

Academic Writing: A Theoretical Approach to Efficient Writing
Ecrit académique : Approche Théorique à l'Ecrit Efficace

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Abstract

Academic writing has proved to be the most difficult skill to teach and learn in the teaching-learning process. A priori, it poses tremendous pressure on stakeholders (viz., teachers and English language learners). Basically, effective academic writing marks epiphanical occasions for English language learners' virtuosity and intellectual growth. It is within the range of the current paper to demonstrate how academic writing could be implemented and sustained in the Algerian tertiary education.

Keywords Academic writing; English language learners; intellectual growth; Algerian tertiary education

Résumé:

L'écrit académique s'est avéré la compétence la plus difficile à enseigner et apprendre dans le processus pédagogique. A priori, il pose une pression formidable sur et les enseignants et les apprenants de l'anglais langue étrangère. Un écrit académique est foncièrement une occasion d'épiphanie dénotant la virtuosité ainsi que la maturité intellectuelle des apprenants d'anglais langue étrangère. Cet article vise à démontrer que l'écrit académique pourrait être intégré et maintenu aux études universitaires.

Mots-clés: écrit académique ; apprenants d'anglais langue étrangère ; Maturité intellectuelle ; études universitaires

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1. INTRODUCTION

The current paper evolves from a powerful claim: namely that scholarly life depends heavily upon the right scholarly habits of reasoning and academic production. It has been, nonetheless, noticed that the Algerian tertiary education students frequently fail to produce satisfactory academic writings in discipline-based courses. It is worth emphasizing that poor academic writing stems from poor approaches to the dynamics of scholarly reasoning habits and dramatic linguistic, methodological, and stylistic deficiencies, as well as psychological and socio-cultural interference. Academic writing poses, therefore, an extra burden on both teachers and students especially as LMD (post)-graduate students are required to submit scholarly theses by the completion of under and post-graduation studies. *Au fond*, efficient academic writing marks *epiphanical* occasions for students' virtuosity and intellectual growth. It is within the scope of the current paper to demonstrate how academic writing course could be implemented and sustained in the Algerian tertiary education. The premise is to assist teachers of Writing Expression (WE) module to design a curriculum that aims at enhancing students' academic writing performance. The author is guided by the following questions, which he shall eventually attempt to address:

1. Why do ELLs have to write in academia at all ?
2. Is academic writing esoteric and parochial ?
2. Why do ELLs fail to produce efficient writing ?
3. How familiar are ELLs with writing and its intricate mechanisms ?
4. In what way do ELLs fail to balance between ideas, language, and discourse in AW ?

2. Writing: A Diachronic Probe

Although man existed well before some salient achievements (e.g. growing crops, manufacturing the wheel, etc.), only writing marked man's *début* in history. Gregorian (in Graham and Hebert 2010, p. 6) note “ [...]

the instinct for human beings to express their feelings, their thoughts, and their experiences in some lasting way has been with us for a very long time''. In fact, all that came before establishing writing systems was labeled pre-history, which clearly indicates that thanks to writing Man has started recording events. Furthermore, it appears that beside speech and thinking, writing has characterized humans from other creatures. Supporting this view, Fischer (2003, p. 7) evidences ''What distinguishes modern *homo sapiens* is a global society based most importantly on writing. Once the domain of a few thousand, today writing is a skill practiced by about **85 per cent** of the world's population ...'' (**emphasis added**). According to Powell (2000) who notes ''Writing is the most important technology in the history of human species, except how to make a fire'' (cited in Ferris and Hedgcock 2013, p. 1) which amounts to the invention of writing as a breakthrough in its own right. In wide brief, ever since the invention of writing systems, Man has been constantly engaged in reading and writing.

Historians claim that early writing systems appeared in the Middle East (3200 BC) and more precisely in the Levant, Mesopotamia and Egypt although other civilizations such as the Chinese (1200 BC) and Mayan (600 BC) knew some forms of writings of their own. In the same vein, Healey (1990, p. 7) observes ''The writing systems of the ancient Near East prior to the invention and widespread of the alphabet from 1700 BC onward included a large number of syllabic signs ...''. Thanks to those *graphemes*, ancient civilizations were able to leave to the coming generations the occurrences of the day. Rudgley (2000, p. 15) corroborates ''writing is, of course, one of the main features of those societies considered to be civilized''. It is obvious that civilization and writing are interconnected. Palmer (2009) concludes

Through writing, noteworthy cultures around the world painted a picture of their culture. They related their conquests and their ruler's feats, their knowledge, their interactions with the world around them, their daily lives. The implementation of writing in a society's history indeed marks progress through change for not only the society itself, but for mankind.

In today's advanced societies, writing seems to serve different purposes and manifests itself in different forms. Coulmas (2013, p. 1) succinctly states "We live in a literate world". Creative writing, academic writing, (auto)biographical writing, digital writing, and scientific writing have turned out to be a salient feature of modern societies. Each of these types has its own governing rules and standards, which eventually characterize it from the other ones.

3. Categories of Writing

According to Britton and co-authors writing is function-bound: What the writer intends to achieve determines to which category the text belongs. Phoenix (2002, p. 9) further outlines the three categories as follows:

3.1 Expressive/ Personal Writing: It refers to personal reflection of life-shaping experiences.

3.2 Transactional/ Informative Writing: It indicates factual and informative writing.

3.3 Poetic/ Literary Writing: It is understood to be the creative and esthetic production.

4. Definition of Academic Writing

By definition, academic writing refers to writings produced by academics for other academics in an academic setting wherein they discuss an issue of importance to academia. Thus, academic writing may be justifiably claimed to be of dual purpose: discipline-related and discipline-motivated activities. It is impressively rare to find definitions of AW that sit well with different situations. A priori, academics avoid the temptation to couch in concrete terms a definition for AW, especially as it has attested on various occasions to be evasive in nature and even a tricky endeavor. Nonetheless, Ng (2003, p. 11) identifies AW as in broad terms "... it is the kind of writing that scholars and academics produce ... as can be seen in books and articles in academic journals". Writing that fulfills a purpose of education in a college or university, either in response to an academic assignment, or professional writing produced by trained academics (teachers and researchers) for presentations and publications can rightfully be called academic writing. Overall, AW appears to adhere to rigorous

formal, stylistic, and methodological rules; nothing is taken for granted. Everything must be clear and well defined.

Discipline-based writings are characterized by accuracy, objectivity, and every-word-count principle. Here are outlined some of its basic features

- It is discipline-related type of writing.
- It is produced by scholars for scholars.
- It has rules and practices that need be organized around a formal order or structure in which to present ideas, in addition to ensuring that ideas are supported by author citations relevant literature.
- It deals with the underlying theories and causes governing processes and practices in everyday life, as well as exploring alternative explanations for these events.
- Academic writing follows a particular ‘tone’ and adheres to traditional conventions of punctuation, grammar, and spelling.

Academic writing may share features with other types of writing, yet it has its own culture and diction. In the same line of thought, Singh & Lukkarila (2017, p.3) note " it is a different culture with its own language".

5. Motives for Writing

It can boldly be claimed that literacy (*namely*, reading and writing) characterizes the knowledge-based societies of the 21st c. Supporting this argument, Coulmas (2013, p. 1) corroborates “‘We live in a literate world’”. It seems paradoxical to note that most people do not often realize how much they write and need to write. Intuitively, people think that they read more than they write. The fact that people may write as much as they read: They scribble on a sheet of paper ; they jot down a phone number ; they text message (i.e., they write SMS) ; they twitter; they facebook, and they chat, etc. Gledhill *et al.* (1995, p.188) outline motives for writing:

- Writing is an aid to communicate (including display) and social organization, and its origin is in complex forms of both. It may be employed primarily to communicate at distance in space and hence to serve complex networks, as in trade, and it may serve storage and communication in time, so that it enhances administration and control, often it does both.

- Hence, the claim could be put that people under a full range of circumstances tend to write so much, for good or ill. For that particular reason, writing assignments need be part and parcel of student academic life.
- Publishing research findings and sharing experience and knowledge with other academics seem to be the ultimate aim of scholars. Vipond (1993, p. 2) confirms that “ [...] the main purpose of writing is to communicate research findings”. Therefore, conducting research and getting it published cannot be dissociated ; this is the very essence of academic life that students need to understand and cope with it. Should they fail to put up with this standard, they risk to fail altogether in their academic career.

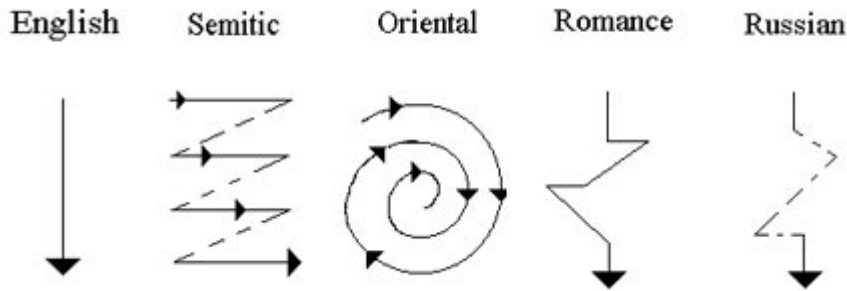
As a final comment, writing is an indelible part of being academic no matter how this “craft” is hard to learn. Writing for the sake of academic writing is in itself a motive to undertake writing.

6. Culture and Style of Writing

Writing is a process and the production thereof is influenced by the different cognitive, emotional, intellectual, social, and cultural forces. As language is a social phenomenon, so is writing. In other terms, what people write reflects not only their thoughts, but also the conventions, perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs common to their cultures. Duszek (1997, p.273) echoes “Since writing is undeniably a social act, scholars naturally formulate their thoughts and ideas according to the discourse community to which they belong”.

Style refers to the way the writer expresses his/ her thoughts and ideas. Lourens (2007, p. 65) defines style as “ [...] the how of writing : it concerns the specific choices that a writer needs to make to put his/ her thoughts into words”. Style appears to be culture bound in that people perceive and express verbally according to the standards of the culture to which they belong.

In his pioneering yet controversial article entitled *work cultural thought pattern in intercultural education*, Kaplan (1966) identifies five types of writing all of which are culture-defined : linear, parallel, circular,



6.1 Detour Style : Spanish-speaking writers tend to make detours while they discuss an issue.

- They opt for a formal and ornate style (Reppen and Grabe 1993)
- Rather long sentences and clauses (Simpson, 2000).

Different

- Different topical subjects in one paragraphs (Simpson, 2000)

6.2. Parallel Style : Arabic-speaking write and tend to talk about two themes in the same paragraph. Rubin (1995, p.15) perceives Arabic style as “florid, full of high diction and superlatives”.

- Preference for coordinate clauses (namely, the excessive use of the coordinating conjunction “and”).
- Long sentences
- Interactional
- Different and sometimes loose topics come to be involved in the same paragraphs

6.3. Linear Style : It seems that Anglo-American writers follow a linear pattern : They deal with one thing at a time. Its features are listed down.

- Less interactional
- More reduced sentence style
- Informationally oriented (Lux & Grabe 1991, cited in De Mejia, 2006, p. 100).
- Repetition of key words as coherence device (Simpson, 2000)

- Preference for subordinate clauses (namely, the subordinating conjunctions such as but, however, and although, etc.).

6.4. Circular Style: Oriental cultures of China, Korea, and Japan tend to prefer to indirectly address social issues out of self-effacement and politeness. Matalene (1985, cited in Rubin, 1995, p. 14) explains “ [...] because of the deeply acculturated reverence for ancestors and authority, Chinese writers avoid the kind of original discovery and unique expression that Western writing teachers seek to inculcate”. The tackling of issues is, therefore, from outside into the inside. This tactful approach is meant to built rapport all the more being polite, which eventually avoids upsetting interlocutors.

7. Intellectual Styles

Intellectual styles (IS) refer to individuals' preferred ways of processing information (perception, retention, recalling, etc.) and undertaking cognitive and other tasks (Zhang and Sternberg, 2020). From a purely psychological perspective, how people perceive and express themselves depend on their mental makeup. Another strong cross-cultural theory is the one put forward by Galtung (1985) who stipulates that there is a strong correlation between culture and intellectual styles. The discussion below compares and contrasts how peoples of different cultural backgrounds express themselves.

While English-speaking intellectual style seems to be teamwork-based and tolerant, the German-speaking intellectual style tends to be top-down and deductive, the Latin Mediterranean (mainly French and Italian) intellectual style appears to favor the beauty of locutions (Siepmann, 2006). As for the Arabic intellectual style celebrates esthetic elegance of rhetoric. Difficult and less commonly known vocabulary is very much appreciated at the expense of content. Digression is often tolerated. A mild patronizing attitude seems to be indulged.

8. L1 and L2 Writing

Research shows ambivalent attitudes toward the clear and consistent correlation in L1 and L2 proficiency. The correlation between L1 and L2 abilities and whether one affects the other is a debatable issue. On the one hand, there are those who confirm that L1 writing abilities hones L2 abilities (Ma Won Zainudin). On the other hand, research conducted by

other researchers on the abilities in L1 and L2 do not appear to be correlated (Karsen & Kuehn 1992, Aliakbari 2002).

9. Features of Academic Writing

There is a growing need for writing either in the academic circle or elsewhere. Actually, academic contributions in refereed journals define scholars and their research. Some kind of orthodoxy has established itself in academia ; it oftentimes rises to the following:

9.1 Formality: It refers to the serious & non-conversational diction, formulas (viz., Dear Sir, Truly Yours), spelling, and grammar used in writing (i.e., avoidance of everyday speech and colloquialism).

9.2 Objectivity: Dispassionate attitude in academic writing is always sought. “Be emotionally neutral: most academic writing requires you to stand back and analyse dispassionately as an objective onlooker” (Cottrell, 2003).

9.3 Accuracy: It refers to the truthfulness of a statement (e.g. Shakespeare died in 1616).

9.4 Clarity: It indicates the directness in attaining the meaningfulness of statements. It stands opposite ambiguity or confusion.

9.5 Precision: It refers to the degree of specificity (compare (a) A good number of road accidents are due to driving beyond speed limits, (b) 30% of road accidents are due to driving beyond speed limits).

9.6 Concision (or Conciseness): It stands at the end of wordiness. It refers to to-the-point prose.

9.7 Structure: It follows an established pattern or organization.

9.8 Responsibility: By being responsible, the writer backs up what s/he claims all the more being ethical (no plagiarism).

9.9 Consistency: It indicates the adherence to precise, well-defined standards & conventions (do not use interchangeably both British and American spelling in the same context).

9.10 Esthetics: It refers to the beauty of the text through analogies, allegories, metaphors, and similes, etc. Unfortunately, the esthetic aspect of AW appears to be the least considered by most scholars. Elegant style may be seen by many as a pariah. A scholarly inquisition is often launched to purge the scientific style from aspects of beauty and graceful cadence. No

cogent reasons are put forward except that the academic writing should be strictly objective.

10. Lexico-grammatical Issues in AW

Vocabulary repertoire is a major indicator of writing success. How many words do you need to write academic papers? They need quantity and quality. Judd (1976, in Yang *et al.* 2001 p. 28) assert “Vocabulary has been relegated to secondary status in favor of syntax because of the misconception that students only need to master basic grammatical structures in order to understand and communicate in target language”.

Blanpain (2006, p.13) “When writing academic texts in English, non-native speakers often produce a prose that sounds translated and unnatural”. In the following table, non-native students' and teachers' perspectives on difficulties in academic writing.

Table1: ELLs' and teachers' perspectives on academic writing difficulties

Non-native Students' Perspectives	Teachers' Perspectives
Vocabulary (62%)	style as the most problematic factor (92 %)
style (53 %),	outweighing grammar (77 %)
spelling (41 %)	vocabulary (70 %)
grammar (38 %)	handwriting (31 %)
punctuation (18 %)	punctuation (23 %)
handwriting (12 %)	spelling (23 %)

11. ELLs’ Academic Writing-Associated Errors

Errors attest to be endemic in students’ writings, which- after all- prove that the latter are struggling with cultural, (socio)linguistic, and discoursal aspects of the target language. Although making errors is natural, ELLs are usually terrified of teachers’ evaluation. Besides, no one takes issue with the fact that most (if not) all teachers are steeped in “error-mongering”, which is, in a sense, a most aggravated form of (un)intended student intimidation. Intuitively, ELLs are enticed in practically all kinds of language errors, be it linguistic, stylistic, discoursal, cultural, and cognitive.

This may account for the fact that writing assignments loom threatening and daunting to almost all ELLs. It seems that ELLs anticipate errors even before they put pen to paper, and they are aware of the harmful effects of errors on the final marks and grades.

As a case in point, the following passage produced by one of my EFL students as a part of a term examination paper wherein ELL students were asked to write a paragraph on the nature of teaching. The inconsistencies that infest the text seem to be a textbook case of most Algerian tertiary students' (and Arab students' for that matter) writing-associated errors :

Teaching is the imparting Knowledge and skills through a method. and it could be verbal or non-verbal. The teacher in the classroom consider like a leader from their students, and he instruct by given an advances and instructions for facilitate way for Learning and Seek a Knowledge. The teacher in the classroom have a great role. and the good teacher is who assessing learners and motivate them for learn easily. Furthermore, the teacher in the classroom is (like) main person in the operation of learning. and A good teacher also who can create an appropriate Situations an for their learners. and also encourage students for learning without any barriers. In the end the teacher should be know (their) her role because he is the main element in the operation of learning.

The examination of the passage discloses that inconsistencies could be categorized into three classes:

Table 2 : ELLs’ Writing-associated errors

Language-related Errors	Reasoning-relating Errors	Emotion-related Errors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Poor grammar+inappropriate use of tenses+punctuation+unnecessary words+ informal diction+capitalization+Confusion of British & American spellings, etc. ➤ poor use of cohesive devices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ badly crafted ideas + poor delivery+ poor vocabulary choice+ making false assumptions (namely, as we know...) + generalizations+misquoting, etc. ➤ Poor coherence 	<p>-Low self-esteem is deliberately taught in Algeria. TT do not believe in students’ <i>self-efficacy</i> (i.e., belief in being able to perform a task at a specified level) and <i>self-perception</i> (i.e., evaluation of one’s competence).</p>

Writing assignments are stressful for ELLs. These are often anxious that their written productions will be “mocked at” or detracted from its real value or merit. Hyland (2008) echoes “They feel that their own ideas are not important, and so they face writing as retelling the ideas of other people”. In broad terms, ELLs have problem writing good grammar texts;

some have trouble because they have a poor repertoire ; others have trouble crafting their good ideas in an elegant style.

Good writers follow an established pattern when they undertake to write academic papers. Research reveals that good writers concern themselves with text-generating ideas, then they take as long as it take to revise their written products, and finally they focus on discoursal features of the text.

12. What Works in AW

EFL students are generally reluctant and at times upset to be given a written assignment probably because they lack ideas, have poor lexicogrammatical *répertoire*, and above all else dread *negative feedback*. The latter proves to exercise tremendous pressure on their psyche and eventually chips away at their self-esteem. Berniger (2011, p.69) observes “students are often scarcely motivated to write”. Supporting this theory, Bell *et al.* (2010, p.276) note “writing essays is the bane of the student’s academic life”. Multifarious factors appear to frustrate students ; they span from linguistic to stylistic to psychological. Berniger (2011, p.69.) elaborates “ due to various interacting factors, such as low self-perception in writing competence and self-efficacy in writing, severe teaching evaluation of students’ written productions, and boring tasks, which are often unable to stimulate their involvement in writing”. In the same line of thought, Lundesford (in Clark 2011, p.14) attributes basic writers’ inability to write effectively to the fact they have “not reached a level of cognitive development that would help them to form abstractions”. As a remedial strategy, EFL teachers of writing may adopt the following:

12.1 Creativity & Innovation : Real-life tasks, surveys, interviews are to be implemented and encouraged.

12.2 Collaboration: Teamwork in writing may lead to better academic papers especially when each member of the team undertakes a particular task that facilitates the other student's.

12.3 Positive feedback: Feedback that is well planned and that targets to improve the work stylistically, thematically, linguistically, and intellectually adds to the validity of the written work. According to Hyland & Hyland (2019, p.xv) "Constructive feedback intended to raise writers' awareness of their language , improve their texts, and help them to learn to

use the language effectively has remained a core component of the second-language writing classroom for many years".

12.4 Self-efficacy : Berniger (2011, p.70) defines self-efficacy as “the individual’s belief in being able to perform a task at a specific level”. ELLs who think that they can complete a written task successfully are learners whose self-esteem is high and can rely on their skills to boldly overcome writing challenges.

12.45 Self-perception : Berniger (2011, p.70) identifies this construct as the “individual’s evaluation of his/ her competence in writing”. ELLs need be trained to engage in critical evaluation of their written production from different perspectives.

12.6 Humility : Self-centeredness and “smugness” undermine writers' efficiency. It is said that Hemingway rewrote one chapter of his novels fifty times to improve it. Efficient writers submit their written productions to different reviewers with a quiet hope to eradicate errors.

13. Omnibus Recommendations

From the very onset, the paper aspires to come up with a better understanding academic writing from a theoretical perspective. But, most importantly, a quiet hope is nursed to propose some guidelines to surmount the teaching of academic writing in EFL classes. The recommendations that follow are the inspired from what has been put forward so far:

- Sensitize students to the importance of developing their writing skills by encouraging students to write papers for local seminars and workshops, and attributing rewards awards to the best students' research papers

- Guidance instead of penalty should be implemented in writing classes. Academic writing is a long process and, therefore, it requires a great of patience and guidance. Genuine interest in students' written products by providing constructive feedback seems to be a necessary step to achieve efficiency in academic writing.

- Teachers need to effectively introduce and use ICTs in teaching academic writing, which would add a touch of creativity and innovation in teaching academic writing.
- Teachers ought not detract L1, its culture, and style in favor of L2. Hence, ELLs' self-esteem is not damaged. In so doing, teachers need to consolidate ELLs' belief in self-efficacy and self-perception.
- Teachers need to urge students to collaborate (i.e., a way of dealing with people which respects and highlights individual group members' abilities and contributions. There is a sharing of authority and acceptance of responsibility) and cooperate (i.e., set of processes which eventually help people interact together in order to accomplish a specific goal) to develop their (i.e., students') leadership and interpersonal skills.
- Teachers should target students' intellectual growth (brainstorming, library research, & questioning everything, etc.) through the assignment of engaging topics for research (e.g., field research and investigations are appealing as well as interesting).
- Engage ELLs in phonemic awareness and phonic activities. Bridging the gap between what is uttered and how it is graphically represented need be consciously approached.

14. Conclusion

Literacy in knowledge-based societies of the 21st c. has turned out to be a birthright, or to put it in Coulmas' words (2013, p. 1) "... a human right". Despite its importance, writing is a difficult skill to implement, especially in second and/ foreign language classes. This author may rightly put forward that writing is singularly the most challenging skill to teach and learn effectively particularly more so by non-native learners of English as well as would-be scholars. Murray & Moore (2006, p. 4) validate "Writing has often been recognized as *demanding* and sometimes *troublesome* dimension of academic life" (*emphasis* added). Academic writing is a craft which requires a significant effort and time amount from the part of the

ELL-writer to address some academic issues head-on. It is epiphanical to observe that ELLs are not genetically predisposed to be academic writers; all that they need to accomplish is to develop a “feel” to communicate their thoughts graphically. The latter may be aware of some writing mechanics, however, they do not prove to be familiar with the prerequisites to produce an effective academic piece. AW is a matter of training and perseverance; all it needs is a little faith in one’s abilities and the tripartite: practice, practice, and practice. Subsequently, AW cannot be claimed to be esoteric and/ or parochial. In common with other skills, the AW can be developed and improved through adopting different teaching strategies, but above all by raising teachers’ awareness as to the importance of implementing effectively AW. As a concluding comment, with the advent of technology, spread of knowledge, and easy access to information, it appears that there is a dire, growing need for writing more than ever inside and outside EFL classes.

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