

Teaching and Learning English Academic Writing in Malaysian Tertiary Context

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Abstract English academic writing holds an integral part in higher education. It entails a formal style of writing where writers are compelled to follow academic writing conventions to support their claims and arguments in writing. Despite the importance of English academic writing, majority of lecturers and students especially those in the context of English as second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) view English academic writing as challenging to teach and learn. This is because writers are obliged to utilize their cognitive, writing, and academic literacy skills while also having to use English language that might not be well familiar to them. This article reports on the issues faced by ESL lecturers in teaching English academic writing and issues in learning English academic writing among students in the Malaysian tertiary context. The authors also highlighted a few gaps identified from previous studies and suggested a few suggestions for teaching and learning English academic writing and recommendations for future research to help close the gaps. This review would benefit related stakeholders especially ESL lecturers and students at the tertiary level, higher education institutions and curriculum and policy makers.

Keywords English Academic Writing, ESL/EFL, ESL Lecturers, Higher Education Institutions, Undergraduate Students

speaking is very essential in ensuring success. Among these aspects of language proficiency, writing that is done either in the context of English as second language (ESL) or English as foreign language (EFL) is considered as the most challenging task. Jusun and Yunus [1] reiterated writing skills are the most demanding skills to be taught and learned in the classroom. In higher learning institutions, the type of writing that ESL/EFL students are required to accomplish is English academic writing. This writing is considered as complex and challenging skills as students need to have mastery in English language forms and functions as well as having knowledge in the field of study that they are engaged in.

At the tertiary level of education, it is compulsory for both undergraduate and postgraduate students to produce writing by following the conventions of academic writing, such as correct use of English grammar, appropriate selection of academic vocabulary, correct use mechanics of writing, and referencing skills. Students are expected to produce a good piece of English academic writing that portrays their level of maturity in presenting their claims and arguments as they are mainly being assessed through their proficiency in writing skills. Some of the written assessments that students need to accomplish which required them to use English academic writing forms are written assignments (i.e., essays) academic reports, and thesis to meet their study needs [2]. Hence, it makes English academic writing as essential skills to be possessed by students for their learning at tertiary level.

Despite its importance for tertiary level education, English academic writing still presents a challenge for most ESL/EFL student writers [3]. ESL/EFL student writers faced challenges in their English academic writing due to

1. Introduction

In the context of learning, proficiency in four English language skills which are reading, writing, listening, and

several factors despite having been introduced to English language as early as from kindergarten especially those in Malaysia, where English is considered as the second national language of the country [4]. Some of these prevalent factors are possessing low level of proficiency in English language, interference of L1 into L2 academic writing, and having writing anxiety [5, 6, 7].

Additionally, there are also challenges in the teaching of English academic writing among the ESL lecturers. For a reason, teaching of writing skills at tertiary level is much more demanding as compared to teaching writing skills at school level. ESL lecturers are expected to be equipped with the necessary pedagogical skills, such as having knowledge in teaching approaches, classroom management skills, and preparing lesson materials. At the same time, ESL lecturers should also occupy good content knowledge in writing skills, possess excellent command and proficiency in English language, and meet the required conditions to teach at tertiary level. However, from the reviews of literature made by the authors, there is scarce of study conducted especially in the Malaysian tertiary context that focuses on the issues faced by ESL lecturers in teaching English academic writing. Majority of the available studies are focusing on the challenges faced by students in learning English academic writing [6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 40].

In relation to this, the article intends to discuss on past studies concerning the issues in teaching and learning of English academic writing in higher education institutions amongst ESL/EFL lecturers and students specifically in the Malaysian tertiary context. The authors also discuss educational policy in teaching and learning English language and at the same time report on the gaps found from previous studies and highlight several implications, especially on teaching and learning of English academic writing and suggest a few recommendations for future research. The authors hope that the article benefit related parties in the field of ESL and education, especially in tertiary context of education, precisely the ESL/EFL lecturers, tertiary students, higher education institutions, curriculum, and policy makers and researchers in the field of ESL and education.

2. Educational Policy in Teaching and Learning English Language in Malaysian Education Tertiary Context

The role of English as a second language in the Malaysian education system has long started after Malaysia gained its independence from the British rule in 1957. Since then, the role and importance of English language can be seen at all levels of education in Malaysia. In relation to tertiary context, the Malaysian government has developed few educational policies to govern higher

education institutions.

English language teaching has long been influenced by the role of English language in Malaysia since independence which can be traced back to the National Education Policy, 1988 (NEP, 1988), Education Act, 1996 (EA, 1996), University and University Colleges Amendments Act, 1995 (UCA, 1995), Private Higher Educational Institutions Act, 1996 (PHEIA, 1996), National Council of Higher Education Act, 1996 (NCHEA, 1996), and National Accreditation Board Bill, 1996 (NABB, 1996). Based on these policies, English language is deemed as important and is regarded as the second most important language in the national education policy, especially in the Malaysian tertiary context [16]. However, there is no specific policy that stipulates on the use of English language and how it should be used in the classroom at higher education institutions in Malaysia [15].

With the liberalization and internalization of higher education through its policies, such as the Private Education Act 1996, National Higher Education Action Plan 2007–2010 and National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2020, it has opened door to many international students to continue their study here as Malaysia aims to be one of the international education hubs [15]. These international students come from different parts of the world, such as China, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Yemen, Africa, and from several other countries. Moreover, with the increased number of private higher education institutions in Malaysia, it has also allowed secondary school and post-secondary school students to further their studies at local higher education institutions. As a result, it has boosted a high number of eligible secondary school students to further their studies which is aligned with the Ministry of Education (MOE) vision in providing equal access to qualified students to pursue their studies at tertiary level of education [17].

In relation to teaching and learning of English language in tertiary education, all courses that are offered in Malaysian higher education institutions are guided by the National Education Policy. This policy gives priority to the use of both languages which are, *Bahasa Melayu* as the national language and English as the second language. Students are taught in English language as the main medium of instruction in the classroom while for some courses that are related to specific language used, like the General Studies (*Mata Pelajaran Umum* or MPU) courses, such as Ethnic Relations (*Hubungan Etnik*), Islamic Civilization and Asian Civilization (*Tamadun Islam and Tamadun Asia or TITAS*), and Malaysian Studies (*Pengajian Malaysia*), Malay language (*Bahasa Melayu*) is used. The use of Malay and English language in higher education institutions is not only teaching students the content knowledge but also emphasizing elements of thinking skills, ethics, and morality as gazette in the National Education Philosophy for graduates to have holistic education. Precisely, the teaching of English language courses at tertiary level inculcates the elements of

communication, critical thinking skills, and problem-solving skills in developing students' soft skills.

In essence, the latest education policy which is the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (Higher Education) which was published in 2015 continues to accentuate the importance of English language for students at tertiary level. The blueprint aims to ensure that “every graduate will have the relevant disciplinary knowledge and skills (*ilmu*), ethics and morality (*akhlak*), as well as appropriate behaviors, mindset, cultural and civilizational literacy (*beradab*) to advance them to a high level of personal well-being. They are taught to be global citizens with a strong Malaysian identity, ready and willing to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, society, nation, and global community. Such holistic, entrepreneurial, and balanced graduates are a natural extension of the goal of the Malaysian basic education system to develop values-driven Malaysians” (p. 20) [18]. In short, mastering English language will not only help to enhance students' proficiency in the language but also help them to develop the needed soft skills.

3. Issues in Teaching English Academic Writing among ESL Lecturers in Malaysian Education Tertiary Context

Based on the current educational policies in the Malaysian tertiary context, Malaysian Higher Education Ministry (MOHE) has yet to develop any specific policy or curriculum to address the teaching and learning of English language, especially English writing skills. Too [15] in his study on English language teaching and policies at tertiary level, mentioned there is no specific policy given to universities (i.e., public, and private) on how language instructors should teach their students. In fact, according to him, universities (i.e., public, and private) are given autonomy to manage their academic program by following and adhering to the standards as prescribed by the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) in ensuring the quality of teaching and learning.

Moreover, flexibility is given to instructors to use teaching approaches that are deemed suitable for their classroom practices. This is further supported by Johari [11], as she too mentioned there is no specific teaching approach stated in the educational policies or curriculum that should be employed by ESL lecturers in teaching English academic writing to their students. Thus, ESL lecturers employed various teaching approaches which they think might be suitable to be used in the classrooms based on their students' proficiency and the syllabus of English academic writing courses at their respective institutions. Some of the approaches used by Malaysian lecturers in teaching English academic writing are process-based approach, product-based approach, genre-based

approach, and collaborative writing approach [19, 20, 21, 22].

In this light, Johari [11] asserted that there is not one specific approach that is considered as the best or ideal to teach such a complex skill of English academic writing. This is also in tandem with Nordin [23] who conducted a study among tertiary ESL students and reported that there is no specific teaching approach that is deemed as suitable to be used in teaching English academic writing. Due to this, many Malaysian ESL lecturers are still grappling with their teaching of English academic writing in order to help students to write academically in tertiary context [24, 25].

Some previous studies mentioned that lack of pedagogical skills among the Malaysian ESL lecturers in teaching academic writing skills has led to the contributing factors of incompetent ESL student writers [26]. This finding was in tandem with Zamin, Kassim and Kamaruddin's [27] study among the novice ESL lecturers in teaching English academic writing. They found two main alarming issues which are ESL lecturers lack of teaching experience in tertiary context and content knowledge in academic research writing. These novice lecturers admitted they lacked knowledge on referencing style and skill in writing literature review. Moreover, these inexperienced ESL lecturers also claimed of being afraid to teach English academic writing due to its technical aspects.

In another instance, Kamaruddin and Abdullah [28] also stressed similar issues faced by novice ESL lecturers in Malaysia. They are found to have insufficient teaching skills particularly in teaching the processes and conventions of English academic writing. This finding is concurrently similar with findings in Ibrahim, Yusuf, and Khairi's study [9]. Four main issues are associated with the teaching of English academic writing which are: 1) attitude of the ESL lecturers, 2) lack of content knowledge and pedagogical skills, 3) techniques in teaching, and 4) inappropriate use of teaching strategies and writing assessments. This is also the case mentioned by Alabere and Shapii [29] in their study where underqualified, unprepared and lack of experience among the ESL lecturers are some of the issues affecting the teaching of English academic writing.

Therefore, based on the past literature, there are many issues surrounding the complexities in teaching English academic writing. ESL lecturers are found to face several problems in regard to their teaching and one of the most prevalent issues is in searching of the suitable teaching approach.

One of the most popular teaching approaches is the process approach. This is due to the influence and implementation of such approach in the education system since 1980s [30]. Through this teaching approach, students are taught on the processes of writing which are pre-writing, outlining, drafting, editing, revising, and publishing. In this approach, ESL lecturer acts as a language facilitator in transforming the learning process to a more student-centered approach [31]. This approach has allowed learners

to be independent in their writing as they are exposed to recursive and dynamic processes of writing. Some of the writing tasks performed by students using this approach are academic essays, report writing and other related written assignments.

The second approach is product-based approach. This is a traditional teaching approach where ESL lecturers act as the main knowledge provider and emphasis is given on the structure of writing and use of academic vocabulary. In this approach, students are required to imitate a model or sample of writing to produce their own. However, some researchers and writers have criticized the use of this approach as it does not emphasize the language creativity of the student-writers as greater emphasis is given on the accuracy of grammar, vocabulary, and its structure [32]. Next approach is genre-based approach in which students are taught to produce their writing tasks according to the specific genres of writing. Through this approach, students learned various formatting and language requirements needed for each genre, such as descriptive, argumentative and classification types of writing. However, the drawback of this approach is that too much emphasis is given on the product rather than the processes of writing itself [33].

Finally, it is collaborative writing approach. In this approach, students are expected to engage in writing activities by engaging with other peers in producing their writing. Students are to engage either in pairs or in groups collaboratively in producing their piece of academic writing. According to Zhang [34], collaborative writing is used to facilitate learning process in second language classroom. This approach allows the learners to not only practice their English academic writing skills but also promote critical thinking skills, self-reflection as well as idea sharing between learners [20].

4. Issues in Learning English Academic Writing among Students in Malaysian Education Tertiary Context

Malaysian students have been exposed to the use of English language as early as in their childhood education, primary and secondary levels of education. Moreover, students who are pursuing their studies at tertiary level are required to use English language in their studies. With the implementation of Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015 – 2025 (Higher Education), prominent role is given to English language to be fully utilized at Malaysian higher education institutions both at public, and private institutions as the main medium of instruction (EMI). With this enactment, Malaysian graduates are expected to be proficient in English language not only in their studies but also for their future careers.

Considering the importance of possessing good proficiency in English language, Malaysian students

especially those in their undergraduate studies are required to take English academic writing course [35]. With the implementation of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses, students learn to improve and enhance their skills in writing academically while learning in English medium instruction (EMI) at higher education institutions [36]. Hence, in most higher learning institutions students are required to register and learn English academic writing course to enhance their proficiency and competency in writing academically to meet the need of their studies in the academic community [37]. As students progressed in their studies, they should be able to move from general writing practices, which is done at school level to a more concise, formal, and structured writing by fulfilling the needs of their field of study at tertiary level [36]. Therefore, writing at this level is seen as a complex process where it does not only require good proficiency in English language, but also entails critical thinking of the writers to utilize their English linguistic knowledge in delivering their claims and arguments in a clear and effective manner [11].

Nor and Rashid [38] pointed out that proficiency and comprehension in English academic reading are essential aspects that contribute to students' academic writing competency. Without having literacy in academic reading skills, students will have difficulty in evaluating and synthesizing information from their readings and consequently will not be able to produce a critical and concise piece of English academic writing [7]. On top of that, English academic writing also requires the student writers to present their ideas and at the same time engage with the readers. This incompetency among the Malaysian ESL students has made English academic writing seem to be a daunting task among them especially in communicating their ideas coherently while at the same time appealing to the readers' interests with their writing [39]. For instance, Ibrahim, Yunus and Khairi [9] in their study found that students in an engineering program are having low proficiency in English language. Due to this lack of proficiency, majority of the students are unable to elaborate and explain their arguments effectively as they have lack of English grammar knowledge and limited academic vocabulary to construct good sentences in English.

On another note, Malaysian ESL students also encountered problems in using correct English grammar, academic vocabulary, punctuations, spelling, and other lexical issues. It is reported that students have lack of English vocabulary especially in their discipline content vocabulary which prevented them from expressing ideas in writing. This is due to their lack of proficiency in English language and as a result of this, students produced lots of grammatical errors. On top of that, students are also reported having issues in maintaining cohesion and coherence in their academic writing [8, 6, 40] in which there is a lack of flow of ideas in their writing.

Additionally, students in Malaysian tertiary context also have lack knowledge in academic research scholarly

writing. Many are found to have difficulty in utilizing research-based knowledge especially in citation and referencing. They are unaware to cite and refer to the authors according to the correct style of referencing. Due to this, it has led to academic dishonesty where students are found to commit academic plagiarism in their English academic writing [41, 42, 43]. Lastly, students also have problems in reviewing academic research papers in which they are having problem to evaluate and synthesize information from the reading text. Consequently, they are not able to summarize and paraphrase correctly, unable to determine the research gaps, and poor use of academic language [10, 12].

In short, students faced several problems in learning English academic writing which can be traced back to possess lower level of English proficiency. Due to this, it has led to several other issues, such as writing issues, language issues, referencing skills issues, and mechanics of writing issues.

5. Gaps in the Literature

Based on the reviews made by the authors and with careful investigation on the issues of teaching and learning of English academic writing in Malaysian tertiary context, several gaps are found. There is a little in-depth and descriptive explanation of studies conducted concerning the issues in teaching English academic writing. To be precise, there is dearth of studies that focus on the teaching issues faced by ESL lecturers in teaching English academic writing in both public and private higher education institutions in Malaysia. Many of the past studies are concentrating on the issues faced by students [6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 29, 36, 40, 44], and there are extremely limited studies conducted in the Malaysian tertiary context to discuss the issues faced by ESL lecturers in teaching English academic writing [27, 28, 29].

As indicated by Zamin, Kassim and Kamaruddin [27], Ibrahim, Yusuf and Khairi [9], Yunus and Chan [26] and Kamaruddin and Abdullah [28] in their studies, with inadequate teaching experience at the tertiary level, lack of content knowledge and suitable teaching approaches to teaching English academic writing, ESL lecturers faced several difficulties in teaching English academic writing. Hence, it can be seen in the past studies where students produced lots of language-related issues because of their inability to write academically according to the academic writing conventions [6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 27, 29, 36, 40, 44]. Therefore, it is necessary to further investigate on the issues faced by ESL lecturers in teaching English academic writing in the classroom to address students' academic writing issues.

On another note, with careful investigation by the authors, it was found that most of these studies were conducted in the context of international postgraduate students in Malaysian universities [6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13,

14, 40]. Hence, there is shortage of study conducted that focus on the issues faced by undergraduate students in learning English academic writing in Malaysian higher education institutions. Furthermore, almost all the previous studies were conducted in public Malaysian universities and there is scarce of studies conducted in the context of private Malaysian universities to compare the findings. Thus, it is worth to investigate the issues faced by Malaysian undergraduate students in learning English academic writing to mitigate the issues before they move to a higher level of education, postgraduate study.

Another area of identified gaps is the use of research designs. Based on the review, many of the past studies utilized quantitative and mixed method research designs [8, 9, 12, 13, 29, 36, 37, 40]. While these studies have provided great insights to the field of English education and teaching writing, they however are not able to provide in-depth information on the practices and problems faced by ESL lecturers and undergraduate students in teaching and learning English academic writing. These studies only rely on survey questionnaire in gathering data and this may not be sufficient to describe the real-life context of the phenomenon of teaching and learning English academic writing. In other words, these studies are not able to gather the *emic* perspectives of the participants (i.e., Malaysian ESL lecturers and undergraduate students) as compared to what an in-depth qualitative study can yield.

On top of that, there are also theoretical gaps identified from the previous literature. A credible theory can provide significant foundations for knowledge in the related field. However, it is indicated that several past studies have not linked or related suitable theories in explaining the teaching and learning of English academic writing in the Malaysian tertiary context. These past studies do not employ any specific theory to underpin the study [6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 23, 29, 36]. Nevertheless, there were only two studies [27, 44] that have indicated some theories in their study. While these theories may be helpful in explaining the phenomenon, these theories however may not be able to justify thoroughly the issues of teaching and learning English academic writing in-depth in the context of tertiary education.

Lastly, there is a lack of literature that discusses gaps in the educational policy or curriculum specifically in teaching and learning English academic writing at higher education institutions in Malaysia. Based on the current educational policies in the Malaysian tertiary context, there are no explicit policies or curricula that are developed by the Ministry of Higher Education to precisely address the teaching and learning of English language, in particular writing skills. Also in his study [15] on English language teaching and policies at tertiary level, it is stressed that there is no specific policy given to higher education institutions (i.e., public, and private) on how language instructors should teach their students. In fact, higher education institutions (i.e., public, and private) are given the autonomy to manage their academic program with

condition following and adhering to the standards as prescribed by the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) in ensuring the quality of teaching and learning.

6. Conclusions

Given the fact that English academic writing skills hold an important part of students' learning at the tertiary level, possessing such an essential skill will help to ensure their success in learning and in their future endeavor as writing is a lifelong skill. It is paramount for researchers to further investigate the issues surrounding teaching and learning of English academic writing in the context of tertiary level especially in the Malaysian tertiary context. This is because English academic writing is an essential skill for the academics, researchers, and both the undergraduate and postgraduate students as it is the main medium of communication in the academic discourse community. Moreover, students are being assessed through their proficiency in English academic writing skills in almost all tertiary academic programs.

On a similar note, ESL lecturers should also possess essential pedagogical skills, and content knowledge skills to teach English academic writing. By possessing good content knowledge in the conventions of academic writing skills, and pedagogical content knowledge, ESL lecturers would be able to help their students improve their skills in writing academically through their suitable teaching approaches and teaching materials.

Posited that, by investigating further on these burning issues of teaching and learning English academic writing will help to offer further perspectives on its importance at tertiary level. The administration of higher education institutions should also play their role in providing professional and institutional supports to both ESL lecturers and students, such as by organizing seminars, webinars, and workshops on English academic writing. For ESL lecturers, seminars, or webinars on content knowledge in English academic writing are needed for them to further update their knowledge and current trends in teaching, such as by integrating technology-based teaching in academic writing. In doing so, webinars or workshops on technology-based teaching should be provided to ESL lecturers to enhance and polish their pedagogical content knowledge in teaching. This is important for ESL lecturers to integrate the use of technology in their lessons since they are teaching the 21st century students who are expose to the use of technology in their studies.

As for the students, professional supports in terms of workshops or seminar on technical aspects of academic writing like referencing skills and accessing university's database should be provided to them which can be done during the new academic semester intake or during semester break. Next, policy and curriculum makers should also look into the curriculum and syllabus of English academic writing where changes and revisions are needed

in the contents of academic writing course. There should be more emphasis and integration of the needed language skills, such as writing and reading skills into the syllabus where students should be taught on reading skills, such as skimming and scanning. By possessing such skills, it will help students to extract and synthesize information from the reading texts. Apart from that, technical aspects of academic writing like referencing skills should also be given emphasis where students need to learn the technical aspects in doing citations and references to published works.

In terms of recommendations for future research, the authors urged more researchers and scholars to further explore on the burning issues of teaching and learning of English academic writing at different types of higher education institutions, such as colleges, college-university, or even polytechnics. This is because different institutions have different syllabus of academic writing and looking into these institutions will bring new insights in terms of teaching and learning English academic writing. Other than that, future research can be done among young ESL lecturers and tapping into the problems that they faced in teaching English academic writing will help researchers, policy, and curriculum makers in designing the syllabus contents and higher education institutions in providing the needed professional supports to these young lecturers.

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