

Academic Writing Needs of Research Scholars in an Indian University

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of a study conducted on a group of research scholars from Arts and Humanities in an Indian university. The main objectives were to determine i.) their awareness and perception towards their academic writing needs in English, ii) the strategies that they adopted to deal with the challenges in academic writing, and iii) whether they felt the need for the inclusion of academic writing courses in their course work. The study was a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods where the participants responded to both objective and descriptive questions. The findings revealed the perceived problem areas and the challenges that they face while writing, the strategies they adopt to deal with them and the lack of awareness of academic writing needs among the scholars. Finally, it highlights the 'want' for the inclusion of effective academic writing courses.

Key words: academic writing; challenges; research scholars; perceptions; local skills; global skills

Introduction

Schleppegrell (2012) defines 'academic language' as a new set of registers with differences across disciplines. She cites Cummins (1981, 1984) who distinguished between interpersonal language and academic language. Cummins had highlighted features like more complex sentences and a specific type of vocabulary that characterize academic language. Archer (2010) as cited in Pineteh (2014), has defined the "language of academia" as "a very specialized discourse which presents a problem for all students whether they are first or second language speakers of English". Student success in any university is inextricably about developing a 'voice', a culture of intellectual enquiry and "aspects of social integration which involve the affective dimensions of their engagement with higher education" (Beard, Clegg & Smith 2007 as cited in Pineteh, 2014). This 'language of academia' is mostly manifested through writing and speaking, and as observed by Tan (2011) as cited in Javadi-Safa (2018) the ability to write effectively for academic purposes is considered to be very important for academic success.

Various studies have revealed that tertiary level

students' struggle to write for academic purposes. Lin and Morrison (2021) had observed in their study that L2 students find academic writing difficult. They listed three factors to explain this phenomenon. Firstly, they need to engage in more complex writing tasks like writing theses, journal articles and proposals. Secondly, they need to write with a specific target audience in mind. Lastly, academic writing demands more critical thinking on the part of the writers. These problems are further compounded by the lack of adequate writing proficiency in English.

In India, English is the accepted language for academic writing for research purposes. In the context of the Indian universities, a lack of awareness about the importance of academic writing is apparent. Though Ph.D. course work was introduced to familiarize research scholars with the different aspects of research work viz. research methodology, research ethics etc., there is no academic writing component. The absence of an academic writing component may be due to a number of factors like lack of awareness as mentioned above or lack of trained faculty to teach writing to research scholars from various disciplines.

The result of an absence of such courses is that

research scholars struggle with academic writing in English. This problem is compounded by the fact that English is an L2 for most of the research scholars, and most of them are not very proficient in the language. Consequently, there is a gap that is observed between the cognitive and linguistic ability of the students. Matters are further complicated by the general attitude among the academia that if you are good in your subject matter, you will be able to write. However, academic writing has its own rigor. The characteristics of academic writing can be identified as highly coherent and cohesive writing that are considered as criteria to assess the quality of the text. (Witte and Faigley, 1981 cited by Wischgoll, 2017).

The research questions that were formulated to achieve the objectives of this study were:

1. What is the level of awareness and the perceived academic writing needs among the participants?
2. What are the prevailing practices of L2 research scholars in managing the challenges that they encounter in their academic writing?
3. Is there a perceived need for training in academic writing?

Literature review

According to Lin and Morrison (2021), there is very limited research on the problems faced by graduate students in their academic writing. They have mentioned Hyland's (2016) work on students' perception on the academic writing challenges in Hong Kong, and the strategies formulated to tackle them. Some of the strategies were textual appropriation often leading to plagiarism, developing peer support networks etc. Their own study was conducted to determine the academic writing challenges faced by postgraduate L2 engineering students. The study revealed a number of interesting differences between the student and the faculty regarding academic writing challenges.

Another important study in this area was done by Phothongsunan (2016) who determined the challenges faced by Thai university lecturers in publishing their

academic work in English. As opposed to the focus of the present study that only looked at the writing aspect of research, Phothongsunan's work covered the challenges faced during the publication process. One of the findings that has a bearing on the present study were the difficulties faced while writing in English viz. problems in grammar, lack of technical vocabulary, sentence formation and writing styles. This study also reported most of the respondents as advocating the need for Thai university lecturers to be more involved in 'research domains and activities' and setting up of English writing centers or language labs for 'language editing support'. This study also asserted that academic writing programs for lecturers should be launched by universities to support lecturers in their academic writing endeavours based on 'their specific needs in writing'.

Defazio et al's (2010) paper shares the experiences of four faculty of an American university while teaching academic writing to undergraduate students. All four adopted different strategies to teach writing to their respective groups, and in all four cases, the students' writing improved. Recently, a number of studies have been conducted to determine the perception of students towards strategies that they use while using EAP. One such study was the one conducted by Mazgutova and Hanks (2021) on a cohort of Chinese students. The students shared that they could perceive an increase in the use of writing strategies after the intensive EAP training. These studies validate the importance of teaching academic writing strategies that benefit students.

Methodology

Fifty six research scholars from an Indian university were invited to participate in this study. They were from diverse disciplines like Economics, Commerce, Women's Studies, Geography, History and Sociology. The ages of the participants ranged from 25 to 35 years. All 56 research scholars voluntarily participated in the survey.

This study was a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses. The questionnaire was created in Google Forms and shared with the research

scholars. It had a combination of objective and descriptive questions that aimed to determine the following constructs.

- the attitude of the research scholars towards academic writing in English
- the challenges that they faced while writing for academic purposes
- the most common strategies that they adopted to deal with the challenges
- the need for academic writing course as a component of their respective research programmes

The objective responses were quantified using descriptive statistics, whereas the descriptive ones were thematically analysed to answer the research questions.

Findings

i. Level of awareness about academic writing among the participants

All the participants claimed that writing for research purposes is different from other types of formal writing e.g. writing a formal email, an application etc. A few bases for the difference that were provided by the research scholars were: formal style of writing, specific format, academic register, use of complex sentence structure, neutral tone, discipline specific vocabulary, in-text citations and references, critical thinking etc. A couple of verbatim statements made by the respondents are provided below.

- *We have to follow certain structures with the whole academic writing process. Need to maintain distance from the argument in the form*

of being impartial.

- *in terms of the organisation, it has to be systematic. It is usually started by general statement and followed by the details or supporting ideas. The style of writing should be formal. in term of sentence structure, it usually uses more complex sentences in order to make the paragraph brief but also dense. In addition the selection of vocabulary is different too. Some academic words are required.*

A significant number (75 %) of the respondents maintained that the type of academic writing that is required in their subject is different from that of other subjects. The different aspects of writing that emerged were vocabulary, style, sentence structure and format and organization. Of these, vocabulary and format and organization were the most common. On the other hand, 42.8% maintained that academic writing does not differ across disciplines. The major themes that emerged for no difference were the same pattern in terms of format and organization and discipline specific writing.

A few verbatim statements of the respondents on how it is different are presented below.

- *Yes, it is different. I am in humanities. Although my research also needs to be objective the sentence structure and format is very different from science research projects*
- *Language of social science is different from science subjects as it involves more qualitative data.*

ii. The perceptions of research scholars towards the different aspects of their academic writing skills.

Table 1: The ratings by research scholars on different aspects of their academic writing

| Sl. No. | Items | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
|---------|--|----|----|----|---|---|
| 1. | I can effectively use appropriate vocabulary and word forms | 7 | 25 | 18 | 4 | 2 |
| 2. | I can use a variety of sentence structures | 8 | 22 | 19 | 4 | 3 |
| 3. | I can write using an academic style and tone | 7 | 19 | 23 | 4 | 3 |
| 4. | I can write a good academic paragraph | 4 | 22 | 20 | 5 | 3 |
| 5. | I can logically support and develop my main point | 10 | 22 | 17 | 5 | 2 |
| 6. | I can write an accurate summary of information that I have read in English | 10 | 24 | 19 | 2 | 1 |
| 7. | I can write an accurate paraphrase of information that I have read in English | 8 | 24 | 19 | 2 | 2 |
| 8. | I can write accurate quotations in English | 7 | 19 | 22 | 4 | 3 |
| 9. | I can write a good academic research paper | 3 | 18 | 25 | 4 | 4 |
| 10. | I can write appropriate research questions to guide my research process | 8 | 20 | 19 | 6 | 3 |
| 11. | I can use various patterns of organization (e.g. comparison, process description, cause and effect etc.) | 7 | 16 | 25 | 4 | 4 |
| 12. | I can use a logical pattern of paragraphs | 3 | 27 | 18 | 4 | 3 |
| 13. | I can use accurate in-text citations using MLA | 6 | 22 | 17 | 6 | 4 |
| 14. | I can write an outline to logically organize my ideas before writing | 6 | 21 | 21 | 5 | 1 |
| 15. | I can write an appropriate reference list | 13 | 26 | 11 | 2 | 4 |
| 16. | I can write an appropriate literature review | 11 | 22 | 17 | 3 | 3 |
| 17. | I can write an appropriate abstract | 9 | 23 | 18 | 2 | 4 |
| 18. | I can write keeping in mind a target audience | 9 | 24 | 17 | 2 | 4 |
| 19. | I can write accurate quotations | 7 | 17 | 24 | 3 | 4 |

iii. Views on problem areas

Participants were asked to select the aspects of academic writing that they found problematic. Global

skills are a problem in academic writing as can be observed in the following table.

Table 2: Research scholars' perception of their problem areas in academic writing

| Skills | Problem areas in academic writing | N (56) | % |
|---------------|---|--------|------|
| Local skills | Using appropriate vocabulary | 15 | 27.3 |
| | Writing long grammatically acceptable sentences | 17 | 30.9 |
| | Writing texts longer than a sentence | 12 | 21.8 |
| Global skills | Writing in an acceptable tone and style | 28 | 50.9 |
| | Writing with coherence and cohesion | 22 | 40 |

iv. The perception of the research scholars about their supervisor's opinion of their academic writing skills.

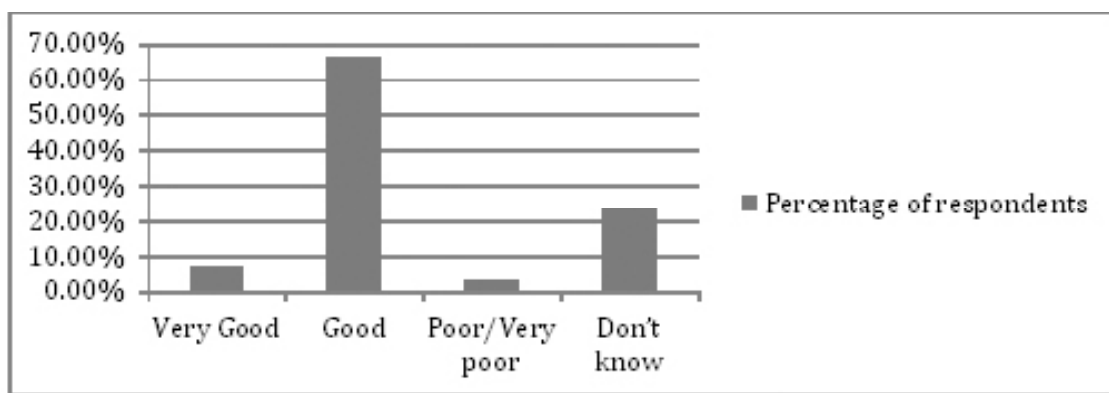


Fig. 1: Research scholars' perception of their supervisor's opinion of their academic writing

v. Motivation to write longer academic texts

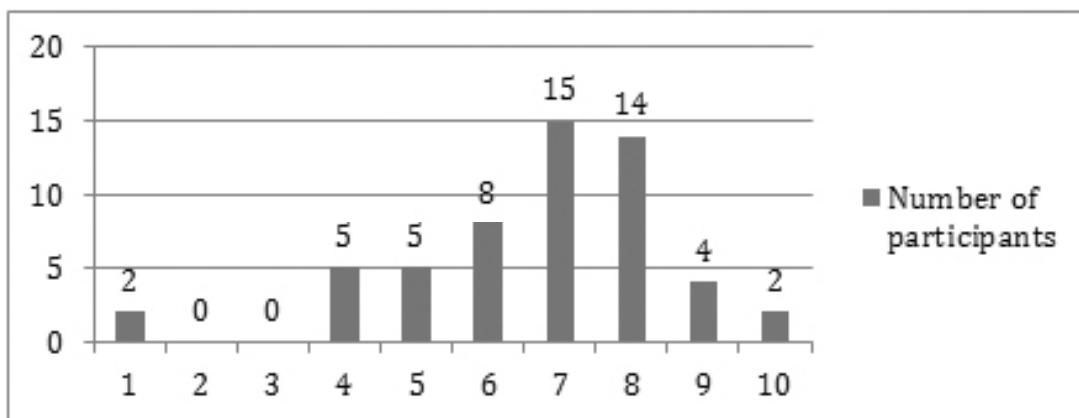


Fig. 2: Motivation of research scholars to write longer texts.

vi. Prevailing practices of L2 research scholars in managing the challenges they encounter in their academic writing?

Table 3: Prevailing practices of research scholars in managing the challenges they encounter in their academic writing

| Sl. No. | Strategies to deal with challenges | Percentage of respondents |
|---------|--|---------------------------|
| 1. | Take help from existing research papers | 54.5 |
| 2. | Take help from supervisors | 18.2 |
| 3. | Learn on my own | 9.1 |
| 4. | Take help from fellow research students, try to write in my native language first, and then translate into English | 18.2 |

vii. Need for training in academic writing

Table 4: The stages in their academic career when they received training in writing long texts.

| Type of writing | Stage of academic career | Percentage of respondents |
|-----------------|--|---------------------------|
| Non-academic | Never | 48.2 % |
| | At the graduate or post-graduate level | 30.4 % |
| | In school | 14.3 % |
| Academic | Never | 69.6% |
| | During post-graduation | 30.4 % |

A significant number (56.4 p.c.) said that academic writing is included in their Ph.D. or M.Phil coursework but they were not satisfied with the efficacy of those courses.

The reasons provided in Table 7 emerged from a thematic analysis of the responses obtained from the participants.

Table 5: Reasons mentioned by participants to include academic writing courses in Ph.D. programmes.

| Reason | Improve language structure | Build Confidence | Build Vocabulary | Use appropriate Style | Use appropriate tone | Cite and quote correctly etc. | Write review analysis | Write appropriately for intended audience |
|------------------------|----------------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|---|
| Number of participants | 4 | 7 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

A few verbatim statements of the respondents are given below.

- 1 *Yes. Writing classes facilitate the writing process and they can be really helpful for researchers as they are new to research writing. They can help us in understanding how to brainstorm ideas, write coherent text, organising ideas, etc.*
- 1 *Of course, it would! Those classes will help the interested students to hone their skills of academic writing process. They will also be of great help in the development of students as an academic. The trained students will be able to contribute comprehensively to the existing academic fields that they are interested in.*

Discussion

A discussion based on the research questions that were outlined earlier is provided below.

Research question 1: What is the level of awareness and the perceived academic writing needs among the participants?

All 56 research scholars responded that writing for research purposes is different from other types of formal writing e.g. writing a formal email, an application etc. A few bases for the difference that were provided by the research scholars were: formal style of writing, specific format, academic register, use of complex sentence structure, neutral tone, discipline specific vocabulary, in-text citations and references, critical thinking etc.

Academic writing is distinguished from non-academic writing by being more coherent, explicit and clearer, better organized, use of citation and reference to other works (Farahani & Mohemmed, 2018). The features of academic writing can be listed as exact language, complete sentences, well developed prose, adequately organized details, a clearly developed topic, and a formal academic discourse and it is based on facts and written with a serious tone and an objective stand based on highly investigated information (Pagliawan, 2017).

A significant number (75 %) of the respondents said

that the type of academic writing that is required in their subject is different from that of other subjects. Major themes that emerged were vocabulary, style, sentence structure and format and organization. Of these, vocabulary and format and organization were the common aspects. On the other hand, 42.8% maintained that academic writing does not differ across disciplines. The major themes that emerged for no difference were the same pattern in terms of format and organization and discipline specific writing. However, it may be noted here that of the 75 % who said that discipline-specific academic writing is different, 26.7 % of the respondents cited reasons that were not valid. They were mostly commenting on non-writing aspects of their research viz. the methodology and the type of data that were collected. This indicates a lack of awareness among the respondents about what is involved in writing as a process.

This finding aligns with studies conducted by Ezza et al. (2019) that revealed that writing in different disciplines also differs according to the approach to the audience. They observed that less experienced research scholars should acquire generic and discipline specific writing skills to function adequately in their disciplines. Their study revealed that participants wanted to be taught academic writing as a discipline specific skill.

As evident in Table 1, the research scholars gave themselves quite high scores in all the skills. The local skill that most of them felt that they lacked proficiency in was writing accurate quotations in English. The global skills that they thought they lacked proficiency in were writing with an academic style and tone, writing a good academic paragraph, writing quotations, using various patterns of organization, organizing ideas and writing accurate quotations. Therefore, they considered themselves less proficient in global skills like text organisation, idea development and awareness of audience needs compared to the local aspects of writing such as vocabulary, tense use and sentence structures.

When participants were asked to select the aspects

of academic writing that they found problematic, three local and two global skills found mention as problem areas in academic writing. More respondents mentioned global skills like writing in an acceptable tone and style and maintaining coherence and cohesion in their writing than local skills like vocabulary, sentence grammar and longer texts. This is an important finding, because it does not fully corroborate with Lin and Morrison's (2021) observation that vocabulary was the principal source of difficulty for their subjects (a group of undergraduate students), which is compounded by another two essential elements of academic writing, register (tone and style) and organisation (cohesion and coherence) (Evans & Morrison, 2018; Hinkel, 2011). This finding also shows a slight divergence from studies like Mazgutova and Hanks (2021) that revealed that student writers find linguistic aspects like grammar too in addition to cohesion, style and clarity to be more challenging than content and organisation related aspects of writing. However they also mentioned certain other studies that show an opposite trend.

It can be seen in Fig. 1 that the majority (66.1 p.c.) of the respondents claimed that their supervisor's considered their academic writing skills as 'good'. This indicates confidence on the part of the respondents about their academic writing skills. However, it was not clear what made them make that claim since the question was not followed up with questions on what made them think that the supervisors thought their writing skills to be 'good'. Another significant observation was that 23.2 p.c. of the scholars said that they 'Didn't know' what their supervisors' opinion about their writing was.

Since more than 50 p.c. (see Fig. 2) claimed that their motivation was either 7 or 8 on a scale of 10, it indicates quite a positive attitude towards the writing of longer texts. However 20 (35.7 p.c.) of them rated their motivation below 7. This number is also quite significant as it indicates a lower motivation towards writing longer texts. This finding corroborates with Büyükyavuz & Çakır's (2014) study which revealed that only half the participants (teacher trainees) wrote

in English outside the classroom.

Research Question 2: What are the prevailing practices of L2 research scholars in managing the challenges they encounter in their academic writing?

As shown in Table 3, a higher number of research scholars (54.5 p.c.) take help from existing research papers. As Corbett (1971) comments, imitation requires students to look closely and emulate the model. This can be an effective strategy, but if not done in the proper way, it might lead to plagiarism. The above findings corroborate with the results from studies like Dong's (1996, p.453) that have shown that most students approached their academic writing by "probing in the dark and learning from mistakes". Another strategy that they resort to is the use of "model" academic papers. Students have been seen to succeed in using these "textual resources", but that does not discount the fact that academic writing is a necessary skill that students need to be equipped with.

Research Question 3: Is there a perceived need for training in academic writing?

A very high number of participants (69.6 p.c.) claimed that they never received any training in academic writing (Table 4). A significant number (56.4 p.c.) said that academic writing is included in their Ph.D. or M.Phil coursework but they were not satisfied with the efficacy of those courses. All the participants responded positively to the inclusion of academic writing courses in PhD programmes. However, only a handful of participants (Table 5) could provide clear reasons that supported their opinion regarding the inclusion of such courses.

Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that research scholars are aware of a need for academic writing courses in English. However, the reasons for this perceived need may vary due to lack of awareness about the mechanics of academic writing. Though most of them claimed that the type of academic writing they did for their subject was different from other subjects, they were mainly talking about the

methodology of research in their disciplines rather than about the process of writing.

Motivation to write longer texts varied among the participants. Fewer participants claimed proficiency in local aspects of writing compared to the global skills. Half of them said they did not know what the supervisors thought about their academic writing and the other half said they thought it was 'good'. The most popular strategy to deal with their academic writing was found to be taking help from existing research papers. Studies have revealed that this strategy can work for the scholars but only with proper training. Significantly, almost all of them felt that academic writing classes facilitate the writing of academic texts more confidently and appropriately. It was evident from the data gathered that none of the participants received any effective training in academic writing throughout their academic life.

This paper makes a case for introducing effective academic writing in research programmes. It highlights the lack of awareness of academic writing needs among the respondents, the perceived problem areas and the strategies that they adopt to deal with the challenges and also the 'want' to include effective academic writing courses in the research programmes of their respective disciplines. This study suffers from a few drawbacks like the absence of the research supervisors' 'voice' that could have added a further dimension to the findings of this study and the lack of 'triangulation' of data as there were no follow up interviews to validate the responses of the participants.

In conclusion, this study discussed a number of pertinent issues that need to be addressed on an urgent basis in order to provide research scholars with the support that will enable them to write confidently and share their work with the world academia.

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