

Academic Writing Needs Among ESL Learners in Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Academic writing is indispensable for ESL (English as a Second Language) learners at the undergraduate level, yet it is challenging for many of them. This study explores undergraduate ESL learners' perceptions of academic writing in Arunachal Pradesh. The study findings underscore the acknowledgement of the essential nature of academic writing among the learners and highlight the perceived difficulty in mastering this skill. Furthermore, sub-skills within academic writing pose specific challenges for the learners. In view of these findings, there appears to be a pressing need to enhance the academic writing capabilities of the respondents. To address this need, the paper advocates initiatives to raise awareness about the intricacies of academic writing, with a specific focus on its sub-skills and distinctive features.

Keywords: Academic writing skills, ESL learners' perceptions, Arunachal Pradesh

Introduction

Academic writing is an integral and essential skill in any academic context. It is a formal style of writing used in schools and higher educational institutions, such as colleges and universities, to communicate ideas, disseminate information, and ensure the credibility of one's work for acquiring degrees, among other purposes. Lindemann (1987) rightly pointed out that academic writing serves as a parameter in academic contexts to measure success, intellectual attainment, and knowledge, functioning as a tool of economic supremacy. Additionally,

academic writing involves a conscious set of thinking processes, representing a continuous activity and a means of engaging in dialogue with others to disseminate ideas and information (Fang 2021; Wilson, 2022). Scholars in writing, such as Emig (1977), Flower and Hayes (1981), and Raimes (1987), have also discussed that writing constitutes a set of thinking processes, a recursive activity, and a non-linear process. Thus, academic writing reflects the ability to both write and think.

In higher education, academic writing is extensively used for educational purposes. Subsequently, ESL learners are exposed to various types of academic writing, including essays, assignments, formal letters, reports, academic tests, research articles, dissertations, etc. Therefore, ESL learners are expected to learn and master the required basic skills, conventions, and features of academic writing as undergraduates. Meeting the requirements of different dimensions, such as linguistic aspects, writing aspects, organisational aspects, and other conventions, makes academic writing complex and challenging for ESL learners. Moreover, learning English in an ESL context also contributes to challenges in academic writing (Negari, 2011; Mohan & Lo, 1985). Irvin rightly said that academic writing is “playing a familiar game with completely new rules” (2010, p. 3).

Despite the complexities and challenges inherent in academic writing, its importance in higher education remains undeniable. Therefore, the present study delves into ESL learners’ perceptions regarding the significance of academic writing at the undergraduate level in Arunachal Pradesh. Furthermore, the study aims to scrutinise ESL learners’ specific academic writing needs.

Literature Review

Several studies have examined ESL learners’ academic writing difficulties or challenges at the undergraduate level across diverse educational contexts and geographical regions, such as China, Kenya, South Africa, and India (e.g. Mwangi, 2017; Xiao & Chen, 2015; Pineteh, 2014; Cai, 2013; Fatima, 2018; Baria, 2019; Shravan, 2018; Sangamitra, 2018; and Jacob, 2015). These studies have identified several academic writing challenges faced by ESL learners that broadly encompass language-related issues, such as grammar, spelling, vocabulary, syntax, and stylistics, which hinder learners’ ability to express ideas clearly and appropriately.

Additionally, structural and organisational difficulties, including coherence, cohesion, logical sequencing, paragraph development, and the use of transitional devices, are emphasised as critical barriers to effective academic writing. Contextual influences also play a significant role in shaping these challenges. For example, social media's informal writing styles have negatively affected the academic writing of South African learners, as noted in Pineteh's (2014) study. Similarly, in India, the interference of regional languages and a reliance on memorisation instead of critical engagement with ideas have impeded the development of academic writing skills (Jacob, 2015; Sangamitra, 2018). The studies reviewed highlight that learners across various contexts recognise the significance of academic writing in their academic and professional pursuits. Considering the inadequacy of existing teaching materials and pedagogical approaches to meet the learners' specific needs, researchers have proposed several strategies, including developing specialised teaching resources, establishing writing development centres within institutions, adopting process-oriented approaches, and using task-based activities. In this regard, Mwangi's (2017) study in Kenya underscores the importance of constructive feedback and creating learner-supportive environments. Sangamitra's (2018) research in India demonstrates the effectiveness of process-based writing approaches in improving students' writing outcomes. Similarly, Shravan (2018) emphasises that raising learners' metacognitive awareness about their writing skills can enhance the teaching and learning process. Jacob (2015) further highlights the importance of designing academic writing courses based on comprehensive needs analysis to align with students' academic goals and proficiency levels. Overall, the studies offer valuable insights into the persistent challenges faced by ESL learners in academic writing and provide practical pedagogical strategies to address them. The emphasis on the need for further research to explore region-specific challenges and solutions is meant to improve ESL learners' academic writing skills with a learner-centred approach that integrates linguistic, structural, and contextual considerations.

As there is currently no specific study on the academic writing needs of undergraduate ESL learners in Arunachal Pradesh, the present study seeks to bridge this research gap.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are multifaceted. Firstly, the research aims to explore the perceptions of academic writing proficiency held by undergraduate ESL learners in Arunachal Pradesh. This exploration is designed to understand the learners' perspectives on their own academic writing abilities. Secondly, the study seeks to assess the extent to which learners acknowledge the essential nature of academic writing, providing insights into the collective awareness of its significance. Additionally, the study delves into the nuanced domain of sub-skills within academic writing, identifying specific challenges ESL learners encounter. Lastly, the study examines learners' preferences regarding the content, instructional methods, and learning materials in an academic writing course, providing valuable insights for course design and pedagogical strategies.

The Survey: Analysis and Discussion

The study employed a quantitative descriptive survey design to explore the undergraduate ESL learners' attitudes towards academic writing and the challenges they encountered. Using purposive sampling, 280 undergraduate learners from 6 government colleges of Arunachal Pradesh were selected for the study. Data collection utilised a survey questionnaire adapted from relevant studies (Cai, 2013; Godhaniya, 2014; Amiri & Puteh, 2017; Shravan, 2018). The questionnaire consisted entirely of closed-ended questions, including three types: selecting relevant options, responding with "Yes," "No," or "Not Sure," and using a five-point Likert scale. It contained six main items, each with multiple sub-questions. The first item asked respondents to identify which groups of learners require academic writing skills. The second explored why academic writing is considered necessary for undergraduate learners. The third assessed how frequently learners encounter difficulties in academic writing, while the fourth examined specific challenges related to language use and writing organisation. The fifth item gauged expectations regarding including various academic writing tasks (e.g., note-taking, essays, research papers) in a course on academic writing. The sixth item sought preferences for teaching methods and materials.

The study is characterised as descriptive and exploratory. Adhering to ethical standards, the study prioritised ethical integrity by informing

respondents about the research and obtaining voluntary consent from all respondents involved. Percentages based on frequency count and mean value were used to analyse the data. The findings are tabulated using a bar chart or a table and are followed by a discussion as presented below:

Figure 1. *Recognition of the Significance of Academic Writing Across Various Categories*

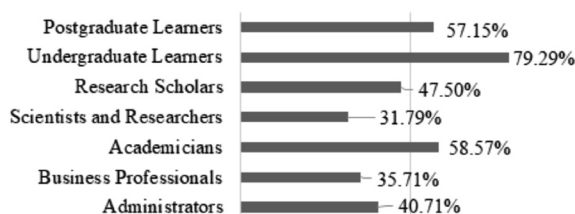


Figure 1 illustrates the perceptions of ESL learners at the undergraduate level regarding the importance and relevance of academic writing. The figure indicates that the learners recognise the relevance of academic writing across various categories, including undergraduate learners, academicians, postgraduate learners, research scholars, administrators, business professionals, scientists and researchers, and others.

A majority of respondents, constituting 79.29%, expressed that academic writing is particularly important for undergraduate learners. This high percentage suggests an awareness of the relevance of academic writing within the context of their current studies. This awareness could be attributed to the existence of an academic writing course at the undergraduate level, contributing to their well-informed perspectives. Additionally, a significant majority of respondents considered academic writing important for academicians (58.57%), postgraduate learners (57.15%) and research scholars (47.5%). This aligns with the understanding that academic writing is crucial in advanced academic pursuits.

However, fewer respondents acknowledged the importance of academic writing for scientists and researchers. This variation in recognition suggests diverse perspectives among undergraduate learners. While academic writing is widely recognised as a significant communication medium, especially in research, less than half of the respondents (31.79%) deemed it relevant for researchers and scientists. This finding raises concerns, as academic writing is an integral skill applicable across

various sectors. The limited acknowledgement of its relevance among researchers and scientists may stem from a lack of awareness about the broader significance of academic writing. Despite the majority agreeing on its relevance for undergraduate learners, there appears to be a gap in understanding its wider application.

In conclusion, while respondents show awareness of the importance of academic writing within the academic context, there is room for enhancing their understanding of its broader relevance across different domains. Addressing this awareness gap could contribute to a more comprehensive appreciation of the significance of academic writing skills beyond the undergraduate level.

Table 1. *ESL Learners’ Perspective on the Role of Academic Writing*

<i>Statements</i>	<i>Responses</i>
Academic writing skills are essential for undergraduate studies	63.93%
Academic writing skills are essential for pursuing postgraduate studies in future	58.93%
Academic writing skills are essential for pursuing doctoral research (PhD) in future	41.79%
Academic writing skills are essential for reporting and publishing research work	49.29%
Academic writing skills are essential for a future professional career	67.86%
Other reasons (please specify)	12.14%

Table 1 illustrates that ESL learners recognise the importance of academic writing courses across various educational levels. According to the survey results, respondents deem the academic writing course as paramount for their future careers. This acknowledgement is rooted in the understanding that effective writing skills are indispensable in virtually every profession, where tasks such as reading, critical thinking, and written communication are integral. Hence, academic writing skills emerge as crucial for success in careers requiring proficiency in these areas. In the specific context of Arunachal Pradesh, where various recruitment examinations, including the prestigious civil services, necessitate writing skills, the importance of academic writing courses is underscored.

The respondents agree on the significance of academic writing courses in ensuring success during undergraduate studies. The imperative for academic writing courses becomes evident in various writing tasks in undergraduate studies, such as essays, reports, assignments, etc. In essence, the data from Table 1 highlights the respondents' recognition of the pivotal role that academic writing courses play in shaping their professional careers.

The majority of respondents acknowledge the significance of academic writing courses for postgraduate studies. In advanced academic pursuits, good writing skills are imperative. However, a notable number of respondents do not perceive academic writing courses as crucial for doctoral research and advanced research work. This perspective may stem from the expectation that individuals should have already acquired a comprehensive understanding of both basic and advanced forms of academic writing during their undergraduate and postgraduate studies. These findings underscore the varying perceptions regarding the necessity of academic writing courses at different stages of education and career progression.

Figure 2. Frequency of Difficulty in Academic Writing

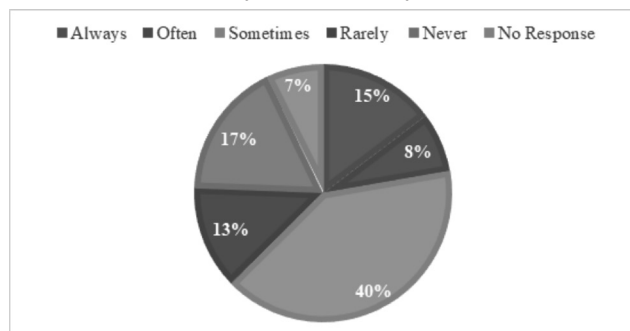


Figure 2 shows the frequency of difficulty faced in academic writing and provides valuable insights into the challenges experienced by the respondents. As presented in Figure 2, 14.64 % of respondents indicate that they consistently face challenges in academic writing. 7.50 % report facing difficulties often. This suggests a notable portion of respondents experiencing persistent difficulties, pointing to the potential areas of concern. The majority of the respondents (40.17%) felt that they sometimes face problems in academic writing. This suggests that a substantial portion of respondents encounter challenges intermittently,

highlighting the prevalent nature of the issue. On the other hand, 12.86% rarely face difficulties, and 17.14% of respondents assert that they never face difficulty in academic writing and feel confident in their writing abilities. From the analysis, it can be inferred that most of the respondents are not comfortable with academic writing, indicating a widespread need for support or interventions.

Tables 2 and 3 present an overview of perceived academic writing needs among ESL learners at the undergraduate level in Arunachal Pradesh. Respondents were asked to indicate the frequency of difficulties encountered in various sub-skills of academic writing. Responses were encoded as follows: 1 for “Never,” 2 for “Rarely,” 3 for “Sometimes,” 4 for “Often,” and 5 for “Always.” Consequently, a mean value exceeding 3 suggests that learners frequently encounter difficulties in the specified sub-skills, while a mean value below 3 indicates infrequent challenges in those areas.

Table 2. *Academic Writing Needs of ESL Learners: Language and Mechanics*

<i>Language</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Using appropriate words and phrases	3.37
Using correct spelling	2.87
Following grammar accurately	3.52
Using correct punctuation	3.24
Using correct sentence structures	3.33

Table 2 highlights that learners frequently encounter challenges in the language aspect of academic writing, specifically in using appropriate words and phrases, following grammar accurately, using correct punctuation, and constructing correct sentence structures. Although spelling appears to be a relatively minor concern, addressing this area can contribute significantly to overall writing refinement. The data indicates that grammar is perceived as the most challenging sub-skill in academic writing. This difficulty may stem from the predominant focus on grammar in the teaching and learning of English writing. In educational institutions, English language components are often taught using a product approach, emphasising writing as imitation rather than fostering a communicative process in teaching writing due to time constraints. Additionally, native language interference could contribute to this challenge, as languages in the Tibeto-Burman and Tai Kadai

language families, prevalent in Arunachal Pradesh, have grammatical structures differing from English. In Arunachal Pradesh, English is taught as a subject rather than a language in government schools and colleges, resulting in less emphasis on language skills.

Table 3. *Academic Writing Needs of ESL Learners: Writing and Organization*

<i>Writing and Organisation</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Writing an introduction/ introductory paragraph	2.81
Expressing what you want to say clearly	3.23
Developing ideas into paragraphs	3.12
Organising paragraphs	2.95
Writing a conclusion/concluding paragraph	3.02
Developing ideas logically	3.07
Linking sentences	3.09
Using transitional words and phrases (e.g., moreover, nevertheless, etc.)	3.02
Revising your writing	2.67
Summarising	2.98
Paraphrasing	2.97
Using quotations (quoting from different authors and sources)	3.35

Table 3 outlines the challenges learners face in writing and organisation skills, specifically focusing on paragraph construction, logical sequencing of ideas, transitional words, and quotations. The data indicates that respondents found using quotations from various authors and sources particularly challenging, possibly due to a lack of exposure to referencing styles, which is not prevalent at the undergraduate level. Additionally, the table illustrates that respondents frequently struggle to link sentences, use transitional words and phrases, develop ideas logically, form paragraphs, articulate thoughts clearly, and craft conclusions. Remarkably, the least problematic sub-skill is revision, as respondents find it manageable due to its reliance on existing structures or information, facilitating easier editing and deletion of their writing. The challenges identified in the writing and organisational sub-skills suggest a potential need for more awareness of academic writing conventions and features. Consequently, respondents may benefit from support in various sub-skills of academic writing, whether related to language or the writing and organisational components.

Table 4. *Expectations from an Academic Writing Course*

<i>Statements</i>	<i>Percentage</i>		
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Not Sure</i>
Writing notes from a lecture	68.5%	7.86%	23.57%
Writing notes from books	66.43%	11.07%	22.5%
Writing long/essay-type answers	49.28%	19.28%	31.43%
Writing term papers and assignments	70%	7.14%	22.86%
Writing field and lab reports	27.86%	26.07%	46.07%
Writing descriptive essays	47.14%	12.14%	40.71%
Writing argumentative essays	34.64%	24.29%	41.07%
Writing narrative essays	46.43%	15.36%	38.21%
Writing reviews of books	59.64%	11.79%	28.57%
Writing academic articles/ research papers	57.86%	10%	32.14%
Writing case studies	48.93%	17.14%	33.93%
Writing research proposal	41.79%	13.21%	45%
Writing thesis/dissertation	21.43%	14.64%	63.93%

Table 4 presents students’ expectations regarding the inclusion of various academic writing tasks in an academic writing course. The data shows that 70% of students expect to learn how to write term papers and assignments, followed closely by 68.5% expecting to write notes from lectures. These tasks are likely prioritised because of the grading system, which places significant emphasis on the quality of term papers and assignments, as well as the importance of summarising lectures—a vital skill for students. In contrast, the least prioritised tasks are writing a thesis/dissertation and writing field and lab reports. The lower priority given to thesis/dissertation writing may reflect a lack of awareness among students about research activities. Additionally, the minimal number of students from lab-oriented and field-based disciplines could explain the limited interest in writing field and lab reports.

Table 5. *Preferred Teaching-Learning Activities and Materials*

	<i>Mean</i>
Activities	
Lectures given by teachers	3.89

Teacher-student interaction and discussion	3.94
Writing tasks	3.67
Discussion on the topic before the writing task	3.78
Pair work	3.15
Group work	2.51
Individual work	3.43
Peer-evaluation	2.93
Teacher's evaluation	3.71
Self-evaluation	3.29
Use of teaching-learning aids and technological tools	3.82
Use of social media sites, such as blogs, as teaching media	3.12
Grammar exercises and explanation of the grammatical rules	3.82
Vocabulary exercises with essential academic word lists	3.62
Materials	
A textbook	3.98
A workbook	3.52
Any other reading material(s) provided by the teacher	3.67
Extra exercises (which are not there in the textbook or workbook)	3.13

Table 5 shows the respondents' preferences for various teaching activities and materials in an academic writing course, rated on a scale from Least Preferred to Most Preferred (1 to 5). The most preferred activity is teacher-student interaction and discussion, which received the highest mean score of 3.94. In contrast, group work (2.51) and peer evaluation (2.93) are the least preferred activities. Despite these lower scores, most of the 12 teaching-learning activities were generally favoured by the students, except for group work and peer evaluation. As for teaching materials, a textbook emerged as the most preferred, though all three options (textbook, workbook, and other materials) were favoured to some extent. The preference for textbooks may be attributed to their central role in school education, as they provide well-organised and structured content aligned with the syllabus and curriculum.

The analysis of challenges in academic writing, as depicted in Figure 2 and Tables 2 and 3, reveals significant difficulties in both language-related and organisational sub-skills. The frequent struggles with grammar, punctuation, and sentence construction highlight the need for

targeted interventions to improve language proficiency. The findings also indicate challenges in logical sequencing, the use of transitional phrases, and incorporating quotations, suggesting a lack of exposure to academic conventions and referencing styles. The influence of first language interference and the prevalent product-oriented teaching approach further exacerbate these difficulties, particularly in a multilingual context like Arunachal Pradesh.

Furthermore, the study identifies notable gaps in students' expectations regarding academic writing tasks and course activities. While tasks such as term papers and lecture notes are highly prioritised, thesis writing and field reports receive minimal attention, reflecting limited awareness of their importance in research-oriented careers. Similarly, preferences for teacher-student interaction over group work and peer evaluation suggest a reliance on guided instruction rather than collaborative learning. This preference could stem from students' familiarity with traditional instructional methods, highlighting an opportunity to introduce diverse pedagogical strategies to enhance engagement.

Conclusion

The study underscores the importance of tailored academic writing courses that address the unique challenges and expectations of undergraduate ESL learners. By emphasising the universal relevance of academic writing and offering targeted support, educational institutions can equip learners with the skills needed to succeed academically and professionally. The findings highlight key areas requiring pedagogical attention, including language proficiency, organisational skills, grammar, sentence construction, logical sequencing, and referencing conventions. Addressing these challenges necessitates a shift from product-oriented to process-oriented teaching approaches, fostering a communicative and participatory learning environment. Incorporating collaborative activities, such as peer evaluation and group work, can promote critical thinking and encourage shared learning experiences. Additionally, exposing students to advanced writing tasks and research-oriented activities can better prepare them for the multifaceted demands of academia and the professional world.

In conclusion, the study reaffirms the critical role of academic writing skills in shaping academic achievement and professional growth,

underscoring the need for sustained efforts to support learners in this essential area. Moreover, balancing traditional and innovative teaching methods is crucial to accommodating diverse learner needs and preferences. This approach is particularly significant in linguistically diverse regions like Arunachal Pradesh, where academic writing skills can serve as a vital bridge to broader opportunities and success.

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