

## ACADEMIC WRITING LEARNING SKILLS: TEACHING FACTS AND EXPECTED REMDIES

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### ABSTRACT

Writing as a skill still occupy an important space in the EFL teaching and learning spheres in general and in university curriculum in particular. Many reasons have worked together to make writing a skill that an important part of the students' success in English language learning is a based on its mastery. Yet, EFL university students still face real challenges to manage the writing skill appropriately students claim that they still have difficulties to overcome major writing problems such as the lack of appropriate vocabulary and the insufficient knowledge of the English language writing conventions. Yet, students' problems would seem more serious when dealing with academic writing aspects. At the late stage of the Master graduation, students attend academic writing course where they need to learn the basic skills of critical essay writing. It is at such a level of Master studies that teachers of the critical essay module are aroused by the complicated fact of the students' mastery to the critical writing essay and analytical reasoning skills .The present paper aims at investigating the academic writing challenges of Master students at Chlef University and the possible strategies for addressing such academic and critical writing challenges. The study relied on an online survey submitted in the form of a Likert scale questionnaire to 27 Master students from Chlef University. Results revealed that Most students' major problems are their poor sentence structure , their lack of mastery of academic writing conventions and their weak ability to analyze writing topics.

**Keywords :** Academic writing, Critical thinking, English language, Writing problems

### Introduction

Learning how to write and read became vital for many people in the growing industrialized modern societies (Harmer, 2014).After It has become a feature of literacy for adults and children, writing has given literate citizens more advantage over those who are deprived of the ability to read and write. In the education context, students' success and advancement throughout their learning career often relies on the students' assessment to their writing proficiency through exams and tests. Teachers in general and foreign language teachers in particular, therefore, work relentlessly to develop the students 'writing skill in general and their academic writing skills in particular. This is in the time when students often need to write essays , dissertations and exams and that is what makes writing a demanding skill students face. In the process of academic writing learning, students are asked to manage academic conventions, the language and the text type or genre. Numerous studies has been made in the world academic spheres on the major problems that students face to write according to academic norms and conventions. Yet; more focus was the international students' academic writing development who need to maximize their academic writing potential in English for their degree courses (Bailey, 2011).The current paper scope will be limited to depict Algerian university students' major problems they generally face with academic writing.

### What is Academic Writing?

Although it is not easy to provide an exact definition to academic writing, there has been attempts to define academic writing under more than one approach. In early approaches, academic writing meant simply moving from paragraph to paragraph writing in a more controlled process (Gulkat, 2004). Starting from the 60's and on , more emphasis was to be on the sentence structure .Later on , researchers started to draw attention to the main differences that would exist between different cultures. People may have different reasoning because they belong to different cultures and no human no individual's mind can be independent from its culture (Shweder, 1991). Thus, beside linguistic problems, Cultural differences are another challenge for ESL learners. For students, academic writing means essentially the type of writing that they need to do for university courses including assignments, reports, essays and dissertations. Students' attention should be drawn to the fact that writing for university study purposes is different from writing in previous secondary and middle school. Through academic writing, students have to be trained on topics of academic community interest where they discuss thoughts and findings with logic and evidence. The chosen topics which are to be dealt with in the already mentioned assignments address a specific type of audience .i.e. 'target reader' (Mennens MSc & Wilkinson MSc, 2002).

### Features of Academic Writing

Writing as a skill serves for a varied communicative purposes which correspond to different contexts throughout life. Being involved in the different interpersonal settings includes expressing feelings and thoughts which do not follow a structure of punctuation and grammar. Similarly, in these kind of settings it is acceptable to use colloquial expressions, abbreviations and time buying expressions such as ‘that’s cool’, ‘by the way’, ‘mmm ...it’s alright’. However in academic writing, students are asked to respect punctuation rules and grammar. In academic essay writing, students are asked to comment and analyze given topics using evidence from other sources. Thus, the students’ type of writing should be of interest to other students and scholars .However, writing from other texts remains a real challenge for most students to overcome speck (2001).Along with that , students to present their reasoning in clear and well-structured manner. Eventually students need to learn that each type of assignment has a different format (essay, report, dissertation, project, etc.) and thus requires a different way of analysis and discussion that should lead to a logical conclusion. Besides being clear , accurate and logical in organization, academic writing should « *use authentic texts and examples from a wide range of disciplines* » (Bailey , ibid.)

### The Importance of Academic Skills’ Development

Unlike oral communication, in written forms of communication, people lack non –verbal support (body language, voice, gestures, etc.).Thus, writers need to seek other techniques to make their message understandable by the target readers. Student, therefore, are asked to develop sound writing skills to help readers understand what they really want to say to achieve their university success in the end .Such development of good writing skills may cause a lot stress for university students especially while doing their assignments and exams, yet, in doing so, they will not only be awarded by better grades but they will develop effective writing skills for university different writing tasks and future research career later on. Furthermore, through academic writing mastery and development, student manage to demonstrate their own understanding of given topics, their ability to argue, to analyze using reason and logic. With regard to the purpose of academic writing, Bailey (2011) lists the following common reasons that are clear for writers:

- ✓ *to report on a piece of research the writer has conducted*
- ✓ *to answer a question the writer has been given or chosen*
- ✓ *to discuss a subject of common interest and give the writer’s view*
- ✓ *to synthesis research done by others on a topic*

Developing the students’ academic writing potential boost also their ability in improving other relevant skills such as reading and note-taking , critical thinking and analysis, organizing ideas and finally communicating effectively with a reader.

### What to Consider in Writing an Academic Paper?

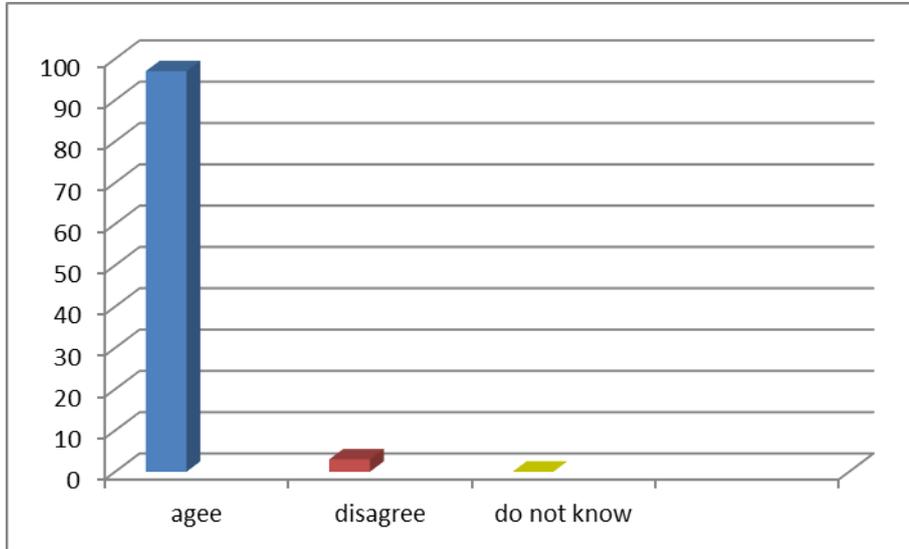
Students need to be aware that academic writing is a writing that is done by a scholar to another scholar. Hence, they need to take important aspects into consideration. When sitting down to write their academic paper, students need first to check what they know about their topic. For instance, if asked to comment on one of Hemingway’s novels, students should be familiar with Hemingway’s other novels so that they can understand what themes are important to him and his work. Moreover, they also need to be aware of different critical on Hemingway’s type of writing in general. Students also should be highly aware to their target reader who is the audience while sitting to draft their academic paper. Yet, before the writer’s perception of the audience, students should first determine their position to the topic. This includes where the student is going to take stand on a topic (whether to be for or against) and from which perspective is he or she going to tackle the topic (from a feminist view, for example). Naturally, students are to take care of their style and tone along the critical and the analytical process of any chosen topic. The tone should be inviting to the reader with the use of concise sentences and exact terminology. Least and not last, structuring the paper should be of a paramount concern for students who beside mastering the essay structure, for instance, of introduction with a thesis statement ,main body and conclusion, they should be trained by their professors on the several structures of research papers. This may include the different models for argument such as: compare and contrast, cause and effect, and so on.

### Methodology

Quantitative data for this study was collected from a group of twenty seven Master students through an online survey questionnaire. It sought to identify students ‘perspectives and attitudes to academic writing by giving

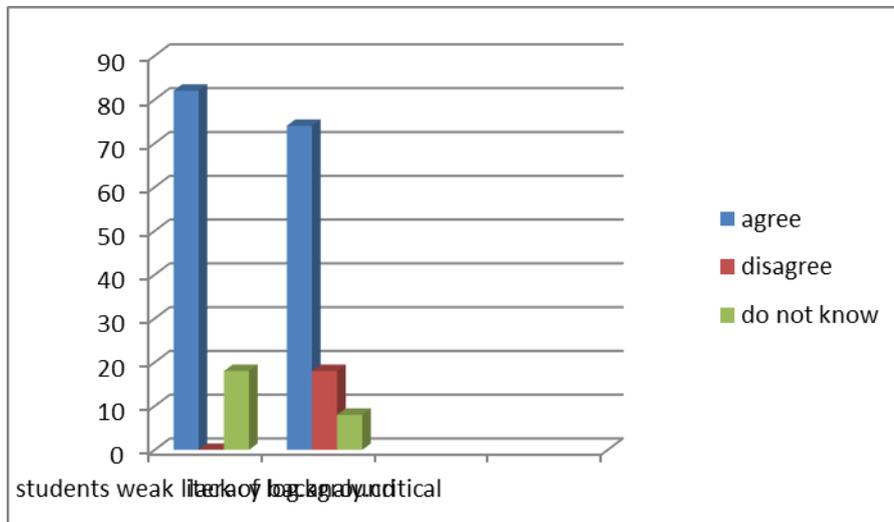
them a 10 -item questionnaire. Some of the items in the questionnaire were designed for a Likert scale response using a three-interval scale of “agree”, “disagree”, “Don’t know”. The other questions were grouped under MCQ type using three interval scale of ‘all’, ‘few’ and ‘most’.

The following figures display clearly the collected data:



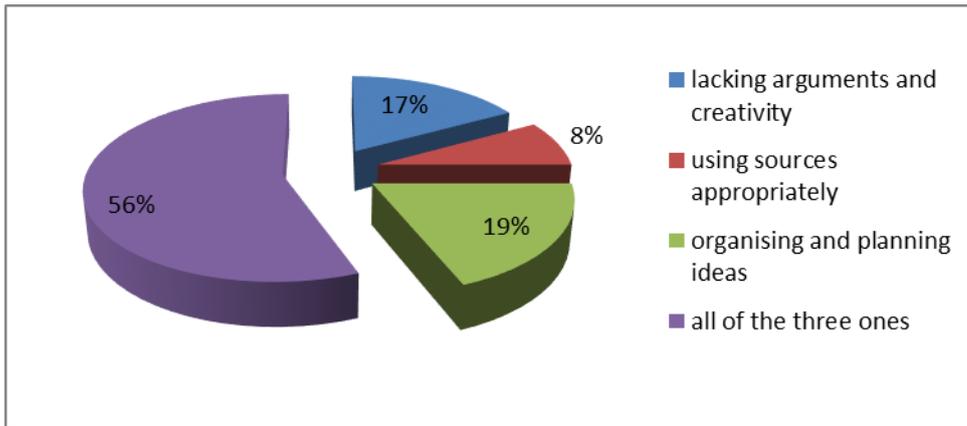
**Fig 1: Students’ Difficulties with Academic Writing**

As expected most students agree on the fact that the academic writing skills monitoring is becoming more and more challenging task that require serious remedial support from the part of the teachers in concern. The succeeding figures will illustrate the major academic writing problems that the student in Chlef are facing.



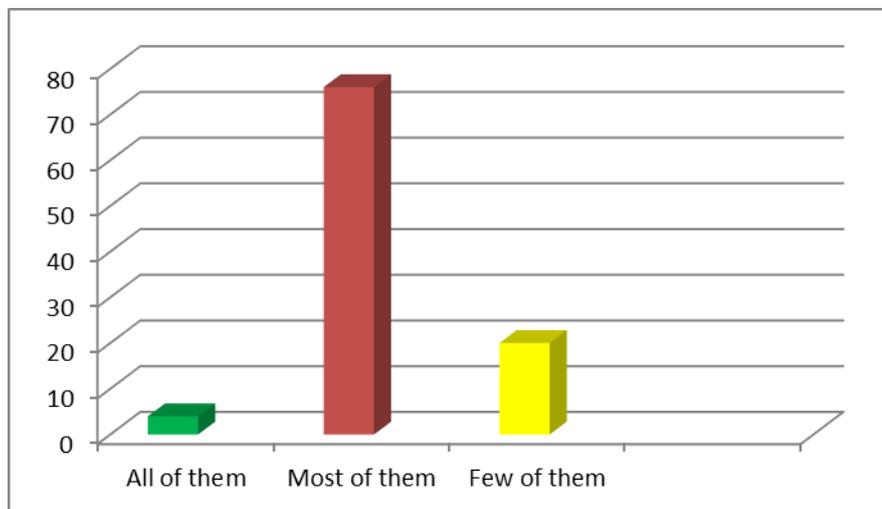
**Fig 2: Students’ basic linguistic and analytical problems**

Beside their poor sentence skill in the mechanics, sentence structure and spelling mistakes, two other major problems that students face while dealing with academic writing are their weakness in the literacy background and their lack of analytical and logical thinking. The weak literacy background involves their inability to manage economic language, conciseness and clarity. This is due to the fact that students have been used to write in a personal way where they rely on feeling over evidence, thus, their language appear unpacked and even redundant. Students also lack the skills of analyzing and reasoning or what is the critical thinking skill. Both problems require much care and consideration in the writing course syllabus where teachers should seek appropriate remedies to the such a fact.



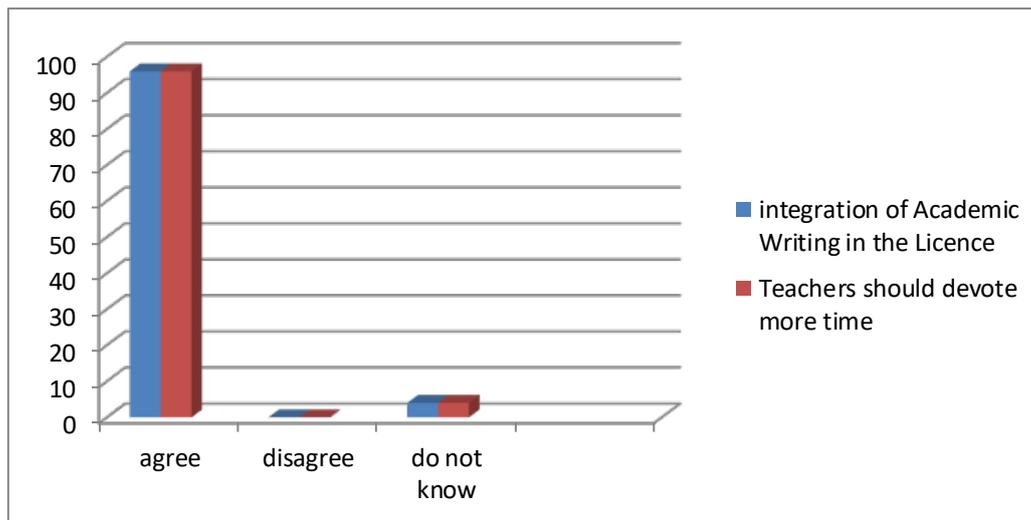
**Fig 3 : Lack of advanced academic writing standards**

Figure 3 shows more important part of students’ problems .More than half of the students in the study admit that they lack the basic skills of advanced academic writing. This involves mainly the lack of arguments and creativity (17%), the citation techniques (8%) and the organization and the planning of ideas (19%). As being explained in Figure 2, the past writing habits which were mainly envisaged descriptive and narrative functions did not allow the development of the students’ critical thinking. It is high time that students should not be involved in any type of personal writing and should receive instead more training on academic writing. This involves mainly learning about the different structures of the academic essays, for instance, the different sections with their main components of each essay, the style and the register. Most importantly, moving from personal response to analytical writing goes mainly through the varied stages such as learning techniques of summarizing, evaluating, analyzing and synthesizing.



**Fig 4: Students’ Lack of confidence in their judgement**

Choosing an appropriate topic, contemplating the audience, considering one’s position are all important steps in the process of an academic paper drafting. Yet, students need also to back up their opinions with facts and evidence. This means that whenever students make a judgement about something in academic writing, they need to support their opinion by linking it to what a published author has written about this issue. Indeed, Citing the source that support one ‘is claim is the central issue in academic writing since it shows that the student has read the relevant literature and has succeeded to integrate it appropriately in his or her work. However, as depicted in Figure 4, students in the current study admit that they lack confidence in the value of their judgement and the strength of their evidence.



**Fig 5: Need to devote more time and focus for Academic Writing**

As the students' university success depends heavily on his or her monitoring to academic writing, students agree and confirm their urgent need to develop their academic writing skills. Such a need emerged unfortunately as a response to students' awareness of their weakness in the mastery of such a skill. Thus, as shown in Figure 5, students wished to see teachers devote more time to train them on the academic writing different skills and also aimed to integrate it as a course right from the undergraduate level.

To sum up, the study findings showed that the students are facing real difficulties to achieve a full mastery of the academic writing skills. Time and again, students are expecting much effort from the part of their teachers in charge of the writing course to seek appropriate strategies to help them develop their writing skill.

### Conclusion

Writing academically is a difficult process that requires much training time and effort. In managing this process, students need to overcome certain challenges that are relevant to the content, the language, the structure and to the organization of the academic writing paper pattern. As Writing is the heart of academic life and because good writing makes a good student, offers professional credentials and helps in the advancement in one's career later on, students are required to do more training to develop their academic writing. This involves minding the conventional rules of grammar and mechanics, using formal language with more precise vocabulary and improving their ability in demonstrating their analytical and critical thinking. For all these reasons, teachers should assume their roles to guide their students to a real understanding of academic writing. The present study attempted to depict some of the major academic writing problems Master students in Chlef University are facing. These covers mainly the lack of arguments, the appropriate use of sources and the academic style monitoring. As there might be other writing weaknesses, teachers need to help students determine those weaknesses and work together to find appropriate remedies for the detected writing problems.

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