

**Academic Writing Challenges of 1st Year Master Students at Dr. Tahar
Moulay University of Saida, and Suggested Remedies.**

Dr.MAROUF Nawel

University of Saida,Algeria , :nawelomar@hotmail.com

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Abstract:

Teachers of English at Dr.Tahar Moulay University of saida face challenges to teach the writing skill and especially academic writing to First year Master students of English as a foreign language. The present paper aims at investigating the academic writing problems that students encounter with the purpose to find practical solutions to this issue. In order to collect data, we distribute a questionnaire to 25 students selected randomly. The results obtained show that students' poor command of the basics of the English language is the reason for their low achievements in academic writing. Another reason is that students do not force themselves to learn writing for official purposes and that they do not feel it as a challenge. The study concludes by suggesting some solutions to this issue.

Key words:Academic writing, linguistic competence, writing skill, challenge, Dr. Tahar Moulay University of Saida.

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1.Introduction

Writing is an important skill required in all fields. However, academic writing is used by professors, scholars, and researchers to convey ideas and make arguments in a formal way following a set of rules. First, it requires a kind of structure such as introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion. Second, in academic writing evidence-based arguments should be provided, because it deals with the theories and causes of a given topic as well as investigating explanations and analyses of these theories. Finally, a significant difference between academic writing and other kinds of writing is referencing. The use of citations and quotations gives more credibility to the written text.

2.Background

Teaching academic writing to students of English as a foreign language or second language is of paramount importance. According to (Whitaker, 2009), academic writing is highly required for university courses. Students are supposed to show a kind of systematic understanding through asking good questions and developing critical arguments about the topic under discussion. To achieve that, a set of tasks are listed by Coffin, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis, and Swan(2003) when they determined what students need to do in academic writing:

Take up a position, Adopt a particular perspective. Put forward points for and against a particular position, explore possible positions, link theory and evidence, draw a conclusion, analyze, be critical, develop a central idea, use evidence to support an argument, express personal opinions, use personal interpretations. Therefore, academic writing if perfectly mastered by students can represent a tool for success at higher educational levels. Nevertheless, in practice writing in general and academic writing, in particular, is not an easy skill to be taught or learned. A lot of ELT students find academic writing difficult and its learning as problematic. For example, non-native speakers of English are often reported to have difficulties with grammar, lexis, syntax (Rose,1985). These difficulties are worsened when faced with more complicated tasks as organizing ideas, defending claims, or addressing readers (Belcher, 1994). The fact that makes students reluctant to summarize and paraphrase other's work (Amin and Alamin, 2012), instead they have recourse just to copying and pasting.

3.Factors affecting the academic writing difficulties

Among several causes listed by Can (2009), the issue of culture remains worthy of discussion. The students' dependence on teachers is still the way of learning in

higher education. Rote memorization with short-term objectives overwhelms EFL classrooms. Thus they acquire poor opportunities to be trained as critical thinkers, and their "critical thinking and analytical abilities are not practiced or utilized in class"(Chou, 2011,p.54). Secondly, poor command in the target language i.e., English may also cause academic writing challenges, when students cannot practice the language in a limited amount of time(Javid and Umer, 2014). As a consequence, students strive to understand the language first to cope with institutional literacy as a result of low proficiency in the language(pineteh, 2012). Therefore, their main difficulties comprise grammatical errors, incorrect punctuation and spelling, irregular verbs, and inappropriate choice of vocabulary. Thirdly, another cause of academic writing challenges is the issue of large class sizes. Teachers of these classes complain about too large classes emphasizing the importance of giving effective feedback to each student's written assignment, in this sense, Bailey(2008) claimed that "regular feedback through one-on-one interaction between students and lecturers could be impossible and the focus would only be on pass rates"(p.2). Lack of reading input and comprehension skills is another factor that causes inadequacy of writing skills. According to Yagado (2006), reading extensively is the only way to get a deep-seated understanding of how to use punctuation, correct spelling, and construct complex sentences and grasp the meanings of words used in their writings. Meanwhile, the students who read much are usually considered skilled writers. Can (2009) has added the lack of confidence caused by the conflicting feedback provided by teachers. He claimed that students are not given constructive feedback that motivates them to improve their academic writing skills. However, some lecturers consider providing feedback as a waste of time especially in large size classes (Archer, 2007). Accordingly, the writing objectives will not be achieved since the students are not conscious of their weakness and strength that results in a repetition of the same mistakes in future writing assignments.

The present study contributes to the research on academic writing difficulties in terms of providing insights from Master I students of the department of English at Dr.Tahar Moulay University of Saida where English is taught as a foreign language.

4.Importance of the study

Limited research has been done in the Algerian universities on the challenges the students face with regard to academic writing. Master I students have received five years of study of academic writing encompassing modules of written expression, techniques of research, research proposal, academic writing. Nevertheless, these students show tremendous weakness in writing skills in general and academic writing in particular. The results obtained from the current study may offer valuable

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insights to both teachers and program designers to find solutions to the situation and to enable lecturers to know about their students' needs and hence to equip them with adequate knowledge and skills in writing.

5. Research questions

- 1-What are the difficulties encountered by Master I students in academic writing?
- 2-What are the causes of these difficulties?
- 3-How can we overcome these challenges?

6. Methodology

6.1 Participants:

The subjects were 25 Master I students who study English as a foreign language and who are supposed to start writing their Master dissertation to obtain a Master degree either in didactics or in literature and civilization.

6.2 Research method

A questionnaire delivered to 25 Master I students were used to gathering the data relevant to the present paper (see appendix A). It includes four sections: background information (section one), linguistic proficiency and attitudes towards academic writing (section two), students' difficulties and challenges (section three), and suggested remedies and solutions to academic writing challenges in section four. Quantitative and qualitative data were provided through close-ended and open-ended questions used in the questionnaire. Particularly, in section three and four.

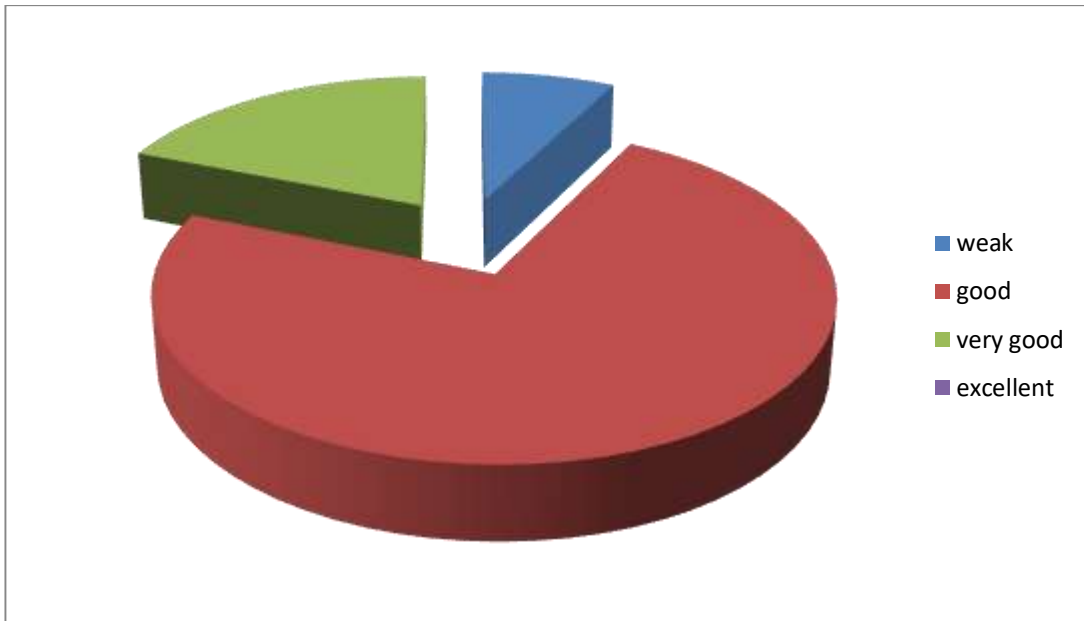
6.3 Procedure

Firstly, a pilot study was conducted to achieve the validity of the questionnaire. Some modifications were held after giving the questionnaire to four students. Then, a total number of 25 questionnaires were distributed among Master I students at Dr. Tahar Moulay University of Saida. After collecting data all the collected questionnaires were reported as valid. The data was analyzed and discussed supported by the review of literature, and eventually, a set of recommendations were suggested.

7. Findings and discussions:

The first two sections of the questionnaire were meant to investigate the students' level, their reading commitment (section one), then measuring their linguistic proficiency and attitudes towards academic writing. As far as the first section is concerned i.e. background information,

Figure 1. Students' Level in English



and as shown in figure 1, 78% of students labeled their level in English as good, whereas, 8% expressed that their level is weak. At the same time, 20% said that their level is very good and none of them said that they are excellent in English.

As for the second question(how often do you read books?), 20% of the students said that they always read books, articles. While 36% claimed that they rarely or often read. The table below shows the students' results:

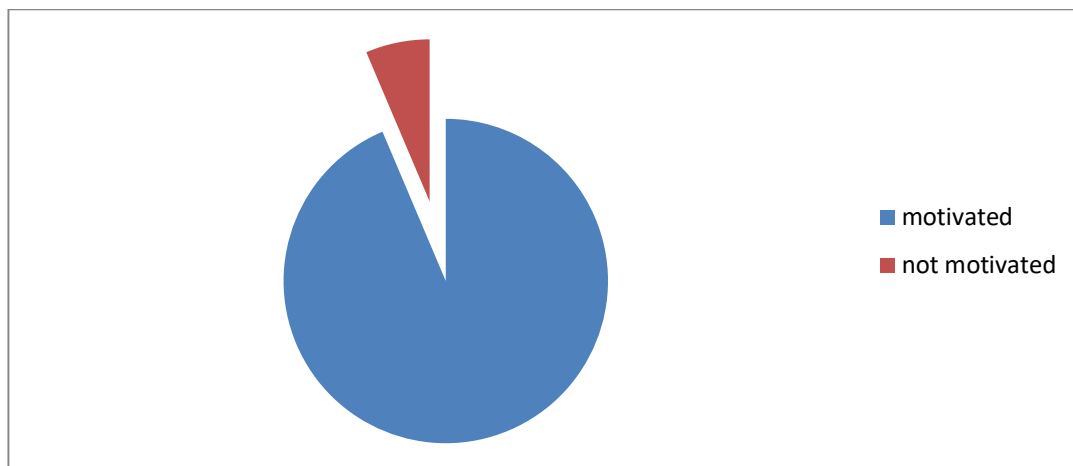
Table 1: The percentage of students' reading habits.

Always		often		Rarely		Never		Total	
5	20%	9	36%	9	36%	1	1%	25	100%

Section two: linguistic proficiency and students' attitudes towards academic writing: As far as the first question is concerned, 78% of the participants claimed that they find it very important to learn academic writing, and 6% of them consider it as important. While none of them expressed that academic writing is not very important or not important at all. In the second question which aims at gauging the students' motivation towards learning academic writing, the results revealed that 88% are motivated and 6% are not motivated. The figure below illustrates these results:

Figure 2: Students' motivation towards academic writing

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The results obtained from question three which investigates the students' writing strategies can be summarized in the following table:

Table2: Students' writing strategies

Strategies	Always		Usually		Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Never		Total	
1-I usually write in English in my free time	3	12%	5	20%	9	36%	7	28%	1	4%			25	100%
2-I check regularly and carefully the writing instructions.	6	24%	4	16%	2	8%	4	16%	7	28%			23	2 missed answers
3-I discuss the writing assignments with my classmates.	3	12%	3	12%	3	12%	7	28%	7	28%	2	8%	25	100%
4-I brainstorm and set a list of ideas about the topic I'm going to write about.	2	8%	7	28%	1	4%	14	56%	1	4%			25	100%
5-I set an outline of the main points of my topic.	6	24%	6	24%	1	4%	11	44%	1	4%			25	100%

6-I revise my writing content and modify where necessary.	4	11 %	2	8%	3	12%	19	76%	/	/			25	100%
7-I usually edit the grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation errors.	2	8 %	7	28%	4	16%	11	44%	1	4%			25	100%
8-I give more importance to the ideas and the content	12	48 %	9	36%	1	4%	1	4%	/	/			23	2missed answers
9-I more importance to the language(grammar, spelling, punctuation).	13	52 %	7	28%	4	16%	1	4%	/	/			25	100%

Section three was devoted to select among a set of difficulties Master

I Students' challenges in academic writing. 36% of them said that they are unable to use language correctly, 44% claimed that they cannot use appropriate academic vocabulary, 32% expressed that they are unable to create cohesion and coherence between paragraphs, 16% cannot express their voice, while 24% struggle with vocabulary and 84% find referencing and citation as a hard task for them. In the last question of this section which was an open-ended question, one of the students mentioned that s/he has a problem with punctuation and that s/he makes usually grammar errors the fact that affects the written text. Other students added that plagiarism is also problematic since they do not know how to avoid plagia. A student claims that s/he usually find difficulty in reordering the ideas after brainstorming to construct a coherent paragraph. Another one expressed that s/he doesn't succeed to manage time either in daily writing activities or in writing a whole research paper.

Section four was devoted to determining in a scale ranging from very useful to not useful at all as solutions to the above-mentioned difficulties. The results obtained are shown in the table below:

Table3. Suggested remedies to academic writing challenges.

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Remedies	v.usful		Useful		Somewhat useful		Not useful at all	
1-Providing the students with the appropriate reading material to be used as references when needed.	12	48%	12	48%	1	4%	/	/
2-Train teachers on ways to help students to improve their academic writing by making it an integral unit in all the modules.	10	40%	13	52%	2	8%	/	/
3-Teaching students how to brainstorm ideas, prepare an outline for their topics, and follow the main stages (planning, writing, and editing)	15	66%	10	40%	/	/	/	/
4-Students should spend more effort to learn academic writing and increase the amount of time in practicing English writing assignments.	11	44%	11	44%	2	8%	1	4%

8.Interpretation of the Results

The analysis of students' questionnaire and interviews reveal that they are conscious of the importance of academic writing. Yet they show no readiness to overcome the challenges of the writing process. For instance, 36% of them claim that they rarely or often (equally) read books or articles taking into account that reading is one of the most effective strategies that may help students improve their writing skills in general and particularly academic writing competence. Students should spend a long time reading English books, and articles to be acquainted with the structure of this written material and to gradually learn how to practice academic writing style. Accordingly, it is highly emphasized that students should read frequently to improve their abilities to write academically. In fact, Krachen(1993) has already affirmed that reading helps students acquire language skills unconsciously.

As for Master I students' challenges, the results show that the difficulties they face while writing is resulting from their unwillingness to apply what they have already learned. For example, a considerable number of the participants claimed that they rarely practice writing out of the classroom. They expressed also that they rarely discuss the writing assignments with their classmates(28%), taking into regard that working cooperatively or in groups enables them to acquire new skills and competencies in various domains, especially writing. Working in groups may also help the learners discuss arguments and present critical views about different issues.

The students' neglect of the conventional phases of writing is meant to be a crucial reason for their failure in the writing tasks. They always miss brainstorming as very important. As shown in table 2, 56% of the students rarely use this strategy before the writing phase. In addition to brainstorming 44% of the participants rarely set an outline for their writing tasks. Editing is another hurdle that students usually don't give much importance to, in fact, 44% rarely edit or revise either the content or the grammar, vocabulary, spelling, or punctuation errors. According to the results obtained from section three of the questionnaire, Master I students' difficulties can be summarized as follow :

Referencing, paraphrasing, and citation: Students usually find it difficult to transfer their own voice using their own style. They find problems with paraphrasing(24% of them expressed their inability to paraphrase). While 84% consider referencing and citation as a big obstacle, Wallace, Schirato, and Bright(1999) claimed that this is due to the students' lack of awareness of its significance in addition to involving a lot of details due to their ignorance of the techniques of paraphrasing and citation. The second significant difficulty is the linguistic abilities of the students, 36% of the students consider themselves unable to use accurately parts of speech,

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appropriate vocabulary, or even connectors. As for coherence and cohesion, 32% of the students find achieving the two techniques quite difficult, they usually fail to make cohesive devices in well structured and organized pieces of writing. In this context, Wenyu and Yang(2008), pointed out that students who follow a clear outline and plan find it easy to organize their ideas and relate them to each other, and this is unfortunately not the case of the participants of the present paper.

Another challenge may be attributed to the difficulty the students find in expressing their own ideas about a given issue since they do not have a piece of sufficient background information about the topic they write about. This may be referred to as the lack of reading habits. Lack of confidence is a significant reason that may hinder students' abilities to write academically. They consider themselves less experts to write on a certain issue.

All in all, one can relate the above-mentioned difficulties to one reason implied from the students' unreadiness and unwillingness to spend any effort to improve their academic writing competencies. This reason is the lack of motivation among students. The students' more concern is getting degrees rather than contributing to the body of knowledge as pointed out by Shah et al.(2011) who argued that " the development of writing competence demands that students be motivated to succeed" .(p.08)

9.Suggested Remedies and Conclusions

Based on the results obtained from the study at hand, a set of solutions and recommendations are provided to face the students' difficulties to improve their writing abilities.

Devote more time for the practice of writing: students should be oriented to take responsibility for their learning. They should be conscious about their shortcomings in the language, in discussing arguments by thinking critically, or in paraphrasing; and this can not be achieved but by practicing. Students should also spend more effort and show full commitment to the writing process. Moreover, given that students are speakers of English as a foreign language, good supervision is of paramount importance. They have to be mentored by their teachers to ensure their immersion in a language learning environment. Curriculum designers and lecturers should give more interest to courses like academic writing since it is the sole way that guarantees the learners success.

Adapting a reading- to write model: According to (Plakans and Gebril, 2012), the integration of the reading with writing has many advantages, it includes the following steps: reading to gain ideas about the topic, shaping opinion on the topic,

using source texts for evidence, and using source texts for language support. Other advantages may include developing critical thinking through reading to various scholars, the fact that makes the learner able to shape his own analysis and views about different topics. As has been already emphasized, most scholars agree that reading widely can improve the learner's writing, and in the process of writing the logical thinking, abilities will be enhanced (Cavdar and Doe, 2012; Gao Qiuping, 2013). Moreover, linguistic proficiency together with many other competencies might be constructed naturally and this is thanks to the long time commitment to reading. The responses to the questions of the interview have also stressed the big role of reading in developing the students' quality of writing. For example, one of them highlighted its importance as follows « I think we should read more books and articles, and even newspapers in order to gain information, we need also more effort in practising academic writing. I believe that practicing is the only way to improve our writing skills» Another participant had this to say " enhancing academic writing requires reading more frequently and at a larger scale, more attentively paying attention to the strategies the various authors use in their writings " .

Training students for relevant references, and paraphrasing techniques, and in-text citation: Teachers have a big role to perform in training students to effectively search for useful references. Showing them how to find these resources should be also one of the priorities of the university in general, and not only teachers. The Librarians should specify part of the time to habituate students to have access to different references. Avoiding plagiarism should also be emphasized by the teachers and the administration staff. They have to make sure that their students master the techniques of paraphrasing the other writers' words, they should know how to use quotations, and how to write citations and reference lists accurately (Peccori, 2008).

Language proficiency and writing conventions: In addition to the students' consciousness about their linguistic shortcomings and the necessity to be fully committed to practice writing, the teachers should exert a lot of effort to search for contemporary teaching methods to help student react positively in the classroom to achieve a high level of linguistic proficiency. This is through using good dictionaries and contemporary authentic materials. The teacher and the institution might create a cultural background that assure an immersing environment that motivates the learners to be self-confident to write and express their ideas. Respecting the writing conventions should be also a priority for the teachers, with their assistance, the students should be taught to brainstorm and set an outline before starting the writing assignment. Respecting the three main stages of writing

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i.e. planning, writing, and editing must be a habit since the first year of study in language courses.

Evaluating the students' pieces of writing is usually missing, but it can be considered as a crucial phase that helps students discuss their mistakes and errors with their teachers and mates to avoid them in the future.

10.Limitations of the study

The present study investigated a small number of Master I students in Moulay Tahar university of Saida(this is because of the special circumstances imposed by the Covid 19 pandemic that limit the presence of students in the universities). Therefore, an investigation of a larger sample might result in in-depth data on the present issue. Consequently, different challenges and related factors may be figured out in future research with a larger number of participants and better circumstances.

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