Academic Writing: Challenges and Potential Solutions

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Abstract
This paper explored postgraduate TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) students' perspectives on academic writing challenges and their practices to overcome them. The study is triggered by identified needs in literature and the empirical needs of postgraduate TESOL students in the study context. In-depth semi-structured focus group interviews were used to collect the data. The data analysis revealed that the difficulties they encounter are mainly filled into one of the following categories: language skills, academic writing skills, and source managing skills. At the same time, the study probed an intervention trial of using Google Classroom. Having explored students' perceptions regarding the use of Google Classroom and its effect on their academic writing revealed the growing understanding of digital tools' impact on encouraging independent learning and critical awareness that contribute to the enhancement of academic writing. However, with the advancements in technology, students seek support from online resources, but they still think that feedback from lecturers and supervisors is a crucial source of support; therefore, scaffolded feedback is recommended.

Keywords: academic writing, Google classroom, postgraduate, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages(TESOL)

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Introduction

EFL postgraduate students have to place themselves in academia with a proper level of critical thinking and academic literacy. Tardy (2010) propounded the challenges faced by EFL students to write formal academic text in English. According to Tardy (2010), students are required to select, evaluate, report, summarize, paraphrase, conclude, argue, select words and grammatical patterns, and avoid plagiarism. Nevertheless, students struggle to produce the required level of writing and to demonstrate critical thinking skills. However, there is a connection between what students read and what they produce in writing. Mudawy and Mousa (2017), also, raised similar challenges and argued that the success of postgraduate students depends on the ability to critically handle the words, ideas, and opinions of others to develop their own academic voice.

Enhancing students' academic writing skills is a concern for higher education institutions, even in English-speaking countries. Boyle, Ramsay, and Struan (2019) proposed a pedagogical justification of providing a compulsory writing skills program hosted on a virtual learning environment for both graduate and undergraduate students at the University of Glasgow in the UK. Such commitment to enhancing academic writing skills is much more in demand for EFL students. Higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia are liable to have different channels to enhance English writing skills like dedicated writing courses, English for academic purposes. In some institutions, there are academic writing centers such as the center for writing in English at King Saud University. Notwithstanding, these crucial skills remain an obstacle and a challenge for EFL postgraduate students.

Academic writing skills are often critical key indicators of successful experience in postgraduate TESOL programs. However, in a disciplinary course designed for postgraduate TESOL students, students are required to write with high-level construction skills by integrating disparate ideas, synthesizing perspectives, as well as a significant concern for accuracy, voice, and audience (Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007). The time limit of face-to-face classrooms is among the challenges a university professor is facing to develop discipline knowledge and address students' needs to improve their academic writing. Schwenger (2016) claimed that "online learning can open up new possibilities for enhancing students' learning" (p. 71). Therefore, considering digital tools, such as Google Classroom, to create a blended learning environment in a postgraduate course could allow for more personalization and learner autonomy, which meet students' needs and enhance discipline knowledge at the same time. Bernard et al. (2009) asserted that the way blended learning is designed affects how student learning can be supported in a course. However, well-designed blended learning opportunities are a potential solution to develop academic writing skills.

Although some recent studies have investigated the challenges of academic writing, whether from the lecturers' perspective (Singh, 2019) or undergraduate students' and lecturers' perspectives (Mudawy & Mousa, 2017), but every research context is unique. Hence, the current study is an attempt to figure out postgraduate TESOL students' perspectives on academic writing challenges and their practices to overcome them. Moreover, to explore postgraduate TESOL students' perceptions regarding the use of Google Classroom and its effect on their academic writing. It aims to inform TESOL postgraduate program leaders in the context of the study (Taibah University) about these challenges and the possible solutions; and encourage the use of information and communication technologies to enhance academic writing.

Theoretical Framework

To understand student writing and literacy in academic contexts, Lea and Street (1998) unfold three models of student writing: study skills, socialization, and academic literacies. The study skills model assumes competence in academic writing mainly with the surface features of the language, i.e., grammar, syntax, punctuation, and spelling. The second model is an academic socialization model which assumes that mastering the ground rules of a specific academic discourse can ensure successful academic writers. The third model is academic literacies; and like the first two models, it is mainly concerned with meaning-making and identity; and views student writing at the level of epistemology rather than skill (Lea & Street, 2006).

On the other hand, reading and writing are reciprocal skills. According to Zamel (1992), "reading and writing work in tandem to promote and enhance one another" (p. 481). It is obvious that the more one reads, the more it will help in becoming a better writer. However, Stosky (1983) stresses the relationship between reading and writing and states that "better writers tend to read more than poorer writers, and that better readers tend to produce more syntactically mature writing than poorer readers" (p.16).

Using the academic literacies model, which focuses on student perspective of academic literacies rather than educators, and focusing on reading to develop writing skills, this study attempts to understand how students could develop a sense of academic voice and become effective academic writers.

Research Methodology

Basic qualitative study design was adopted that involved in-depth semi-structured focus group interviews. According to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007), focus group interviews can stimulate participants to state feelings, perceptions, and beliefs that they would not express if interviewed individually.

The study sample was all postgraduate TESOL students enrolled in the Researching Second Language Classroom course during the academic year 2018/2019 at Taibah University. All students are Saudi, receiving their undergraduate and graduate instruction in both English and Arabic. However, the English language was the most frequent medium of instruction and discussion with lecturers. Also, the English language is the primary language for most of the reading materials and assignments during their postgraduate program.

Students participated voluntarily in the study; their consent was obtained by signing an informed consent form.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis was followed to answer the following research questions: What are the perspectives of postgraduate TESOL students on academic writing challenges? What are the practices of postgraduate TESOL students to overcome these challenges? What are the perceptions of postgraduate TESOL students regarding the use of Google Classroom and its effect on their academic writing? According to Creswell (2007):

data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organising the data (i.e., text data as in transcripts, or image data as in photographs) for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion (p. 148).

For coding, five themes emerged from the analysis of the transcribed data: students' experience of academic writing, difficulties students encounter in academic writing, support for academic writing, Google Classroom experience, and interdisciplinary issues.

Findings and Discussion
Students' Experience of Academic Writing
The first section of the focus group interview was concerned with exploring students' perceptions and experience of academic writing. In response to the first two questions about their experience with academic writing, students reported a low level of satisfaction. They felt constrained by the lack of academic vocabulary as it is clearly stated in the following excerpts:
S_2: "I don't feel satisfied about my writing process, I write a lot of unconnected ideas"
S_4: "My writing process is organized, but still I am not satisfied with the level of academic writing"
S_3: "I do feel satisfied to some extent, but I need more efforts to reach the desired level of writing"
S_1: "My writing process is good in general, but I need to practice and read a lot to gain vocabulary because I find it difficult to express my ideas"
S_5: "My writing process is organized, but I need to read more to improve my knowledge regarding academic vocabulary and structure".

At this level, postgraduate TESOL, students are required to write assignments for assessment purposes in different courses, some in Arabic, but most of them in English. Academic writing often requires students to write from an expert position, even when they do not consider themselves experts on their topics (Tardy, 2010). However, students are expected to show the ability to produce a good piece of academic writing, but they are facing difficulties in doing so.

Difficulties Students Encounter in Academic Writing
Students reported that academic writing is a challenging task to do. They highlighted some difficulties that they encounter while writing their assignments and research proposals, as stated in the following excerpts:
S_1: "I find it difficult to express my ideas. I have been told that I need to paraphrase, summarise, and integrate information from different sources, but I don't know how. It is difficult to analyse ideas and prepare them to be communicated in an academic written text"
S_2: "I think and prepare my ideas in Arabic and then translate my thoughts into English which resulted in very poor written English"
S_3: "I jot down my ideas; they are good ones, but the structure and grammar are not good at all"
S_4: "I find it difficult to generate ideas using a variety of academic vocabulary"
S_5: "it is difficult to transfer my ideas into meaningful written text because of spelling, grammar, and lack of vocabulary. Also, I find it difficult to choose appropriate references and research articles"

Difficulties encountered by students fill into one of the following categories: language skills, academic writing skills, and sources managing skills. All these reported difficulties indicate the absence of systematic training and support for postgraduate students which resulted in making such an activity a highly challenging task. Furthermore, with their Arabic linguistic ability, which is more advanced than English, students are most likely affected by their sociocultural literacy practices (Kumar & Aitchison, 2018), which accounted for making academic writing in English more problematic.

Support for Academic Writing

After reporting their academic writing difficulties, students were asked in the focus group interview to report any kind of support they had to overcome difficulties and improve their academic writing. They mainly pointed out technology as a source of support as they stated in the following excerpts:

S_2: "I use different online resources for spelling, grammar, translation"
S_3: "I look for online forums discussing academic writing, it is really helpful"
S_5: "I usually use proofreading websites to improve my academic writing"
S_4: "I google my topic looking for published articles; and I learn to use English in the same way as those researchers do by following their writing style".

With the advent of technology, students are finding support much more accessible via online resources. However, they still feel much more confident when they get feedback from their instructors and supervisors as one of them stated:

S_1: "I mainly depend on feedback I got on my assignments to improve my academic writing."
Another student asserted the importance of feedback as the main source for support as it is stated:
S_5: "Our instructors are busy most of the time; therefore, I look for native speakers to proofread my assignments and improve my writing style".

From students' point of view, feedback from supervisors is a key support contribute to their success at this stage. Through feedback they are informed if they met the accepted level of academic writing to fulfil their degree requirements.

Google Classroom Experience

Participants in this study were continuously exposed to online technology, i.e., Google Classroom, throughout an academic semester in which they were taught an educational research course. The course instructor was posting a question every week on a different topic of educational research methodology. At the same time, she was attaching the assigned reading and YouTube videos about the same topics every week. However, students were asked during the focus group interview about their experience with Google Classroom. All students reported that they read and watched all the attached learning materials. To check how effective the experience was, students were asked if they could guess why the instructor assigned the learning material and posted a question to answer and discuss online weekly. The following excerpts show their awareness:
S_1: "at the beginning, I thought it is just to help us to answer the posted question, but by the end of the semester I realized that reading and writing on Google Classroom help me to improve my academic writing"

S₂: "I think it was to cover the topics that we discuss in the class, but we need to read more about it; also, to provide us with important and primary resources"

S₃: "To finalize our knowledge about different educational research topics; and enhance our writing abilities"

S₄: "To improve our knowledge related to educational research; and improve our writing skills"

S₅: "I think it is just to help us to find the answer of the posted questions".

They were involved in a collaborative group assignment in which they answer the posted question and comment on each other answers in which they incorporated information from references to argue their points of view. These activities influenced students' abilities and skills to interpret and judge sources and critically evaluate and reorganize information. Students ascertained how useful their experience was with Google Classroom, as stated in the following excerpts:

S₁: "It was good in general, and easy to share ideas"

S₂: "It was really good experience with effective communication. The variety of resources (books, articles, videos) are useful, however, sometimes I feel it was overload to do"

S₃: "it was difficult to deal with it at the beginning, but I finally master it and I want to keep it up"

S₄: "It was beneficial and helpful to improve academic writing. Also, it is an interesting way of communication and getting feedback"

S₅: "Google Classroom experience motivated me to read and participate, but it was difficult to manage my time to deal with questions and reading materials".

The above analysis of students' perception of Google Classroom value revealed the growing understanding, among postgraduate students, of the impact of digital tools on encouraging independent learning and critical awareness as needed during their postgraduate studies.

Interdisciplinary Issues

In reporting their thoughts on how they would complete their writing assignments and their theses successfully, postgraduate TESOL students referred to the feedback again as a crucial scaffolding technique to help them to complete their academic writing successfully. Students stated the following:

S₁: "I hope to have instructors and professors who are willing to give feedback"

S₂: "I think we need native speaker instructors to proofread our assignments and theses and provide us with feedback"

S₃: "we need to communicate more with our instructors to get oral and written feedback"

S₄: "we need to submit online and get online feedback"

S₅: "not only feedback, we need instant feedback"

Postgraduate TESOL students demonstrated an awareness of their needs and suggested the following:

S₁: "We need an academic writing club in which we could meet as postgraduate students to discuss and solve our academic writing issues with help from experts"

S₂: "The department and school should provide us with opportunities to network in the academic field"

S₃: "We need specialized training courses on academic writing"

S$_4$: "I think highly professional academic writing courses could help us"
S$_5$: "I need to know where to go and who to talk to when I struggle to finish my assignments. We don't need only courses, but keen instructors and tutors for academic writing"

Students are looking for support as their academic literacy demands grow. It is unrealistic to leave it to be embedded in disciplinary subject courses. It is obvious that the class time of a subject course, even if it introduces research methods and skills, and academic writing for research purposes wouldn't guarantee mastering the essential skills that promote educational success, i.e., a well-written thesis. Schwenger (2016) asserts that "appropriate support at every level is essential for students to acquire literacy competencies and scaffold learning" (p. 73). Therefore, dedicated courses at every level should be provided.

Conclusion

This study is useful as it provided data about postgraduate TESOL students' perspectives on academic writing challenges and their practices to overcome them. Moreover, it shed light on postgraduate TESOL students' perceptions regarding the use of Google Classroom and its effect on their academic writing. However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations. First, even though the researcher had interviewed all students enrolled in the Master of TESOL program, but the sample is only from one higher education institution. Students at other institutions might experience different issues. Second, notwithstanding that qualitative study generates in-depth data about the case under investigation, but it is hard to generalize the results to other case studies. Third, even though that the data was collected as one-off inquiry of academic writing experience which might be developed and changed by time and experience, but the researcher had chosen the end of last semester to conduct the focus group interviews after postgraduate TESOL students had enrolled in different courses and exposed into the experience of academic writing in different subject courses. Despite these limitations related to the sample, but such a study could be essential because academic writing is a concern across all subjects and disciplines.

The academic literacies model, which was adopted as a theoretical framework, focus on making meaning and understanding institutional and academic constructions of knowledge (Boyle, Ramsay, & Struan, 2019). This model was useful to investigate students' perspectives on academic writing as it offers a comprehensive understanding of students writing experience.

On the other hand, TESOL students, as novice researchers, need to be enculturated into academia by obtaining academic writing principles. The academic department at the university should take the responsibility to engage students in an environment that leads to better academic writing. They should rethink the TESOL program and involve a specific course to enrich students' experience in academic writing both in language skills as well as academic writing skills such as understanding arguments and critical thinking. Furthermore, the use of always-on and connected technology like Google Classroom with interactive and collaborative features can enhance academic writing. However, such a technology would not guarantee better academic writing for postgraduate students; therefore, lecturers must intervene and provide constructive and scaffolded feedback.

Although the study's potential implications are not exhaustive, they have a knock-on effect on the issue of academic writing and TESOL postgraduate students' needs and concerns. Hitherto, with all the advancements in technology and the potential solutions they provide, students still think that feedback from their lecturers and supervisors are crucial for their success in academic writing.

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