



ACADEMIC WRITING CHALLENGES FACED BY UZBEKISTAN MASTER STUDENTS

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<https://doi.org/10.36078/1767726142>

Abstract. The study investigates Master's students' main academic writing challenges, including specific cultural and linguistic factors that negatively affect the development of their academic writing skills. The research was carried out in four higher educational institutions in Uzbekistan: Namangan State Institute of Foreign Languages (NamSIFL), Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages (SamSIFL), National University of Uzbekistan (NUUz) and Uzbekistan State World Languages University (UzSWLU). The study employed mixed-method approach and administers a survey to collect both qualitative and quantitative data from 181 MA students representing ten academic groups, enrolled in English-major philological disciplines. The research results indicate that the majority of MA students experience academic writing difficulties primarily due to limited instructional guidance and feedback, as well as insufficient time for writing practice. Additional contributing factors include unfamiliarity with academic writing conventions, language barriers, differences between the mother tongue (Uzbek) and the target language (English), and low levels of academic literacy skills. The study recommends enhanced academic writing instruction through the application of a genre-based approach and the integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), which can facilitate academic writing instruction and improve students' writing performance.

Keywords: academic writing challenges; master students; survey; digital technologies.

O‘ZBEKISTONLIK MAGISTRATURA TALABALARIDAGI AKADEMIK YOZUV MUAMMOLARI

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Annotatsiya. Tadqiqot magistratura talabalarining akademik yozuvlari bilan bog‘liq asosiy qiyinchiliklarini, shu jumladan, ularning akademik yozuv rivojlanishiga salbiy ta‘sir ko‘rsatadigan o‘ziga xos madaniy va lingvistik omillarni o‘rganadi. Tadqiqotlar O‘zbekistonning to‘rtta oliy ta‘lim muassasalarida: Namangan davlat chet tillar instituti (NamDChTI), Samarqand davlat chet tillar instituti (SamDChTI), O‘zbekiston Milliy universiteti (O‘zMU) va O‘zbekiston davlat jahon tillari universitetida (O‘zDJTU) olib borildi. Tadqiqotda aralash usulli yondashuvdan foydalanildi va 10 ta guruhdan tasodifiy tanlab olingan 181 nafar ingliz filologiya fanlari bo‘yicha tahsil olayotgan magistratura talabalaridan sifatli va miqdoriy ma‘lumotlarni to‘plash uchun so‘rovnoma o‘tkazildi. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko‘rsatadiki, magistrantlarning mutlaq ko‘pchiligi metodik yo‘riqnoma va qayta aloqa yetishmasligi, shuningdek, yozma mashq qilish uchun vaqt kamligi sababli akademik yozuvda muammolarga duch kelmoqda. Boshqa sabablarga akademik yozuv qoidalarini bilmaslik, til to‘siqlari, ona tili (o‘zbek tili) bilan o‘rganilayotgan til (ingliz tili) o‘rtasidagi farqlar, shuningdek, savodxonlik darajasining pastligi kiradi.

Kalit so‘zlar: akademik yozuv muammolari; magistratura talabalari; so‘rovnoma; raqamli texnologiyalar.

Introduction

Academic writing skills development is one of the major tasks in higher education institutions since it points to the academic success in a postgraduate program [AlMarwani 2020: 115]. It has been observed repeatedly that non-native English speakers often face problems with grammar, lexis, and syntax, along with challenges in understanding the rhetoric of academic English, organizing ideas, defending claims, and addressing readers. Thesis writing is especially difficult since often students' language proficiency is limited and they may lack genre knowledge, and social knowledge [Meher Singh 2015: 13].

The research problem lies in exploring what challenges are faced by Uzbekistani students at four different higher educational institutions. Although previous studies highlight the fact that Uzbekistani postgraduate students struggle with academic writing [Samanhudi 2019: 62-68], the academic writing challenges of master's degree students from different parts of Uzbekistan have not been fully examined. The aim of the research is to

study the causes of such difficulties among MA students in order to better understand the factors contributing to them and search for appropriate instructional solutions

Literature Review

In the global academic arena, where English is the primary medium, the role of academic writing courses is significant for postgraduate students studying in English. The research carried out among Turkish postgraduates with English-oriented majors, investigated students' academic writing needs by examining their perceptions of academic writing, including different aspects such as the linguistic conventions and readers' expectations. However, the students failed to *convey their arguments and opinions* in academic writing which is important for gaining credibility and recognition in academia. Similarly, students faced problems with *writing in various academic genres such as these, book reviews, research articles, and conference presentations*. Also, the students struggled with writing *discussions; found it hard to present results effectively and developing methodology* sections in article writing. The results implied students' lack of understanding of how to *avoid plagiarism, cite sources correctly, paraphrase and use appropriate vocabulary* in academic writing. As a solution, the study recommends exposing students to extensive writing tasks, involving them in long academic papers and providing extensive reading of theses and research articles through which students can review and analyze literature and gain knowledge of academic structure and style. In academic writing instruction, the research stresses the need for students to develop cultural, disciplinary and linguistic awareness. Namely, students should understand the connection between these types of awareness and academic writing. In addition, students need to be introduced linguistic features of academic writing such as lexical bundles and meta discourse. Lessons on referencing correctly and avoiding plagiarism should also be incorporated. It is suggested that a genre-based approach in academic writing instruction is the most effective since it enables students to learn to differentiate unique linguistic conventions of each genre influenced by discipline and culture. Before producing their own pieces of writing, students are assigned to analyze linguistic features of each genre, especially its rhetorical moves such as the abstract, introduction, methodology, sections. For this purpose, instructors might introduce *corpora* consisting of authentic academic materials. Scholars agree that in academic writing it is important to express one's stance and engage with readers, so, they suggest adding organizational issues, stance, and engagement training into the writing courses, as well as developing skills of using linguistic devices properly in academic writing. Hyland proposes a method of raising rhetorical consciousness to instruct *meta discourse* as an important element in academic writing.

There are five key components of it: 1) understanding the writers' specific needs; 2) considering their previous writing and learning experiences; 3) recognizing how language serves different functions; 4) recognizing the value of social interactions; 5) the use of authentic texts, as cited by Yuvayapan and Bilginer (2020). They suggest that this approach can be fulfilled in three steps: the writer should 1) clarify their linguistic strategies; 2) create opportunities for students to use and 3) produce their own compositions [Yuvayapan 2020: 606–607].

In a similar study conducted at Malaysian public universities, which examined international postgraduates' academic writing issues, challenges were found to be more *language-related* rather than related to general academic skills. Linguistically, they found it hard to *develop coherent paragraphs, write summaries and paraphrase effectively*. Also, their *academic vocabulary was limited*, which made it difficult to use *appropriate lexical phrases*. Regarding their general academic writing abilities, they struggled with *critical writing*, for example, in *critiquing literature or writing the introduction, conclusion or discussion sections* of the research. For them, the reasons for these academic issues were *low levels of English proficiency, methods of English language instruction they received and curriculum that they had* back in their homelands. To tackle these issues, the research suggests using English for Academic Purposes (EAP) genre-based pedagogy and providing language reference resources to support student's writing. Practically, the curriculum should offer new materials focusing on EAP and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), specifically developed for them. Also, it is crucial to incorporate critical thinking skills into the curriculum to help students address their academic writing difficulties [Kotamjani 2018: 194].

The study of Indonesian postgraduate students' academic writing challenges in a UK university shed light on students' problems with *critical thinking* that hindered effective academic writing. In particular, students were asked to write essays which revealed what challenges they encountered: a) they struggled to *clearly present their thoughts and arguments*; b) they lacked skills to *critically analyze and interpret information*; c) they could not *critically evaluate sources and arguments effectively*; d) they could not *present ideas precisely*, with all crucial details. It is believed that factors contributing to such issues were a) *low levels of critical awareness* shaped by their Indonesian educational background, which is not as focused as British education on critical thinking; b) their failing to understand *critical thinking concepts* as they are defined and expected by university and instructors; c) *differences in academic requirements* between Indonesian educational expectations which creates confusion among students; d) *limited*

English language skills to convey critical arguments effectively [Samanhudi 2019: 112].

When Palestinian postgraduate students' academic writing needs were examined, they were advised: a) to seek language support resources such as workshops, webinars and training courses oriented toward helping to enhance academic writing skills; b) to join peer writing groups which allow learners to share writing experiences and learn effective writing practices from each other; c) to use technologies such as AI-based tools and programs that support students' continuous language development, even outside the classroom. They also recommend postgraduate programs to create academic writing courses specifically designed to meet postgraduate students' needs. For instructors, it is suggested that regular workshops be organized throughout the semester, either conducted by the instructors themselves or hire other experts. Lastly, teachers are advised to thoroughly assess postgraduates' writing skills upon admission to the postgraduate program, which can reveal their academic writing needs and challenges from the outset and allow for targeted instructional solutions [Badah 2023: 110].

Students at this level are expected to have all the academic skills and competencies, including familiarity with academic writing conventions, disciplinary knowledge and field-specific technical vocabulary and English proficiency. However, a study conducted among Malaysian postgraduates investigating their challenges in research writing, explored that students experience *confusion during the process of writing*, feel lost and need guidance, particularly, a structured approach in writing, to navigate their task journey. In addition, the study stresses the need for students to maintain connection with peers and other researchers outside their university environment. Consequently, the lack of social interaction can adversely impact their writing experience and academic fulfilment [Jeyaraj 2018: 32–33].

After a thorough study of Chinese postgraduates' academic writing difficulties, the following recommendations were given: 1) *Language problems* which are resulting in students' inability to express their arguments and issues with academic conventions and vocabulary use should be tackled through concentrating on enhancing language skills through courses and extra practice. 2) Challenges caused by *cultural differences* such as the difference in academic expectations and writing styles can be supported by learning more about cultural standards of academic writing typical to their field of research. It should be noted that difficulties related to language barriers and cultural differences are likely to adversely affect critical thinking and argumentation skills. The research suggests providing integrated support to address language skills, cultural adaptation, critical

thinking, argumentation, and time management. 3) *Absence of writing strategies*, that is, students lack of effective techniques for planning, drafting, and revising the text and not understanding academic writing concepts such as process or structure can be aided through targeted instruction and attendance of ongoing workshops. For institutions, it is suggested that set up writing centers which offer personalized instruction and resources for writing, as well as provide individual consultation to address specific writing issues. Also, students should be encouraged to peer-review to foster skill exchange and collaboration. Institutions should encourage students to use literature management software (e.g., *EndNote*, *Zotero*) for organizing references; utilize online collaboration platforms (e.g., *Google Docs*) for team writing; use advanced language models such as *ChatGPT* for brainstorming, error checking, and idea generation, ensuring adherence to academic integrity in classes. 4) *Feelings of stress and anxiety* when writing an academic assignment as they feel stress from the need to achieve high expectations. This, in turn, leads to a decrease in quality of writing performance. In such situations, students are encouraged to gain feedback from peers, mentors or writing centers. 5) *The need for additional instruction and guidance* from mentors and extra support with writing resources which are reported to be limited. However, these issues might lead to psychological stress, leading to time management issues. To handle them, students should be provided with academic writing resources [Churan Wen 2025: 9].

Another study examined Malaysian supervisors views on Jordanian postgraduate students who faced difficulties in writing their dissertations through interviews. The supervisors reported that students' main problems were *grammar-related*, followed by several minor issues. In particular, students find it hard to use correct *verb tenses*, *reporting verbs*, *subject-verb agreement*, *punctuation*, *articles*, *capitalization and spelling*. These issues were believed to be caused by students' educational background. In addition, students were reported to have limited *vocabulary* which may result from insufficient writing practice in undergraduate programs. Supervisors stated that those students had *low levels of motivation*, too, which were believed to stem from their limited *English proficiency*. According to the supervisors, fear of assessment was another reason why less proficient Jordanian postgraduate students tended to procrastinate or avoid writing tasks. Finally, students were reported to struggle with the *organization of their dissertation*, especially *the introduction*, *problem statement*, and *literature review sections* [Hawari 2022: 552].

Current academic writing situation in Uzbekistan

In higher education of Uzbekistan students' academic writing skills and related challenges have been studied by Martin Percy and Liliya Makovskaya whose research focused on the impact of feedback on students' writing processes in educational settings in the UK and Uzbekistan [Percy & Makovskaya 2021]; A. B. Musoyeva advocates for establishing writing centers in Uzbekistan, similar to those operating in the US, which are expected to support students in improving writing skills and enhancing publishing practices in the university community [Musoyeva 2024: 657–659]; Ergashev R.S. (2024) examined traditional instruction of academic vocabulary among master students which was found to be valuable among adult learners in teacher-centered educational context [Ergashev 2024]; F. Sh. Alimov studied development of writing competence in English among non-philological faculties [Alimov 2018]; N. Dj. Begibayeva explored ways to enhance school teachers' written communication competence in English with the help of online resources [Бегибайева 2022]; M. B. Alimardonova developed assessment rubrics for future English teachers' writing competence development [Alimardonova 2024: 77–78]; S. A. Rakhmatova examined academic writing and challenges of teaching it for instructors and proposes a three-level framework to enhance efficiency both for teachers and learners in higher education [Rakhmatova 2024].

In Uzbekistan, a research studied difficulties associated with academic writing instruction, first academic English has linguistic and structural features which are not typical to Uzbek, so it can be challenging for students to directly translate from English to Uzbek since cognitive load goes up and the likelihood of making errors increases several times. This, in turn, results in coherence and cohesion of the text. Secondly, limited exposure to academic English, which is usually practiced only in classes, plays its role in students' poor academic writing development. Students would benefit more if they were involved in reading English materials outside of educational institutions, too. Thirdly, there are cultural and rhetorical disparities between the languages. For example, rhetorically, in Uzbek the writer is suggested to narrate and expresses his arguments indirectly, whereas in academic English clarity and directness are highly valued attributes. Such varied cultural standards in writing may cause misinterpretations about academic writing expectations such as argumentation and evidence-based reasoning. Furthermore, according to the research, not all Uzbek students are exposed to English as the first foreign language. Prior to it, they are usually assigned to Uzbek (mother tongue) and Russian (foreign language), which, presumably, hinders development of writing abilities. Another issue concerns Uzbek curricula which tend to prioritize reading skills and grammatical competence while giving limited attention to productive skills such as writing. Consequently, students with little practice in written

English, go through hardships concerning argumentation. Lastly, the research considers that there is a lack of pedagogical resources and expertise which is fundamental in academic writing, followed by insufficient teachers who are well-experienced EAP experts, which is reflected on the quality of academic writing instruction [Turdebekova 2024: 273–274].

In a study, scholars compared cultural aspects of Uzbek and English academic writing, according to which English academic writing encourages brevity, objectivity, and directness while Uzbek academic writing supports thoroughness, formality, and narrative style. Traditionally, in Uzbek writing style, it is common to add personal experiences or illustrative examples to strengthen arguments, whereas in English academic writing, the text should be impersonal, providing evidence, especially in social disciplines. This creates challenges for Uzbek writers to meet the global academic expectations, since using a personal voice is considered as unacceptable or unprofessional. As scholars regard, it is cultural standards that impact the way writers convey and argue their thoughts which is the reason why it can be difficult for Uzbek writers to write more formally and impersonally. In addition to stylistic differences, the way arguments are developed also differs across the two academic traditions. For example, in Uzbek it is common to develop an argument indirectly, through anecdotes or background information that serves as a support, which is not the case in English. In English academic writing one has to provide the argument with clarity and concision at the start, which should be immediately supported by explanation and examples, and this is another challenge that confuses Uzbek writers [Tukhtaboeva 2024: 65].

Materials and Methods

Research design

The present study endeavors to evaluate Uzbekistani master's students main challenges in effective university writing and to identify whether there are particular cultural or linguistic factors that hinder the development of their writing skills. The research used *a mixed-method approach* which required administering a survey to MA students. The survey consisted of one multiple-choice *select-all-that-apply* question and a *Yes (please describe)/No question* that would gain both quantitative and qualitative information. The study examines master students' academic writing challenges that negatively affect their academic writing performance and seeks to propose instructional solutions to address these difficulties.

The research questions are:

1. In your opinion, what are the main challenges you face when learning how to write effectively at the university? (Select all that apply)

2. Are there any specific cultural or linguistic factors that make it challenging for you to improve your writing skills? (Yes (please describe)/No)

Sample

The research focuses on both 1st and 2nd year master's students enrolled in four higher educational institutions in Uzbekistan: NamSIFL, SamSIFL, UzSWLU and NUUz. The participants were affiliated with English-major philological departments of Language Typology, Literature, Foreign Language and Literature (FLL) and Linguistics. Non-random sampling was implemented for its practicality and relevance to the needs of the research as the most suitable method. This decision was based primarily on the *accessibility of participants* and the *feasibility of gathering the sample size* within this specific student population. The initial plan was to involve 200 students, 50 from each university. However, due to some practical constraints, only 181 MA students (91 %) from 10 groups in four institutions altogether were examined (Table 1).

Table 1

Participants of the survey

The four institutions	Number of overall participants	Year of MA and percentage	Majors pursued by participants	Number of participants from each group
NamSIFL	48	1 st year: 100%	Foreign Language and Literature (FLL)	17
			Language Typology	14
			Literature	17
SamSIFL	43	1 st year 37 %	FLL	16
		2 nd year 63 %	FLL	27
UzWLU	42	1 st year 40 %	FLL	17
		2 nd year 60 %	FLL	25
NUUz	48	1 st year 75 %	Linguistics	18
		2 nd year 25 %	FLL	18
			FLL	12

Overall	181/200	1 st year participants: 65 % (117/181)	7 groups of FLL; 1 – Language Typology;	FLL–132 students Language Typology – 14
		2 nd year participants: 35 % (64/181)	1 – Literature; Linguistics Groups	Literature – 17 Linguistics – 18

Instruments

A questionnaire was designed to collect data about MA students' difficulties with academic writing caused by various factors such as lack of instruction and feedback; challenges in comprehension and application of writing conventions; language barriers; lack of time or any cultural or linguistic factors causing hardships in their writing skills enhancement.

The questionnaire was pre-printed beforehand in 60 copies for each institution. The questions were of *select-all-that-apply* and *yes/no* types.

Data analysis procedures

The study's data analysis involved a survey analysis. Since the question types yielded both numerical and categorical data, it was suitable and comprehensible to present it in a table (*RQ1*) and in categorized manner in text (*RQ2*). The comparisons of results were made across the institutions and by year of study in the Master's program using figures and percentages. This blended approach in comparison allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the data, supporting or refuting the study's hypotheses.

Results

RQ1: In your opinion, what are the main challenges you face when learning how to write effectively at the university?

Table 2

Writing challenges faced by MA students at university

Challenges Institutions/Groups	Limited guidance and feedback from instructors	Difficulty understanding and applying writing conventions	Language barriers	Lack of time for writing practice
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N a m S I F L	FLL 1 st year (17)	8	6	4	7
	Language Typology 1 st year (14)	5	4	3	7
	Literature 1 st year (17)	7	2	6	8
	Overall: 48	20	12	13	22
S a m S I F L	FLL 1 st year (16)	5	5	2	9
	FLL 2 nd year (27)	10	5	5	9
	Overall: 43	15	10	7	18
	Linguistics 1 st year (18)	2	8	-	5
N U U z	FLL 1 st year (18)	6	2	4	10
	FLL 2 nd year (12)	4	2	2	8
	Overall: 48	12	12	6	23
	FLL 1 st year (17)	7	7	4	3
U z S W L U	FLL 2 nd year (25)	12	8	9	6
	Overall: 42	19	15	13	9
	181	75	49	39	72
T o t a l					

NamSIFL: The outcomes concerning difficulties in writing development at university indicated that about a half of the respondents (22=45,8%) lacked time for writing practice, close to 41,6% (20) who expressed their dissatisfaction with the limited guidance and feedback provided by teachers. Also, 25% of participants (12) found it difficult to understand and apply writing conventions, and almost as many as those respondents (13=27%) had language barriers, which served as an obstacle in writing development.

SamSIFL: Obviously, the major problems are connected with time, meaning that 18/43 (42%) students could not allocate as much time as they would wish, as well as limited instructional guidance and feedback which served as

a challenge for 15/43 (35%) respondents. For 10/43 (23%) of the participants it was hard to understand and use writing conventions in practice, while 7/43 (16%) students reported having language barriers hindered their engagement in effective writing.

NUUz: In general, lack of time is the main issue for the biggest number of respondents (23/48 = 48%). Equal number (12/48 = 25% each) of participants complained about limited instructional guidance and feedback and hardships of understanding and using writing conventions. 6/48 (13%) considered language barriers to be their major hurdle in effective writing practice. Moreover, one student from the Linguistics group expressed a desire to learn about online platforms that provide guidance on academic writing. In addition, a student from the first-year FLL group reported that the instructional guidance was unclear, as indicated in the “other (please specify)” section.

UzSWLU: In this institution, most respondents (19/42 = 45%) suffered from limited guidance and feedback provided by teachers, reportedly, followed by challenges in comprehension and implementation of writing conventions (15/42 = 36%). Similarly, 13/42 (31%) students had problems with the language. 9/42 (21%) lacks time for writing practice (Table 2).

RQ2: Are there any specific cultural or linguistic factors that make it challenging for you to improve your writing skills?

Regarding culture- or language-specific problems, 35% in NamSIFL, 14% in SamSIFL, 23% in NUUz, and 21% in UzSWLU confirmed having difficulties connected with culture-related or linguistic factors.

NamSIFL: 65% (31/48) of participants claimed they had no culture or language-related challenges, whereas the rest 35% (17/48) noticed some obstacles because of culture and language. Many students who had such problems specified, by claiming that lacking high level vocabulary, having passive academic language, difference between English and their mother tongue (Uzbek), the interference of the Mother tongue in English writing practice and low level of English are major difficulties in their writing practice. To remind, these are the challenges of 1st year NamSIFL survey participants, who made the whole population of respondents.

SamSIFL: 14% of SamSIFL master's students have challenges caused by culture or language issues. Among the one who confirmed such hardships were only 2nd year masters, which probably indicates their awareness of the learning process, their exposure to academic writing and their weaknesses they have found out during this process.

In particular, “mentality, shallow dive into discussion, no specific topic, lack of academic skills, and lack of resources” were provided in the answers section.

NUUZ: Overall, 23% of NUUZ master’s students (11 respondents) confirmed having difficulties caused by cultural or linguistic factors. Among them 9 (19%) are 1st year- and 2 (4%) are 2nd year students. Respondents who opted for “yes” further specified having challenged by cohesion, coherence, translating culture-specific terms or understanding, lack of academic vocabulary, structuring thoughts in writing and difficulties to understand theory.

UzSWLU: 21% (9) masters of UzSWLU responded affirmatively, among whom 7 (17%) 1st years and 2 (5%) 2nd years. No additional description was provided.

Later these results were grouped into these 5 categories:

1. *English vs. Mother Tongue*. The difference between English and their mother tongue (Uzbek); mother - tongue interference with English writing;
2. *Cross-cultural awareness and mentality*. Translating or understanding culture-specific terms.
3. Limited academic English proficiency: lack of advanced vocabulary, weak academic lexis, and passive use of academic language; Insufficient academic literacy skills: difficulties in understanding theory, shallow engagement in discussion, unclear topic focus, problems with cohesion and coherence, and challenges in structuring ideas in writing; Lack of resources.

Discussion

RQ1: In your opinion, what are the main challenges you face when learning how to write effectively at the university?

The response given by the student participants from four domains researched through the questionnaire showed that challenges in effective university writing practice are connected with *limited guidance and instructional feedback* for the dominating 75 students out of 181 which make 41% of the total number. The research suggests that for the writing instruction to be effective, one should understand that the process of writing becomes more and more complicated as their understanding deepens, making the relationship between writing and its instruction more confusing. However, the scholars believe these three key considerations can guide writing instruction masterfully: 1) there is not just one way of becoming a writing prodigy. There are many. There are diverse teaching methods accessible to every single writer to focus on their high-levels assets or enhance their low-level skills; 2) incorporating the development of a variety of subskills in

writing instruction, providing a range of contexts that support growth in writing. Various subskills can be actively developed with different writing modes/formats; 3) controlling subskills operation is important for writers. Students should be able to guide their writing process, observe their low-level points. They should have high levels of metacognitive awareness along with practice and reflection [Rijlaarsdam 2014: 547]. Also, scholars suggest that the integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) can highly benefit both teachers and students in writing instruction, as they enable learners to study at their own pace, encourage independent learning, provide immediate feedback, and assist teachers to monitor progress in learners. Although some tasks are usually more effective to be done by instructors, there are other activities perfectly handled by ICTs. For instance, if teachers conduct brainstorming activities and oral presentations, ICTs can provide writing spaces and train learners with games. The use of ICTs eases the instructional work letting teachers allocate more time and chances to approach students and their challenges individually [González-Laguna 2024: 18].

Moreover, the current research results indicate that 72 respondents (40%) reported a lack of time for writing practice as a major reason for ineffective university-level writing. Such a lack of time can be interpreted differently when similar findings from previous studies are considered. A research conducted in Bhutan suggests that students might fail to deal with their laziness and poor time management which prevents abundant writing practice which could also be caused by low levels of academic writing comprehension [Dema 2020: 39].

In addition, 49 (27%) and 39 (22%) students *reported difficulties related to the application of writing conventions and language barriers*, respectively. This supports another research which believes graduate students fail to use correct grammar, appropriate lexicon in sentences and paragraphs, and face problems with formal language use, awareness of their audience, writing coherently, applying relevant cohesive devices and organizing the academic assignment correctly, hedging properly which might require serious amount of effort and time to master [Yağız 2012: 1263].

RQ2: Are there any specific cultural or linguistic factors that make it challenging for you to improve your writing skills?

As can be seen, in all educational establishments researched, there are issues related to culture and language, although the levels are not high. The difficulties reported in questionnaires are in five distinct categories, since it was considered they are caused by distinct factors.

In the first category “English vs. Mother Tongue”, the problems are mainly connected with first language interference in foreign language writing, which is common in foreign language learning. Also, students reported that difficulties arising from structural differences between English and their mother tongue (Uzbek) as the two languages belong to distinct language families. This finding supports conclusions drawn in previous research conducted among Turkish postgraduate students with low levels of academic writing proficiency. The difficulties were attributed to students’ reliance on direct translation from their mother tongue into English, adversely impacting the writing quality in a way they recognize, comprehend and follow academic writing conventions and standards [Kaya 2023: 11].

The second category “Cross-cultural awareness and mentality” is about cultural perception of the world. For example, translating or understanding culture-specific terms is problematic among some students, as they stated. This observation supports the existing findings of previous studies done among university students in Jordan who had difficulties in translation of culture-specific phrases from Arabic to English. According to the research, the students were unable to produce appropriate translations and lacked effective translation strategies. Students often translated literally or omitted part of the texts when they could not translate them. Following a thorough analysis of such situation, it was concluded that primary factors for the students’ poor translating skills of culture-specific terms were their ignorance of both cultures and use of wrong methods and approaches in translation. Consequently, it was suggested to have an extra training of translation studies that closely focuses on studying culture-related terms [Badah 2023: 82].

The third category “Poor Academic English” was about students’ academic English which is required for academic writing such as university assignments. Many students complained about having passive academic English and lacking high level vocabulary. This reflects observations obtained in the research carried out among Chinese postgraduates who, also, faced challenges with English academic writing. The participants of the interviews administered in the research reported that main reasons for poor academic writing were lack of academic lexicon, specifically, the use of synonyms when paraphrasing, unfamiliarity with the meaning of vocabulary, limited word choice, full reliance on dictionaries, confusions and mistakes that damage the quality of readability and comprehension levels. Also, students had grammar-related issues due to the difference in languages such as use of prepositions, sentence structure, passive voice, coherence, use of conjunctions and adverbial connectors, spelling, and punctuation, which they believe, were caused by their mother tongue and cultural worldview [Li 2023: 212].

The fourth category “*Poor Academic Literacy skills*” is, unlike the previous category, encompasses a broader set of competencies required for academic work. These are examples of issues stated by the students: “difficult to understand theory”, “shallow dive into discussion”, “my topic is not specific enough”. Also, some students reported their confusion between cohesion and coherence, and their weakness in structuring thoughts in writing. Similar challenges were documented in previous research when students considered having low academic literacy skills. Although they felt they were devoting huge amounts of time and effort, they found reading academic texts, the theory too hard to comprehend and cope with because of significant course burden and uncommon terminology. The research demonstrated that the instructor perceived the situation completely differently, thinking that students were simply not interested enough. Finally, the research underscored the necessity for focused instruction in academic reading strategies [Bilikozen 2019: 214]. In another research conducted among Iranian EFL postgraduates, their reading difficulties and what causes stimulated those hardships were investigated. During the analysis of data gained through the questionnaire results, it was identified that the major cause for difficulties in reading comprehension was a *lack of content knowledge*. However, linguistically, postgraduate students did not report having issues since they all had higher levels of English, in comparison with undergraduates who were more concerned with unknown vocabulary. Also, in the comprehension of texts, the research highlights the roles of conceptual and socio-cultural knowledge. Furthermore, the research investigates situations in which students were familiar with vocabulary in the text, still failed to comprehend the meaning of it. This phenomenon was interpreted as the factor of being non-native learners’ challenges as there are a multitude of words with a range of meanings and sometimes it becomes confusing for EFL learners to understand the text properly [Kheirzadeh 2012: 150].

The fifth category is “Lack of resources”. This issue was mentioned by a first-year FLL student studying in Samarkand, which may be interpreted differently. For example, by “resources” they could mean literature, digital tools, financial support or any factor that could “feed” the research and ensure its development. The research that investigates research needs in post-graduate studies suggests educational institutions should provide effective resources and a supportive research culture to maximize student potential, since they play a crucial role in successful postgraduate education. Such resources enormously contribute to students' self-development and career growth [Zainal Abiddin 2009: 41–42].

Pedagogical implications

- Postgraduates lack instructional guidance and feedback. The students should be offered extra instructional support and focused training of writing subskills and metacognitive awareness. Teachers can benefit from integrating ICT tools into instruction, allowing technology to support certain activities while enabling instructors to devote more time to addressing individual students' writing challenges.
- Postgraduates report insufficient writing practice due to limited time, which might indicate poor time management skills. This problem can be handled through consultation with supervisors who can instruct them how to schedule their days and hours for more productive research activity.
- Postgraduates have problems with writing conventions and language barriers which should be tackled with additional support by faculties.
- Postgraduates experience Mother tongue interference in English writing.
- In their research students find it difficult to translate or understand culture-specific terms and expressions.
- Their poor academic English hinders effective writing practices.
- They need additional instructional support on literacy skills development to cope with academic assignments such as reading extensively and comprehending the theoretical material, which stresses the need to develop content knowledge.

Conclusion

The current study investigates postgraduate students' academic writing challenges. Although the number of participants was relatively substantial (181 students), still be insufficient to draw conclusions about all academic issues faced by the students. Also, the responses provided were analyzed generally in comparison with fellow institutions, which might, as well, not be as accurate as if they were analyzed in correlation to their pursuing majors since there was more than one specialty investigated.

For future research, we recommend investigating academic writing challenges among MA students more specifically, in regard to their disciplines which can bring about additional causes and solutions; designing a curriculum of scientific writing skills that incorporates ICTs and online tools as a modern solution to the problem; apply genre-based approach in academic writing instruction so that learners can discriminate organization, structure and functions of each genre; teach academic writing subskills and conventions for students' better academic activity.

The findings of the present research about the challenges of postgraduates in their academic writing can serve as valuable source, providing specific problems among Uzbekistani MA students, based on which modern instructional solutions can be designed.

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