



EFL Students' Perceptions of Challenges in Academic Essay Writing: A Case Study of Omar Al-Mukhtar University

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تصورات طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية حول تحديات كتابة المقال الأكاديمي: دراسة حالة بجامعة عمر المختار

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Abstract:

Academic writing is one of the most demanding skills for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL); it requires more effort and time for mastery. Among the various forms of academic communication, essay writing is distinguished as a particularly challenging task. It requires more than just vocabulary, as it involves a precise understanding of grammar, logical coherence in organization, and the ability to develop clear ideas Asnas & Hidayanti, (2024). Some challenges in writing can make students confused. A descriptive survey designed was adopted using Yes/ no questionnaire including ten items. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The participants were twenty-two fourth-year students enrolled in the English Department at Omar Al-Mukhtar University. The findings indicate a complex reality: while many students report a basic level of confidence in their ability to generate ideas, they experience major barriers such in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Furthermore, the results reveal a gap between what students want to express and the tools they have to organize their ideas effectively. Limited use of pre-writing strategies and a lack of consistent writing practice at home continue to negatively affect their writing proficiency The study concludes that there is an urgent need to focus on integrating writing mechanics and structured strategies into the curriculum to enhance student proficiency.

Keywords: EFL writing, Academic composition, writing anxiety, pre-writing strategies, linguistic barriers.

المخلص:

تُعتبر الكتابة الأكاديمية واحدة من أكثر المهارات تطلباً لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL)؛ إذ تحتاج إلى جهد ووقت أكثر لإتقانها. ومن بين أشكال التواصل الأكاديمي المختلفة، تتميز كتابة المقالات بأنها تشكل تحدياً بشكل خاص، فهي لا تتضمن فقط امتلاك حصيلة لغوية، بل تتطلب فهماً دقيقاً لقواعد اللغة، والتماسك المنطقي في التنظيم، والقدرة على تطوير أفكار واضحة (Asnas & Hidayanti, 2024). ويمكن لبعض تحديات الكتابة أن تسبب ارتباكاً للطلاب. وقد تم اعتماد المنهج المسح الوصفي باستخدام استبيان (نعم/لا) يتكون من عشر فقرات، وتم تحليل البيانات باستخدام الإحصاء الوصفي. شارك في الدراسة اثنان وعشرون طالباً من طلاب السنة الرابعة بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة عمر المختار.

وتُشير النتائج إلى واقع معقد: فبينما أظهر العديد من الطلاب مستوى أساسياً من الثقة في قدرتهم على توليد الأفكار، إلا أنهم يواجهون عوائق رئيسية في قواعد اللغة، والإملاء، وعلامات الترقيم. علاوة على ذلك، تكشف النتائج عن وجود فجوة بين ما يرغب الطلاب في التعبير عنه والأدوات التي يمتلكونها لتنظيم أفكارهم بشكل فعال. ولا يزال الاستخدام المحدود لاستراتيجيات ما قبل الكتابة (Pre-writing) ونقص ممارسة الكتابة المستمرة في المنزل يؤثران سلباً على كفاءتهم الكتابية. وتسلط الدراسة الضوء على الحاجة إلى تركيز تعليمي أكبر على آليات الكتابة واستراتيجيات الكتابة المنظمة في فصول اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن هناك حاجة ملحة للتركيز على دمج آليات الكتابة والاستراتيجيات المنظمة في المناهج الدراسية لتعزيز كفاءة الطلاب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، الكتابة الأكاديمية، قلق الكتابة، استراتيجيات ما قبل الكتابة، العوائق اللغوية.

Introduction:

Writing means expressing your ideas and thoughts in a written text. writing is an essential skill needs to be learned by English foreign language learners. In the world of academia, writing is the primary vehicle for sharing ideas; students are expected to constantly refine this skill, as it is the ultimate goal of their language education. As stated by Pinter (2006), writing is a complex skill progressing from the level of copying familiar words and phrases to developing an awareness of text structures, genres, and the processes of drafting and editing, and writing for an audience.

It is a complex balancing act that requires grammatical precision, logical organization, and the ability to develop ideas with clarity Asnas & Hidayanti (2024). Many students find it incredibly difficult to transform their internal thoughts into well-structured written work, a process that frequently leads to frustration and lack of satisfaction. Various studies as in Graham, Harris& Mason (2005) have shown that the position of writing skill in EFL context, writing is considered as complex and challenging skill to truly master.

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While existing studies tell much about what goes wrong in student writing, they rarely stop to ask the students why they believe they are struggling. Filling this gap is essential, it is important to improve how writing is taught and learned, by considering the process through the perception of the students themselves. Therefore, the prior goal of this study is to explore and categorize the challenges fourth-year English majors at Omar Al-Mukhtar University face in essay writing. By understanding these personal perceptions, it would be easier to reduce the barriers that prevent students from expressing their voices effectively in the written form, by taking the time to listen to students and explore their personal perceptions of these challenges; it would assist in improving instructional practices and enhancing writing outcomes.

Literature Review:

Unlike other oral communication, which allows immediate clarification, writing is regarded as the most challenging skill for EFL learners to acquire, since it requires management of linguistics, cognitive and social resources. According to Hyland (2003), writing is not only a knowledge of linguistics but also a social act that needs students to navigate particular academic conventions.

Extensive investigations have been carried out to examine the persistent barriers facing EFL learners in essay writing, a primary area of difficulty for EFL writers involves grammatical accuracy which Riadil et al. (2023) identifies the most formidable obstacle to overcome. These challenges frequently center around fundamental sentence structure, such as subject-verb agreement, verb tense errors, and the creation of flawed sentences like run-ons, fused sentences, and fragments Alfaruqy et al., (2025). In addition, Al- Khresheh (2016) argued these inaccuracies could be a result of first language (L1) interference since students apply the logic of their L1 to English, this cross-linguistic pressure result in productive inhibition, since the fear of making errors prevents students from completing their writing tasks.

Another consistent challenge faced by EFL students in academic writing is lexical difficulty, learners have difficulties in selecting the appropriate vocabularies and overcoming limited lexical resources. Asnas and Hidayanti (2024) stated that vocabulary is one of the four most frequent challenges for Indonesian university students. Similarly, another related study investigating challenges in essay writing found that learners struggle profoundly with areas of grammar and vocabulary Hardini et al (2025) the difficulty was found in applying correct words in formal academic contexts, this leads to the use of inappropriate expressions to overcome these challenges, they use online dictionaries and digital writing aids.

Beyond grammatical and lexical challenges, EFL students often struggle with writing mechanics such as spelling, punctuation and capitalization that have been identified as major difficulties as stated by Asnas and Hidayanti (2024). For example, students may struggle with rules of English spelling that differs from their native languages phonic system also challenges in using commas, periods, and apostrophes correctly can lead to misunderstanding of the sentence boundaries and intended meaning.

Even though, some studies Hardini et al. (2025) argued that mechanics of writing could be considered as a sub-category of language problems that hinder student's ability to produce and deliver polished essays. Contemporary research has shifted the focus from regarding writing as a finished product to exploring and examining the process behind it. The techniques before writing such as outlining and brainstorming are vital for organizing ideas before writing. However, Li and Wang (2024) argued that without multi-stage approach cognitive processing capacity becomes strained. This leads to cognitive overload where students cannot manage their ideas and grammar at the same time. Taye (2024) also highlights that insufficient writing practice in both inside and outside the classroom contributes to writing difficulties for EFL students.

As mentioned in the preceding sections, the literature highlights the previous research on EFL students' writing challenges and strategies in isolation; however, there remains a significant insight for localized studies with specific departmental contexts. Since most previous studies have produced generalized findings across all academic writing tasks. This descriptive study focuses on the lived experiences of students in English majors to address this gap from broad to specific local insight. The findings were used as a goal to turn these insights into practical changes in how we teach writing within the department.

Methodology:

This research employed a descriptive survey to investigate the students' perceptions of essay writing challenges. The participants consisted of 22 fourth- year students enrolled in English department at Omar Al- Mukhtar University. A convenience sampling method was used, as these students were readily accessible to the researcher and possess the lived experience to address the specific writing challenges within this academic context. Data were collected by using researcher –designed questionnaire featuring 10 closed ended (yes/ no) questions. These questions targeted main aspects of academic essay writing, consisting of grammatical structure, writing mechanics, process and organization.

To make sense of the students' feedback, the researcher used descriptive statistics to analyze the responses from our group of 22 participants. By converting their individual answers into clear frequencies and percentages, looking closely at the data helped to identify the common challenges in their experiences, showing that many fourth-year learners are navigating the same difficult hurdles together. The following tables and charts visualize these results, offering a direct look at the specific hurdles these fourth-year learners face as they navigate the complexities of essay writing.

Findings and Results:

The primary purpose for this section is to highlight the quantitative data collected from the survey questionnaire. The results are presented into categories to describe each variable of the study starting from linguistic challenges, procedural habits and the instructional environment at the University of Omar Al- Mukhtar.

Table 1: Students' Perceptions of Challenges in Academic Essay Writing (N=22)

Category	Questionnaire Item (Q#)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Linguistic Challenges	Grammatical structure anxiety (Q2)	15	68.2%
	Concerns with capitalization and spelling (Q6)	18	81.8%
Organization & Ideas	Difficulty with organizational patterns (Q3)	18	81.8%
	Difficulty expressing thoughts in English (Q4)	18	81.8%
	Perceive essay writing as a difficult task (Q1)	9	40.9%
Mechanics	Acknowledge importance of punctuation (Q5)	20	90.9%
Process & Practice	Use of pre-writing (outlining/brainstorming) (Q7)	9	40.9%
	Practice writing outside the classroom (Q8)	9	40.9%
Environment	Satisfaction with classroom time (Q9)	11	50.0%
	Receipt of teacher encouragement (Q10)	20	90.9%

Starting with structural organization: The most significant challenge revealed by participants was specifically on essay organization and expressing ideas. The majority of the students in the sample highlights about 81.8% (n=18) in (Q3) with organization patterns. Similarly participants show another obstacle with the same score about 81.8 (n=18) in (Q4) in translating and expressing their thoughts in English.

Grammatical accuracy indicates another challenge by 68.2% (n=15) in (Q2) reflecting high number of linguistic anxiety during the drafting stage. The findings also highlights a significant gap between the students' understanding of writing mechanics and their confidence in applying them. The highest positive response recorded in (Q5) with 90.9% (n=20) of acknowledge on the importance of using punctuations. On the other hand, participants scored 81.8% (n=18) are worried about capitalization and spelling errors in (Q6). The data shows a marked deficiency in the use of pre- writing strategies and independent practice which are critical for writing proficiency, only 40.9% (n=9) of students use outlining and brainstorming in (Q7). Perceived difficulty correspondingly scored 40.9% (n=9) of the participants practice writing outside the classroom requirements (Q8).

Interestingly, same response rate highlights about 40.9% (n=9) in (Q1) categorized essay writing as challenging and difficult task, despite of the high level of errors recorded elsewhere. A significant record indicates 90.9% (n=20) reported they receive sufficient encouragement from their teachers in (Q10). According to the dedicated time to students in writing, the participants show parallel divergence. while 50% (n=11) in (Q9) show that half of the students are satisfied with the current classroom time, others viewing time inadequate and they need more time.

Discussion:

The findings of the research reveal a detailed perspective of fourth year English major students at Omar Al –Mukhtar University. A significant point of interest is the sharp contrast between the students' general perceptions and their technical challenges. While less than half of students 40.9% reported that essay writing is a challenging and difficult task (Q1), the data showed that students might not fully realize the complexity of writing until they are forced to write professional academic composition with linguistic demands.

The findings reveal a significant paradox in the students' self-perception: a particularly striking revelation in the data is the disconnect between their confidence in expressing ideas and their technical mastery. While a vast majority of fourth-year students (81.8%) feels capable of expressing their thoughts (Q4), a substantial 68.2% (Q2) remains deeply anxious about grammatical structures. This suggests that while these senior students have an abundance of content to share, they are psychologically restricted by a persistent fear of linguistic error. This finding aligns with Raoofi et al. (2017), who argued that high believing in one's ideas does not necessarily correlate with technical confidence in EFL contexts.

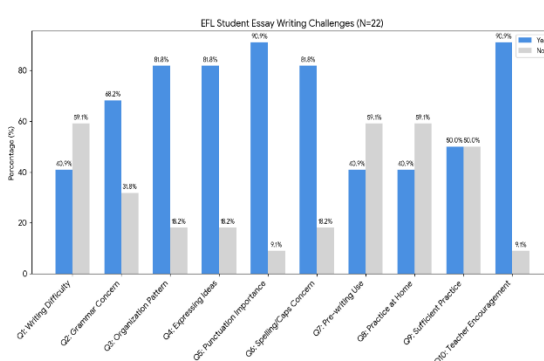


Figure (1): A Visual Comparison of Conceptual Confidence vs. Technical Barriers among EFL Students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University (N=22) .

Furthermore, the data suggests that students are disproportionately preoccupied with the surface level of their writing. Even though 90.9% recognize punctuation as a vital element (Q5), 81.8% continue to express anxiety over basic mechanics (Q6). As Fareed et al. (2016) observed, EFL learners often fixate on surface-level mechanicslike spelling and punctuation because these rules offer a tangible sense of control. Unfortunately, this preoccupation often comes at the expense of mastering deeper logical flow and complex academic essay structures, which remain much more intimidating for the student researcher.

In addition, the data shows a high level of concern about punctuation (90.9%) and spelling (81.8%), suggesting that students are worried and preoccupied by the surface level of errors. This similarly aligns with what Al-Fadda (2012) discovered, that students often prioritize surface-level mechanics like

punctuation over the actual content of the essay because they feel more in control of small rules than complex arguments. This is further proven by the low use of pre-writing strategies (40.9%). Without using an outline, their mental effort is divided between generating ideas and correcting grammar simultaneously, leading to the frustration seen in their overall difficulty scores.

The evidence suggests that the participants at Omar Al-Mukhtar University are experiencing a significant mental overload. According to Al-Fadda (2012), this occurs because the cognitive load of managing L1 interference and English grammar consumes the student's limited processing power. Li and Wang (2024) pointed out high cognitive load in argumentative writing is a primary cause for the drop in writing quality. For the twenty-two students in this study, the struggle to manage technical mechanics means they have no mental space left to apply the writing strategies they have learned, leading to the disjointed arguments found in their compositions.

The structural results of this study were equally striking, with 81.8% of students identifying organizational patterns as a major hurdle (Q3). This indicates that for many, the challenges of writing extend far beyond the sentence level to the very architecture of the essay. This structural hurdle is compounded by a significant strategy deficit, as only 40.9% of participants reported utilizing pre-writing techniques (Q7). This lack of pre-writing suggests that students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University view writing as a single step product rather than a recursive process, which significantly increases their cognitive load. Writing as a personal skill, students treat it as a restricted classroom task. Consequently, bridging the gap between their high conceptual confidence and technical performance requires a shift at Omar Al-Mukhtar University away from repetitive grammar drills and toward explicit instruction in independent pre-writing strategies.

Finally, the data reveals a telling disconnect between the classroom environment and independent habits. While teacher encouragement is remarkably high at 90.9% (Q10), home practice remains low at 40.9% (Q8). This suggests that many students are trapped in a difficult emotional state where a lack of confidence and fear of failure hold them back from practicing. This aligns with the findings of Liu and Huang (2025), who identified a direct link between foreign language writing anxiety and the avoidance of writing tasks, creating a cycle where stress prevents the very practice needed for improvement.

Furthermore, this lack of planning aligns with the findings of Graham et al. (2005) who suggests that Libyan EFL learners often remain stuck at the surface level of accuracy focusing on spelling and syntax because they lack a process-oriented framework. This is further reflected in the gap between high teacher encouragement (90.9%) and low independent home practice (40.9%). As noted by Taye (2024), such a reliance on the teacher as the sole motivator prevents students from reaching true fluency. Instead of viewing, the 50/50 split in satisfaction with classroom time (Q9) suggests that half the students feel they need more intensive practice and individualized feedback to master the craft.

Conclusion:

This research illustrates that fourth-year English major students have the ability to come up with meaningful and deep ideas, but their creative potential is restricted by technical anxiety. Even though students have the ability and desire to write freely, they are worried about making errors in grammar and spelling that limit their performance. The findings highlight another gap in the use of pre-writing stages such as brainstorming and outlining. This forces them to balance between grammar and organization at the same time and leads to cognitive overload. In addition, the lack of practicing at home suggests that writing is still considered as a classroom chore rather than a vital personal skill they can improve and own.

Recommendations:

Instead of spending all time teaching grammar drills and other mechanics, the focus should shift through a multi-stage process from planning and writing drafts as encouragement. In order to help students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University to overcome their writing fears, we should know and rethink how the classroom works. Students need to start writing with confidence that is built through pre-writing habits. These tools, like mind mapping and outlining, need to be integrated to give students the opportunity to organize their ideas. Furthermore, assignments are vital for students to encourage independent practice outside the classroom. This helps to turn writing from a scary classroom task into a personal skill they can truly have.

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