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**Navigating Academic Writing: Exploring Challenges Faced by ESL Learners in
Arunachal Pradesh**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the paper is to investigate the academic writing challenges of ESL (English as a second language) learners at the undergraduate level in Arunachal Pradesh. It explores the learners' perceptions and experiences of their academic writing challenges. Subsequently, it also examines teachers' perspectives on the academic writing challenges of their learners. The participants for the present study were undergraduate students and teachers from six colleges in Arunachal Pradesh. The study adopted a qualitative approach to analyse the data collected using semi-structured interviews. The findings show that the learners face a range of difficulties in various aspects of academic writing, such as accurate and appropriate use of language, writing mechanics and organisation skills. ESL learners' language use challenges pertain to grammar, writing mechanics, vocabulary, and sentence structures. Similarly, the challenges in writing and organisation are linked to paragraph development/construction, logical and coherent sequencing of ideas, adoption of an academic style, and the use of logical connectors.

Keywords: Academic Writing Challenges, ESL Learners, Teachers, Perceptions, Arunachal Pradesh

Introduction

Academic writing is a formal style of writing used in any academic setting, such as colleges and universities. In tertiary educational settings, academic writing is a vital communication tool for learners to articulate ideas and showcase their work, often serving as a key assessment method. As Barker aptly notes, "writing has to be your ambassador in your absence" (2006, 117). Common activities within academic writing include writing paragraphs, essays, compositions, term papers, research papers, project reports, theses and dissertations. Any writing that fulfils institutional requirements or within academic and research contexts can be labelled academic writing. Lea and Street assert that the principles of academic writing extend to K-12 education, serving as a preparatory stage for higher education (2006, 368).

Academic writing distinguishes itself from everyday conversation by necessitating careful elaboration, argumentative support, logical sequencing, rigorous reasoning, and cohesive composition (Routledge, routledge.com/blog/). Thus, academic writing is characterized by a need-based, goal-oriented, genre-specific,

and formal approach, adhering to established conventions and conditions. Moreover, clarity and precision, devoid of ambiguity, are paramount in academic writing (Fadhel, 2019; Pratiwi, 2016), emphasising organizing content into logically connected and smoothly developed paragraphs. Recognizing academic writing as an integral and indispensable component of the academic landscape, this study aims to identify students' challenges in this domain. Furthermore, the study endeavours to support teachers in improving their students' academic writing abilities. Concurrently, it provides valuable insights for course materials designers to tailor their materials based on students' specific requirements and needs.

Literature Review

Several studies have affirmed that academic writing poses a significant challenge for ESL learners as it extends beyond the realm of mastering grammatical rules, vocabulary, and writing mechanics and involves intricate thinking, a recursive nature, and a non-linear process (Emig, 1977; Flowers & Hayes, 1981; Raimes, 1983; Wilson, 2022). Spencer (2007) argues that academic writing becomes a challenge not only to ESL learners but even first-language speakers. Likewise, Mohan and Lo (1985) and Jiang (2011) argue that many ESL learners consider academic writing difficult due to its complexities and variations.

Misbah et al. (2017) claim that a lack of vocabulary affects the learners' ability to acquire writing skills. Word choice or choosing the correct vocabulary according to the context is essential to convey an accurate sense of the meaning because using vague words creates confusion. Similarly, Viera (2017) affirms that lack of vocabulary and inappropriate vocabulary usage poses significant challenges in writing. Byrd (2003) asserted that grammar is the most challenging aspect of learning language skills. Other challenges in academic writing skills among ESL learners relate to mechanics, vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, structure, use of language, and stylistics (Shravan, 2018). In addition, various studies also show that students' texts lack the cohesion and coherence essential for logical, argumentative, and comprehensible writing (Al-Hozaimi, 1993; Aljamhour, 1996; Al-Semari, 1993).

The review of related studies highlights the academic writing challenges of ESL students acknowledged by various researchers around the world. To the best of our knowledge, the present study is the first of its kind as it attempts to study the academic writing challenges of ESL learners at the undergraduate level in the context of Arunachal Pradesh.

Research questions

1. What are the academic writing challenges of undergraduate ESL learners in Arunachal Pradesh?
2. What are ESL learners' and teachers' perceptions regarding the academic writing challenges faced by the students?

Methodology

The present study adopted a qualitative research approach to understand the perceptions of ESL learners and teachers regarding the challenges in academic writing. The qualitative research approach helps "understand human behaviour and experience" better and in a more in-depth way (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007, 43). A qualitative approach was used to collect and analyse the data to understand the students' challenges and answer all the research questions. Hence, the study is descriptive. The study was conducted in six government colleges of Arunachal Pradesh. These colleges have been selected for the current study because of the sizeable enrolment of students and the range of courses offered, which provide a diverse academic setting. Thus, a purposive sampling method was used for the present study. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with two groups of participants to identify the students' academic writing challenges. The first group comprises 60 undergraduate students and the second group consists of 23 English teachers from the six selected colleges. The interviews were conducted one-on-one, and the responses were recorded, transcribed, and analysed qualitatively. Moreover, the ethical considerations for the study were strictly maintained, and all the participants consented to participate in the research by signing the consent form provided by the researchers. Furthermore,

relevant interview excerpts have been quoted as teacher's or student's response to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

Analysis and Discussion

This section discusses the results of the one-to-one interviews conducted with both learners and teachers to identify ESL learners' academic writing challenges. Based on the results of the interview data, the academic writing challenges are categorised as language skills and writing and organisation skills. Grammatical categories and components of writing mechanics, such as punctuation, spelling, contracted forms, capitalisation, sentence structure, and vocabulary, are classified as language skills of academic writing. The second classification consists of academic style and language, paragraph development, logical sequence of ideas, and logical connectors in writing and organisation skills.

As per the interview results, most learners highlighted their problems regarding using grammar, which is considered the most challenging academic writing skill. The grammatical categories, such as 'tenses', are considered the most difficult, followed by the 'article'. Subsequently, all the English teachers also confirmed that their students lack basic knowledge of grammar.

For instance, one of the teachers claimed that: "The standard had gone down, as there is no basic foundation of grammar; the students cannot construct basic decent sentences. I feel so helpless because I cannot teach them the basic grammar and punctuation at the college level..." (Teacher's response)

Similarly, another teacher highlighted that the students "are poor in basic grammar, so it becomes difficult to teach them. I do not have a choice but to refer them to read middle school standard grammar books. For instance, most students come from government schools and were not taught grammar properly. I also did my schooling from government schools and was never taught grammar properly..." (Teacher's response)

In addition, one teacher discussed that: "Students here (Arunachal Pradesh) learn English-as-a-second language, so it is important for them to have mastery over the language and they need to learn the basic skills in writing... However, the students are not equipped with the skills of writing because they are not taught properly at the foundation level... Many of my students shared that they can understand but cannot write...Teaching basic grammatical categories at this level is difficult. It should be given at the school level, where students are taught about the English language and its technicalities in writing... They also lack logical sequencing of ideas: one idea, one paragraph... I often encourage their critical thinking and encourage them to use their style of writing (in their own words) rather than copy-pasting it either in the exam or assignments..." (Teacher's response). Thus, most teachers and learners consider grammar the most challenging skill affecting academic writing.

Subsequently, most students and teachers also perceived grammar as the foremost essential skill of academic writing. The finding shows that the attitude of ESL learners and teachers in Arunachal Pradesh concurs with Fregreau's (1999) discussion, where teachers and learners are obsessed with grammar and find grammar to be an unattainable skill.

Grammar is considered important in academic writing because it gives the scope to communicate ideas and thoughts in a more credible and readable way; however, it should not be perceived as the foremost important skill of academic writing. Moreover, grammatical category errors are considered local errors (Burt & Kiparsky, 1972; Hendrickson, 1978) that do not hinder the text's ideas and comprehensibility, although they affect the readability and clarity levels.

The results indicate that the students have difficulties in writing and organisation skills such as paragraph development, logical sequencing of ideas, academic style and language use, and logical connectors. One of the teachers highlighted that: "Students do not have proper knowledge of academic writing and lack the basic skills, for instance, format, language formality, formation and development of paragraphs, etc..." (Teacher's Response).

Similarly, a few students confirmed that they face challenges in paragraph development and logical sequencing of ideas. The following response of a student highlights the challenges in the logical sequencing of ideas: "I know so many things to write, but I am unable to write it in logical ways. My writings do not have logical order... (Student's Response)

However, the majority of the students did not discuss any skills related to writing and organisation during the interviews. It indicates that most students lack awareness of writing and organisational skills in academic writing. Likewise, some teachers did not discuss writing and organisational skills. This indicates that students are not aware of the importance of these academic writing skills.

The results also confirm that the learners struggle with various components of writing mechanics, such as punctuation, spelling, capitalisation, and contracted forms. As per the data, punctuation seems to be the most challenging category in learners' academic writing, followed by spelling. During the interviews, two teachers frustratingly complained that they become "breathless" while reading their learners' test papers and assignments due to improper or no punctuation markings. Moreover, spelling also seems to be a significant problem among undergraduate learners. Both punctuation and spelling are essential aspects of academic writing; punctuation is like a set of signposts to the reader to clarify the meaning and communicate effectively because punctuation markings change meaning.

Word choice/vocabulary in academic writing is the use of precise and effective language to convey accurate information to avoid any ambiguities or incorrect use of words. Academic writing is not creative writing because the goal of academic writing is to inform and enlighten; thus, word choice/vocabulary plays a vital role in academic writing. Some of the teachers think that many ESL learners at the undergraduate level face challenges in word choice/ vocabulary.

The issue of sentence structure is also prominent among the learners. One of the sentence structure difficulties is run-on sentences; this issue is prominent and anticipated due to the intense punctuation issues among the learners. In addition, some issues are vague and incomplete sentences, choppy and stringy sentences, and word order problems resulting from a lack of grammatical knowledge. Highlighting the issue of sentence structure, one of the teachers responded that the students lack basic writing skills and cannot write even a sentence correctly..." (Teacher's response). Another teacher commented that "Sometimes, I am unable to comprehend the sentence structures of the students; they are weak in this area although they have studied the language (English) for almost 12 years at school..." (Teacher's response)

The results indicate that ESL learners at the undergraduate level in Arunachal Pradesh face considerable challenges in academic writing. It further shows the problems in overall English language proficiency among most ESL learners. Various research shows that learners lacking English language proficiency have difficulties expressing their ideas in writing, which results in writing issues such as poor grammar, mechanics, inadequate vocabulary, sentence structure, and problems in paragraph development and ideas (Singh, 2016; Giridharan & Robson, 2011).

Conclusion

The study concludes that ESL learners experience challenges in various skills of academic writing related to grammar, writing mechanics, accurate and appropriate use of language and academic words, and sentence structures. Furthermore, the challenges in writing and organization, such as paragraph development, logical sequencing of ideas, and logical connectors, are also prominent. However, challenges associated with writing and organizational skills are often not explicitly acknowledged by the learners. Learners' limited responses related to these challenges may be attributed to a potential lack of awareness regarding these specific skills of academic writing. Therefore, raising the students' metacognitive awareness regarding their academic writing skills is necessary, enabling them to assess their needs and enhance their proficiency.

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