postgraduate degrees as the students are required to study many courses before they start composing their thesis or dissertation (MOHESR.gov.iq, 2014) while the Malaysian universities are mostly research-based, where students are expected to do research in their specified areas of study (MOHE., 2012). Postgraduate students in Malaysian universities are supposed to have sound academic writing skills. The gap between Iraqi postgraduate students' weak academic writing ability and the strong academic writing traditions of Malaysian research universities has made it necessary to study the academic writing difficulties encountered by Iraqi postgraduate students in Malaysian universities.

Given the current dilemma faced by Iraqi postgraduate students, this study is timely. Besides investigating the students' academic writing ability, it is also hoped that the study can provide the reasons behind the low academic writing competence of the Iraqi postgraduate students in Malaysian universities.

## **2.0 Research Purpose**

Investigating the difficulties faced by Iraqi postgraduate students in Malaysian universities will provide a real feedback to categorize these difficulties from the most to the least complex, which in turn would help postgraduate students, universities and the Iraqi education system to overcome these difficulties by different means.

Iraqi postgraduate students may perform self-learning concerning these difficulties by doing practices and writing tasks to improve their level in academic writing, and especially the most difficult ones they faced during their writing. Universities can provide courses, seminars and workshops concerning the most difficult skills in academic writing for postgraduate students. Finally, the Iraqi Ministry of Education and Higher Education may take into consideration the needs of postgraduate students who are pursuing their Master's or Doctoral degree abroad in countries emphasizing the importance of scientific research, where the key issue in research is academic writing skills. Iraqi education planners may include academic writing as a subject in school or include many academic writing courses in Iraqi universities for undergraduate students in all majors.

This study will examine the problems faced by Iraqi postgraduate students in academic writing skills. In addition, this study will highlight the most difficult academic writing skills faced by Iraqi postgraduate students in Malaysian universities and suggest some solutions to overcome these problems, or at least to improve the level of those students in these academic skills. This study attempts to answer the following questions; (1) What are the most difficult academic writing skills faced by Iraqi postgraduate students in Malaysian universities?, and (2) What are the reasons behind the low competence level in academic writing skills among Iraqi postgraduate students in Malaysian universities?

## **3.0 Literature Review**

The review is divided into two sections; related works of academic writing in general and academic writing of Arab students.

### **3.1 Academic writing in general**

Mousavi and Kashefian (2011) conducted a study to explore the common errors made by Iranian students at the postgraduate level in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and the main causes of these difficulties in their English academic writing. The findings revealed that the students had an inadequate level of academic writing in English. They faced difficulties in both content and form in writing due to the limited attention given to English because it was a foreign language to them.

However, Indonesian students were unfamiliar with academic writing tasks because they were burdened with socio-cognitive and psychologically charged tasks (Handoyo, 2012). The author highlighted five major aspects in academic writing that must be addressed by the faculty members in their teaching of academic writing since the purpose is to assist students produce scholarly articles. The aspects were critical thinking, authorial voice - self voice and expert voice, plagiarism, linguistic resources, and feedback or the participation of a critical peer.

In the case of Malaysian students studying in Australian universities, Abdullah (2011) found that they had difficulties in adjusting to their new learning culture. Fortunately, they were able to cope with the situation by becoming active learners and enlisting the help and support of their spouse and other Malaysian friends in enhancing their academic writing ability. Even though they could adjust to the new academic environment with good writing skill, it did not totally transform them into excellent academic writers.

Other Asian students pursuing a Master's degree in the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages at a university in Australia encountered diverse academic problems in writing such as integrating general information into academic writing (Phakiti and Li, 2011). The researchers also discovered a strong relationship between general academic problems with challenges of academic writing. The students' level of academic English, their prior pedagogical experience and academic adjustment had an impact on their academic writing difficulties.

In the African continent, Lamptey and Atta (2013) using a set questionnaire and interviews on 506 Ghanaian postgraduate students discovered that they had problems with the citation of references in their academic work. There was inconsistency in citing references and the students adopted varying citation styles in their theses submitted to the repository of the same department. These academic writing problems were due to students not fully understanding the reference style formats and the tendency to rely solely on books, lecturers or librarians for help to ensure accurate citations in their work.

From the above studies, the main problems faced by international postgraduate students in their academic writing can be summarized as follows: weak control in content and form (Mousavi & Kashefian, 2011), poor citation skills (Lamptey & Atta-Obeng, 2013), limited reviewing ability, weak writer's voice and rampant plagiarism (Handoyo, 2012).

### **3.2 Academic writing of Arab students**

In a study to determine the types of difficulty encountered by King Saud University postgraduate students in learning to write academic English and also their learning needs, Al Fadda (2012) discovered four types of academic writing difficulties. They were the ability to distinguish between

spoken and written English, making an outline before writing a draft, identifying the skills needed for successful writing and avoiding vague words and phrases. The findings seemed to suggest that the students faced a lot of stress in their academic writing class.

Similarly, Arab speaking postgraduate students at University Technology of Malaysia too found academic writing a daunting experience (AbdulKareem, 2013). Although the findings of the study could be used by English language teachers and English for Specific Purpose specialists who are currently teaching academic writing, the numerous difficulties encountered by the students highlight that academic writing in English for Arab postgraduate students is a critical issue that needs to be addressed.

This need is further emphasized by Imani and Habil (2012) and Al-Zubaidi (2012). The former who investigated the writing strategies employed by Arab postgraduate students in their dissertation and thesis writing found significant patterns of academic writing problems across both types of writing while the latter who conducted a study to determine the major language difficulties encountered by Arab postgraduate students in their academic writing in English claimed that the students require help to develop their comprehension and application of the relationship between language skills and academic knowledge building. Other academic writing challenges faced by Arab postgraduate students at the College of Business Studies, Universiti Utara Malaysia were vocabulary register, organization of ideas, grammar, spelling, and referencing (Al-Khasawneh and Maher, 2010).

The review on the main difficulties faced by Arab postgraduate students in academic writing can be summarized as linguistic competence and citation (Al-Khasawneh & Maher, 2010; Al Fadda, 2012) and making an outline before writing (Al Fadda, 2012), whereas academic writing is considered a crucial issue among Arab postgraduate students which needs to be explored by researchers (Abdulkareem, 2013, Imani and Habil, 2012, Al-Zubaidi, 2012).

#### **4.0 Research Method**

Two instruments were used in conducting this study: a questionnaire and an interview. After reviewing previous literature concerning academic writing difficulties, a questionnaire was adapted from Al-Khasawneh (2012) to measure the potential difficulties faced by postgraduate students in academic writing and the causes that led to these academic writing difficulties. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: the first part was focused on demographic data; the second covered the reasons that influence academic writing difficulties, while the third part contains the potential problems in academic writing. The second and third parts in the questionnaire were in the form of a 5-point Likert scale with the following scales: Strongly agree (SA) was assigned to number 1, Agree (A) for number 2, Neutral (N) for number 3, Disagree (D) for number 4, and Strongly Disagree (SD) for number 5.

For the qualitative data, a one-to-one interview was conducted with six students; three males and three females. Four of them were from the social science faculty, and two from the science faculty. As the number of postgraduate students in social science faculty was higher than those in the science faculty, the interview was conducted for equal number for both genders.

## 5.0 Data Collection and Analysis

The sample of the study comprised 30 Iraqi postgraduate students of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia enrolled in the Master's program (in their third and fourth semester of study) from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities and The Faculty of Applied Sciences as they are familiar with academic writing tasks, for example, writing for their projects or thesis. Doctoral students were not targeted as they had already been engaged in full research from their first semester. The samples were chosen randomly, where the researcher visited the faculties and identified Iraqi postgraduate students and met them randomly in order to fulfill the target number of the sample.

After the two instruments were prepared, the researcher met the postgraduate students in their faculties and explained the importance and the aims of the study. They were also asked regarding their permission to participate in this study, as the information they shared would be used only for academic purposes and would be kept confidential. All postgraduate students who agreed to participate were given precise instructions and clarifications on how to answer the questionnaire. The answered questionnaires were collected by the researcher from the students.

### Questionnaire Reliability

According to Waters (2002), the reliability test of questionnaire is one of the most important tests in order to measure the consistency of responses. However, many respondents provide random answers rather than real answers to the questions. The reliability of a questionnaire can be measured by using Cronbach's alpha test. The acceptable alpha coefficient is more than 0.7 (Waters, 2002). Table 1 presents the questionnaire reliability analysis. The alpha coefficient obtained was 0.85. Therefore, the responses of the questionnaire items were considered as reliable.

Table 1: Questionnaire's Reliability

Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Respondents	No. of Items
0.85	30	20

## 6.0 Findings and Discussion

Table 2 summarizes the frequencies and means of the items responses for the reasons that influence academic writing difficulties. The respondents disagreed with all of the items in this part. The reasons that caused difficulties in academic writing were: Using Arabic in English Classes with 87% of the total answers, Few Opportunities to Practise English with 90%, Methods of Teaching English)with 85%, Insufficient Practical Writing in Educational Institutions) with 70% and Weak Foundation) with 70%.

Table 2: Deceptive Analysis of the reasons influencing academic writing difficulties

Item Number	Item	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Percentages
1	Using Arabic in English classes	1	1	2	7	19	4.40	87%
2	Teachers' low proficiency	0	2	6	12	10	4.00	73%
3	Few opportunities to practise English	0	0	3	17	10	4.23	90%
4	Writing done in Arabic	0	5	9	7	9	3.66	53%
5	Methods of teaching English	0	0	5	16	9	4.13	85%
6	Mother tongue	2	3	3	13	9	3.80	75%
7	Medium of instruction	1	1	8	12	8	3.83	67%
8	Weak foundation	0	0	9	4	17	4.26	70%
9	Lack of writing practice in educational institutions	0	1	8	10	11	4.03	70%
10	Teachers' lack of interest	0	2	11	13	4	3.63	57%

According to Table 3, the respondents disagreed with all the items under potential problems in academic writing. The potential problems included; Capacity with 77% of the total answers, Paraphrasing with 77%, Grammatical Problems with 74%, Vocabulary Problems with 70%, Referencing with 70%, and general problems with 70%.

Table 3: Deceptive Analysis of Potential Problems

Number	Item	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Percentages
1	Vocabulary problems	0	2	4	10	14	4.20	70%
2	Register	0	2	11	13	4	3.63	57%
3	General	0	0	9	16	5	3.86	70%
4	Capacity	0	3	4	14	9	3.96	77%
5	Paraphrasing	0	1	6	11	12	4.13	77%
6	Expressing ideas	0	1	2	13	14	4.33	57%
7	Grammatical problems Prepositions Articles Tenses Word order	0	2	6	12	10	4.00	74%
8	Organizing ideas	0	2	4	10	4	4.20	47%
9	Spelling	0	3	10	9	8	3.73	57%
10	Referencing	0	2	7	17	4	3.76	70%

The main aim of the correlation analysis is to find the integration level between the reasons and potential problems of academic writing. In other words, the strong correlation between the reasons and potential problems of academic writing will indicate the inter-relationship between the reasons and potential problems of academic writing. Thus, the proposed solution may be usable for the

reasons and potential problems of academic writing. On the other hand, the weak correlation will produce different proposed solutions for these reasons and potential problems of academic writing. Table 4 shows that there was significant correlation at 0.01 between the reasons and potential problems of academic writing. Thus, these parts are closely interrelated with each other. The proposed solutions could be prepared as a package to improve the performance of the reasons and potential problems of academic writing.

Table 4: Correlations between the Reasons and Potential Problems

		Reasons	Potential problems
Reasons	Pearson Correlation	1	.544**
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.001
	N	30	30
Potential problems	Pearson Correlation	.544**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.001	
	N	30	30
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).			

On the other hand, the main aim of the interview is to analyze three main things; the difficulties faced by students in academic writing, the reasons behind the academic writing difficulties, and the proposed solutions to improve the level of academic writing. Table 5 summarizes the findings of the interview. 75% of total respondents declared that they faced difficulties in organizing ideas and they did have the vocabulary to write well while 80% of them stated that the main reasons behind these difficulties were due to a lack of reading and writing practice as well as a lack of courses focused on academic writing in Iraq. All the respondents claimed that reading more academic articles and having more writing practices would be sufficient to boost the students' writing skills.

Table 5: Summary of Interview Findings.

Questions	Findings	Percentages
What are the main difficulties that you face in academic writing?	1-Organizing ideas 2- Did not know how to make critical review of papers 3- Did not know how to compose academic research 4- lack of vocabulary	75%
In your opinion, what are the reasons behind these difficulties in your academic writing?	1- Lack of reading and writing practice 2- Lack of courses focused on academic writing in Iraq	80%



	3- Lack of courses focused on academic writing in Iraq and incorrect way of teaching how to write 4- Weak foundation in academic writing	
Do you think you can improve your academic writing skill? How?	1- Reading more academic articles 2- More writing practice	100%

According to the analysis of the questionnaire and interviews conducted, Iraqi postgraduate students faced many problems in academic writing. They had vocabulary problems and are weak at paraphrasing, making grammatical mistakes, poor at managing references, and poor at organizing and expressing ideas. In addition, they did not know how to review academic papers critically, had no knowledge of composing and organizing academic research, and they found organizing ideas into a story extremely challenging. There were many reasons behind these difficulties, among them were a lack of reading and writing practice, a lack of courses focused on academic writing in Iraq, and incorrect ways of teaching them how to write. Moreover, the students believed that there were many ways to improve their level of academic writing, including more practice in reading and writing, reading more academic articles, more writing practice and daily reading of academic articles.

## 7.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

The Iraqi education system is course-based even for postgraduate students in Master's or Doctoral programs (Rabab'ah, 2001). Students are required to study many courses before they can start writing their thesis or dissertation. Arabic language is used mostly on a daily basis in other contexts rather than educational context (Abdulkareem, 2013). One of the problems faced by Iraqi postgraduate students in Malaysian universities is that they have a low competency level in academic writing because of their undergraduate study background in their country. Consequently, they face difficulties in their academic writing while pursuing their studies in Malaysia (Yuen & Nisreen, 2014). The findings indicate that the students face many difficulties in academic writing which could be reduced through improving the students' academic writing skills.

The students could be provided with support such as the production of visual practices of academic writing since video courses on academic writing practices are considered to be an efficient method to improve students' level of academic writing. These courses need to satisfy the various levels of students' needs, i.e. beginners, moderate and high levels. Another suggestion is to produce standard methods in evaluating students' writing performance. Students need to know their current strengths and weaknesses in academic writing to improve on their academic writing ability.



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