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Exploring the Writing Challenges Faced by M.Phil. and Ph.D. Scholars: A Case Study

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Abstract: *Academic writing plays a pivotal role in developing research proposals. The present study aimed to explore the grammatical errors that M.Phil/PhDs scholars commit in academic writing. The present study employed a qualitative case study designed to explore the challenges in the English language faced by the M.Phil and PhDs scholars. The 20 Ph.D. and 36 M.Phil scholars were selected by busing purposive sampling technique. Data were collected by using two self-developed semi-structured interviews protocol. Thematic analysis approach was employed for data analysis. The findings revealed that all the participants reported that correct use of tenses was a big hurdle that entailed the other grammatical mistakes and reduced the report quality because all the lexical aspects are linked with these mechanics. The study recommended that English language courses be offered to postgraduate, M. Phil and Ph.D. scholars to learn the technical aspects of the language and provide students with online interactive programming.*

Key Words:

Introduction

University students may find academic writing to be one of the most vital and one of the most challenging abilities to master. This is especially true for people who are learning a foreign or second language (L2) (Lee & Tajino, 2008; Negari, 2012). Vocabulary, precise spelling, and essay argument development are just a few hurdles students confront. The ability to write well demands a thorough knowledge of a language's grammar. These skills are crucial for university students because past studies show poor grammar harms writing performance (Myles, 2002).

The precondition for promoting and expanding research at Pakistan's institutions is an improved command of the English language, especially in academic writing. Most postgraduates do not show any writing abilities, specifically academic writing skills needed in Pakistan to boost research activity. It is recognized that traditional English language courses focusing

on general English cannot meet the needs of university students for research writing. As a result, a pragmatic critical approach to developing academic English can help inexperienced writers improve their writing skills and develop critical thinking regarding academic standards. Because critical writing is a requirement in higher education, it is more important to examine and assess than to provide a straightforward explanation in most academic writing (Woodward-Kron, 2002).

No one can deny the relevance of academic writing in learning other subjects where English is the medium of teaching and mastering the English language. In their view, the essence of writing is that it is "a thinking instrument for language development and critical thinking in all disciplines," according to Bjork and Raisanen (1997). Academic writing significantly impacts second language learners' growth (Kareem, 2013,

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p. 8). When it comes to students who are not majoring in English, Leki and Carson (1994) say that their success in their other courses is strongly dependent on their ability to write well in academic settings.

Chou (2011) studied students' attitudes about academic writing and discovered that they value academic writing since it serves as a springboard for publishing their work and a tool to communicate their interests to others. Due to the high value placed on writing ability, many studies have expressed a variety of perspectives on how to teach writing in general and writing standards in particular. For example, there has been debate about whether to use a product-oriented strategy (focusing on the end product and producing grammatically perfect documents) or a process-oriented one (paying more attention to the underlying writing process).

According to Badger and White (2000), the latter approach implies the practice of linguistic skills. However, some scholars condemned it for its ignorance of the social and intellectual context (Yiu, 2009). As a result, a third dominant strategy, the genre approach, emerged specifically due to the communicative approach. Grami (2009) defines it as "an approach that emphasizes writing as a product, and in some ways is a continuation of the product approach, but with an emphasis on how this product is altered by various events and types of writing" (p. 34). Along with writing teaching approaches, scholars have taken note of the difficulties associated with academic writing.

Academic writing can be defined as the design and development of university-level procedures for organizing and creating students' ideas and critical thinking and developing students' vocabulary and grammatical syntax. Additionally, students enrolled in English writing lessons should be exposed to the aspects that promote strong vocabulary, effective sentence formation, and paragraph organization based on punctuation marks and conjunctions.

Other perspectives, as Li (2007), said that writers' constructs have to address some assumptions about the identifications and growth of English as a second language (ESL) contexts addressing the usage of effective lesson plans in teaching academic writing. Thus, students can interact with academic writing values, culture, and identity to change and set their demands.

Statement of the Problem

English is a key communication medium in Pakistan, both locally and internationally, and it is used as a medium of instruction in schools and in colleges and institutions. Students must be able to comprehend intellectual discourse in order to be accepted into the university community. As "Academic writing in English at advanced levels is a challenge and tough even for the majority of native speakers" (Al Fadda, 2012, p.123), considerably more so for students learning English as a second language. Renandya and Richards (2002) argue that academic writing is critical in university settings because students are increasingly expected to conduct their studies in the English language and produce specific writing genres such as assignments, essays, summaries, critical reviews, and research papers.

This study aims to examine the writing challenges encountered by second language learners in the English language. When students enter university, they are introduced to a novel and unfamiliar setting of teaching and learning by completing various assignments. Students must adjust to new ways of knowing, understanding, interpreting, and organizing knowledge as soon as they enter the new cultural experience of university life. As a result, academic achievement is contingent upon students' ability to communicate their ideas effectively through writing. However, many students struggle with academic writing rather than achieving success in their academics.

Students in Pakistan confront numerous difficulties while paraphrasing. For instance, pupils cannot use their own words, reformat sentences based on critical thinking, or reorganize sentences to be more academically productive. Other difficulties Pakistani pupils face include interference with their language (Urdu).

The distinction is between Pakistani students and native English speakers, who possess a range of writing styles, abilities, and backgrounds. Pakistani students are incapable of organizing the functions of writing, the process of reading to writing, and then the interference of the domestic language (L1) with the second language (L2), which prevents them from using critical thinking and the paraphrasing process to create new word structures based on their perspectives without changing the meaning of the words. The majority

of students make numerous errors in sentence form.

Significance of the Study

This study aims to examine the difficulties and errors faced by M.Phil.. and Ph.D.. researchers in Academic Writing to make recommendations and answers for recommended future research. In Pakistan, the English language curriculum is a top priority for the Ministry of Education. As a result, it is critical to address academic writing at the university level and recognize the challenges students encounter in this area. This study is significant as it will aid in the exploration of the errors that students make in their academic writing. This study will assist M.Phil. and Ph.D. academics in overcoming errors in their writing. Additionally, this study will assist teachers in guiding M.Phil. and Ph.D.. students in their academic writing.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Investigate the type of common errors that M.Phil./Ph.D. scholars commit in academic writing.
2. Explore the challenges that M.Phil. In their academic writing (assignments and research proposals), scholars face in the English language.
3. Explore the remedial strategies teachers use to overcome the challenges and difficulties that M.Phil./Ph.D. scholars face in their academic writing (assignments and research proposals) in English Questions

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this research.

1. What are the common errors and mistakes committed by M.Phil./Ph.D. scholars in academic writing in the English language?
2. What linguistic challenges and difficulties do M.Phil./Ph.D. Do scholars face while writing assignments and research proposals in the English language?
3. How do teachers overcome the linguistic (grammatical) challenges faced by M.Phil./Ph.D. Scholars while developing their assignments and research proposal in the English language?

Delimitation of the Study

The study was delimited to the grammatical mistakes, including sentence structure, cohesion, organization of thoughts, and punctuation marks committed by M.Phil. and Ph.D. scholars in their academic writings. The essential punctuation marks were Capitalization, Exclamation marks, Question marks, Ellipses, comma, colons, semi-colons, parentheses, End marks, etc. Only those students who are either working or have submitted their research proposals were taken.

Limitation of the study

Despite all of the efforts put forth, all of the formalities completed, and all of the rules and regulations obeyed, it appeared that the researcher would be confronted with a few constraints. As universities were closed due to Ovid 19, the researcher had to face difficulties in taking face-to-face interviews. During this situation, the researcher had to take telephonic interviews in which the research could not see the facial expression, which is typically very helpful in transcribing the data.

The teachers were unwilling to give interviews and delayed it up to a point, so it took too much time to take data from the teachers. Despite these problems, the researcher completed her task successfully.

Methodology

This study aimed to explore writing difficulties faced by second language learners in the English language. To achieve the intended result, the case study research design was used. In this research strategy, the case study is the essential process employed on a priority basis since it addressed "how" and "why" questions, and the study's focus was on contemporary events in a real-life environment, which made it the most appropriate procedure to use. This case study helps explain, examine, and exhibit real-life occurrences in the instances that have been selected (Yin, 1994). This qualitative research case study was designed to explore the academic writing challenges in the English language faced by the M.Phil. and Ph.D. scholars at the University of the Punjab, Lahore. Inter-pretivisim philosophical research paradigm was employed for the present study. In this research strategy, the case study was the most

critical process employed on a priority basis since it addressed "how" and "why" questions and the study's focus was on contemporary events in a real-life environment, which made it the most appropriate procedure to use. This case study helps explain, examine, and exhibit real-life occurrences in the instances that have been selected (Yin, 1994). In order to collect data, two instruments were developed: 1) a Semi-structured interview for teachers; 2) a Semi-structured interview for Ph.D. scholars. These instruments were improved in the light of the expert opinion. The research ethics were fulfilled at every stage of conducting this research. The thematic analysis was done for the qualitative data acquired from a variety of sources

Findings of the Study

Generally, all the participants agreed that academic writing is all about the technicalities of a specific language (if English), and the confronting challenge is writing mechanics. For non-native speakers, it is being taught as a subject but not as a subject language. Further, it was highlighted that these difficulties/challenges were associated with language and mechanics of writing. Generally, all the study participants agreed that appropriate use of subject-verb, adjective, adverb, punctuation, and articles, correct use of tense, and lack of variety of words (vocabulary) were the challenging aspects of the English language for non-native speakers of English. The participants' responses informed that the most recurring mistake was the correct use of the subject with the verb. The findings also revealed that almost all the participants reported that correct use of tense was a big hurdle which entailed the other grammatical mistakes and reduced the quality of the report because all the lexical aspects were linked with these mechanics. The majority of the participants agreed that while rephrasing the literature review, they mistakenly put the wrong tense, which changed the overall structure sense of the sentence. In addition, the findings also highlighted that being non-native speaker of the English language, participants were even unable to insert punctuation in sentences appropriately, and excessive use of articles spoiled the coherence of the sentence. Like students, teachers (supervisors) reported the same mistakes that students/scholars committed during their academic writing. The popping problems were

listed as linguistic issues, grammatical problems, inappropriate mechanics, complex sentences, disconnectivity, lesser harmony among paragraphs, poor sentence structure, etc.

The content analysis was conducted as one of the qualitative analysis techniques to achieve the research objectives and it depicted what was advocated during interviews the same was encountered in research proposals.

The findings also revealed that the level of difficulty and intensity of challenging situations vary from subject to subject. Compared to students of other subjects/areas, English literature students faced less difficulty pertaining to language and structural composition. In contrast, other subject students shared a different point of view because they were not well familiar with the technical rules and principles of the English language.

However, it was highlighted by the significant number of the students that the use of software for grammar and spelling check has resolved this problem to a great extent, but it is persistent because with the change of subject, the verb was changed, and the whole sentence structure accordingly modified.

The analysis also informed that students/scholars adopted/adapted some strategies during academic writing to minimize the linguistic and grammatical errors

which were these read research articles and reports intending to improve technical writing skills to successfully complete academic writing during research work, reading the written text, again and again, to avoid mistakes, improve overall sentence structure, utilize online dictionaries to find synonyms, and antonyms of words, get help from online software to proofread the text and highlight some grammatical mistakes and requested some senior fellows/colleagues and friends for proofreading which helped to improve and learn at the same time.

In addition to this, students put forward some suggestions, i.e., group discussions help students to share their knowledge and experiences with other students and learn from each other mistakes, as English is our second language, so, students must qualify a linguistic course to learn enough about rules and principles of specific language and avoid to use complex and compound sentences.

Results and Discussion

The completion of the successful research report is highly based on academic writing, which is technical/scientific writing and follows a sequential way to present the information equipped with empirical evidence to augment the research findings with literature. Academic writing is a professional way of conveying empirical information/data to the intended recipient. A significant proportion of participants highlighted the major characteristics essential to be followed during academic writing, i.e., use of simple and easy language, correct use of grammar, up-to high-level standards, free from ambiguity, slang, and contractions. The current study was grounded to discover the challenges of academic writing that MPhil and PhD scholars of University of the Punjab, Lahore, face during their research report.

It was explored that all the participants explicitly and repeatedly reported that English language proficiency is the major hindrance in academic writing which stopped the positive development of the scholars from being a good writer of their research report because, in the second language, they were unable to describe their expressions and ultimately found escape in copy-pasting the content. A further problem for Pakistani universities is the multifaceted educational background of students, which includes instruction in both Urdu and English in the public sector and the private sector. In order to acclimate to an environment where writing was required, pupils must overcome significant obstacles.

It was evident from the responses that confronting challenge is mechanics of writing because, for non-native speakers of English, it was being taught as a subject but not as language. In this way, participants have less command over linguistic and technical aspects of the English language robustly. To a great extent, mechanics of writing is a hurdle during academic writing because English is not our first language, and they lack in understanding the technical aspects of that language and the significant proportion of the time was consumed on refining/correcting the mistakes instead to utilize on analysis and other vital parts. According to the research study, academic writing issues included a lack of academic terminology, avoiding plagiarism, effectively utilizing cohesive devices, developing logical arguments, creating coherent connections between ideas, and exhibiting critical thinking in their academic writing. (Alharbi, 2017).

Participants also highlighted that strong command over writing mechanics is crucial in successful academic writing because it was a critical component of writing. According to the participants of the interviews, there were manifold problems that students experienced during academic writing. Further, it was highlighted that these difficulties/challenges are associated with language and writing mechanics. The study's findings indicated that Pakistani students viewed AW as a critical subject. However, they struggled with a variety of writing challenges, including insufficient writing, expressions, grammatical and syntactical errors, and desired to improve their writing abilities. Additionally, the study revealed several additional elements that contributed to students' writing difficulties. (Ashraf, Rubab, & Ajmal, 2020).

Generally, all the study participants agreed that appropriate use of subject-verb, adjective, adverb, punctuation, and articles, correct use of tense, and lack of variety of words (vocabulary) were the challenging aspects of the English language for non-native speakers of English. This study supported our findings and revealed that the majority of students faced many common challenges that mainly concerned word choice, grammar, punctuation, paraphrasing, and citing (Sara, 2010).

The content analysis was conducted as one of the qualitative analysis techniques to achieve the research objectives and it depicted what was advocated during interviews the same was encountered in research proposals. Al Badi (2015) concluded in his research study that supported our research findings that students struggled when it came to language use, coherence, and cohesion, expressing their voice. It was apparent that academic writing challenges faced by EFL learners at the tertiary level concern style and word choice, paraphrasing other scholars" ideas, and struggling to produce organized well-structured writing pieces. The deficiencies EFL learners were bound to face in written production include word choice, grammar, spelling, punctuation, coherence, and cohesion.

It was informed that for most of the participants, grammatical/structural errors

worked as the most significant challenge, while academic writing involved spelling mistakes, formation of sentences, parts of speech, etc. The analysis of the participants' responses showed that every language has its technical aspects, which was always a big challenge for other second language speakers to understand. Generally, all the participants agreed that they often struggled in refining their research reports because grammatical errors always existed even after repeatedly revising the content. They faced recurring problems, i.e., repetition of words due to lack of vocabulary, poor sentence structure and formation, and weak harmony among sentences and paragraphs. Collectively all these were a big hurdle for me. Our research findings were backed up by the outcomes of a research study, which revealed that participants made many spelling mistakes that interfered with the consistency of their academic written work. These mistakes fell into three categories: omissions, additions, and substitutions.

Conclusion

It is concluded that being non-native speakers of the English language, MPhil and Ph.D. scholars frequently commit mistakes (linguistics) in their research reports/proposals, which is evident from the responses of the participants and found during the content analysis as well. Generally, all the participants agreed that academic writing is all about the technicalities of a specific language (if the English language), and the confronting challenge is the mechanics of writing. Participants also highlighted that strong command over writing mechanics is crucial in successful academic writing because it is a critical component of writing. According to the participants of the interviews, there are manifold problems that students experience during academic writing. Further, it was highlighted that these difficulties/challenges are associated with language and writing mechanics.

Furthermore, it is concluded that English language proficiency is the major hindrance in academic writing which stops the positive development of the scholars from being a good writer of their research report because, in the second language, they are unable to describe their expressions and ultimately find escape in copy-pasting the content. The analysis informed that grammatical/structural errors worked as the most

significant challenge for most of the participants, while academic writing involves spelling mistakes, formation of sentences, parts of speech, etc. The analysis of the participants' responses shows that every language has its technical aspects, which is always a big challenge for other second language speakers to understand. Generally, all the participants agreed that they often struggle in refining their research reports because grammatical errors always exist even after repeatedly revising the content. They faced recurring problems, i.e., repetition of words due to lack of vocabulary, poor sentence structure and formation, and weak harmony among sentences and paragraphs. Collectively all these were a big hurdle for me. The findings also revealed that the level of difficulty and intensity of challenging situations vary from subject to subject. Compared to students of other subjects/areas, English literature students face less difficulty pertaining to language and structural composition. In contrast, other subject students shared a different point of view because they were not well familiar with the technical rules and principles of the English language.

It is also concluded that teachers rarely utilized some techniques to minimize the structural challenges during academic writing or even during course assignments except forwarding some instructions as suggestions to be followed. It is also concluded that teachers encouraged teachers to encourage students to read articles, research reports, newspapers, and books. Further, they sometimes provide feedback with comments to revise the piece of writing but neither devise nor adopt any specific strategies for the long-term benefits of students.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn after analyzing the results of the study:

- The most confronting challenge for the students during academic writing is a lack of English language proficiency which is ultimately linked with linguistics and grammatical errors. So, it is imperative to enhance students' English language skills to improve their academic writing skills. For this, the English language/linguistic courses must be offered to postgraduate, MPhil, and Ph.D. students/scholars to

learn the language's technical aspects and provide students with the online interactive programmer.

- Writing mechanics is the technical aspect of the English language, which may only be removed with proofreading and timely feedback from the supervisor. This is imperative for teachers/supervisors to center on students' continuous development process by orienting students into the academic culture of reading and writing. Additionally, students must be informed of the writing process, including drafting, revision, and redrafting.

- It is evident from the findings that students spend significant time removing grammatical errors and mistakes, which leads them to delay the submission of assignment/research proposal/research

report. It is crucial to train students' meta-cognitive skills to manage all the tasks to avoid any delay effectively.

- It is revealed from the findings that students find it an easy escape to copy/paste the content from previous researches instead of writing it in their language. Though it is strongly associated with the English language, students also lack research skills because they cannot focus on writing abilities. It is recommended that departments create spaces for intensive reading and writing activities that will allow students to experiment with writing challenges by promoting critical thinking and logical reasoning skills.

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