



Voices from the Classroom: Nine EFL Students' Perceptions on their Academic Writing Skills

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Abstract:

Background: Learning to write academically in English poses challenge for Arabic speaking learners, mainly due to the difference in the two linguistic systems (English and Arabic).

Purpose: This study aims to explore the specific challenges Omani EFL students face in developing their academic English writing skills, with a focus on identifying linguistic issues and conceptual difficulties.

Methodology: A qualitative descriptive design was used for data collection. Responses were obtained through in-depth interviews from nine EFL students enrolled in the foundation program at A'Sharqiyah University in Ibra, Oman during the year 2025. Data analysis involved transcribing the recordings, identifying, categorizing, and labelling patterns and themes pertinent to the research questions.

Findings: It was found that students faced difficulties in two areas: (1) linguistic areas, namely grammar, vocabulary, and spelling, (2) conceptual areas, that is writing on topics they were not familiar with. Students admitted spending less time on engaging in autonomous learning, such as reading for enjoyment and practicing writing outside classroom requirements.

Originality/Value: The value of this research lies in its offering educators and curriculum designers in similar EFL contexts to address the multifaceted nature of academic writing difficulties.

Keywords: *writing; English; challenges; AI; extensive reading.*

1 Introduction

In Omani educational system, English language teaching holds a significant place. According to the new educational system enacted in 1998, Omani students start learning English from grade one through twelve (Sergon, 2011). At the university level, majors such as Engineering, Computer Science, and Business use English as a medium of instruction. Furthermore, English is a university requirement course for all majors at the university. Given the important place that the English language has in the Omani curriculum, students have to pass the English language course at a Center for Language and Foundation Studies (CLFS) before enrolling into their major. CLFS caters to the academic needs of university students by providing them with skills needed for academic success in higher education.

The CLFS program at A'Sharqiyah University (ASU) consists of three programs: English language, Mathematics, and Information Technology (IT). As mentioned, enrolling in the foundation program is a mandatory requirement for all students who have been accepted to study at a university so that they are better prepared to meet the expectations of the university programs. All newly registered students take a placement test during the orientation week of the first and second semester. Based on their placement test results, the students are assigned to one of the three levels (Level 1, Level 2, or Level 3) (A'Sharqiyah University, 2021). Nevertheless, students who score 5 on the IELTS band are exempted from taking the English course at CLFS.

Once in the foundation program, students receive instruction and training to ensure better success in their majors. Along with the skills of listening, speaking, reading, the skills to write well play a significant role for students' success since when they enroll in their majors, they are required to respond in writing to assignments, tests, and exams. However, due to the differences in the linguistic systems of both languages (Arabic and English), Arabic speakers struggle when writing in English. This study aims to explore nine students' views toward their academic English writing skill development. All the nine students were enrolled in level 3 at the CLFS program at A'Sharqiyah University during the year 2025.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

This study aims at achieving the following objectives:

- To identify the difficulties that students encounter when writing in English.
- To analyze the relationship between students' academic writing proficiency and (a) their engagement in extensive reading and (b) time spent on autonomous writing practice beyond coursework requirements.
- To examine students' English language learning experience at schools, particularly focusing on the nature of practice received in developing their academic writing skills.
- To assess students' perception regarding their views towards the benefits and limitations of using AI-powered tools in their academic writing process.

1.2 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its systematic investigation of the interconnected factors that influence students' academic writing proficiency. By identifying the specific difficulties students face, drawing the connection between the impact of extensive reading and autonomous writing practices, and highlighting students' perceptions towards the use of AI tools in their academic writing, this research attempts to provide several significant pedagogical implications for instructors who teach English academic writing skills.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Despite the significant place English language instruction holds in the Omani educational system, students' academic writing proficiency remains a critical challenge. By shedding light on the multifaced nature of the challenge faced by Omani students when writing in English, this study, hence, seeks to gain a better understanding of the nature of the problem and attempts to contribute to the existing literature.

Foreign Language Learners of English face similar difficulties in English writing (see for example Alsariera and Alsaraireh, 2024; Ibrahim, 2021; Anh, 2019). In their investigation of the problems faced by EFL students at a Saudi University, Dhanapal and Agab (2023) revealed that the participants had issues with writing using correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation marks. The authors suggest that students need to develop knowledge of grammatical skills, vocabulary building, and compositional skills. In Patty's (2024) words, "... students' writing challenges are complex and encompass the cognitive, linguistic, and affective domains. These challenges

significantly affect the students' writing abilities and their academic achievements" (pp. 382-383).

1.4 Research Questions

- What difficulties do students face when writing in English?
- How much time do students spend on extensive reading?
- How much time do students spend practicing writing in English?
- When reflecting on their English language learning experience at school, do students feel they had a strong foundation to develop their writing skills?
- What do they perceive as advantages and disadvantages of the use of AI tools when writing in English?

1.5 Delimitation of the Study

This study is confined to specifically hearing the voices of a small group of students as they expressed their views on the difficulties they faced when writing in English. The students were enrolled in Level 3 English language program at the CLFS program at A'Sharqiyah University during the academic year 2025. The focus was mainly on students enrolled in the CLFS and not those enrolled in the University major programs because CLFS serves as a bridge to help students transition to their respective majors; in other words, it prepares them for academic success once they enroll to their respective majors that use English a medium of instruction.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Writing Difficulties

Studies conducted within the Omani context has shown that students face numerous challenges when writing in English. For instance, in a higher educational context in Oman, it was found that the difficulties students face in English academic writing, include limited range of vocabulary, inability to use a range of grammatical structures, difficulty comprehending English reading texts, and difficulties in summarizing and paraphrasing (Mustafa et al., 2022). Similarly, the textual analysis of forty essays written by undergraduate students at Dhofar University (Oman) had many mistakes in spelling and grammar, and limited vocabulary. It was also found that students were unable to write thesis statements and topic sentences and to develop coherent essays (Uba & Souidi, 2020).

Al Sayabi and Tuzlukova (2014) conducted a study that involved a randomly selected 1114 school students and 317 university students from various Omani regions and found that both group of students struggle with vocabulary and content aspects of writing. The authors suggested that "in both educational contexts more effort is needed to align the writing requirements with the other skill areas especially reading as lack of ideas and how to develop them seems a serious concern for both parties," (p. 45).

2.2 AI in EFL Writing

Al-Raimi et al. (2024) reported 61 Omani students' positive perspectives toward using Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI), which included using GAI for translating words, phrases, and sentences, as well as checking spelling and grammar. AI tools were also used to generate ideas for their writing and to help them compose essays and paragraphs. Aladin's (2023) research study showed that students at Dhofar University (Oman) stated that using AI dictionary programs and applications, such as Grammarly and QuillBot, proved to be effective in helping them improve their academic writing skills and logical thinking. Similar finding appeared in Syahrin and Akmal (2024) examination of the perceptions of instructors, students, and administrative staff on the role of ChatGPT at Dhofar University (Oman). It was found that students extensively used AI to help them with their assignments, figure out complex problems, enhance the quality of their written work, brainstorm ideas for research, and refine topics. In other contexts, also, students indicated the benefits of using AI for academic research, especially in the stages of planning, selecting a topic, and drafting (Utami, et. al., 2023). Farrelly and Baker (2023) mentioned different benefits of AI for learners whose native language is not English. For instance, AI has the potential to serve as a personal tutor for students.

2.3 The Benefit of Reading in Improving Students' Writing

Extensive Reading (ER) involves reading materials for enjoyment and general understanding. Findings from studies on the integration of extensive reading in English language teaching programs have shown its effectiveness in enriching students' vocabulary and enhancing their ability to use accurate, varied, and complex sentence structures. These improvements reflected not only in their increased language competence but also resulted in greater

confidence and creativity in academic writing (Linuwih, 2021; Habibi et al., 2015).

Taye and Teshome's (2025) study showed a moderate and statistically significant positive correlation between extensive reading engagement and writing proficiency. Through reading, students enhance their academic writing proficiency as it helps them with vocabulary growth, syntactic development, and organizational clarity. Despite its benefits, the authors pointed out, extensive reading does not seem to be practiced in many EFL contexts. The participants in Owusu-Acheaw's (2014) study also acknowledged the benefits reading offered in enhancing their ability to write better. However, the author stated students did not spend time reading a novel or any type of fiction outside the class, and their reading was only confined to passing the exam. Similarly, Mahmood (2022) explained that due to lack of language knowledge, motivation, absence of an extensive reading program, and lack of teacher's help and guidance, students rarely do extensive reading.

3 Method

This research uses a qualitative descriptive method in its design. The study was conducted at the CLFS program at A'Sharqiyah University in Ibra, Oman. The participants of this study are nine students enrolled in level 3 program during the Spring semester of 2025. The participants were selected as a "sample of convenience" which is defined as those participants who the researcher can have easy access to (McKay, 2006). The researchers are full-time instructors at A'Sharqiyah University, so this made it easy to reach out to the participants.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants. Interviews seemed an appropriate procedure for garnering answers to the questions posed in this research as they "allow researchers to investigate phenomena that are not directly observable, such as learners' self-reported perceptions or attitudes," (MacKey & Gass, 2005, p. 173). The interview consisted of pre-determined set of questions, and follow-up questions were asked as needed to obtain more details. The interview results were first transcribed and then analyzed through coding: identifying, categorizing, and labelling patterns and themes pertinent to the research questions. The data from the students have been reported with minor edits.

4 Results

Question 1: Challenges Students Identify When Writing

Most of the students pointed out that the topic provided to them to write on seemed like a challenge. For example, Student 3 said, *"Maybe the topics about places or something and I don't have knowledge about it or maybe about an experience and I haven't experienced this experience."* Another student stated, *"sometime when the topic is difficult uh I feel worried but umm when the topic is easy, I get excited and creative in the writing."* Spelling out words correctly, writing grammatical sentences, and vocabulary usage were also mentioned as areas where students faced difficulty in.

Question 2: Time Spent Reading Outside Class

Out of the nine students, five students stated they did not read in English or spent very little time reading outside the class. The other three students who stated that they read mentioned reading posts on social media as the type of reading in English they normally engaged in. One student, (#3), who worked as a tourist guide, however, said he read email messages from his clients.

Question 3: Time Spent Practicing Writing Outside Class

In response to the time spent practicing writing outside the classroom, three of the students did not spend any time practicing writing. One student said half an hour, another 10 minutes, an hour a week, 3 hours (when the student had homework to do). Student #8 explained, *"like maybe two hours in a day. I think I learn more vocabulary like I focus mostly on vocabulary and finding new words in any social program and sometimes I write in English but not that much. I focus on like mostly in vocabulary OK umm."* Student #3 interacted with tourists and wrote messages on WhatsApp providing them information about his town and places to visit and stated that this helped his writing.

Question 4: Reflection on the shift in Writing Tasks from School to the Foundation

The students indicated that writing in schools tended to be simpler with less focus on academic writing; for example, Student #8 said, *"when we were in school, we only wrote stories and emails and sometimes essay, but the teachers in school don't focus a lot on writing—the writings in academic way."* Another student mentioned that the required word length of writing at the foundation was longer in comparison to writing at school. Student #1 explained that *"the*

difference between writing when I was in school is that we don't write. We don't practice writing inside the classes. When anyone wants to write anything, he will do at their homes and bring it to the teachers. But in university we keep a portfolio of our writings. It's one of the practices. We practice writing and we also practice for the final exam--writing exam."

Question 5: Opportunities and Challenges of Using AI

Using AI tools gave students confidence and was used as a personal tutor as student #2 said, "AI brought the perfect essay, and we see how we do the same thing like the AI or Chat GPT...." Student #6 mentioned that "Yes, sometimes I ask him to give me an idea to have a background about the topics, then I can't find another topics like when I want to know about some words or that I ask him to give me a sentence then I know about this vocabulary and how to form my thoughts" and checking mistakes as student #8 said, "when I finish my second draft I can ask AI to check my writing and tell me if there are any mistakes."

5 Discussion

The linguistic challenges, such as difficulties with vocabulary, grammar, and spelling, reported by the students aligned with previous research finding conducted within the Omani context (Mustafa et. al., 2022; Uba & Souidi, 2020; Al Sayabi & Tuzlukovam 2014). The skill of writing is known to consolidate other aspects of language, such as vocabulary, grammar, thinking, and planning; lack of such skills impedes the students' ability to clearly express themselves.

Research findings from this study also revealed that students did not invest much time in reading outside classroom requirements. Many studies have pointed out the interconnected and interdependent nature of reading and writing (Al Sayabi & Tuzlukova, 2014). Reading offers many benefits to students in terms of developing their writing skill; for instance, students can expand their vocabulary, sentence structures, and organizational skills (Taye & Teshome, 2025; Habibi et. al., 2015). Hence, integrating extensive reading programs can better serve the needs of the students, and help them improve their formal writing skills. Students will be exposed to meaningful linguistic input that can enhance English language acquisition. Furthermore, extensive reading can develop learners autonomous learning skills.

On the other hand, some students mentioned reading posts on social media as the type of reading they engaged in outside the class. Reading social

All the participants agreed that the use and dependence on AI prevented the development of their learning; for example, student #3 explained, "In my opinion, using AI a lot didn't make you learn or didn't make you know new things you should learn, you do yourself. No, it is not a good learning tool. It is not a good learning tool because AI does everything for you like you want. If you want an email to respond or to talk with someone you write it, write for an email to someone exactly or that talking about... It is a problem. You should know and you should learn how to write emails. In the future you will be a teacher or you are an employee, you should know how to write emails. You know, for your boss or for your students or for anyone. You should not let AI do it for you." Similarly, student #1 said that students who depend on AI tools when completing homework do not do well during tests when they have to do timed writing. He explained that students who simply copy and paste the writing, do not learn anything; so, when they have the final exam, they cannot write anything.

posts may have its benefits; however, at the same time, social media posts tend to be unstructured and may be written using informal or slang language. This may not help students develop their formal academic writing skills, particularly, as some students had mentioned that their experience with writing during their school journey did not focus much on academic writing development. In his paper, Al-Issa (2006), referring to the Omani and Gulf Countries students, mentioned that students on exiting high school find themselves communicatively inadequate in the English language. According to Al-Issa, "Language is taught for its own sake and is hardly, if ever, used as an effective tool for achieving anything other than passing exams, as a result students tend to treat English as another 'fact-based school subject and a hurdle to overcome'" (p. 24). Hence, the foundation writing program serves as bridge to help students smoothly transition to their university education and course requirements as students are required to maintain a portfolio of their writings as well as they are given practice with timed writing.

This study also showed that students faced conceptual difficulties when asked to write on topics they were not familiar with. Lee and Yoon (2023) highlighted the connection between topics of texts and EFL learners' language proficiency effect on their writing quality. It was found advanced level students performed better than the

intermediate level students in writing argumentative essays on both topics (driving and smoking). Superior writing skills and ability for effective arguments might not result from students' familiarity with the topic, but from students' proficiency which can enable them to write better. This indicates that having a good level of language proficiency can help students overcome the difficulty of unfamiliar topics, enabling them to express themselves even when they are not quite familiar with topics.

Similarly, students involved in this study acknowledged using AI tools, but also accepted that overreliance on AI tools will impede the development of their writing skills (Fakir, et. al., 2024). Evidently, AI technology provides learners a range of benefits, such as enhancing their English language proficiency, personalizing their learning, and providing them with features that facilitate their learning (Farrelly & Baker, 2023; Utami et al, 2023). On the other hand, overreliance on AI tools can hinder the development of students' skills. Some respondents in this study highlighted that students who copy and paste assignments from AI tools do not perform well during timed writing tasks. To better take advantage of available AI tools, students can be guided to effectively use these tools to help them scaffold their academic writing skills; for instance, by receiving immediate feedback on appropriate syntactic structures and word choice, students can actively get engaged with the text they are writing.

6 Conclusions

This study explores the perspectives of nine students enrolled in the CLFS program concerning the development of their academic writing skills. The findings showed students faced difficulties in two areas: linguistic challenges—such as syntactical structures, word choice, and spelling, and conceptual challenges—when writing on unfamiliar topics. Students also acknowledge spending less time on extensive reading or supplemental writing practice outside mandatory coursework. To address these challenges, a multifaced approach is recommended. First, in light of the overwhelming benefits of extensive reading in language improvement, it is advisable students invest more time in reading beyond formal instruction. Second, the CLFS curriculum can integrate a more systematic extensive reading program to encourage students to read. In addition, students can develop effective writing habits by, for example, keeping journals to regularly practice

their writing skills. Finally, guided, pedagogical use of AI technology as a personalized tutor could offer more scaffolded support to learners and positively impact their English language development.

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