

Bangladeshi Students' Challenges of English Academic Writing in an International University

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Abstract

At present, many Bangladeshi students go abroad to pursue their undergraduate and postgraduate studies. However, most often, it is seen that they have a difficult time in understanding the rules of academic writing in the new institution. This qualitative multiple case study explores challenges related to writing assignments faced by 11 Bangladeshi students from Madrasah, Bengali and English medium schools studying at an international research university International Islamic University, Malaysia. A qualitative thematic analysis of the students' semi-structured interviews revealed that the students felt that Bangladeshi English curricula should include components of close reading, academic writing, and basic computer skills for writing assignments so that all the students are prepared for writing assignments in academia in future. The study is significant for the education policymakers of an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) country such as Bangladesh where English is taught as a second language to the students.

Keywords: writing challenges, Academic writing, Bangladesh.

Introduction

English academic writing for higher studies is a specialised skill that differs from day-to-day casual writing. Academic writing requires writers to use objective tone and evidence to put forward their logical arguments in a concise manner. For instance, academic

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essays, research papers, book chapters for academic anthologies, articles for journals, reports, proposals and many such types of writing fall under the category of this genre of writing (What is academic writing, 2019). Literature suggests that non-native English-speaking students have various challenges in understanding English academic writing when they pursue their tertiary level study (Bawa & Watson, 2017; Jiang, 2011). According to a study conducted among 20 university students, it was found that the students struggled the most in determining the appropriate writing norms for genre. They also faced challenges with writing with clarity and using proper grammar and organisation. Writing in a concise manner with relevant information added to the list of challenges along with lacking critical thinking and knowledge of proper mechanics of writing as well (Hartshorn & Evans, 2019). Non-native Chinese undergraduate students at an English medium university in Hong Kong have similar challenges as not understanding the inter-textuality of assignments. Often, they struggle to complete writing within the deadline as they did not know how to do planning of writing effectively. A thorough investigation of the existing literature on the academic writing challenges of non-native English-speaking students reveals that there is a gap of knowledge regarding the challenges Bangladeshi students face while writing academic assignments in English, at an international English medium university. Hence, this qualitative study explores Bangladeshi students' challenges of writing academically at an English medium international university located in Malaysia and how they relate their present learning experience with their past experience of learning at their schools.

Literature Review

Challenges of Academic Writing

Non-native English-speaking learners face various challenges in academic writing. Mdoana-Zide and Marfugu (2023) note that South African students have problems with conceptualising the essay's topic, organising its various paragraphs and selecting the right punctuations. Similar issue of not understanding text cohesion and coherence can be discerned among tertiary level German

(Kochubei, 2021) and Indonesian (Dewi & Siregar, 2022; Mali, 2023a; Mali, 2023b; Ratnawati et al., 2018) and Saudi (Khasawneh, 2023) EFL learners. In a study among postgraduate students of Saudi Arabia, AlMarwani (2020) found that students did not have sufficient vocabulary and grammar knowledge to express their ideas into English. They often took time to translate their thoughts from Arabic to English and were not able to generate ideas for writing at the pre-writing stage. Many EFL students have problem with generating ideas for writing academically which was found among students of Jordan (Ibnian, 2017), Malaysia (Asraf & Ahmed, 2018; Ien, et al., 2017), Indonesia (Dewi & Siregar, 2022; Uswar & Andrinani, 2019).

In fact, literature suggests that non-native students face the most difficult time in understanding how to write well academically when they first enroll into a tertiary institution. Indonesian undergraduate students struggle to find a research topic for their thesis and cannot use a variety of vocabulary in the draft of the thesis (Mali, 2023b). Similarly, final year students of Cameroon's four nursing institutes found it difficult to write their final thesis and held ineffective teaching and feedback on their academic writing responsible for it (Tita et al., 2023). From another study conducted among South African first year students, it was evident that the various mother tongues used by the L2 learners were interfering with their academic writing skill (Magaba, 2023). Even at the post-graduate level of study, Turkish students are not able to understand the rigor academic writing at the masters level requires which makes them appear as unprepared for taking up the challenges of writing academically (Alostath, 2021). The Saudi postgraduate students at King Saud university, Saudi Arabia find academic writing difficult because of not being able to see the difference between spoken style and written style of English (Fadda, 2012). The above discussion indicates that when non-native learners enroll in a tertiary level of education, their previous experience of learning writing does not match the demands of academic writing at the higher educational environment. The same issue exists among Bangladeshi students who are non-native speakers of English. The current study bases its investigations on the following research questions:

Research Questions

1. What academic writing challenges do the Bangladeshi students face while studying abroad in an international university?
2. How do they relate their present learning experience with their past English learning experience?
3. How do the students solve their problems of academic writing?

Study Design

A qualitative multiple case study approach was adopted for this study because it aims at exploring the English learning experience of each student in Bangladeshi schools and its impact on their current experience at the tertiary level in an international university. According to Yin (2014), case studies help researchers to find in-depth information about a current phenomenon that has not yet been explored in a context.

The researcher has adopted the snowball sampling technique for conducting the study to get information-rich data from the available participants (Patton, 2002). The first criterion for choosing the participants was that they faced some academic challenges while studying in the current faculty that they are enrolled in. The second criterion was that they studied in either Bangla medium, English medium or Madrasahs located in Bangladesh. A total of eleven Bangladeshi students studying at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), were selected for this study (please see Table 1 for participants' profiles).

The researcher chose semi-structured interviews as the main technique for data collection because they allow participants to “speak in their own voice and express their own thoughts and feelings” (Berg, 2007, p. 96). In this regard, Kakilla (2021) mentioned that semi-structured interviews can be very useful for knowing the in-depth views of the participants. The interview protocol (please see Appendix A) was developed based on the main

research questions of the study that adopted the responsive interviewing model (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In such interviews, the researcher forms a conversational partnership with the informants and attempts to make sense of the experiences they had through the stories they share (SM, 2013). Throughout the interview, follow up questions were asked (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) to know more about the key interview questions.

For analysing students’ interviews, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim with Transcriber AG software. The transcriptions were then coded with the seven-column coding template (Ahmad, 2017) by utilising open coding, in-vivo coding and constructed coding techniques in two cycles (Saldana, 2013). In the first coding cycle, the entire transcript of each interview was coded. In the second cycle of coding, only selected prominent codes from the transcripts were listed as prominent categories. The categories were then analysed for identifying emerging themes that formed a thematic pattern. For establishing the credibility and trustworthiness of data, two experts from the field of Applied Linguistics and ELT were invited for rating the themes, and the percentage of inter-rater reliability was 85. In addition, the procedures of intra-coding by the researcher and inter-coding by another expert were adopted to make the data analysis process credible. In addition, member checking was completed by emailing the transcripts of the interviews to the participants.

Participants’ Profiles

The profiles of this study’s participants are given below in Table 1. The researcher has used pseudonyms to keep their identities anonymous.

Table 1. Profiles of Participants

No.	Partici- pants’ name	Under- graduate/ Post- graduate	Current Field of study	Previous Educational Background
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1	Sharmin	Post-graduate (3 rd semester)	M.A. in English Language Teaching, Dept. of the English	Studied in a Bangla medium school in Kushtia and completed B.A. in English Literature and Language from a private university in Dhaka
2	Faisal	Post-graduate (3 rd semester)	M.A. in TESL, Education	Studied in a Bangla Medium School in Jamalpur. Completed B.A. in English Literature and Language from a private university in Dhaka
3	Kamrun Nahar	Post-graduate (Final semester)	M.A. in Media and communication	Studied in a Bangla Medium School in Dhaka and completed B.A. in English Literature and Language from a private university in Dhaka
4	Nasik	Under-graduate (3 rd semester)	B.Sc. in Information, Communication and Technology	Studied in a Bangla medium School in Sylhet
5	Ayesha	Under-graduate (2 nd year)	B.Sc. in Economics	Studied in an international school in the UAE till grade seven. Then studied in an English version school in

				Bangladesh
6	Mahir	Under-graduate (final year)	Bsc. in Information, Communication and Technology	Studied in an English medium school in Dhaka
7	Kashfia	Under-graduate (2 nd semester)	BSc. in Economics	Studied in an English medium school in Chittagong
8	Mizan	English bridging course	Bsc.in Information, Communication and Technology	Studied in a Bangla medium school in Bogra
9	Tamanna	Under-graduate (3 rd semester)	B.A. in English Language, Dept. of English Literature and Language	Studied in a Bangla medium school and studied Accounting for a year in a college under the National University Colleges, Bangladesh
10	Marufa	Under-graduate (2 nd semester)	B.A. in English Language, Dept. of English Literature and Language	Studied in a Madrasah in Dhaka
11	Rahman	Under-graduate (1 st semester)	Bsc.in Information, Communication and Technology	Studied in a Madrasah in Dhaka

Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the main findings of the study in the light of existing literature. The findings are arranged according to the research questions of the study.

Academic Writing Challenges Faced while Studying in the Present Institution

Not knowing about the Norms of Academic Writing

When the respondents were asked about what challenges they faced while studying in the present international university, most of the Bangla medium schools' students informed that they were surprised to see their poor grades in the first two semesters. Then they realised that it was happening because they did not know about the norms of academic writing. Although Faisal, Kamrunnahar and Sharmin had completed their M.A. in English from two Bangladeshi private universities in the capital Dhaka, and were pursuing their second masters in Malaysia, they felt that they did not know about the expectations they ought to meet in academic writing. Faisal informed,

I first came to know about academic writing and logical arguments in essays when I enrolled in IIUM.

In the case of an English medium school's student Kashfia, she could not understand the requirements of academic assignments in the initial semesters and was held responsible for plagiarising her assignments. Usually, it is expected that the students from schools with English medium instructions are much more fluent in using the language and may not have a problem understanding the instructions given in this language. But Kashfia came to know that for academic assignments, only being fluent is not sufficient. She defended herself with the following statement,

I didn't know what plagiarism is and how to avoid it. But gradually I grasped the technique of putting my own voice into the academic assignments.

Similarly, Kamrunnahar stated that the private university where she completed her English Bachelors from, had foundation courses in English reading, writing, listening and speaking. However, only one semester of these courses did not help her much to know how to write the longer research papers that she was asked to do at present. In this regard, Sharmin said,

We were never given any research-based assignments in our undergraduate life in Bangladesh. My teachers asked us to write longer assignments by hand so that we could not copy from the internet. That is why I am not accustomed to using Microsoft Word and take a longer time to complete my academic assignments here.

Sharmin's statement indeed reminds us of the fact that making our Bangladeshi university graduates proficient in only English is not adequate for meeting the needs of computer literacy that students require in academia. Lack of facilities such as CD/VCDs, and projectors. Laptops, OHPs and multimedia in most of the government schools (Ahmed, 2014) do not let the students learn about appropriate words for making digital presentations. Due to the lack of digital knowledge and practice, students from Bangla medium schools and Madrasahs have trouble making effective presentations at the tertiary level of study abroad. Here, it is noticeable that these students lack "discourse competence" under the communicative competence which allows a person to read, write, listen or speak appropriately in different contexts (such as making digital presentations) (Canale, 1983). The finding also reflects Alostath (2021) and Fadda's (2012) studies conducted on Turkish and Saudi students respectively, where the student participants are not able to understand the demands of academic writing.

Rote Learning and Academic Writing

Rote learning is another obstacle for participants while writing pieces that require them to think critically on their own. Nasik mentioned that being from a Bangla medium school, he and his friends followed the previous years' board examination's question pattern. They used to memorise answers to selected questions for

their examinations. For this reason, Nasik also faced trouble with assignments at the current university where he had to search for relevant information from various sources and include them in support of his report's arguments. This example shows that the students of Bangla medium schools usually depended on textbook information (Zahra, 2012) to pass board examinations (Hassan, 2014). These students were not provided with ample opportunity to practice communicative English (Ahmed, 2016), let alone think critically about preparing various types of written assignments.

Not able to Write Cohesively

Mahir, another student from an English medium school background had mentioned that he was not having a problem writing cohesively in English because his school had trained him how to do that. However, in the first semester, he could not put the logical arguments properly in longer assignments and also did not know about formatting the assignments with 7th APA style. So, even the students from English medium schools were facing problems with the technical aspects of completing a research-based assignment at this international university.

Mahir pointed out,

Being a student of an English medium school, we might have better English fluency, and we have the habit of reading a text critically and thinking on our own before writing about an unknown topic. Our schools gave us a lot of freewriting exercises that help us to think critically. But in the case of academic writing, we were just shown different parts of an academic essay in school. The teachers never emphasised how to maintain the quality of a good essay. I had to take help from the coaching centres before our O' levels examination to improve writing.

The above statement suggests that not only the students from Bangla medium schools and Madrasahs but also the students from English medium schools need appropriate writing skills for completing assignments by following academic norms. Moreover, only being fluent in English does not help in knowing the technical aspects of

formal academic writing that fall under “discourse competence” of communicative competence (Canale, 1983). Other studies on challenges of non-native English speaking students’ academic writing also corresponds with this finding that the students find it difficult to organise paragraphs and write coherently (Kochubei, 2021; Dewi & Siregar, 2022; Mali, 2023a; Mali, 2023b; Ratnawati et al., 2018; Khasawneh, 2023).

Not able to Find a Writing Topic

During the interview, Tamanna had talked about her frustrations regarding not being able to find an appropriate topic for the final term paper of the courses. Literature also suggested that non-native students in international universities have challenges of conceptualising an idea for written assignments. They also have problem with generating ideas for their writing (Asraf & Ahmed, 2018; Dewi & Siregar, 2022; Ibnian, 2017; Ien et al., 2017; Mdodana-Zide and Marfugu, 2023; Uswar & Andrinani, 2019).

Lack of Critical Thinking and Critical Reading

To practice the art of thinking critically is very important for students at the tertiary level of education. In this regard, Ayesha, another participant, felt inadequate compared to her Malaysian classmates studying at the Department of Economics at the current university. She explained that she had studied in an international school in the UAE and came to Bangladesh when she was in the seventh grade. She enrolled in an English version school where the national curriculum's textbooks are followed with English as a medium of instruction. Ayesha used to get bored with the lessons of this school because she had learned through PowerPoint presentations and video clips in the UAE whereas the Bangladeshi school asked them to read books and memorise information. When she enrolled in her current university, she found it hard to relearn how to think critically and know how to paraphrase with proper references. She was also accused of plagiarising in the initial semesters.

She states,

My Malaysian classmates were quite good at doing academic written assignments because they had completed their matriculation programme before entering university. But for me, I was never taught how to do academic assignments, I actually had to learn by myself.

Hartshorn & Evans (2019) found similar issues among non-native international students that they lack the ability to write in a concise manner and think critically.

Critical reading is another skill that students pursuing higher studies require the most. In this regard, Nasik. Tamanna, Ayesha and Kashfia mentioned that they did not know how to read academic articles that the teachers asked them to review for their assignments which led to not being able to submit good written research papers. This also shows that Bangladeshi students must become familiar with what particularly serves their academic purposes, before entering universities.

Ayesha commented,

We were not used to reading articles in school and it was difficult for me to understand academic articles.

Such discrimination emerged because the Bangladeshi students were not prepared sufficiently to pursue higher studies abroad. The skills required for this context are not only general English language skills but also skills of thinking critically, writing academically and presenting one's thoughts convincingly through an effective multimedia presentation.

Bangladeshi students' experiences discussed above, indicate that Bangladeshi students may be benefitted if a study programme such as the Malaysian matriculation programme is offered by the Ministry of Education before university enrolment. Malaysian students who aim to get admission into a public university usually apply to get admission into the matriculation programme that offers a year-long study programme for the streams of Science, Accounting and Technical Steams. This programme offers some general courses such as Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, Accounting and many

other courses for preparing students ahead of their enrolment into majoring in subjects they want to study at public universities. Along with these, it also offers some compulsory subjects such as Information Technology, English Language, Dynamic Skills, and MUET (a course to prepare students for the Malaysian University English Test (Adzmi, 2019). A student completing the matriculation programme is thus aware of critical reading, academic English, resources for writing research papers, basic rules of research papers as well as effective digital presentations required for their future study at the tertiary level.

Lack of Communicative Competence

In addition, some Bangladeshi students do face problems following teachers' instructions when they begin their study abroad. For instance, Marufa and Rahman were not able to understand the teacher's instructions in the initial two semesters because of their weakness in listening skills. Both of them were from the Madrasah background where English is given the least priority and the teachers use Arabic and Bangla as their medium of instruction. That is the reason why they faced trouble communicating in English. The situation does emphasise the fact that the CLT-based national curriculum is not serving the graduates from higher secondary schools and Madrasahs well for meeting the communicative requirements of everyday life, let alone their academic life. Both the participants lacked grammatical competence and social competence (Canale, 1983) which is usually acquired through practice in various contexts. Many researchers have pointed out already that the CLT based curriculum does not accommodate speaking and listening skills in the English assessments which do not provide students with the opportunity to practice these skills (Ansarey, 2012; Hasan & Akhand, 2009; Roy, 2016; Sultana, 2014; Shurovi, 2014).

Past English Learning Experience in Bangladesh

According to the participants from Bangla medium schools, they began to study English as a subject at the very beginning of their school life. However, most of the time students from schools with Bangla medium instruction were encouraged to memorise

English essays and the task of free writing was never introduced by the teacher. They had a 45-minute English class, four times a week where the teachers followed the new CLT curriculum. Most of the time the teachers were using Bangla as their medium of instruction which corresponds with the findings of studies conducted by Farooqui (2014) as well as Rahman, Pandian and Kaur's (2018) studies. Bangla medium schools' students further explained that they did not know anything about English academic writing and research till they enrolled in their current Malaysian university. Mizan mentioned,

In Bangladesh, we were never taught what is the topic sentence, thesis statement, body paragraphs or supporting details. Here, in the first semester of the bridging course, I got to know about these parts of an essay. On the other hand, in Bangladesh, we wrote only memorised one-paragraph essays. Here, all the assignments that we are asked to do are research-oriented. In school or college, we were never introduced to how to do research.

Another participant, Tamanna had completed a year in the Department of Accounting in a college under the national university degree colleges in Bangladesh, before coming to Malaysia. She mentioned that in Bangladeshi private universities, students get a chance to learn how to make PowerPoint slides and complete assignments with the help of computers. This is not implemented in the government universities which leaves the students with a lack of basic digital skills needed for academia. In addition, she mentioned that the degree colleges do not teach how to write academic assignments and give lectures from books that the students memorise and regurgitate in the examinations. She experienced the opposite while studying at her current Malaysian university where teachers encourage her to ask questions in the class and always tell students to substantiate their arguments in assignments with appropriate evidence. This finding vibrates Rahman & Karim's (2015) opinion that Bangladeshi socio-cultural backgrounds do not let students open up and ask questions to the teachers. Tamanna's contrastive experience in both Bangladesh and Malaysia indeed reflects that many of the students are following the same route of memorisation

at the universities and not taking steps to ask questions and think critically. This is an outcome of being habituated to rote learning throughout 12 years of pre-primary to higher secondary level education.

The students of madrasah backgrounds were facing more issues while coping with English academic writing as English is not practiced well in madrasahs.

On the other hand, though the students at English medium schools had the advantage of being fluent in English, they also felt that their schools did not provide knowledge of writing academically. It shows how discourse competence under communicative competence (Canale, 1983) is needed for the students of this stream as well.

Solving the problems was also quite stressful for the participants in the initial semesters as they had to learn a new way of thinking, writing and presenting at the tertiary level. They held their past English learning experience responsible for the present challenges. The next section briefly discusses the participants' opinions on their past English learning experiences.

Solving the Problems

When the participants faced the above challenges in the current university, they resorted to online websites for getting ideas and plagiarised. Some of them sought help from seniors and asked them to give private tuition. It again takes us back to the education system where Bangla medium schools' students look forward to private tuition (Zahra, 2012) to pass examinations.

On the other hand, Faisal said that he asked the teachers about how to improve assignments and learnt from their feedback. On this note, Tamanna informed,

When I was confused about the structure of the assignment, I asked the teacher for a sample that we can follow. The teacher was very annoyed and refused to give any. She said that if all the other students can do it, I should be able to do the assignment as well. Malaysian students complete the year-long Matriculation programme before their undergraduate studies and do well in university.

Sharmin informed that she did not understand citations of a research paper when she enrolled in first year. She took tuitions from a senior Bangladeshi of the same department to understand various aspects of academic writing. Marufa, being from a madrasah background, did not comprehend the assignment instructions given in class. She also opted for tuition provided by a senior in the university hostel. These choices of Bangladeshi students, especially from Bangla medium and madrasah backgrounds show the extent to which they are dependent on the tuition and coaching classes from schooling years. They find it challenging to explore new reading materials on their own and learn how to write well academically.

Conclusion and Implications

This study attempted to put forward a glimpse of what academic writing challenges Bangladeshi school graduates to face while pursuing higher studies in an international university. The findings show that only being proficient in the English language was not helping the students to keep pace with the requirements of international university's academic expectations. Moreover, most of the respondents also highlighted that they had never been encouraged to read and think critically in their schooling years, which thwarted their ability to think deeply about a topic at the tertiary level of study. It was quite surprising that even the students of English medium schools who are expected to have sound knowledge of English have also admitted that they were struggling with the academic assignments in their first year of tertiary education.

In the case of Bangla medium schools, the Ministry of Education Bangladesh keeps focusing on the CLT based English

textbooks and curriculum throughout the primary to higher secondary years. Unfortunately, focusing only on CLT based English proficiency falls short of the skills learners need to survive in academia. A reason behind this is that teachers are focusing on only grammatical competence under CLT whereas the other three competences such as sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence (Canale, 1983) are also required to develop communicative competence completely among learners. These students are unable to choose the correct forms of words and strategies while completing academic written tasks because they often lack discourse competence. The contrast becomes more visible when Bangladeshi school graduates go abroad to study in an international university and feel “inadequate” in comparison with their other international classmates.

During the interviews, most of the participants referred to the Malaysian matriculation programme that teaches academic English language skills, presentations and Information technology to school graduates, prior to entering the tertiary level of education. A few of the participants suggested that such a programme could be introduced for Bangladeshi students of all streams as well. The study programme would cover topics such as different types of essays, parts of an essay, academic writing norms, knowledge of plagiarism, referencing styles, critical reading and writing, conducting a mini-research and writing a report in the correct format, asking critical questions in academic seminars, presenting in academic conferences, and making effective digital presentations.

Hence, after considering this study’s findings, the author proposes to the policymakers to consider introducing a course titled “Bridging Programme”, that will be compulsory for the students of the three streams. This programme will help Bangladeshi students to make the transition from school years to the tertiary level of study. Within the programme, they will learn how to read texts critically, write academic assignments well in English, ask thought-provoking questions as well as respond to them, and make digital presentations of an international standard which is an absolute necessity to survive in the present academia.

Alternatively, norms of critical reading, academic writing, drafting a research paper and presenting it with digital tools can be introduced as a part of a course in the academic curriculum in all the streams of schools. This course could be included from grade 8th to 12th where students will be able to learn step by step.

A question may arise, why not add a chapter on academic writing to the existing *English for Today* books instead? If such a chapter is added, it will be only for the students of Bangla medium schools and Madrasahs whereas the study findings confirm that the students of English medium schools also face similar problems while studying in international universities. That is why the Bridging Programme or compulsory course infused in the curricula of the three streams will be more useful for Bangladeshi students or students from any ESOL contexts who are about to begin their higher studies both at home and abroad. Teachers of various international universities may get a glimpse of the reasons why students from various ESOL countries struggle with their academic assignments and focus on bringing changes in their teaching techniques.

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