

Challenges, Causes and Solutions in the Process of Writing English Academic Papers for English Postgraduates

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Abstract: Writing academic papers in English is essential for English postgraduates. However, ESL/EFL learners face many challenges and difficulties in academic writing. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the challenges, causes, and solutions. This study interviews six English major Chinese postgraduates. And the interviews are recorded and then transcribed into data. It has been discovered that English postgraduates would face a variety of challenges including language and academic issues. It concludes that students, teachers, and the universities should work together to assist postgraduates in overcoming challenges and enhancing their academic writing.

Keywords: Academic Writing; English Postgraduate; Challenges; Causes; Solutions.

1. Introductory

1.1. Research Background

Academic writing requires the ability to argue coherently and logically and demonstrate the meaning of the research results. Besides, with the advancement of globalization, English has become not only the lingua franca of international communication, but also the main language of academic communication. As non-native speakers, therefore, postgraduates in China are faced with not only the strict standard of the thesis but also the high requirement of English proficiency. It is a demanding and challengeable task to write the English thesis for many students. Hyland (2016) has also pointed out that the reason why non-native speakers will experience difficulties may be that the target language's linguistic norms differ from their mother tongue. Likewise, Brown (2000) has stated that writing requires the full competencies. Although English postgraduates are supposed to be competent with academic writing in English, many of them admit that they lack such competence and they are dissatisfied with their academic performance in general.

1.2. Significance of the Research

Previous research on this topic, both domestic and international, focused on various aspects employing various methods. However, the thought of students was largely ignored. ESL/EFL learners, particularly English postgraduates in China, whose inner voices regarding academic writing have been rarely heard.

The majority of results are based on textual analysis or questionnaires which focuses solely on linguistic-related issues. However, qualitative methods like in-depth interviews which focuses on social, educational and personal considerations are ignored. As a result, this study can offer support for academic writing analysis. This study will supplement the above neglected factors and fill in the gaps.

1.3. Research Goals and Questions

Attention should be paid to raising some theoretical and practical suggestions to help postgraduates to overcome the challenges. Therefore, what influences academic writing

among English postgraduates is one of the main study issues. Besides, what kind of assistance may postgraduate students hope to receive to enhance their academic writing is one of the major research questions.

2. Literature Review

According to Jiang (2011), academic writing is difficult for ESL/EFL learners due to its complexity and variation. From the perspectives of cultural origins, educational values, rhetorical strategies, and reader awareness. Jiang also demonstrated the obstacles and challenges in L2 academic writing. Cai (2013) says that students struggled with academic writing because they were unable to express their ideas in an academic writing style, teachers didn't teach them how to use proper references, and they were even unsure of the research paper format. The difficulties that EFL learners face in their academic writing were examined by Hyland (2002), Sun Wenkang (2004), Leilei (2017). It was discovered that ESL/EFL learners would have a range of challenges, from linguistic to non-linguistic. Other researchers such as Braine (2005), Ferenz (2005) and Wen Qiufang (2022) focused more on the explanation of the difficulties and tried to identify the elements influencing the writing process. They claimed that both internal and external influences affected academic writing. In the former, factors including motivation, linguistic proficiency, self-efficacy, composition competence, and identity were considered, whereas in the latter, factors like time, policy, supervision, and access to academic sources were taken into account.

3. Methodology

A descriptive qualitative research study with a small sample for in-depth analysis was carried out in an effort to address the perceptions of English postgraduates regarding their difficulties with academic writing. An interview was conducted with six English postgraduate students from four different study areas—linguistics, literature, translation of theory, and MA of translation. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather the data in accordance with the study questions and the details we hoped to get from the interviewee.

Four parts were covered in the interview schedule: personal background information, opinions on academic writing, prior experiences with academic writing, and their expectations for help from all sources. However, some on-the-spot questions were also posed based on the individual responses of the participants in order to gather important information. In total, six one-on-one interviews were conducted in the months of November and December of 2022. In addition, an hour-long interview was conducted with each interviewee. The interviews were recorded on audio, and the researcher also took some additional notes during the interviews.

The transcript data was created through verbatim transcription of the interview recordings. First, each transcribed interview was extensively read, and the information of each interviewee were summarized. Second, when analyzing the data, constant comparisons between cases were used to distinguish between individual difficulties brought on by individual factors and shared challenges brought on by shared factors. In addition, the data were compared to previous research findings.

4. Findings

4.1. The Awareness and Process of Academic Writing

All interviewees are clear that a formal academic English paper consists of several parts: abstract, introduction, literature review, research design, results and discussion, conclusion, acknowledgments, and references, and are clear about the issues that needed to be addressed in each part. The following is their consensus on the content and purpose of each part. They believe that the abstract generally uses simple and clear language to describe the purpose, methods, results and significance of the research; the introduction briefly describes the background and progress of the research, highlighting your own research; the literature review summarizes the academic schools of thought and describes the current research trends in the field; the research design describes in detail the methodology, procedures, and research process of the research, which allows the research to be repeated if necessary; the results and discussion should analyze data objectively and correctly, and dig deeper into the reasons for the results and the correlation with previous results; the conclusion logically summarizes the innovations and inadequacies, and provides the research value as well as ideas and directions for future research; the acknowledgement includes two main components: assistance given to the author by an individual or institution, and the source of funding to support the research; the citations should be marked and the details of the literature should be listed in the references according to the requirements of different journals.

The interviewees also gave the following answers. The purpose is to demonstrate that you have a depth of knowledge in your field of study, to identify gaps and to prove the significance of your research (Interviewee 1). Their knowledge of the structure of academic papers may be inextricably linked to their usual attention to papers, as the university requires graduate students to publish before graduation (Interviewee 2).

When writing academic papers in English, the process is basically the same: 1) review the literature to understand the study of current conditions and find innovative and in-depth points; 2) design their own research and collect data accordingly; 3) analyze and organize the data afterwards; 4)

finally write the paper. The first draft is written in English with the necessary data, pictures, labels, etc. After that, the first draft is revised repeatedly for grammar, vocabulary, structure, logic, citations, etc. Words, sentences, and paragraphs will be added or deleted (Interviewee 3). After making their own revisions, interviewees will also ask their teachers and classmates to help them revise their papers. After that, they will revise again to make sure that the final paper they turn in is accurate. This shows that the interviewees are very clear about the whole process of writing an academic English paper, the requirements for publication, and the significance of repeated revisions and seeking help to improve the quality of the paper. This may be due to the fact that their universities attach great importance to the publication of academic papers.

4.2. Factors Affecting the Writing of Academic Papers in English

The results show that the interviewees consider factors affecting the writing of academic papers in English including ideas, overall structure, good data, analysis and discussion of results, logic, clear expression, grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, good literature index, and extensive reading of literature.

4.2.1. Linguistic Factors

In terms of linguistic factors, the results show that the interviewees consider factors affecting the writing of academic papers in English including vocabulary, grammar, sentences, spelling, punctuation, etc. Vocabulary is the basis of an academic paper in English, and especially synonyms need to be used accurately, which reflects the authenticity of the paper. However, Chinese students often do not understand the true meaning of English vocabulary. Besides, there are limitations in the choice of words. When writing their papers, they rely solely on the notes in the Oxford Dictionary, resulting in frequent ambiguities and errors, which seriously affects the reader's understanding. In terms of grammar, Chinese students often find it difficult to learn it, especially the use of prepositions, as it is not as important in Chinese. They just don't use their comprehension but their memory to memorize the fixed collocation of phrases by rote. In terms of syntactic composition, the position of the subject and object in Chinese and in English, are reversed in a sentence. In English, the passive voice is used more often in argumentative writing, while in Chinese the active voice is mostly used. Many Chinese students have difficulty in mastering the use of the passive voice in English sentences. Also, there are problems with the logical connection of sentences. English writing requires the use of conjunctions or adverbs to connect paragraphs and sentences to convey transitions, progressions or explanations, whereas Chinese expressions do not require the use of words that indicate the relationship between paragraphs and sentences. Therefore, the result is that their ideas cannot be expressed clearly. The interviewees believe that the most fundamental factors leading to the above problems are their native language and cultural thinking. (Interviewee 5). Chinese people tend to think holistically and comprehensively, emphasizing ambiguity, while Westerners tend to think individually, emphasizing specificity and clarity. Therefore, it will lead to the difference in the structure of discourse (interviewee 6).

4.2.2. Academic Factors

In terms of academic factors, specific academic difficulties

include academic thinking, style and conventions, as well as quoting rules. Overall, for interviewees, one of the most important factors is the idea and content, because your article should have a new idea that is better than others. The second important thing is the overall structure, because it reflects the clear framework of an academic paper and represents the clear thinking of the scholar. The third important factor is logic, because the researcher needs a clear and logical presentation in order to be able to communicate with everyone. Specifically, different interviewees encounter different difficulties. Four interviewees have difficulties in finding and collecting relevant references. This is because some of the materials need to be purchased at high prices. And it is also difficult to organize the various information logically together. Three interviewees find data analysis difficult. For liberal arts students, they need to learn data processing software from scratch if they want to deal with huge data, which will take a lot of time. All interviewees think that the discussion part is much more difficult. They not only need to discuss the results of their research, but also to compare them with previous research, which requires a high level of academic competence.

It is noteworthy to note that the understanding of 'plagiarism' in Chinese and Western cultures is very different. In Western culture, citing someone others' paper requires strict adherence to citation rules. Copyright infringement is a very serious matter. In China, borrowing others' papers seems to be more common. According to surveys, Chinese scholars are not as fluent as native English speakers due to their language capacity, thinking patterns and writing paradigms. Therefore, Chinese scholars inevitably have problems with vocabulary and expressions when writing and translating their papers, and may directly translate sentences and paragraphs from the original text, resulting in suspicion of plagiarism. However, some of the Chinese scholars are with the purpose of publishing papers quickly and obtaining titles, which leads them to not strictly abide by the academic ethics in the process of writing and publishing their papers. Nor do they conduct sufficient thinking and research, resulting in a lack of originality in the content of their papers.

4.2.3. Other Factors

In addition to linguistic and academic factors, they also face other challenges, such as various stressors and emotional factors. Specifically, some of them have to deal with the pressure of hunting for a job and writing papers at the same time. Some are even under great pressure from family and marriage. As a result, they are unable to balance life, work and study. Eventually, they develop various negative emotions, such as anxiety, depression, sadness, and pain. In more serious cases, some people will be depressed. In short, they are not physically and mentally healthy, which causes them to be unable to focus on reading and writing and become less effective in writing papers.

4.3. Solutions to Challenges

4.3.1. In Terms of Individuals

To cope with these difficulties, they adopt strategies such as reading literature, imitating published articles, taking academic writing classes, asking others for help in revising, writing and practicing more, and communicating with teachers.

One interviewee recommends developing a clear writing plan. For example, you need to determine how many papers you should read each month and how many words you should

write for your own paper, and then assign these tasks to each week and then to each day. Subsiding complex and huge tasks into smaller ones can promote efficiency and completes your own papers on time. Besides, in order to write an organized, structured, and logical paper, it is important to identify the topic, research questions, methods, and conclusions of the paper and to clarify the framework and content of the paper before writing.

Another interviewee advises students to exercise caution and patience during the tedious writing process. It is necessary to be persevering and persistent in the face of each submission and each revision. After writing, students can ask peers or teachers to review, revise and give feedback on the paper. This helps scholars to review their papers from different perspectives and improve the quality of their papers.

Most importantly, to write high-quality papers in a particular field, scholars need to continue to study and reflect and become familiar with the knowledge in the field. Scholars need to keep abreast of current hot topics and issues in the field by reading international academic journals and attending international conferences. The interviewees gave the following useful methods: pay attention to others' expressions when reading English papers; take more notes when necessary to accumulate diverse expressions; and pay attention to details of language, such as quotations, punctuation and formatting in papers.

4.3.2. In Terms of Universities

It is strongly recommended that academic writing courses be held as early as possible. This allows postgraduate students sufficient time to prepare their papers so that it does not clash with their job search before graduation. Notably, one student said they had a semester that was underutilized, so he hopes that universities will adjust the paper schedule to make the whole process more efficient and not delay various things until they are about to graduate. And universities can organize lectures and invite people with experience in publishing to interact with the students. Also, universities' paper writing courses could go into more detail on how to search for resources on the computer. And universities' libraries should offer more free books and free online resources so that postgraduate students can study on their own at any time. In particular, many expressed a lack of resources for foreign language journals. At the same time, more than one person hope that universities could provide more funds to support their researches.

4.3.3. In Terms of Teachers

All the interviewees want to have a class in which teachers will clarify how to write each part of the essay, provide targeted training and some common sentences. It is important to note that all the interviewees express the wish that teachers could focus on the literature review part which is considered to be the most difficult.

One interviewee suggests that teachers should include new entrants in academic groups consisting of senior students as soon as possible so that they can share their academic writing experiences together. First, simple topics can be discussed, then more esoteric ones. The way of group discussion enables them to learn from each other, encourage each other, correct each other, and make progress together. From this it can be seen that paper discussion meetings can motivate postgraduates to study. Therefore, regular group meetings deserve to be widely adopted. Besides, some other interviewees desire long-term direction from teachers. They suggest that teachers meet with postgraduates more

frequently through seminars or presentations so they can learn more about academic writing.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary of the Study

Through interviews with six English postgraduates, the purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of ESL/EFL learners with academic writing. It focuses on the challenges and difficulties encountered by English postgraduates, the influencing factors, and solutions for improving academic writing. It concludes that the challenges ESL/EFL learners encounter in academic writing not only involve linguistic issues such as the selection of words and sentence patterns, but also academic issues such as the selection of topics, the processing of literature, the collection and analysis of data, discussion, and logical reasoning. Academic issues appear to be more challenging for English postgraduates than linguistic issues.

The findings suggest that academic writing can be improved in many ways. Students, teachers, and the universities should work together. For students, they should frequently read academic papers and practice writing. They should also consult teachers and communicate with peers. For teachers, they should provide students with more training and help them revise. For universities, current academic writing books and effective classes should be provided.

5.2. Limitation of the Study

It is important to point out the major limitations of the current study. The only way the data are collected is through an interview. The complex situation of academic writing by postgraduates is not fully revealed or explained.

5.3. Implications for Further Study

In terms of methodology, future studies may employ a variety of methods, including interview, case study, questionnaires and sample analysis. Thus, more data from more diverse perspectives can be gathered. Despite these limitations, this study still hopes to provide some valuable information for academic writing.

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