

## English language writing problems Challenged by the ESL Learners and Instructors in Pakistan

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*Second language (L2) writing has always been a problematic area for second language learners and a hot topic for second language researchers. The emergence of the field of L2 writing is a relatively recent phenomenon, but it has come of age. Intermediate Colleges of Lahore constitute the population of this study. Convenient Random sampling technique was used to take samples from the selected population. Two hundred and forty students and sixty teachers were taken as participants who were from public and private colleges. The data, collected through a questionnaire, was analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science). The findings suggest the most frequent writing difficulties faced by higher secondary level students are convention problems, grammatical issues and difficulties of tenses, and learning of usage problems, etc.*

**Keywords:** Writing skill, Public sector colleges, Private sector colleges, Writing difficulties, Teachers' opinions

### **Introduction**

English is one of the loved languages for Pakistani nation as they feel good to use it in their communication. One of the reasons behind its popularity might be its being used as a medium of instruction throughout school, college and university instructions (NEP, 2009). One more thing is its comprehensibility around the globe because it is being used in many countries of the world as L1, L2, FL, or OL (official language). The world is squeezing now due to the influx of technology and people now need to communicate with the people living across the world (Nunan, 2005).

Crystal (1997) declared English as Lingua Franca for all communication types. She is enjoying the SL status in Pakistan, because it is being used for multi purposes by our society (Warsi, 2004). Cook (2001) noted that choices of careers and life styles are directly affected by the current trend of gaining expertise in second language. normally, when one claim to have mastery in a language, it needs to have a grip on basic four skills of language: two productive, speaking and writing and two receptive, reading and listening. Aronoff & Rees-Miller (2007) quoted that writing is quite natural activity and do not need any kind of explicit instruction to learn it. It is also said "Writing is a system of more or less permanent marks used to represent an utterance in such a way that it can be recovered exactly without the utterer intervenes" (Daniels & Bright, 1996, p.2). McArthur, (2006) claimed it as cognitive and social process. In a socially cognitive domain writing is more effective medium of communication than the oral one.

Unlike speaking, writing enables human beings to convey a message independent of time and space (Hughes, 1996). It is considered man's best academic achievement based on skills or

components like mechanics, production, conventions, and cognition. The act of writing is independent of time and place; the writer has to depend upon formal features to convey the intended meanings. Failure to correctly take advantage of these features causes frustration for the writer (Leisak, 1989). English is the second and official language in Pakistan, as well as a natural language to work with and learn science and technology at higher levels (Warsi, 2004; Bhatti, Parveen, & Ali, 2017). It is taught as a compulsory subject in Urdu as well as English medium schools through the recommended books of Punjab Textbook board (Azim, Bhatti, Hussain, & Iqbal, 2018; Azim, & Garcia, 2020); however, the majority of students with rural and urban backgrounds cannot communicate properly in English and hence perceive it as a challenging subject (Warsi 2004). At secondary (grade 9-10), intermediary (grade 11-12), and bachelor levels (grade 13-14), many of the students from the Arts and Humanities cannot meet the requirements of the examination in English. The purpose of the study was to explore the difficulties in writing English from the students' and teachers' points of view.

Teachers have to take care of student's motivation, their level of writing, and preferred way of learning before preparing any task (Zerin: 2007). The purpose of teaching writing as one of the four language skills is to facilitate student's learning and their daily communication. Grammar is very helpful for practical language skills. Grammar in writing skill determines how a paragraph build-up and how the ideas can be understood. Teachers often find their students lack in this aspect. It is important to explain any given topics as bright as possible and assure that all of them fulfill the objective that teachers want (Nunan, 2005). There are lots of ways to create an excellent learning environment for a younger learner, and it is a fact that students absorb even better that way (Nunan, 2005).

### **Research Objectives:**

The objectives of this study are:

1. To identify the most frequent writing difficulties in English faced by higher secondary male and female students
2. To get the opinions of English language teachers' perceptions about the difficulties of teaching writing skill at Higher Secondary level
3. To ascertain the comparison of the perceptions of English teachers and learners regarding the difficulties related to writing skill

### **Research Questions**

The research questions of the study are:

1. What are the most frequent writing difficulties in English faced by higher secondary male and female students?
2. What are the perceptions of English language teacher's about difficulties in teaching writing skills at Higher Secondary level?
3. What are the ways of comparison between English teachers and learners' opinions regarding difficulties in writing?

### **Academic writing challenges in Second Language**

First, writing usually suffers from a lack of interaction, which stimulates oral production in conversation (Shafie, Maesin, Osman, Nayan, and Mansor, 2010, p. 61). Often, in higher education, writing tasks require students to draw on outside sources and adopt the styles and genres of academic discourse (Tardy, 2010, p. 12). Confidence in writing ability is a must. This was especially the case when there was conflicting feedback from different faculty (Can, 2009, 25) One of the difficulties of writing in a second or additional language is that it is generally believed to require some mastery of writing in the first language.

The lecturers indicated that they found it challenging to advise students on academic writing, and regarded themselves as being unclear about what that advice should be (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010, 175). Additionally, poor language proficiency remains an issue. Novice writers have particularly poor language proficiency, and, due to this factor, cannot conduct productive discussions in the target language. Warschauer argues that oral language proficiency is significant for any learner of language, because it is the most widely used skill (Shafie et al., 2010, p. 63).

Written work is described as one of the major causes of concern for students at university (Jordan, 2012), and considerable research has been done to investigate why students face academic writing challenges (Tardy, 2010). Academic writing is a difficult skill to be learnt or taught since "it is not a simple cognitive activity; rather it is believed to be a complex mental production which requires careful thought, discipline and concentration" (Grami, 2010, p. 9). Academic writing challenges for students begin as soon as they enter the university. Lebowitz (2000) mentions that one of the challenges faced by students is academic writing which is different from the non-academic discourse they used in secondary schooling. So, students tend to employ some of the elements of non-academic writing discourse when they write at university. As a result, these students receive comments from lecturers that such discourses are unacceptable in academia (Mbirimi, 2012).

It is important that students practise paraphrasing of sources and acknowledging them appropriately to avoid academic theft, either accidentally or on purpose (Abdulkareem, 2013; Al Badi, 2015; Alamin & Amin, 2012; Bowker, 2007; Cornwell & Robertson, 2011; Deakin University, 2015; Dudu et al., 2012; Keck, 2006; Pecorari, 2003). The world of grammar is also quite challenging to students because it has a variety of rules. Students' academic papers are

usually fraught with mechanical weaknesses, especially in areas like paragraphing, punctuations, word-class and sentence construction. According to Pineteh (2012), students' sentences are often shortened and 31 complicated because they still grapple with grammatical aspects, such as subject-verb agreement, tenses, spelling and how to join sentences to make a coherent paragraph. These weaknesses recur because students misconstrue academic writing as a product and not a process, meaning they do not revise and edit their texts after writing (Al Fadda, 2012). Yagoda (2009, p. 13) lists the "seven deadly sins of student writers," highlighting such offences as dangling modifiers, omitted commas, gratuitous commas, improper use of semicolons, vagueness and other issues of style and grammar usage.

### **Writing difficulties with Pakistani students**

Ahmad et al. (2011) conducted a research program on the nature of difficulties in Learning English by the Students at Secondary School Level in Pakistan. The study revealed that the students of provincial govt. schools faced more difficulties in learning grammar and English as second language as compare to Federal government school. Akram & Qureshi (2012) conducted a research in Burewala & Vehari on the topic of Problems in Learning and Teaching English Pronunciation in Pakistan. The research concluded that to improve pronunciation of students, teachers should be aware of their weakness and strength regarding English pronunciation, and they should present themselves as role model for the students. Bilal, (2013) conducted a research about Problems in Speaking English with L2 Learners of Rural Areas School of Pakistan. Students were found to have problems in speaking skill.

Farooq et al (2012) also conducted a survey about Opinion of Second Language Learners about Writing Difficulties in English Language. The study revealed that students found problems in spelling, vocabulary and in grammar. Haider (2014) conducted a mix method research An Exploratory Study of Organizational Problems faced by Pakistani Student Writers with Learning Difficulties (LD) in EFL It was found that students had lack of confidence and motivation with problems of writing anxiety. They were not motivated but forced to memorise and if they developed their skill, they would surely keep away from plagiarism. Tariq et al (2013) conducted a research about difficulties in learning English as a second language in rural areas of Pakistan. The study concludes if parents support and encourage learning, it would incorporate an urge to learn English. The research also proves if the students belong to an educated family.

Hassan & Sajid (2013) conducted a research about ICTs in learning: Problems faced by Punjab province Pakistan. They found that most of the participants had positive perceptions about integration of ICTs into their teaching and learning. Possible problems to the investigation of ICTs and many of these difficulties were verified by the teachers and students.

### **Research methodology**

Descriptive research design was used for conducting this study for which Survey methodology was used to meet the stated objectives.

This study is based on a survey to document the opinion of 12th grade students (Higher secondary students) regarding difficulties in writing in the English language. The students and teachers of the public and private sector colleges constituted the target population of this study. 240 (gender balanced) students were taken from six private colleges (30 from each college) of Lahore, whereas 60 English language teachers were selected from target population colleges of Lahore. The data of Survey research was collected by questionnaires using five points likert Scale.

## Data Analysis

### Frequency Tables

		Gender of the Student			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	120	50.0	50.0	50.0
	Female	120	50.0	50.0	100.0
	Total	240	100.0	100.0	

The table is presented for respondents' gender, from which the data is collected. It shows that number of samples. The participants are 240. Among 240, 120 are males and 120 are females.

		Name of the College			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Public sector	120	50.0	50.0	50.0
	Pvt sector	120	50.0	50.0	100.0
	Total	240	100.0	100.0	

This table shows the number of colleges. There are eight colleges which constitute the population. Among the following colleges 4 are girl's colleges and rest of the 4 are boys colleges. 30 participants were taken from each college.

### T – Test

Table 1.1

#### *Gender wise students' opinions on writing difficulties*

Categories		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T Value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Tenses	Female	120	17.4875	3.56330	4.910	.001
	Male	120	14.9167	4.49416		
Punctuation	Female	120	8.9979	2.52102	-4.730	.001
	Male	120	10.5333	2.50817		
Sentence Structure	Female	120	14.3333	2.86624	3.468	.001
	Male	120	12.8950	3.52470		

Vocabulary	Female	120	14.4117	3.67504	4.321	.001
	Male	120	12.2500	2.01049		
Spellings	Female	120	11.2500	2.01049	2.995	.054
	Male	120	11.3245	2.53204		

An independent sample t test was applied on the students' data gathered on gender based to know the gender based differences on difficulties faced by them. There is a significant differences in using tenses, punctuation, sentence structure, and vocabulary faced by students both male and female. Mostly female students are uncomfortable in using Tenses, and sentence structure but in vocabulary female students are good as per the mean score indicated. Male students are good in vocabulary but weak in sentence structure; whereas both male and female students are at the same level in using spelling of the English language as there is no significant difference in English spellings.

Table 1.2

*College wise students' opinions on writing difficulties*

Categories		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T Value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Tenses	Public	120	15.5432	1.56330	4.910	.001
	Private	120	14.7610	3.49416		
Punctuation	Public	120	10.0193	2.30715	3.571	.011
	Private	120	9.9979	1.40812		
Sentence Structure	Public	120	12.7510	3.52470	2.468	.071
	Private	120	12.5333	3.86624		
Vocabulary	Public	120	11.2500	3.01049	-5.880	.001
	Private	120	15.4117	2.67504		
Spellings	Public	120	10.2100	3.01049	1.756	.062
	Private	120	10.9867	2.67504		

When the independent sample t test was applied to know their difficulties in writing skill on students from private and public sector colleges. There is no significant difference in sentence structure and spelling as the 2-tailed significant value is more than the cut value. Yet there is a significant difference in using tenses, punctuation, and vocabulary in which mean difference shows that public sector college students are good in tenses and punctuation but private sector college students are better in vocabulary using for their writing skill.

**PART II***Gender of Teacher*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Gender	Male	30	50.0	50.0	50.0
	Female	30	50.0	50.0	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	
Teaching	5 $\geq$	33	55.0	55.0	55.0

Experience	5<	27	45.0	45.0	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

The table is presented for respondents' gender, from which the data is collected. It shows that number of samples. The participants were 60 teachers. Among 60, 30 were males and 30 were females.

### T – Test

Table 1.3

#### *Gender wise teachers opinions on writing difficulties*

Categories		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T Value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Tenses	Male	30	16.6667	1.61145	1.577	.049
	Female	30	15.8867	2.17870		
Punctuation	Male	30	8.0556	1.56368	-.702	.485
	Female	30	8.3444	1.62236		
Sentence Structure	Male	30	19.0722	2.23978	.110	.913
	Female	30	19.0111	2.04777		
Vocabulary	Male	30	16.0500	1.49629	-.478	.043
	Female	30	16.9854	1.73770		
Spellings	Male	30	15.9259	1.69174	-2.026	.039
	Female	30	16.7515	1.46375		

The teachers were asked to rate the writing problems of intermediate students. Their responses were analysed to check the mean values of their scores to the major problems of intermediate students. There was a significant difference in the opinions of male and female English language teachers regarding tenses, vocabulary and spellings; whereas there were no significant difference for punctuation and sentence structure. The 2-tailed values for the tenses is .49, for vocabulary is .043, and for spellings is .039 all three values are lower than the cut value of .05. The mean difference shows that male teachers value tenses more than female teachers, but female teachers give more value to vocabulary and spellings. For other factors like punctuation, and sentence structure both male and female teachers are on equal grounds.

Table 1.4

#### *Experience wise teachers opinions on writing difficulties*

Categories		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T Value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Tenses	5≥	33	15.9212	2.02172	-1.589	.117
	5<	27	16.7111	1.77620		
Punctuation	5≥	33	8.4242	1.52131	1.215	.229
	5<	27	7.9259	1.64948		

Sentence	5 $\geq$	33	18.8687	1.83889	-.674	.504
Structure	5<	27	19.2531	2.45531		
Vocabulary	5 $\geq$	33	16.7515	1.46375	2.026	.47
	5<	27	15.9259	1.69174		
Spellings	5 $\geq$	33	17.3919	1.46375	-1.026	.69
	5<	27	18.3245	2.69174		

Independent sample t test was applied to know the difference of opinion between the more experienced and less experienced language teachers regarding writing problem of college students. There were no significant difference between the teachers of having more than 5 years of experience and having less than or equal to 5 years experienced teachers. The mean difference shows that experienced teachers (more than 5 years of experience of teaching English) give more value to tenses, sentence structure and spellings but less experienced teachers give more value to punctuation and vocabulary. Though the difference of opinion is less than significant but the mean difference is found that means the difference of opinions are there between the language teachers.

## Findings

The purpose was to explore the writing difficulties faced by the students at higher secondary level. Writing is an exhibition of cognitive, visual, conceptual and motor potentials (C. Mercer, & A. Mercer, 2004). English writing is a difficult task for the Pakistani students due to the lingual and cultural differences. Eastern and Western cultures differ in many of the aspects that affect the acquisition of language (Ya Wen, 2007). These differences may cause the grammatical errors, composition problems and inappropriateness of presentation of ideas in English (Cai, 2004). The focus of this study has been Pakistani Higher secondary school students' writing errors and teachers' opinions on such errors. The writing error items studied in this research were tenses use, sentence structure, punctuation, vocabulary and spellings.

Students' opinions on writing difficulties were sought after. Male students are more prone towards

## Conclusion

English is a common language being understood and used for communication in the world. It is considered as a key to success. The college students in Pakistan have taken twelve years coaching for English language but do not have mastery in English writings. Commonly, they take it just to pass the examination instead to have hands on practice. The first research question of this study was what are the most frequent writing difficulties in English language faced by higher secondary students? It has been concluded from the findings that the most frequent writing difficulties faced by higher secondary level students are convention problems, grammatical issues and difficulties, learning usage problems, etc.



The objective of the research has been identified which was to identify most frequent writing problems. The second research question of this study was what are the problems in the usage of punctuation and prepositions in writing English faced by male and female higher secondary school students? They higher secondary students face difficulties and the problems in the usage of punctuation and prepositions in writing English. They feel great difficulty in using punctuation marks. They feel difficulties while capitalisation of proper nouns while writing English language. The higher secondary level students feel tremendous difficulties in prepositions. The learning and usage of prepositions has always been a great confusion for second language learners due to complex nature of prepositions. They always commit mistakes in using prepositions. This answer to the research question fulfills the objective of the research objective.

The third research question of this study was what are the perceptions English language teacher's about difficulties in teaching writing skills at Higher Secondary level? It is to sum up from the findings that as per the perception of English language teachers they secondary school level Pakistani students face. It is hard and difficult for the students to make a difference between past indefinite tense and present perfect tense. It is also hard and difficult for the students to make a difference between past indefinite tense and past perfect tense. The students face huge difficulty while using double future tense in their writing. They cannot cope with conditional sentences at all. Prepositions are more complex and their appropriate usage for the students. Prepositional verbs and phrasal verbs are very difficult for the students. The students are weak in using helping verb and main verb.

Grammatical features and conventions are bit difficult for the students of higher secondary level students. Past continuous tense with past habitual actions is difficult for the student. The students are lacking in organising their sentences and paragraphs and in connecting paragraphs. In the domain of punctuation, hyphen and exclamation mark is difficult to the students. The answer to the third research question addresses and fulfils third object which was to know of English language teacher's perceptions about difficulties of teaching writing skill at Higher Secondary level.

The fourth research question of this study was to explore the answer of what are the ways of comparison between English teachers and learners' opinion regarding difficulties in writing? While comparing the perception of the English language teachers and the students, it is found from the findings that the perceptions of the students about writing difficulties are almost same with the perception of English language teachers. They face difficulty in using tenses. They face tremendous difficulties in tenses. They face difficulties in double future tense while writing English. The frequent problem which the students face while writing is the correct use of present simple tense.

The students face problems in constructing sentences. Their sentences don't convey complete sense as they are not good at marking commas in sentences. They feel problems in the

use of conditional sentences. They feel great difficulty in writing is the incorrect use of punctuation marks. Grammatical mistakes affect their expression in writing. They face difficulty while using passive voice in their writing. They face difficulty while using double future tense in their writing. Their sentences are not well organised that's why they can't communicate well. Their written expression is not good in describing the past events. They face problems in connecting one paragraph with the other. Their sentences don't convey complete sense as they are not good at marking commas in sentences. Grammatical features are one of the problems they face in their writing. They feel confused while referring to the things which I have already mentioned in my writing. The answer to this question addresses the objective of the research.

The most frequent problem which Pakistani students face is that they first think in Urdu and then translate it in English which is different from Urdu in syntax, idiom and imagery. Although some international level researches indicated that the most occurring difficulty in writing English language was that of rhetoric and grammar whereas Pakistani students faced problems of rhetoric significantly but they are not highly ranked as compared with other factors of writing English language (Davies, 2003). The most serious problems were that of vocabulary deficiency, L1 interference and confusion in grammatical rules. The students feel difficulties in writing when they face difficulties in reading. Reading and writing are two complementary skills and develop simultaneously (Mubagna, 2010; Rummel, 2005). Writing is much difficult than listening, speaking and reading (Dixon & Nessel, 1983). The female students face more difficulties than the male students in English writing due to the factors taken in this study. The difficulties in English writing are also interrelated with each other.

## Recommendation

- Teachers should adopt eclectic approach in teaching composition and innovative methods of teaching vocabulary and should train students in appropriate word selection. Students should be taught to handle L1 interference especially interference of L1 syntax while writing English language.
- Teachers should adopt eclectic approach to inculcate knowledge of both genre and process of writing. Students should be taught to handle the first language interference especially how to avoid the mistakes created due to L1 syntax.
- They should be trained to remember the irregular spellings and rules of making spellings. Grammar rule should be focused and applied linguistics be employed during teaching English. More emphasis should be on written work than the oral one.
- This study leads to the need of an extended study in terms of geographical area, sample size and the factors causing difficulties in writing English.
- The future study should also focus on difficulties in writing English faced at elementary, secondary and the graduation level learners.

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