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## Student's Perceptions on Academic Writing Skills at Postgraduate Level in Public Sector Institutions of Pakistan

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### *Abstract*

*There is no ambiguity regarding the importance of English writing proficiency in non-native academic context. The academic writing skill is considered as indispensable knack at post graduate level in Pakistani Academia. But then again, it becomes a hard nut to crack for the higher education level learners to acquire it. Since English is considered as Second Language (ESL) in our perspective, therefore it has its own complications through which our learners go through to complete their professional degrees. In order to find out the core hitches and hurdles confronted by the ESL learners while writing Research Reports and Article, an electronic survey study was planned by the researchers. Therefore, through this survey study it was intended primarily to get actual information about the problematic academic writing areas of ESL learners. It was also planned to get the participants' point of views regarding their specific necessities in writing academically and technically, to be addressed in their teaching modules. One hundred participants from different public sector institutions participated in this survey. The researcher in the present study used, Cai's questionnaire (2017). It was adapted with few additions and deletions. The basic gears of the questionnaire dealt with 'Lacks', Wants' and 'Necessities' of ESL learners. The numerical and qualitative data extracted through this survey study was further analysed. Statistical analysis of quantitative scores was done in percentages, whereas the thematic analysis of the qualitative data was carried out to draw final findings with perfect precision. Based on the survey findings, major linguistic and syntactic skills were needed to be focused and addressed. In addition, interactive pedagogical practices and multiple instructional strategies were suggested and recommended strongly. This research has its own implications for designing and developing a more appropriate and more compatible pedagogical module for teaching Academic writing. Thus the study provides better picture of learner's needs and clear outline of the objectives to be kept in mind for curriculum and module development simultaneously.*

**Keywords**: Need Analysis, Academic writing Skills, English as a Second Language, Higher Education Level

## Introduction

English is taught as ESL (English as Second Language) in Pakistan from grade one onwards. It is made compulsory for the learners, till graduation to acquire English linguistic knowledge. As it was researched and concluded by Ahmed, Pathan & Khan (2017) that English language is also used as medium of instructions in broader sense in Pakistan. The basic requirement of English language learning is to write with clarity and precision Sudirman, Gemilang and Kristanto (2021). In this domain the learners' capability at post graduate level is gauged through Academic learning skills (Esfandiari, Meihami & Jahani, 2022). In academic writing, the writer is supposed to fabricate the argument to reach certain logical conclusion (Ma, 2021). There are different forms of academic writing as Wei (2013) enlisted the research report, term paper, analytical essay, and argumentative paper as main categories of academic writing.

The module of academic research is made mandatory at graduation and post-graduation levels for research students. Therefore, it has become the most important branch of writing skills. Lavelle and Bushrow (2007) and Vandermeulen et al. (2022) have also acknowledged the importance of academic writing. In their point of view, even the dissimilar ideas can also be knitted in an accurate

syntactic structure to present a new standpoint. But in our context, we still need to work hard to enhance it, As Mumtaz (2021) researched and presented the verdict that there is a grave dearth of academic writing skills in Pakistan. In fact, she found ESL learners being incapable even at tertiary stage of education.

*Statement of the Problem*

At higher education level, the ESL learners are expected to write research articles, reports, synopsis and finally a detailed Research Thesis. It is the mandatory requirement to complete bachelor and other higher degree programs in almost all disciplines. The writing tasks at postgraduate level are analytical and require critical literateness to synthesize the evidence drawn from data collection to prove and to conclude on certain and specific theory. At this stage, majority of our ESL learners are found helpless as their professors also expect a lot from them and consider that academic writing skill was to be imparted and mastered by their language teachers in previous classes (Fatima, Akbar & Akbar (2021). This sad state leads the ESL learners to mental pandemonium. Keeping this situation in mind the study in hand was planned to dig out the real explanations of learner's poor performance and what they really need to be taught and how to be taught while developing their academic writing abilities.

*The objectives of the study were as following:*

1.      To record the perceptions of ESL learners about the problematic and challenging areas of Academic writing skills at post graduate level.
2.      To find out the satisfaction level of participants regarding academic writing courses, if attended previously.
3.      To assess their satisfaction level, concerning the instructional strategies employed in previously attended academic writing classes.
4.      To discover the motives of ESL learners to learn academic writing skills and in which instructional stratagems.
5.      To locate the most demanded academic writing aspect, to be enhanced.

**Background of the study**

Recently, the importance of academic writing is multiplying and felt seriously. The value attached to academic writing is undeniable. Many of the researchers have conducted research on it from multiple dimensions. But at the same time it is most perplexing to acquire. It is considered to be the most demanding intellectual toil for learners to learn it. Through previous studies, the reasons of low proficiency in academic writing can be tracked. Abbad (1988) carried out a research with Yemeni EFL students to trace their real issue in learning academic writing skill. The issue of their interconnection in English became highlighted.

It was concluded by Munoz-Luna (2015), that academic writing is difficult to master because of its complicated nature.  Li (2007) stated that academic writing is a complex skill due to its broad range expertise. Ruggles (2012) figured out that the ESL learners have to take it as a big challenge and must strive hard. It was also endorsed by Munoz-Luna (2015),that academic writing is difficult to master because of its complicated nature. Attainment of adequate syntactic knowledge and sufficient vocabulary were derived as the biggest riddle in the achieving academic writing perfection in the research conducted by Tangpermpoon (2008). Zohaib et al. (2021), in an action research, found academic writing features improved by using content-based approach.

Apart from its complex nature, the researchers explored the other causes of low level of proficiency in academic writing. A study by Wei (2013) reached to the findings that a specialized and contextualized teaching capability is required to teach the skill of writing academically. Hayland (2003) in his book, suggested learner oriented classrooms with effective teaching strategies to improve the learning of academic writing. Al- Khasawneh & Maher (2010) rated inspirational and learner friendly classroom environment as important as the instructional strategies and methodologies to meet the objectives of teaching academic writing. He validated Abbad (1988)'s study and favored the Process approach of teaching.

In the national context of Pakistan, Fatima, Akbar and Akbar (2021) explored the reasons of poor academic writing ability in detail. After having an in-depth scrutiny of the statistics, most of the learners were found entangled in the linguistic and general writing problems i.e., lexical knowledge, syntax and appropriate expression. Other studies in Pakistan like; Kazi (2010), Mumtaz (2021), Sadia, Memon and Pathan (2021) and Iqbal (2021) were conducted in the context of Pakistan to dig out the issue in detail. They investigated thoroughly and built the stance that the Grammar Translation

method makes the classrooms teacher centred and hinders experiential learning. The students cannot interact and therefore no analytical and critical skills are brushed up. The learner stays dependent on the rote learning. Previously, Warsi (2004)'s research, rated obsolete textbooks and untrained novice teachers as the real causes of ESL learners' performance in academic writing. There is no doubt that teaching of critical and analytical skills in academic writing are tough and taxing and need special initiatives to equip our students with academic writing skills. Yasmin & Sohail (2017) recommended foreign linguistic exposure of our students to improve their academic writing abilities.

After having a profound and detailed review of literature, the researcher in present research decided to conduct an online survey to get the first-hand knowledge of student's problems and the frequency of these hitches in their way of learning academic writing skills. They were investigated about the teaching styles and their preferences in learning this skill too.

**Methodology of the Study**

It was descriptive research within the interpretivist paradigm. Descriptive research is the kind of research in which the researcher can better describe the features and characteristics of the sample population (Siedlecki, 2020). By adopting this type of research, the data is collected through wide range of when, what and why questions. The reason for employing interpretive paradigm was that it enables the researcher to record the subjective understanding of the participants on the issue to be researched. The subjects of the research build a subjective relationship with the researcher and gives authentic opinions. The method of survey was adopted to conduct this research. As Hutchinson (1988) also endorsed NA survey because it brings into light the basic and authentic target language needs of learners.

*Participants/Sample*

The sampling of this online survey was purposive. It was because, the purposive sampling enables the researcher to extract the dominant characteristics shared by entire target population (Patton, 2008; Rubin & Babbie, 2009).One hundred students of both genders, pursuing their studies at post graduate level were the respondents of this electronic survey. The major portion of the sample was comprised of those who were engaged in the teacher education and they registered their replies through (https: www.google.com/forms/about/).

*Instrument*

A Need Analysis (NA) survey questionnaire, premeditated by Cai (2017) was adapted with certain additions and deletions. The questionnaire designed by Cai (2017) was actually based on the framework of Hutchison and Waters (1987). Its relevance in the context of current research was evaluated through pilot testing. The NA questionnaire encompassed three sections. Firstly, demographic information of the respondents was required. Then it was divided into three more sections, titled as: Section I; Section II and Section III. The main sections were further subdivided into subsections for an in-depth data collection. Section I included 'General Writing Skills' and 'Language Problems' as sub sections. Section II was based on the inquires related to the previously attended academic writing courses and the Section III was designed to gather information about teaching practices and also included open ended questions to understand participants' preferences about academic writing learning and teaching at post graduate level. In broader sense, the intended information was collected comprehensively under the three sections: lacks; wants and necessities. The 'needs' signified the requirements of the target population. The 'lacks' stood for the expected performance, and 'Wants' were actually the actions to fill up the gaps and learning objectives of the learners. A Five-Likert scale, ranging from 'very easy' to 'very difficult' was used in the section I.
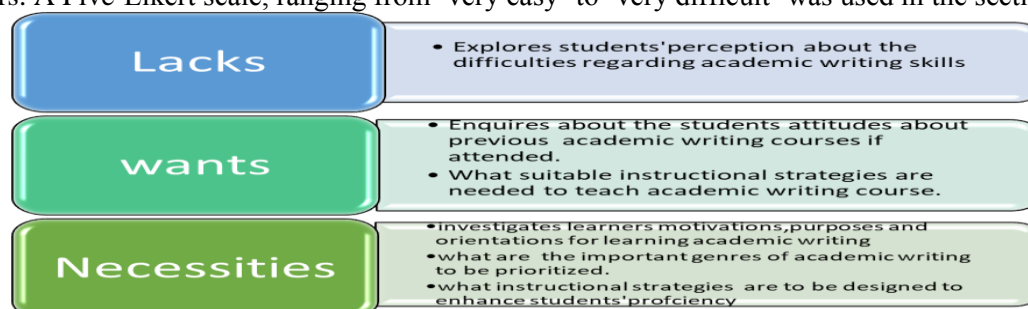


*Figure No. 1:* Three Gears of the NA Survey

Three open ended questions were basically incorporated to locate the specific needs of sample students regarding teaching methodologies. Only thirty minutes were needed to fill the questionnaire.

*Reliability and Validity of the Instrument*

The construct validity, face validity, and reliability of the instrument was confirmed through pilot testing. It was piloted with the 10% of the sample population. Expert's opinion and analysis was also pursued to rank the aptness of the NA questionnaire. The survey questionnaire got alpha coefficient value as .857, which was fairly acceptable.

*Procedure*

After pilot testing, the NA questionnaire was shared with registered participants online and the researchers continued to mail till 100 responses were obtained. The link as mentioned above was sent to them. The moment they filled the questionnaire, the quantitative results appeared in the form of tables and graphs. Enough space was provided in the questionnaire for the qualitative answers. The respondents were free to express their point of views.

*Analysis of Data*

The quantitative data derived from NA was analysed descriptively and the results were presented in the form of graphs. Both quantitative and qualitative responses were examined separately and were displayed independently as well. The findings were made clear and distinct through the pictorial display of results and outcomes. Murphy (2021) advocated the worth of data analysis. He ranked it as an essential feature of research studies. Similarly in the current research, the descriptive analysis was carried out. Since, three open ended questions were also made part of the NA questionnaire, the qualitative results were analysed through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Gibson and Brown (2009) previously approved this kind of analysis because of its flexibility, popularity and accessibility. Lastly, the codes were assigned and the themes were developed to be examined individualistically.

**Results and Findings**

Following were the findings of the NA survey in the response of the five research objectives, mentioned above under the heading of Objectives of the study (see section 3.1).

*Findings*

**Section I**

**Quantitative data findings:**

Table No.1: *Percentage of responses regarding 'general writing skills'*

| Sr# | Statements | Percentages | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | General Writing Skills | Very Easy | Easy | Moderate | Difficult | Very difficult |
| 1. | Writing introduction/ topic sentences | 19% | 25% | 35% | 17% | 4% |
| 2 | Reviewing and critiquing the previous research and creating a research gap | 02% | 18% | 33% | 32% | 15% |
| 3 | Writing research methodology | 08% | 26% | 41% | 18% | 13% |
| 4 | Summarizing and presenting data | 11% | 21% | 31% | 30% | 07% |
| 5 | Writing Commentaries and discussions on the data | 13% | 22% | 40% | 18% | 7% |
| 6 | Writing conclusions | 13% | 36% | 23% | 18% | 10% |
| 7 | Writing references / bibliography | 07% | 28% | 29% | 15% | 21% |

Statistical disposition in table1 shows that 56% respondents considered writing a topic from moderate to very difficult, whereas only 44% found it an easy task. Eighty percent post graduate students hesitated in reviewing and critiquing previous research whereas only 20% were at hand with the skill. Further, writing research methodology was difficult for 72% respondents and 34% could write with ease. Only 32% students could summarize easily whereas rest of 68% found it difficult from moderate to high level. Writing commentaries and discussion was also a difficult task for 65% students whereas, 35% wrote it easily. Writing conclusion remained difficult for almost 51% and the rest 49% did it easily. Likewise, 65% students found difficult to write references correctly whereas, only 35% could it correctly.

**Section II**

Table No. 2: *Percentage of responses on 'language problems'*

| Sr# | Statements | Percentages | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Language Problems | Very Easy | Easy | Moderate | Difficult | Very difficult |

| Sr.# | Statements | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Always |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Understanding the specific language features of the academic genre (such as research paper) | 05% | 18% | 37% | 27% | 13% |
| 2 | Using appropriate syntax to freely build up the sentences and paragraphs | 08% | 22% | 43% | 18% | 09% |
| 3 | Summarizing / synthesizing | 05% | 29% | 33% | 25% | 08% |
| 4 | Paraphrasing Skill to maintain precision | 07% | 20% | 45% | 21% | 07% |
| 5 | Writing coherent paragraphs | 08% | 21% | 37% | 24% | 10& |
| 6 | Using Punctuation correctly | 07% | 32% | 37% | 21% | 03% |
| 7 | Linking sentences smoothly / transition | 07% | 36% | 30% | 21% | 06% |

The table no. 2 reveals that understanding the specific language was remained problem for 70% students from moderate to high level. Using appropriate syntax was difficult for 73% respondents and 30% found it easy. Sixty six percent were in a fix to summarize and synthesize the text whereas, 44% did it easily. A large number of participants, 73% found paraphrasing a difficult task at different levels and only 27% were able to do it easily. Likewise, 71% students found writing coherent paragraphs difficult whereas, 29% were able to do it easily. Sixty one percent students had poor punctuation whereas 39% perceived it an easy skill. Transition was difficult for 51% and rest of the half found it an easy task.

Table 3. *Percentages of The Previous Academic Writing Courses*

| Sr.# | Statements | Percentage of YES | Percentage of NO |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Is there any academic writing (or thesis / research paper writing) course offered at your university for undergraduate students? | 70% | 30% |
| 2 | Have you taken any academic writing (or thesis writing) course during your undergraduate studies? | 45% | 55% |
| 3 | Are you satisfied with their previous Academic Writing Course | 48% | 52% |

Table no. 3 indicates that for the general information about whether a course on academic writing was taught to them at any level, 70% respondents answered in yes and likewise, when they were asked for if they had availed that course, only 45 affirmed the statement. Fifty two percent out of 100 were not satisfied with their academic writing course.

**Section III (A)**

Following were the findings of this research study about:
1. The Previous Teaching Practices/activities in Academic Writing Course.
2. What types of teaching activities took place in your previous academic writing class?

Table No. 4. *Percentage of teaching activities in the academic writing classroom*

| Sr# | Statements | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Always |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | The key textbook used in class | 21% | 18% | 29% | 20% | 12% |
| 2 | Provision of supplementary handouts | 9% | 23% | 32% | 26% | 10% |
| 3 | Supplementary authentic research papers as models | 25% | 27% | 28% | 16% | 04% |
| 4 | Supplementary exercises | 13% | 36% | 26% | 19% | 06% |
| 5 | Academic grammar drills | 14% | 23% | 30% | 20% | 13% |
| 6 | Academic vocabulary drills | 16% | 21% | 30% | 24% | 09% |
| 7 | Academic writing exercises | 09% | 24% | 30% | 27% | 10% |
| 8 | Academic writing practices to improve coherence of the written script | 15% | 24% | 26% | 22% | 13% |
| 9 | Paraphrasing drills | 14% | 23% | 33% | 21% | 09% |
| 10 | Writing comprehension exercises of academic research articles | 19% | 30% | 25% | 17% | 09% |
| 11 | Analytical exercises of research papers | 26% | 22% | 24% | 11% | 7% |

Table no. 5 above shows that 61% students opined that the textbook were often used in the class. Sixty eight percent respondents agreed that supplementary handouts were given in the class.

Only 48% pointed out that authentic research papers were presented as models. Fifty one percent had supplementary exercises. Sixty three percent had grammar drills, 63% had vocabulary drills, 67% had academic exercises, and 61% practiced improving coherence in the written script. Whereas 63% had paraphrasing drills and 51% had comprehension exercise. Finally, only 42% had analytical exercises of research papers. The cumulative numbers show a substantial deficiency in teaching academic skills at post graduate level.

**Section III (B)**

Thematic analysis was done of the attitudes, priorities and perceptions of the respondents about the academic writing learning and tutoring. While recording their perceptions about the need of academic writing teaching module at post graduate level, 86% respondents stressed about its imperative need and implication. Following themes emerged through thematic analysis of their replies. The graphics below, represent the respondents' insights.

1.      The importance of Academic Writing Skills in participants' current Post Graduate program.



*Figure No. 2:* Major themes relating to the importance of academic writing courses

2.      Specification and explanation of those Language issues, which participants needed to be taught in their current Academic Writing Course, to enhance their academic writing skills for writing research thesis.



*Figure 3.* Major themes regarding the important issues to be addressed in the new

3.      What type of teaching practices/approaches, do you think will be suitable for the new academic writing course?



*Figure 4:* Major themes regarding the teaching approaches to teach academic writing

**Discussion**

Through the statistical and thematic analysis, the need of academic writing pedagogical module was emerged with highly elevated expectations. The findings derived from this survey study also revealed that the ongoing lecture method could not bring any change in the academic writing skills of ESL learners. It was further highlighted that in mixed ability class, conventional teaching was failed to cater the individual learning comprehension needs of the target population. These findings of the present research align with the judgments of Kazi (2010), Mumtaz (2021), Sadia, Memon and Pathan (2021) and Iqbal (2021), who proved that the orthodox instructional methods cannot bring any noticeable change in the learners' capability to write academically in the context of Malaysian university. The verdict of Abbad (1988) after his research about Yemeni students also equalizes the results drawn from the research in hand. Therefore, it can be said safely, that unstable learning is the result of ineffective, inappropriate and outdated mode of teaching.

This research has clearly pointed out that teacher education and training can evoke the analytical and critical thinking among the ESL learners and prospective teachers, necessary for academic writing. With this finding, the outcomes of *Toom Auli et al.* (2010)'s study in Finland also coincides. In this way the better adaptation strategies can only help in rapidly changing teaching and learning scenario. The pedagogical styles are changing and the needs of students are also becoming individualized and more specific. Therefore, it is the need of hour to evolve the pedagogical approaches and instructional modules along the fast-varying needs of ESL learners.

The lack of any language teaching and learning strategies was another outcome this survey study. Neither learners, nor teachers were found in exercising any inventive and creative instructional and learning strategies. Only Text books and conventional drill-oriented teaching practices were reported by majority of the respondents. This is how the ability of critical and analytical thinking among learners is stopped and disregarded. In this respect, the results are in line with the findings of Khoshsima and Tiyar (2015) in the milieu of Iran. Another study by Ally (2004), also endorsed the findings of research in hand. His verdict was that the learners were not found motivated and stimulated in the classrooms because the teachers were not employing technological and diversified instructional methods.

Another reason of the rising dissatisfaction level of students within the classrooms, arose in this research was the outmoded and untrained teaching faculty. Their teaching was found obsolete and devoid of contextualized and motivational teaching strategies. Therefore, the need of latest pedagogical modules to teach academic writing is ascended. In this respect the studies conducted by Kazi (2010), Warsi (2004) and Yasmin & Sohail (2017) also endorse the findings of the survey study in hand.

## Conclusion

The current NA survey was conducted to get the first hand information about the ESL learner's perceptions concerning the learning challenges, existing instructional methodologies, learners' motives to learn , their preferred instructional strategies  and finally the most necessitated facet of academic writing. The data collected have generated the results with precision and authenticity. Hence it is clearly established that the ESL learners are facing multiple problems even at post graduate level in general writing skills and in linguistic and syntactic areas.

Secondly, they are having problems due to the obsolete and outdated instructional strategies. As derived from the data, there is an intense need of teaching academic writing even at post graduate level. It is recommended, as highly analytical academic research reports, articles and research thesis are expected to be produced by the students at post graduate level. Secondly and most importantly, the instructional modules are to be revamped and enhanced on the latest lines to meet the learners' learning needs in best possible ways.

### *Implications of the findings*

This survey study keeps wide ranging implications:

- This study has provided information about the existing teaching practices, resource materials and the classroom practices. It has also categorized the needs of learners as well. This information can guide the ESL teachers, resource developers, curriculum designers and subspecialists to boost and enrich the writing abilities of their students.
- This study can enable the teacher trainers, resource persons, prospective teachers to design their instructional modules, which can fulfil the multiple and varied needs of the post graduate learners in enhancing their academic writing skills.
- The conclusions drawn from this study can act as a professional guide for the tutoring academic writing and prospect teachers training.

### Recommendations:

- The ESL teaching should be made more interactive and interesting by enhancing the motivation level of students
- There should be serious concern of teachers to address even individual learner needs
- The pedagogical modules must incorporate interesting and technically advanced instructional strategies to involve the learners in productive learning experience
- The strategies of 'Experiential learning' and 'Flip Classroom' must be introduced. These strategies can help the teachers and learners equally.

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