

# A Gap to Be Filled in The Teaching and Learning of Academic Writing to Meet University Disciplinary Requirements

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## **Abstract**

*Academic writing is at the heart of teaching and learning in higher education. Students are assessed largely by what they write, and need to learn both general academic conventions as well as disciplinary writing requirements in order to be successful in higher education. However, statistics show that the quality of academic writing of university students does not meet the disciplinary requirements. This study explores the gap that exists in between the schools writing and writing at university. The findings show that first year students are underprepared for academic writing while academics blame the responsibilities for school teachers or even hold negative views on students' writing performance. The corrective feedbacks or comments given by lecturers bring more daunting effects than positive motivation for students to improve their academic writing performance.*

**Keywords:** writing at schools, academic writing, unpreparedness, the gap

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1. Background to the study**

When you are offered a place at a university as a new student, there are so many things you are not familiar with. One of the most nightmare tasks names “*academic writing*” which you have never heard of when you were at schools. In comparison with what you have written before, Lowe (2010) states that academic writing may resemble playing a familiar game by completely new rules. So, what is academic writing? Why is it a daunting subject for most students? It is not easy for a first year student to define what academic writing is, simply because they had never heard of or done that before they entered a university. In other words, these students are not well prepared and inexperienced for the subject. Surprisingly, lecturers or academics at universities do not take full responsibilities for teaching academic writing when students are admitted to tertiary education. They tend to perceive academic writing as a school problem or the duty of someone else, that is, as an external and additional task that is not part of their teaching duties. Moore (1998) indicates that some lecturers seem to think that students' writing difficulties should not be addressed by lecturers. Moore reports about such sentiments of some tutors as follows:

I don't think it's my job to teach undergraduate students to write in English. If they won't make an effort to brush up in the medium they are taught in, there's nothing we can do, and they have to fail if they can't communicate. I would have thought that by definition a university as a centre of excellence would exclude people who were so disadvantaged, and yet we have people of the calibre of perhaps a standard seven...The problem is out there, and I don't think the university should be handling that...

The gap between students' under-preparedness and lecturers' unwillingness in learning and teaching academic writing might be the explanation for poor academic writing performance of first year students at universities in general and Thai Nguyen University in particular.

### **1.2. A statement of the research problem**

The International School, Thai Nguyen University is the only institution which uses English as the language of instruction for all disciplines. In addition, they are required to gain a B2-CEFR in English to be recognized graduation. That is a reason why academic writing is one of the most important subjects to fulfill the assignments as well as to write graduation papers.

However, the actual problem is that many students show poor performance in academic writing after a one year intensive English training course is offered. Researchers have noted that most of what is known and written about is how to write better or more academically; little has been written about the perceptions of teachers and students about the issues. This study attempts to investigate the reasons for poor academic writing performance focusing on students' unpreparedness for academic writing at university and academics' unwillingness in teaching practices

### 1.3. A purpose statement of the study

Regardless of varieties of factors such as grammar, ideas, organization, word choices, conventions, which are important for academic writing, the purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions of students towards academic writing instructions and the lecturers' perceptions towards academic writing performance of first year EFL students at the International School, Thai Nguyen University.

### 1.4. Research questions

The study attempts to answer the following research questions

1.4.1. *What are students' experiences and perceptions towards academic writing at universities?*

1.4.2. *What are lecturers' opinions on students' academic writing performance?*

### 1.5. Scope of the study

The study is conducted with second year students at the International School, Thai Nguyen University. These students have completed one year of intensive English. Many of them come from Asian countries such as East Timor, Lao Republic and the Philippines. These students have spent one year studying fundamental English before coming up for academic writing.

### 1.6. The significance of the study

The findings from the present study might be beneficial to both students and teachers in enhancing academic writing skill. Students may consider the skill of writing as an important tool in academic performance. A great demand of writing proficiency is required from students to accomplish various tasks ranging from taking written examinations to dissertations. As Singh (2017) states "The journey to becoming an academic writer is unique and highly individualized for everyone, and inevitably involves some strategic planning, some trial and error, and lots of perseverance". Teachers of academic writing may use the findings to modify teaching practices as well as gaining positive points of views towards students' performance, even design appropriate supplementary activities to improve academic writing for university students.

## II. A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### 2.1. What is academic writing?

Researchers have defined academic writing in number of different ways. Henning (2002) simply defines it as a process of thinking that uses written language. In a more detailed manner, Singh (2017) views

Academic writing is *distinctly different* from other forms of writing. On the surface, it may appear to have similarities with other types of writing, but the more you learn about it, the more you realize that just about every aspect of academic writing, from purpose to tone, from structure to style, and from audience to word choice, is different. Quite literally, academic writing is more than just another way to write; it is a different culture with its own language.

This study adopts Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) who define academic writing as any writing that fulfils the purpose of education in a college or university. That means writing reflects and generates thoughts which EFL students can use to create meaningful messages through a structured, organized and conscious writing process, which involves different stages such as brainstorming, drafting, revising and editing, and for intended audiences.

### 2.2. Writing at schools versus writing at universities

Writing at schools and that at universities is a gap that students have to bridge. As Yong (2010) argues, the transition from secondary school to university poses a serious challenge for many in terms of academic writing. Little synergy is found between what happens in high schools and what happens in tertiary education. The high school curriculum contributes very little to the tertiary education curriculum, particularly in the teaching of writing. This gap needs to be addressed so that EFL students from high schools can be better equipped for the writing demands required in higher education. Unless this problem is addressed, the problem of student writing difficulties will be perpetuated.

At schools, the writing skill seems to be underestimated, partly because of the pressure from final examination which is basically multiple choice questions. Schools play a critical role in developing students' reading and writing skills. If student writing is not addressed adequately at school level, the university programs will always be inundated with students who are academically under-prepared. Some researchers attribute students' poor writing skills to the teachers' reluctance to teach

writing. For instance, Harris (2017) reported that some secondary teachers do not teach composition at school level. This situation is exacerbated when students come to institutions of higher learning and are also confronted by academics who are not willing to teach academic writing. Another reason for the unpreparedness from schools to universities is that the tasks of writing at schools are not effective. Most of the tasks focus on sentence or paragraph levels, few are found in essay levels. Writing at universities is more than the combination of words to make a sentence then sentences together to make paragraphs. Your writing will have different purposes and functions, although university assignments are mainly produced to inform your tutors and lecturers about your knowledge and understanding of the subject area. You will find that you can communicate with your reader, the tutor, through various types of written assignment depending on the discipline and subject areas that you are studying.

### **2.3. Perceptions of students towards academic writing instructions**

Academics, curriculum developers or syllabus designers sometimes inadequately evaluate the programmes that they develop. They ignore the learners' concerns or feedbacks towards the syllabus that is being in used. That's why there is a gap between academics' expectation and learners' performance. It is true that some teaching staff perceived EFL students negatively and could not help them much in their writing.

Lea (2004) argues that students' perceptions and attitudes toward instruction are critical and should be taken into account in our endeavour to teach writing. As a result, the practice of involving learners' inputs in curriculum development is an issue that is heavily debated in the EFL literature and the possibilities of involving students cannot be ignored.

There have been some studies in the literature to explore the perceptions of students towards writing instructions. Lea and Street (1998) employed an ethnographic qualitative approach which included in-depth semi-structured interviews with staff and students, participant observations, samples of student writing, written feedback on students' work and hand-outs on essay writing. They found that students experienced difficulties with writing, particularly with conflicting, contrasting and implicit requirements for writing in different courses. Hirst (2004) acknowledge that many students often feel disempowered, lack confidence and feel completely unprepared for university study. Gambell's (1991) study that aimed to discover students' perceptions toward their own writing and how they go about academic writing found that even successful students are uncomfortable with their own university-level writing and that writing is difficult and stressful to many of them. Blanton (1987) reports that her students are scared to death that they may not write English well enough to pass their exams in EFL in order to advance their academic studies to obtain a degree. She reports that anxiety is a hindrance for them to becoming proficient writers.

### **2.4. Perceptions of lecturers towards EFL students' academic writing performance**

#### *2.4.1. Unrealistic expectations and stereotypes from disciplinary lecturers*

Researches in the field of academic writing show that university lecturers or academics tend to have unrealistic expectations about EFL students and do not take into cognisance students' educational backgrounds. Students do not receive adequate supports from academic writing experts as they blame that for students' self-fulfillment. Cabral and Tavares (2002) suggest that lecturers should make their writing expectations, opinions, demands and understandings explicit and understandable to students in order to help them get acquainted with university writing skills. Some discipline specialists even seem to hold stereotypical opinions toward EFL learners. They felt that they should outsource the teaching of language to language specialists while they concentrate on their core business of teaching content. Wright (2004) discussed the stereotyping as followed;

Stereotyping of EFL students is a disturbing issue at the university level. In a quest to address problems experienced by our students, it is necessary to deconstruct academics' stereotypes of EFL learners. Before judging, labelling and shifting the responsibility of helping disadvantaged learners, academics need to consider the learning contexts from which our students come. He concluded that academics have stereotypical opinions toward EFL students which were not a true reflection of their students. As a result, there is a need for academics to change the way they perceive their EFL students if they would like to achieve success in teaching academic writing to these students

Mitchell and Evison (2006) argue that the teaching of writing should not be a remedial or add-on activity, but an integral, on-going part of disciplinary learning for all students. They further argue that teaching writing should be part of the responsibility of disciplinary academics and should occur within the disciplines' curriculum. Furthermore, Jurecic (2006) added that academic literacies should be taught within the disciplines by discipline specialists and not as a remedial activity by language specialists. The foundation of academic writing should be laid by language specialists by teaching conventions of academic writing and be continued to be taught by discipline specialists so that students can be apprenticed and acculturated into the discourse communities they are entering

#### 2.4.2. *The effects of error treatments and corrective feedbacks*

Error making in second or foreign language learning is inevitable and need not be necessarily considered as signs of poor performance, on the contrary, they should be treated as healthy signs indicating that a learning process is active. Corder (1967) argued that what we term as “error” in second language learners is actually a natural developmental stage, analogous to what children exhibit in acquiring the first language. Ferris (2011) confirms that it is unrealistic to expect that L2 writers’ production will be error-free. Keshavarz (2012) defines language errors as followed;

“Errors are considered to be systematic, governed by rule, and appear because a learner's knowledge of the rules of the target language is incomplete. Thus, they are indicative of the learner's linguistic system at a given stage of language learning. They are likely to occur repeatedly and not recognized by the learner”.

In comparison with mistakes which are seen as *random deviations, slips of the tongue or pen* errors need special treatments because they can motivate or demotivate students with their writing. Ferris (2011) concluded that grammar feedback is a waste of teacher energy and deflects student attention from more important issues. Weaver (2006) found that students were motivated to improve when they received constructive feedback and also suggests that tutors should provide appropriate guidance and motivation rather than diagnosing problems and justifying the marks. Williams (1981) asserted that errors are primarily in the eye of the beholder and especially in the minds of writing teachers wielding red pens – in other words, we notice errors in student writing because we are looking for them, not because they are truly bothersome.

For learners, being able to notice these errors and think of other correct forms can assist them in improving their language level and in being better language users. Ferris (2008) concur that students should be shown their strengths and weaknesses so that they can improve on their future work. Unfortunately, many teachers tend to give vague feedbacks or comments which students were not able to understand and use effectively (Lea and Street 1998). Saito (1994) suggests that EFL teachers need to make explicit the purposes of their feedback so that students can know how to handle that feedback and use it to their benefit. Teachers should take advantages of these errors to plan their classes for remedial actions in order to recast them. Mckeating (1994) said that knowledge of the difficulties in learning a foreign language and a consideration of the possible causes of errors should lead the teacher to develop an attitude which is sympathetic and helpful. This attitude will encourage the students not to worry about error making.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. The context of the study

The study is carried out at the International School, Thai Nguyen University where English is the language of instructions for all disciplines. Students are offered one year study intensive English before learning their selected majors such as International business, Business administration or Environmental management. All the assignments must be written in English to satisfy requirements of the join-program released by administration.

#### 3.2. The subject of the study

Participants of the study consist of 38 second year students and 6 lecturers from the International School, Thai Nguyen University. The selected students are those who have just finished their intensive English and about to learn their majors in the second year of their 4 year program. The lecturers involved in the study are both language and disciplinary teachers.

#### 3.3. Research design

The selected research design for the present study is a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. In the quantitative phase, the researcher acts as an independent objective observer. In the qualitative phase, the researcher is close contact with the participants who are lecturers in this study. The design employs the sequential explanatory model. That means the qualitative findings can be used as a triangulation for the quantitative results.

#### 3.4. Data collection instrument

Data for the quantitative phase is collected through a 20 item survey. The survey consists of two parts; the first part consists of 10 items to explore students’ perceptions toward academic writing and academic writing instructions in class. The second part consists of 10 items to investigate students’ perceptions toward academic instructions and feedbacks from lecturers about their writing performance. Structured interviews are conducted with lecturers to obtain data for the qualitative phase. The interviews are recorded, transcribed and coded to confirm the results from the survey.

#### 3.5. Data analysis instruments

The software SPSS version 20 is used to analyze data obtained from the survey. The structure interviews with the following questions are used to reconfirm what the students perceived from their teachers and their teaching in class.

1. *What is your general opinion of the students' writing competences?*
2. *From your experience, what type of problems do you see as the most common in your students' writing?*
3. *What type of problems do you perceive as the most serious?*
4. *What types of support do you give to your students in academic writing?*
5. *What do you think should be done to improve your students' writing?*

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

##### 4.1. Quantitative results

##### 4.1.1. Students' experience of academic writing

In order to find the students' experiences towards academic writing, a 10 item survey is delivered to 38 students. To determine the internal consistency of the 10-item survey, Cronbach's coefficient  $\alpha$  was calculated, yielding a reliability estimate of .714 for the scale. (table 1)

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.714	10

Table 1: Reliability Statistics for the first survey

Descriptive statistics (table 2) show that all of the students are inexperienced in academic writing (Mean: 1.6; 2.2)

<b>Descriptive Statistics</b>						
Survey Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I do not really know what academic writing is until I go to university.	38	1.00	4.00	62.00	1.6316	.78572
I do not have enough writing experience from secondary school.	38	1.00	3.00	62.00	1.6316	.63335
Most of the writing tasks at school focus on grammatical points.	38	1.00	3.00	82.00	2.1579	.67888
I did not do the writing activities at school because my aim is to pass the graduation exam.	38	1.00	4.00	79.00	2.0789	.91183
I feel tension when I have to write about something in English	38	1.00	4.00	81.00	2.1316	.96341
I do not have enough general knowledge about the topics.	38	1.00	4.00	84.00	2.2105	.84335
I am unable to organize my thoughts while writing.	38	1.00	4.00	86.00	2.2632	.82803
I do not know enough writing strategies such as prewriting, drafting, or editing.	38	1.00	4.00	76.00	2.0000	.83827
We do not have adequate writing activities to encourage us to write.	38	1.00	4.00	86.00	2.2632	.75995
I do not have enough vocabulary to express my ideas.	38	1.00	5.00	77.00	2.0263	1.05233
Valid N (listwise)	38					

Table 2: Students' experiences on academic writing

4.1.2. Students' perceptions towards academic writing class

In order to find the students' perceptions towards academic writing, a 10 item survey is delivered to 38 students. The Cronbach's Alpha  $\alpha$  value for items this survey is 0.617, means these items are reliable (table 3)

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.617	10

Table 3: Reliability Statistics for the second survey

Descriptive statistics show that students are not satisfied with instructions as well as corrective feedbacks from lecturers. (table 4). Means range from 1.8947 to 2.18

Survey Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Teaching method is out dated and cannot satisfy the needs of students	38	1.00	4.00	83.00	2.1842	.86541
My English teachers are not well prepared for their class.	38	1.00	4.00	83.00	2.1842	.83359
My English teacher has little interaction with students in class.	38	1.00	4.00	90.00	2.3684	.71361
My English teacher shows preferences to those who are good at learning English	38	1.00	4.00	79.00	2.0789	.78436
My English teacher does not give me good suggestions.	38	1.00	4.00	79.00	2.0789	.78436
My English teacher criticized me when I did not well in the study.	38	1.00	5.00	79.00	2.0789	.91183
There is not a harmonious relationship between teachers and students.	38	1.00	4.00	81.00	2.1316	.81111
My teachers do not explain my writing errors so that I can avoid.	38	1.00	3.00	77.00	2.0263	.67731
Teachers cannot take all students into consideration in the large class	38	1.00	3.00	72.00	1.8947	.64889
The high frequency to change teachers makes students uncomfortable	38	1.00	3.00	78.00	2.0526	.76925
Valid N (listwise)	38					

Table 4: Students' perceptions towards academic writing

4.2. Qualitative results

The purposes of the interviews are to understand teachers' attitudes towards their students' writing performance. Besides, the findings from interviews may be used to reconfirm the findings from the surveys obtained from students.

The teachers were firstly asked for their opinions about the students' writing. The overall evaluation is poor. However, the findings varied among disciplines; language experts believed that the main problems when writing were grammar, vocabulary and lack of ideas, while discipline teachers put more emphasis on style and vocabulary used. The feedbacks given by these two groups were also different.

Both groups of teachers agreed that students' vocabulary is limited, especially specific terms. For the question of what types of supports suggested by the teachers, the majority of the answers go on the supplementary readings. For the final issue of how to improve students' academic writing, the language teachers suggest more instructions or extra intensive classes on academic styles. Four out of six teachers insisted on extra readings as a way to improve academic writing. They are convinced that by reading

students can enrich their vocabulary of the field, meanwhile improve their writing styles. In response to the question of types of feedbacks to students' writing, some teachers confessed that they did not give detailed treatments of errors or mistakes made by students, partly because of the overcrowded class size. Sometimes they just underlined the errors but not suggest the corrected options.

## V. CONCLUSION

What can be drawn from the present study is that first year students should be carefully instructed on how to write in English, especially academic writing to meet the highly demands of university disciplines. At the same time, extra readings of varieties of subject matters must be part of syllabus for first year students to enrich their schemata. In terms of corrective feedbacks, language teachers should pay more attentions to types of feedback as well as manners of giving feedbacks to motivate students. Last but not least, teachers should bear in mind that first year students are not familiar with writing at universities so step-by-step scaffoldings are necessary.

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**APPENDIX A: A survey for students**

**Part 1: Your experience of academic writing**

Please read the following statements. Put a tick (√) in

- (1) If it is totally TRUE for you. (2) If it is TRUE for you, (3) If you are not sure, (4) If it is partly TRUE for you, and (5) If it is not TRUE for you.

#	Statements	1	2	3	4	5
1.	I do not really know what academic writing is until I go to university.					
2.	I do not have enough writing experience from secondary school.					
3.	Most of the writing tasks at school focus on grammatical points.					
4.	I did not do the writing activities at school because my aim is to pass the graduation exam.					
5.	I feel tension when I have to write about something in English					
6.	I do not have enough general knowledge about the topics.					
7.	I am unable to organize my thoughts while writing.					
8.	I do not know enough writing strategies such as prewriting, drafting, or editing.					
9.	We do not have adequate writing activities to encourage us to write.					
10.	I do not have enough vocabulary to express my ideas.					

**Part 2: Your perceptions towards academic writing instructions and feedbacks given by lecturers.**

11.	Teaching method is out dated and cannot satisfy the needs of students	1	2	3	4	5
12.	My English teachers are not well prepared for their class.					
13.	My English teacher has little interaction with students in class.					
14.	My English teacher shows preferences to those who are good at learning English					
15.	My English teacher does not give me good suggestions.					
16.	My English teacher criticized me when I did not well in the study.					
17.	There is not a harmonious relationship between teachers and students.					
18.	My teachers do not explain my writing errors so that I can avoid.					
19.	Teachers cannot take all students into consideration in the large class					
20.	The high frequency to change teachers makes students uncomfortable					

**APPENDIX B: Interview questions for lecturers**



**Part 1: Demographic information**

1. What is your highest qualification in your discipline?

Bachelors	Masters	Doctorate

2. How long have you been teaching your subject?

1-5 years	6-10 years	More than 10 years

**Part 2: Semi-structured questions**

3. What is your general opinion of the students' writing competences?
4. From your experience, what type of problems do you see as the most common in students' writing?
5. What type of problems do you perceive as the most serious?
6. What types of support do you give to your students in academic writing?
7. What do you think should be done to improve your students' writing?
8. What types of feedbacks do you often give to your students?
9. What do you focus more on?
  - a. *Organization*
  - b. *Content*
  - c. *Grammar*
  - d. *Vocabulary*
  - e. *Mechanic*