

Saudi EFL Learners' Difficulties in Academic Writing: A Case Study of Al-Baha University

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Abstract

This study examines the academic writing difficulties that Saudi undergraduates encounter in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes at Al-Baha University. It explores vocabulary limitations, grammatical errors, and organizational issues. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study combines quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to understand these difficulties comprehensively. Findings reveal key challenges, including linguistic transfer from Arabic to English and limited exposure to academic writing practices. The study recommends strategies such as targeted feedback and the development of specific writing skills to address these issues. It contributes to the literature by offering context-specific insights and practical recommendations for improving academic writing instruction, with implications for curriculum development and pedagogy in comparable EFL settings.

Keywords: Saudi EFL Learners; EFL Academic Writing; Learners' Difficulty; Language Acquisition; Al-Baha University

1. Introduction

Students in higher education programs need to be academically literate, especially if English is a second language. Strong writing skills contribute to academic performance and future employment opportunities in a globalized environment. Mastering academic writing can be especially difficult for students studying in non-native English-speaking nations.

The recent approval of Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia has underlined the need to improve the nationalization of vital sectors such as education and to raise English-language competency. Notwithstanding these initiatives, certain facets of academic writing remain challenging for Saudi EFL learners. Insufficient vocabulary, weak comprehension skills, and a lack of critical thinking are blamed for these challenges (Al-Jarf & Al-Amir, 2022). Moreover, linguistic and cultural differences between English and Arabic increase the complexity of the learning process, particularly in acquiring English grammar and sentence structure (Al-Mansour & Al-Dabbagh, 2022).

Apart from these linguistic obstacles, low motivation and reduced self-confidence are also important factors that impede students' academic writing abilities (Al-Ghamdi et al., 2023). Although many have written on these issues, knowledge of how cultural factors and instructional strategies directly affect the development of academic writing abilities in Saudi students still lags.

By examining the link between language proficiency, cultural influences, and teaching strategies among EFL students at Al-Baha University, this study aims to fill the gaps left by previous research and to support improvements in EFL instruction and curriculum design. It does so by identifying key obstacles and investigating pedagogical interventions that can help Saudi students overcome difficulties in academic writing and excel in their studies.

The following research questions (RQs) investigate Saudi Arabian EFL learners' difficulties in English academic writing and identify the pedagogical approaches they find most helpful in overcoming these challenges.

- 1) What challenges do Saudi EFL undergraduates at Al-Baha University face in academic writing?
- 2) How effective are the current teaching approaches, strategies, and resources in enhancing the academic writing skills of Saudi EFL learners at Al-Baha University?
- 3) How do Saudi EFL learners at Al-Baha University perceive their academic writing challenges?
- 4) What curriculum design and teaching practice improvements could better support their writing development?

2. Literature Review

Academic writing is distinctive because it follows specific conventions and guidelines that differ from other writing styles. It is used in educational and scholarly settings to present ideas, theories, and research findings in a formal and structured manner. Effective academic writing must be clear, concise, logically organized, and supported by credible sources (Al-Mansour, 2015). Factors such as motivation,

self-efficacy, and psychological well-being highlight the importance of life satisfaction and its positive effect on undergraduates' academic performance (Hayee et al., 2021).

Arabic-speaking undergraduates' success in academic writing depends on their ability to articulate, assess, and synthesize words, ideas, and opinions to develop their own academic voice (Al Fadda, 2012). However, writing in English is significantly challenging for non-native English speakers, as it demands strong control over multiple factors simultaneously, including sound knowledge, critical thinking, and original ideas (Anwar & Ahmed, 2016; Nunan, 1989). For Arabic-speaking EFL learners, particularly at Al-Baha University, these challenges highlighted the necessity for specific interventions that emphasize the linguistic, cultural, and cognitive issues hindering students' success in academic writing.

2.1 Previous Studies

A study by Al-Seghayer (2021) identified the challenges Arabic-speaking EFL learners face in academic writing, including limited English vocabulary, grammatical issues, difficulty in organizing their ideas, and effectively integrating sources. Similarly, a case study by Al-Jarf & Al-Amir (2022) emphasized the necessity of support for Arabic-speaking Saudi undergraduates to improve their argumentative skills in English writing. These studies highlighted the need for further contributions to address the issues identified. Moreover, Al-Mansour & Al-Dabbagh (2022) emphasized the role and influence of culture, such as the Arab linguistic tradition and the translation of Arabic literature, on the performance of Arabic-speaking EFL learners in English writing. The study's findings revealed an adverse influence of culture on students' academic writing in English. These studies confirmed that Saudi EFL learners face multiple challenges in English writing and need an effective strategy to address and resolve these issues. Based on these findings, the current study highlights the challenges facing Saudi EFL learners at Al-Baha University and explores specific strategies to help them overcome academic writing issues and improve their practical application.

A study by Al-Ghamdi et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of motivation and self-efficacy among Arabic-speaking undergraduates in English writing. The study found that low motivation and poor self-confidence among non-native English-speaking students create difficulties in developing comprehensible arguments and critical-thinking skills. Further, a recent study by Rehman & Ahmed (2023) highlights the need for intervention through e-portfolios to support EFL students' writing in Saudi Arabia. That study's findings showed a noteworthy improvement in students' writing. The current research builds on these findings by examining motivational self-efficacy and specific ways to address the academic writing issues faced by Arabic EFL learners at Al-Baha University in Saudi Arabia.

2.2 Challenges Arabic-speaking Learners Face in English Academic Writing

Writing accurately in a second language (L2) is known to be complex, challenging, and demanding (Kroll, 1990). Proficient L2 writing, as Alsamadani (2010) pointed out, involves advanced syntactic and semantic processes that are challenging for many non-native students. Rabab'ah and Bulut (2007) identify one such gap, finding that limited English vocabulary knowledge severely hampers Arabic-speaking learners' ability to express themselves in written English. Similarly, Aljuaid (2015) supports this finding, arguing that Arabic students pursuing an English degree often struggle with limited English vocabulary, leaving them unable to express themselves. Furthermore, as with many other Arabic speakers, learners often make glaring errors in English writing because of Arabic sentence structure and configuration. Fareed et al. (2016) noted that translation and back-translation into English most often undermine the composition. Ahmed (2021) proposed conditions for a technology-based approach, arguing that using Google Classroom, for instance, could provide a solution. However, he added that more research is needed on these problems, suggesting far more sophisticated remedies.

A study on Arabic-speaking EFL learners found that undergraduates' challenges in academic writing in English stem from substantial orthographical and structural differences between Arabic and English (Alkodimi & Al-Ahdal, 2021; Kroll et al.). Arabic-speaking students transfer stylistic features of their native language into English, which leads to writing issues. For example, in written work, they often construct lengthy sentences with many "and"s, repeating points to emphasize an argument, with extensive explanation before stating the main idea (Almeahmadi, 2012). While appropriate in Arabic, these tendencies can suppress the clarity and conciseness required in English academic writing.

Alazzawi (2021) identified the importance, for Arabic-speaking learners, of exposure to authentic English-language texts outside the classroom for improved academic writing skills. Limited exposure hinders their ability to develop and refine their academic writing skills, and insufficient awareness of English-speaking environments makes it difficult for them to use appropriate English vocabulary and idiomatic expressions in their written work. A study by Abdul-Rahman (2019) emphasized that Arab learners struggle to acquire vocabulary and use idioms, which negatively affects their fluency and consistency in English writing. These issues arise because Arabic and English have different grammatical structures and rules, and transferring Arabic sentence structure into English writing causes technical errors. However, even Arabic-speaking learners with many years of exposure to English still find academic writing challenging. For instance, Cho (2004) found that Arabic-speaking postgraduate students living in the USA for five years still struggle to express themselves effectively in academic writing.

Arabic-speaking individuals, including Omani undergraduates, encounter difficulties with English grammar in writing, as demonstrated by Atashian & Al-Bahri (2018), who conducted a study involving 200 undergraduates from Oman. The study found that the most common grammatical errors involved punctuation, adverbs, and pronunciation. Similarly, Abdullah (2020) highlighted that Arabic-speaking learners struggle with subject-verb agreement, word order, and article usage; these issues affect the accuracy of students' written work. In addition, Arab learners often find it challenging to organize their thoughts effectively in written English. Alkhawaldeh (2022) stated that

Arab learners typically struggle with proper paragraphing, writing topic sentences, and using a structured argument throughout their writing. Overall, comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and subject-verb agreement are key aspects of academic writing that Arabic-speaking learners find challenging. The study's findings suggest that Arabic-speaking students are particularly careful with their vocabulary choices, especially in writing, and that English writing becomes more difficult as they try to avoid mistakes while using more advanced language.

The present study aims to build on the existing literature on EFL challenges and to contribute to an understanding of context-based interventions for Saudi undergraduate learners. By identifying the academic writing skills of Arabic-speaking undergraduates, this research examines the cultural influences, linguistic proficiency, and instructional methods within the academic writing setting. The current study's findings are expected to address the identified issues facing Arabic-speaking EFL learners in English academic writing by supporting stronger instructional policies and more effective curriculum development.

2.3 Pedagogical Implications

Second Language Acquisition (SLA), along with Interlanguage Theory, Krashen's Input Hypothesis, and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, helps explain the challenges Arabic-speaking EFL learners face. According to Interlanguage Theory, language learners tend to develop a transitional language system that blends elements of their first language—in this case, Arabic—with the target language, English. Krashen's Input Hypothesis holds that language acquisition is achievable only through comprehensible input, which is extremely difficult for Arabic learners to obtain given their limited exposure to academic writing. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory focuses on highly contextualized learning processes and, thus, on how a learner's culture and pedagogy may work against them when attempting to write academically.

Writing has multiple stages: planning, drafting, revising, and editing. According to Flower and Hayes' Cognitive Process Theory, every stage of academic writing relies heavily on cognitive ability. EFL learners whose first language is Arabic tend to face difficulties at all these stages, particularly planning, organizing, translating ideas into text, and editing or revising the material, all of which make academic writing difficult for them.

Sociocultural factors must be considered alongside issues of vocabulary range, grammar, syntax, cohesion, and coherence. Conventional memorization-based learning and specific cultural factors also impede learners' writing skills. This study aims to examine and extend the understanding of these issues through SLA, cognitive, and sociocultural approaches. The findings underline the need for more effective pedagogical techniques to meet the needs of EFL students at Al-Baha University.

3. Methodology

The study applied a sequential explanatory design involving quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Arabic-speaking EFL learners. This mixed-methods approach complemented the quantitative data with qualitative findings, allowing for a more comprehensive interpretation of the results.

3.1 Population and Sampling

The population of this study comprised undergraduate Arabic-speaking Saudi students enrolled at Al-Baha University, a well-regarded institution that teaches EFL in Saudi Arabia. Al-Baha University is located in the southwestern region of Saudi Arabia and provides a relevant context for examining the complexities of EFL education. Students at Al-Baha University engage in academic writing in English as part of their coursework, providing an appropriate context for examining the challenges faced by Arabic-speaking EFL learners; academic writing is a compulsory part of their coursework. The population included male and female students from various academic disciplines who experienced challenges in English academic writing related to cultural, linguistic, and educational factors. These students varied in English proficiency, typically ranging from intermediate to upper-intermediate, based on their academic background and language development.

This study employed simple random sampling to ensure appropriate representation across the target population. For the quantitative phase, 98 undergraduate students were randomly selected to provide unbiased representation across different academic levels and disciplines. For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was used to select five faculty members and 10 undergraduate students with relevant experience and knowledge of academic writing challenges. The undergraduate participants were enrolled in English academic writing courses at Al-Baha University. All participants provided informed consent before taking part in the surveys and interviews, and their confidentiality was maintained throughout the study.

3.2 Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase of this study involved 98 Saudi EFL undergraduate students from Al-Baha University who were selected using simple random sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed by Mustafa, Arbab, and El Sayed (2022). The survey employed a cross-sectional design to assess students' academic writing difficulties across eight questionnaire items. The questionnaire focused on the primary challenges Saudi EFL learners encounter in academic writing and included five-point Likert-scale items, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended questions to capture participants' responses. The Likert scale consisted of five response options: 1 = not difficult at all, 2 = not difficult, 3 = somewhat challenging, 4 = challenging, and 5 = very challenging.

The survey addressed key areas, including students' perceived difficulties in academic writing, the effectiveness of current teaching

strategies and resources, and their suggestions for improvement. It was administered online, with follow-up reminders sent over a two-week period to encourage participation. Participants were instructed to read the guidelines carefully before completing the questionnaire and were given the opportunity to request clarification or assistance when needed.

3.3 Qualitative Phase

The qualitative component of this research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with five educators, including university administrators and faculty members. Student writing samples were also collected as qualitative data to examine specific academic writing difficulties in depth. These samples provide verifiable evidence of the writing problems that instructors and students discussed. The interview guide covered issues such as the specific challenges faced in academic writing, the perceived effectiveness of current support mechanisms, and recommendations for improving teaching practices and curriculum design.

Along with the interviews, students' writing samples were collected and systematically reviewed to identify common academic writing challenges. Each sample was assessed for basic writing skills, grammatical errors, cohesion and coherence, academic vocabulary usage, organization and structure, and critical analysis. The analysis identified specific examples from each writing sample that illustrated the challenges the students faced. These writing samples were examined to identify the specific areas in which students struggled with academic writing and to inform targeted support and instruction. This combined approach of interviews and document analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of the academic writing challenges and support mechanisms at Al-Baha University

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 Quantitative Analysis

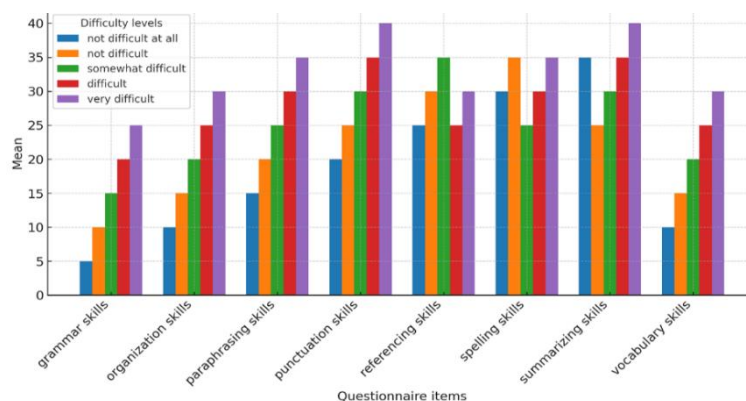


Figure 1. Students had difficulty with the eight academic writing skills in the questionnaire

Figure 1 shows the overall mean responses of participants regarding the difficulty they reported experiencing with the eight academic writing skills featured in the questionnaire. Based on the mean scores, students reported higher levels of difficulty across the academic writing skills than levels of ease. The percentages represent the students' responses on five scales, ranging from difficult to easy. The average rates for the five scales are 16.75%, 20.62%, 27.62%, 13.25%, and 5.38%, respectively. Overall, the results revealed that writing-related difficulties were more prevalent than the absence of difficulties across the academic writing skills investigated among Saudi students.

Table 1. Overview of Self-Assessed Writing Proficiency

Writing Skills	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Content	3.8	0.6
Organization	3.5	0.8
Language Use	3.6	0.7
Conventions	3.7	0.5

Table 1 summarizes the self-assessed writing proficiency of Saudi EFL learners. The results depict the scores and variations in students' confidence across four key writing skills: content, organization, language use, and conventions.

Students rated their proficiency in content highest, with a mean score of 3.8 and a standard deviation of 0.6, indicating relatively consistent confidence in generating meaningful ideas. Their self-assessment of organization was slightly lower, with a mean score of 3.5 and a standard deviation of 0.8, indicating greater variation in their perceived ability to maintain logical and coherent structures in their writing. Language use, encompassing grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, had a mean score of 3.6 and a standard deviation of 0.7, suggesting moderate confidence with some variation among students. Finally, conventions, including adherence to academic norms, had a mean score of 3.7 and the lowest standard deviation of 0.5. These findings highlight areas in which learners perceive strengths and weaknesses and may help guide pedagogical interventions.

Table 2. Percentage of Self-assessed organizational skills and self-assessed vocabulary skills

Levels of Difficulty	Organization Skills (%)	Vocabulary Skills (%)
Very Difficult	15%	20%
Somewhat Difficult	40%	35%
Neutral	25%	25%
Somewhat Easy	15%	15%
Very Easy	5%	5%

Table 2 represents the levels of difficulty experienced by Saudi EFL learners in two important aspects of academic writing: organizational skills and vocabulary skills.

A significant proportion of students reported finding these skills challenging, with 15% rating organizational skills as very difficult and 20% rating vocabulary skills at the same difficulty level. Additionally, 40% of the students rated organizational skills as somewhat difficult, while 35% reported the same for vocabulary skills. At the same time, 25% of students remained neutral. However, 15% of students rated these skills as somewhat easy, while only 5% rated them as very easy. These results indicate that vocabulary skills pose a slightly greater challenge than organizational skills, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to address these difficulties.

4.2 Analysis of Writing Samples

The analysis of student writing samples highlights several common challenges Saudi EFL learners face in academic writing.

4.2.1 Sample 1: Basic Writing Skills: The Importance of Renewable Energy

- Student Writing: "Renewable energy is vital for the environment. It can help to reduce pollution and make the air clean. Solar power and wind power are examples of renewable energy. The government should invest more in renewable energy to save the planet."
- Analysis: This sample shows basic sentence formation and vocabulary but requires greater complexity and depth to improve its overall quality. The student needs assistance in developing ideas and using appropriate academic language. The writing needs greater coherence and smoother transitions between ideas.

4.2.2 Sample 2: Grammatical Errors: The Impact of Social Media on Society

- Student Writing: "Social media has many impacts on society. It changes how people communicate and interact. Many people use social media to share news and information. However, social media also has negative effects, like the spread of false information."
- Analysis: The student demonstrates a basic understanding of the topic and generally uses grammatically correct sentences. However, the writing relies on simple sentence structures and general expressions, such as "many impacts," which could be replaced with more precise academic language. Greater syntactic variety and more specific vocabulary would improve the overall clarity and academic quality of the writing.

4.2.3 Sample 3: Lack of Cohesion and Coherence: The Role of Technology in Education

- Student Writing: "Technology in education is vital. It helps students learn better. Teachers can utilize computers to teach. Online resources are beneficial. Students can quickly find information. Technology also has disadvantages. Sometimes, it can distract students. However, overall it is good."
- Analysis: This student's writing sample lacks cohesion and coherence. Although the student presents several relevant points, the ideas are not sufficiently connected or developed. Clearer transitions between ideas would improve the overall flow and coherence of the writing.

4.2.4 Sample 4: Limited Academic Vocabulary: Globalization and Its Effect

- Student Writing: "Globalization is when countries become more connected. It helps with trade and business. People can purchase products from other countries. It also helps people learn about other cultures. However, globalization can cause challenges like job loss and culture change."
- Analysis: The student uses elementary vocabulary, which limits the depth and complexity of the argument. More advanced academic language, specific examples, and further analysis are needed to support the points made.

4.2.5 Sample 5: Poor Organization and Structure: Climate Change and Its Consequences

- Student Writing: "Climate change is a big problem. It is caused by pollution and deforestation. Animals are affected by climate change. Sea levels are rising. People need to stop using fossil fuels. Governments should make laws to protect the environment."
- Analysis: The student addresses relevant points but needs to improve the organization and use of punctuation. The ideas are presented without a clear introduction, logical progression, or conclusion. Better organization and development of each point would improve the overall coherence of the writing.

4.2.6 Sample 6: Lack of Critical Analysis: Topic: The Benefits and Drawbacks of Online Learning

- Student Writing: "Online learning is good because it is flexible. Students can study at home. It is also cheaper than traditional learning. However, some students may not have good internet access. Also, it can be hard to stay motivated. Overall, online learning has both good and bad points."

- Analysis: While the student identifies both the benefits and drawbacks of online learning, the discussion lacks sufficient critical analysis and depth. The arguments could be strengthened by supporting them with relevant evidence or specific examples. Further development of each point would enhance the overall quality of the writing.

These samples revealed common problems encountered by Saudi EFL students in academic writing, including grammatical errors, lack of coherence, limited vocabulary, poor organization, and insufficient critical analysis. Addressing these problems through targeted support and instruction can enhance students' academic writing abilities.

4.3 Analysis of Faculty Interviews on Saudi EFL Learners' Academic Writing Difficulties

Interviews with Al-Baha University faculty members provide valuable insight into the academic writing difficulties Saudi EFL students face. Faculty responses highlighted several recurring themes, including the impact of language and cultural factors, the effectiveness of current support systems, and the need for better resources and professional development.

4.3.1 Perception of Challenges

Faculty members frequently noted that Saudi EFL learners struggle with essential components of academic writing, such as thesis formulation, coherence, and the proper application of academic language. They ascribed these issues to inadequate exposure to English academic writing requirements and a lack of practice opportunities before university.

"Many students find it difficult to keep consistency and academic tone since they have had little exposure to organized writing techniques before starting university," one faculty member said.

4.3.2 Factors Contributing to Difficulties

Several faculty members acknowledged cultural differences in educational approaches as a significant factor. They explained that the Saudi educational system often emphasizes rote learning over critical thinking and systematic writing, which are vital for academic writing proficiency. Additionally, linguistic differences between Arabic and English, particularly in grammar, composition, and structure, were observed as barriers that complicate EFL learners' writing process.

"The conventional emphasis on rote memorization in Saudi education does not adequately prepare students for the analytical and critical writing expected at the university level," another professor remarked.

4.3.3 Current Support and Resources

Faculty responses reflected mixed perceptions regarding the effectiveness of existing support systems. While some faculty members acknowledged the availability of language laboratories and writing centers, others criticized their underuse and the lack of qualified personnel. Although the existing resources provide some support, further improvements are needed to meet the diverse needs of EFL students.

One faculty member stated, *"While we have writing centers, their use is limited, and most students are unaware of how to access consistent support to improve their writing skills."*

4.3.4 Feedback and Assessment

Faculty members reported providing comprehensive feedback on students' writing assignments, focusing on structural and grammatical errors as well as content coherence. However, they noted that students often struggled to incorporate this feedback effectively, indicating a need for more interactive feedback processes. Likewise, Alshahrani (2022) reported that students persistently face difficulties responding to corrective feedback on their writing.

One teacher stated, *"Although we provide critical feedback, students sometimes struggle to apply it to subsequent writing assignments, suggesting a lack of feedback literacy."*

4.3.5 Suggestions for Improvement

A common recommendation concerned the provision of more comprehensive writing workshops and courses specifically designed for EFL students. Faculty also proposed integrating writing support into the curriculum rather than simply offering it as an additional service. There was also a call for increased collaboration between language support services and academic departments to create a more cohesive support network.

"More embedded writing support within courses would be more effective than stand-alone workshops, which students may not prioritize or attend regularly," said one faculty member.

4.3.6 Professional Development

The interviews highlighted a gap in faculty training related to EFL instruction. Many faculty members desired professional development opportunities focusing on best practices for teaching academic writing to EFL learners. They believed enhanced training would enable them to provide their students with more effective support and feedback.

A faculty member stated, "Regular training on EFL writing pedagogy is essential for us to provide targeted support to students and to comprehend their specific linguistic challenges."

4.3.7 A comparison with Other Institutions' Faculty

Faculty members with experience at other institutions noted that Al-Baha University's challenges were not unique but were exacerbated by a lack of institutional focus on EFL needs. They pointed to successful programs at other universities that could serve as models, such as peer mentoring systems and integrated writing-across-the-curriculum initiatives.

According to one faculty member with experience at other institutions, *"Other institutions have created peer-mentoring and writing-across-the-curriculum initiatives that help integrate writing into all disciplines. Al-Baha University could benefit from similar initiatives."*

4.3.8 Student Engagement

Engagement levels among students varied, with faculty noting that motivation was often tied to the perceived relevance of writing skills to their academic and professional goals. Some faculty suggested that linking writing tasks directly to students' fields of study could enhance engagement and motivation.

One faculty member states, "When the writing assignments are connected to their future career needs or field-specific knowledge, rather than generic assignments, students tend to engage more."

4.3.9 Assessment of Needs

Faculty assessments of students' writing skills generally involve analytical writing tasks and continuous performance evaluation. However, there was a lack of consistency in how these assessments were conducted and used. Faculty members suggested improving assessment tools to adapt their teaching practices to individual student needs.

Another faculty member proposed, "Assessments should be more diagnostic to capture individual student needs at the beginning of each course, helping tailor writing instruction accordingly."

4.4 Long-Term Solutions

For sustainable improvement, the faculty recommended a university-wide commitment to enhancing English language proficiency, starting from earlier educational stages. Long-term strategies included curriculum reforms to embed writing skills development throughout students' academic journeys and increased investment in language support infrastructure.

The faculty interviews underscored the multifaceted nature of the academic writing challenges that Saudi EFL learners at Al-Baha University face. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach involving enhanced support services, targeted professional development for faculty, and systemic curriculum reforms. By adopting these measures, Al-Baha University can better support its EFL learners in achieving academic writing proficiency, ultimately contributing to their academic success and career readiness.

4.5 Reliability Testing

The value of Cronbach's Alpha was .907, indicating statistically strong consistency among the questionnaire items.

4.6 Probability Distribution

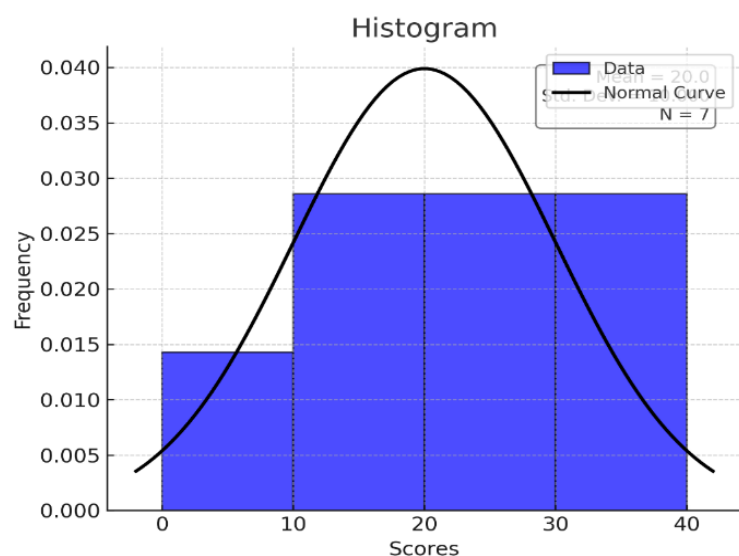


Figure 2. Probability distribution of scores of Saudi EFL students in academic writing

Figure 2 shows the distribution of participants' reported difficulty scores across the eight academic writing skills included in the questionnaire. The results indicate that the reported difficulty scores were distributed around the central range, with participants' responses centering around 19%.

5. Discussion

The results of the current study indicate that Arabic-speaking EFL students face significant challenges in academic English writing. These challenges relate to various aspects of writing, including grammar, sentence structure, vocabulary use, organization, punctuation, coherence, paraphrasing, summarizing, and appropriate referencing. In particular, vocabulary and grammar were identified as among the most problematic areas for students. These challenges were evident in both the quantitative and qualitative findings of the study.

In the quantitative phase, participants reported significant difficulties in vocabulary acquisition, accurate grammatical use, and organizational skills, with more than 60% of respondents rating these areas as “challenging” or “very challenging.” Comparable findings emerged from the qualitative data, where faculty members identified difficulties with fundamental academic writing tasks, such as research writing, thesis development, maintaining coherence in arguments, and using vocabulary appropriately. Faculty members also emphasized the influence of cultural factors, such as rote learning in the Saudi education system, which may hinder the development of students’ critical thinking and analytical writing skills in academic English.

Another significant finding across both phases of the study was a substantial gap in students’ exposure to and experience with English academic writing conventions. Most students reported that their writing difficulties were associated with limited opportunities to practice academic writing outside the classroom. Faculty members expressed similar concerns, emphasizing the limited opportunities for writing practice beyond formal university-level coursework. Furthermore, differences between Arabic and English were identified as a major challenge, particularly differences in sentence structure and syntax, which may hinder effective writing in English.

The current study highlighted several interventions that may help students address their academic writing difficulties. The proposed strategies included providing detailed teacher feedback, engaging students in extensive reading related to their subject areas, encouraging the use of dictionaries, studying model texts, and producing multiple drafts. These strategies may provide appropriate support for developing students’ academic writing and paraphrasing skills and, consequently, enhancing their academic performance.

In summary, these findings highlight the academic writing difficulties experienced by Saudi EFL learners and the need for appropriate interventions to address them. The results also suggest the need for further curriculum development to help students acquire the necessary academic writing skills. Moreover, students should be provided with additional opportunities to improve their writing through constructive feedback. The findings further indicate a need for faculty professional development in EFL academic writing pedagogy. Additional resources should also be provided to help students address their writing difficulties more effectively.

5.1 Qualitative Analysis of Faculty Interviews on Saudi EFL Learners’ Academic Writing Difficulties

Interviews with faculty members across Al-Baha University provided further insight into the writing-skill issues Saudi EFL learners encounter. Faculty highlighted the impact of linguistic and cultural factors, the level of support currently provided, and the need to improve resources and professional development as significant obstacles to academic writing. Faculty noted that Saudi EFL learners’ academic writing skills in research writing, coherence, and vocabulary use are limited, resulting from insufficient practice aligned with English writing standards and a lack of opportunities to practice before postgraduate-level study.

These faculty members identified cultural differences in teaching and learning as one of the primary determinants of students’ writing abilities. Education in Saudi Arabia has traditionally emphasized rote learning, which lacks the critical-thinking elements associated with analytical writing and has impeded the development of academic writing competencies. In addition, marked linguistic differences between Arabic and English, especially in syntax, grammar, and sentence structure, were major factors that made it difficult for EFL learners to write effectively.

Faculty responses also revealed mixed opinions about the effectiveness of current support systems. Some acknowledged the availability of writing centers and language labs, while others criticized these resources for being inadequately staffed. Overall, opinions were mixed: some found the existing resources helpful, while others felt more support was needed to address EFL learners’ needs effectively.

Faculty members also discussed the consequences of feedback and assessment, noting that students often struggled to receive appropriate feedback on their writing. Faculty suggested that more interactive and iterative feedback is needed to help students improve their writing skills.

Faculty members strongly recommended more comprehensive writing workshops and courses that specifically address the needs of EFL students. They also suggested greater integration of writing support into the curriculum, rather than treating it as an add-on service, and called for more collaboration between language support services and academic departments to create a more cohesive support network.

Moreover, many faculty members expressed a need for professional development opportunities to enhance and update their skills in teaching academic writing to EFL students. They suggested that enhanced training would enable them to provide more effective support and feedback. Faculty members with experience at other institutions observed that while the challenges at Al-Baha University were not different from those elsewhere, they were worsening due to a lack of institutional attention to EFL needs. They pointed to successful programs at other universities, such as peer mentoring systems and integrated writing-across-the-curriculum initiatives, as potential models for Al-Baha University.

6. Conclusions

Saudi undergraduate EFL students face several challenges in academic writing in English. The main areas of difficulty include (i)

vocabulary, (ii) English grammatical structures, (iii) reading comprehension, (iv) summarizing, and (v) paraphrasing. The pedagogical strategies that participants reported as most helpful in addressing these difficulties included (i) receiving both specific and general feedback from teachers, (ii) engaging in extensive reading on relevant topics, (iii) using dictionaries, (iv) studying writing models, and (v) producing multiple drafts.

Saudi undergraduate EFL students encounter academic writing challenges arising from a combination of linguistic, cultural, and educational factors. Language proficiency remains a significant concern, particularly in relation to vocabulary, grammar, and other aspects of academic writing. Differences between Arabic and English academic writing conventions may further complicate students' adaptation to English academic writing practices. Furthermore, educational settings may not always provide sufficient preparation for the demands of academic writing in English, highlighting the need for additional support. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that combines language instruction, cultural awareness, and academic skills development. Universities and educators should collaborate to develop strategies that address the specific needs of Saudi EFL students, enhance their language proficiency and cross-cultural competence, and provide clear guidance on academic writing practices. Moreover, creating a supportive learning environment that encourages collaboration, feedback, and continuous improvement can contribute to students' overall success in academic writing.

7. Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of this study is its specific context, as the findings focus exclusively on the academic writing difficulties of Arabic-speaking EFL learners at Al-Baha University. Therefore, the findings may reflect the unique sociocultural and educational context of the institution and may not fully represent the experiences of EFL learners at other universities or in other regions of Saudi Arabia. Additionally, the study's reliance on self-reported data from students and faculty members may introduce response bias, as participants may not always accurately assess or articulate their challenges and perceptions. Another limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the research, which captures the difficulties experienced at a particular point in time and may therefore overlook changes or improvements in academic writing skills over time. Furthermore, limited access to diverse data sources, such as longitudinal data on student progress, may restrict the depth of the insights gained from the study.

As Saudi Arabia continues to play a prominent role in the global academic landscape, investing in the academic writing proficiency of undergraduate EFL students can contribute to their academic success and enhance their ability to communicate effectively in international academic contexts. Educators, institutions, and policymakers have an important role in recognizing these challenges and working collaboratively to empower Saudi EFL students to improve their academic writing in English.

Future research should broaden the scope of investigation by including EFL learners from different universities and regions of Saudi Arabia to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the academic writing difficulties experienced by Saudi undergraduate students. Focus group discussions (FGDs) and study diaries could also provide valuable data on the nature of the challenges these learners face when producing academic writing in English. Additionally, longitudinal research could provide a better understanding of the pedagogical strategies that most effectively support this group of students by comparing the outcomes of different writing-support approaches, such as teacher feedback, extensive reading, dictionary use, studying writing models, and producing multiple drafts, either separately or in various combinations.

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Authors' contributions

I, Saeed Abdullah Alzahrani, was solely responsible for all aspects of this study, including the study design, data collection, data analysis, drafting, and revising of the manuscript. I confirm that I am the only author of this work and that no other individuals contributed to the authorship of this paper.

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I declare that I have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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