

# Barriers to Effective Academic Writing in English Among Undergraduate Students in a Saudi Arabian University

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## Abstract

This study looks into the challenges associated with effective writing for academia in English within first-year learners in a Saudi Arabian university. Data from 150 undergraduate students were acquired using a mixed-methods strategy, including surveys, writing evaluations, and semi-structured interviews. The study found that language obstacles ( $\beta = -0.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and cognitive/skills-related obstacles ( $\beta = -0.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were the most significant indicators of poor academic writing ability. Qualitative research revealed that pupils struggled with word variety, concept structure, and reference abilities, and frequently relied significantly on machine translation technologies. Institutional problems including high class sizes and inadequate feedback also led to low performance. The study indicates that tackling these hurdles needs specialized interventions, such as dedicated writing courses, improved feedback processes, and culturally relevant education. These findings have significance for curriculum designers and instructors who want to boost English writing skills in Saudi institutions of higher learning.

**Keywords:** Academic writing, Barriers, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Saudi Arabia, Undergraduate students, Writing performance

## 1. Introduction

English writing for academia is an essential talent for achievement in higher education, especially in nations where English is the primary language of teaching. English has played an increasingly important role in Saudi Arabia over the last two decades, notably in STEM subjects, business, and medicine (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). Despite substantial spending in English language instruction, most Saudi undergraduate students still fail to produce high-quality research that matches global norms (Al Fadda, 2012).

Being able to write well in English is important for a variety of reasons. It enables students to engage in academic debate, create research papers, and collaborate with international academic groups (Hyland, 2019). However, teachers frequently indicate that students' writing has persistent flaws such as restricted vocabulary, grammatical mistakes, and poor concept structure (Alhaysony, 2017). These problems impair students' academic performance and impede their capacity to publish or engage in research initiatives.

The problem is multidimensional, with linguistic, cognitive, institutional, emotional, societal, and technological elements. Linguistically, pupils struggle in vocabulary, grammar, and cohesiveness. Cognitively, they may struggle with summarizing, paraphrasing, and critical thinking. Institutionally, the curriculum frequently fails to highlight academic writing as a unique ability, and large class numbers limit possibilities for personalized feedback (Mahboob, 2017). Furthermore, sociocultural disparities among English and Arabic rhetorical approaches might cause mismatches in organizing and arguments (Kaplan, 1966).

Given these ongoing issues, it is imperative to conduct a thorough examination of the impediments affecting Saudi undergraduates' academic writing ability. The present research addresses this requirement by looking at the perceived and real hurdles that students experience, utilizing qualitative as well as quantitative information. The findings are intended to give practical recommendations for enhancing English academic writing training in Saudi institutions.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Linguistic Barriers*

Linguistic obstacles are among the most well-documented impediments to learning and research using English for Saudi students. Direct translation from Arabic might result in a restricted vocabulary range, grammatical problems, and unsuitable word choice (Al Fadda, 2012). For instance, Saudi EFL learners frequently translate Arabic syntactic patterns to English, leading to run-on sentences and incorrect adjectives (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). Alhaysony (2017) discovered that students typically utilize casual language and avoid complicated terminology, instead favoring high-frequency terms.

Spelling and punctuation are particularly difficult since Arabic writing rules are very different from those of English. Students may skip articles, employ incorrect prepositions, and suffer with subject-verb conjugation (Rabie & Farrah, 2021). Hyland (2019) observes that these micro-level flaws impair the readability and persuasion of academic papers, even when the overall thesis is good.

### *2.2 Cognitive and Skills-Related Barriers*

According to Saudi research, students frequently write essays that lack strong thesis statements or a coherent sequence of ideas. Paraphrasing something and summarizing are especially difficult; students try to copy verbatim from sources to avoid changing meaning, resulting in unintentional plagiarism (Al-Khairi, 2013). Furthermore, unfamiliarity with

reference systems such as APA or MLA results in insufficient or improper referencing, undermining the integrity of academia (Alhaisoni, 2012).

### *2.3 Educational and Institutional Barriers*

The Saudi institution of higher learning has made tremendous progress in increasing English language programs, but fundamental challenges persist. Academic writing is frequently included into standard English classes rather than taught separately (Mahboob, 2017). This strategy reduces writing practice and reduces possibilities for targeted feedback.

Large class numbers, often surpassing 40 pupils, limit the amount of personalized attention instructors can offer (Alrabai, 2014). Furthermore, evaluation procedures usually favor finished written outputs above the writing process, inhibiting iterative drafting and editing (Hyland, 2003). In other circumstances, a discrepancy in curriculum design and actual abilities of learners causes unreasonable expectations (Elyas & Picard, 2010).

### *2.4 Affective Barriers*

Writing fear, low self-confidence, and a lack of motivation are commonly mentioned among Saudi EFL students (Alrabai, 2014). Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was used to show that students' fear of making mistakes often prevents them from trying with more complicated vocabulary or sentence patterns.

Cultural attitudes regarding error correction may enhance writing anxiety, since public identification of errors can be considered face-threatening (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). As a result, students may confine their communication to simpler forms in order to escape criticism, resulting in undeveloped academic writing (Zhang, 2011).

### *2.5 Sociocultural Barriers*

Cultural rhetorical patterns shape the organizing and presentation of ideas. According to Kaplan's (1966) contrastive rhetoric theory, Arabic academic writing has traditionally valued extensive introductions and indirect reasoning, while English academic writing is more straight and succinct. This disparity can make Saudi students' essays look digressive or insufficiently concentrated in terms of Western academic norms (Alzahrani, 2017).

Gender segregation at Saudi institutions may also have an impact on writing-related group activities, especially mixed-method pedagogies like peer review (Elyas & Picard, 2010). Furthermore, some students see academic writing in English as having little significance to their future trajectories, which diminishes incentive to improve their writing abilities (Mahboob, 2017).

### *2.6 Technological Barriers*

While digital tools might help with writing growth, relying too much on them can hinder skill gain. Google Translate, for instance, is popular among Saudi students, although it frequently delivers faulty translations that maintain Arabic grammatical patterns (Lee, 2022). This might result in "translationese," which are difficult phrases that do not follow natural English usage.

Similarly, although grammar checkers like Grammarly can fix surface-level errors, they can additionally hide underlying grammatical knowledge deficiencies (Dikli & Bleyle, 2014). Students who do not engage in conscious reflection risk becoming passive recipients of automatic corrections instead of active learners.

### *2.7 Research Gap*

Although many studies have looked at specific hurdles, few have taken a complete, mixed-methods approach that examines linguistic, cognitive, institutional, emotional, social, and technical problems all at once in the Saudi context. This study bridges the gap by combining quantitative performance information with qualitative observations to create a comprehensive picture of the situation.

## **3. Conceptual Framework**

This study is based on the assumption that written academic achievement in English is impacted by a variety of linguistic, cognitive, organizational, emotional, social, and technological variables. Each of these categories indicates an independent variable which might influence the dependent variable - students' academic writing performance.

The framework is based on Hyland's (2019) concept of second language text, that stresses the relationship among linguistic structures, writer identity, and organizational environment, as well as parts of Flower and Hayes' (1981) mental procedure theory.

Independent Variables:

1. Linguistic barriers include vocabulary variety, grammar, punctuation, and L1 interference.
2. Cognitive/skill barriers include organization, summarizing, paraphrasing, referencing, and critical thinking.
3. Institutional barriers include teaching techniques, feedback, class size, and curriculum design.
4. Anxiety, self-confidence, and motivate are some examples of affective barriers.
5. Sociocultural barriers include rhetorical traditions, gender engagement, and perceived significance.
6. Technological Barriers: Overreliance on machine translation and a lack of academic writing tools.

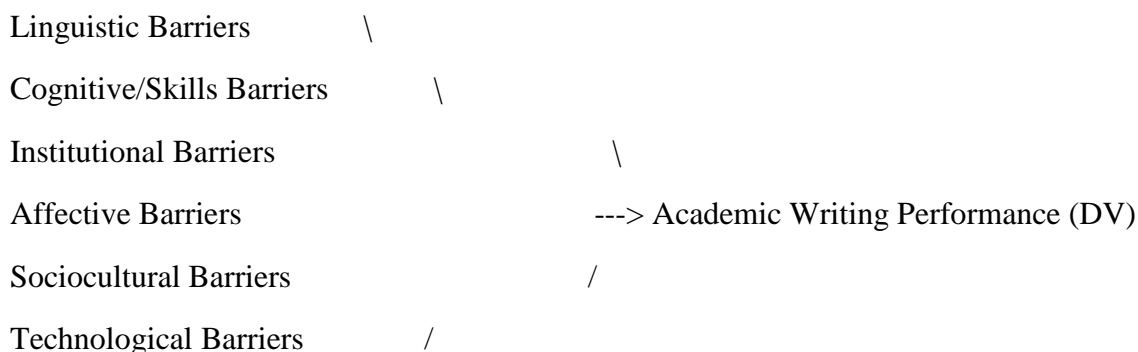
Dependent Variable:

- English academic writing performance is evaluated based on coherence, cohesiveness, grammatical accuracy, lexical richness, and respect to academic standards.

Hypothesized Relationships:

- All independent factors are projected to negatively correlate with academic writing ability.

- Linguistic and cognitive limitations are believed to have the greatest impact.



All independent factors are predicted to have a negative effect upon the dependent variable.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design

This study used a mixed-methods methodology that included quantitative and qualitative methodologies to gain a thorough knowledge of the challenges to good academic writing within Saudi undergraduate students. The quantitative part includes a structured survey and an academic writing exam to assess perceived impediments and writing performance, respectively. The qualitative phase included semi-structured interviews involving selected students and teachers to acquire a better understanding of writing issues and contextual variables.

### 4.2 Participants

The study sample included 150 undergraduate students from diverse departments (engineering, business, sciences, and humanities) from a renowned Saudi institution. Participants were chosen using stratified random selection to maintain balance throughout genders, academic levels (years 1-4), and fields. The mean age was 20.5 years (SD=1.3). Furthermore, 5 English language teachers with expertise in instructing academic writing were specifically chosen for interviews.

### 4.3 Instruments

#### 4.3.1 Questionnaire

A survey that students administered themselves was created to assess students' opinions of impediments to academic writing. It featured 36 items divided into six subscales that corresponded to the theoretical framework: linguistic, cognitive/skills, institutional, affective, sociocultural, and technological constraints. Items were graded on a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was verified via two applied linguistics specialists and pilot tested involving 20 students (Cronbach's alpha = 0.89 across the entire board).

#### 4.3.2 Academic Writing Test

Participants performed a conventional academic writing task that required them to produce a 300-word persuasive paper on a common topic (for example, "The Effects of Technology on Education"). Two qualified raters graded essays based on a rubric that assessed coherence and cohesiveness, vocabulary range, grammatical accuracy, and conformity to academic standards. The reliability between observers was high (Cohen's kappa = 0.85).

#### 4.3.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews with fifteen pupils and 5 professors delved into individual writing issues, coping mechanisms, and instructional obstacles. Interviews lasted around 30 minutes and were recorded on audio with approval.

#### 4.4 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted over four weeks during the spring semester. Questionnaires and writing exams were conducted in classrooms under exam circumstances. Interviews were held in separate rooms to maintain confidentiality. Every participant was given informed consent.

#### 4.5 Data Analysis

##### Quantitative Data

Descriptive statistics described perceived obstacle levels and writing grades. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to analyze the association between obstacles and writing performance. A multiple regression approach was used to assess the predictive value of each obstacle category on writing results while adjusting for demographic factors.

##### Qualitative Data

Thematic analysis was used to evaluate the interview tapes, which were transcribed verbatim. Coding was done inductively, finding major themes about impediments, educational strategies, and student attitudes. Triangulation was performed by comparing topics between students and teachers.

### 5. Results

#### 5.1 Quantitative Findings

##### 5.1.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for perceived barriers and academic writing scores among the 150 participants. Linguistic barriers received the highest average rating ( $M = 3.8$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ), followed by cognitive/skills barriers ( $M = 3.6$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ). The overall mean writing test score was 68.4 out of 100 ( $SD = 11.5$ ), indicating moderate proficiency.

Table 1

Barrier Type	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Linguistic Barriers	3.8	0.6
Cognitive/Skills	3.6	0.7
Institutional Barriers	3.0	0.8
Affective Barriers	3.0	0.9
Sociocultural Barriers	2.8	0.7
Technological Barriers	2,5	0.8
Academic Writing Score	68.4	11.5

### 5.1.2 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients (Table 2) showed significant negative relationships between all barrier categories and writing scores. Linguistic barriers had the strongest correlation ( $r = -0.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ), followed by cognitive/skills ( $r = -0.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and institutional barriers ( $r = -0.38$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Table 2

Barrier Type	Correlation with Writing Score (r)	Significance (p)
Linguistic Barriers	-0.56	< .001
Cognitive/Skills	-0.49	< .001
Institutional Barriers	-0.38	< .01
Affective Barriers	-0.31	< .05
Sociocultural Barriers	-0.27	< .05
Technological Barriers	-0.22	< .05

### 5.1.3 Regression Analysis

A multiple linear regression model including all six barrier types explained 48% of the variance in academic writing performance ( $R^2 = 0.48$ ,  $F(6,143) = 21.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Table 3 shows linguistic ( $\beta = -0.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and cognitive/skills barriers ( $\beta = -0.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were

significant negative predictors, while institutional ( $\beta = -0.16$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and affective barriers ( $\beta = -0.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ) had smaller but significant effects.

Table 3

Predictor	Beta ( $\beta$ )	t-value	p-value
Linguistic Barriers	-0.32	-4.82	< .001
Cognitive/Skills	-0.27	-4.12	< .001
Institutional Barriers	-0.16	-2.31	< .05
Affective Barriers	-0.13	-2.04	< .05
Sociocultural Barriers	-0.09	-1.45	.15
Technological Barriers	-0.07	-1.23	.22

## 5.2 Qualitative Findings

An analysis of interviews involving fifteen pupils and 5 professors found six primary themes about barriers:

### 5.2.1 Vocabulary and Grammar Difficulties

Students frequently expressed poor academic vocabulary and ignorance about grammatical standards. One student stated that:

"I comprehend what I want to say, yet at times I don't find the right phrases, and the sentences sound strange."

### 5.2.2 Challenges With Essay Organization

Both of students and instructors noticed difficulties in arranging writings coherently. A teacher commented:

"A lot of learners fail to write an effective opening and support their arguments coherently."

### 5.2.3 Limited Critical Thinking and Paraphrasing Skills

Several students acknowledged to obtaining sentences from sources since they didn't know how to properly paraphrase. A student explains:

"I am apprehensive about altering the text significantly, as I wish to preserve its meaning and avoid allegations of plagiarism."



#### 5.2.4 Insufficient Feedback and Large Classes

Instructors pointed out that big class numbers impede their capacity to offer thorough feedback:

"With over 40 pupils, I am able to provide broad feedback and rarely have the opportunity to offer individual help."

#### 5.2.5 Writing Anxiety and Motivation Issues

Many pupils mentioned anxiety of making mistakes, as well as poor motivation:

"I don't want to write an essay that's long if I know it'll be filled with errors. It's simpler to write fewer words and keep things simple."

#### 5.2.6 Over-Reliance on Machine Translation

Students commonly acknowledged using Google Translate, but agreed that it often created inappropriate language:

"I use Google Translate to get started, however at times the English is odd, and I have to correct it myself."

### 6. Discussion

The current study aims to identify and examine the impediments to good academic writing in English within undergraduate learners at a Saudi Arabian organization. The mixed-methods approach enabled a deeper comprehension of the linguistic, cognitive, institutional, emotional, social, and technological problems that students encounter.

In line with previous study (Al Fadda, 2012; Alhaysony, 2017), language hurdles appeared as the most important predictor of writing performance. Coherence and academic tone were harmed by a lack of vocabulary and many grammatical problems. This conclusion emphasizes the importance of focused vocabulary development and grammatical support for the Saudi English language curriculum.

Cognitive and skill-related limitations, such as poor essay structure and paraphrasing abilities, also significantly reduced writing quality, corroborating previous research (Al-Khairy, 2013; Alzahrani, 2017). The fear of plagiarism, as well as an absence of critical thinking training, imply that these crucial academic talents require more instructional attention.

Institutional restrictions such as high class numbers and insufficient customized input were consistent with Mahboob (2017) and Alrabai's (2014) findings. These structural obstacles limit students' opportunity to receive constructive critique, which is essential for writing growth. As a result, institutions should explore lowering class numbers or establishing writing centers that give targeted assistance.

Writing anxiety and poor motivation were marginally connected to lower writing scores, matching previous research on psychological barriers in EFL environments (Horwitz et al.,

1986; Alrabai, 2014). Providing a supportive classroom climate and accepting errors as a component of the learning process may assist to relieve these concerns.

While sociocultural obstacles had a less statistical impact, qualitative data revealed that disparities in rhetorical traditions and gendered involvement dynamics affect writing processes. This confirms Kaplan's (1966) contrastive rhetoric concept and emphasizes the importance of culturally sensitive instruction in Saudi universities.

Finally, technical impediments, such as excessive dependence on machine translation technologies, had the least quantifiable influence but were commonly highlighted in interviews. This underscores a rising global worry (Lee, 2022) that, while technology can help with writing, blind reliance may prevent deeper learning. Integrating digital literacy into writing classes may result in more effective tool utilization.

Overall, this study shows the multidimensional character of academic writing issues in Saudi Arabia, necessitating interventions at several levels—linguistic skill development, curricular reform, emotional support, and societal awareness.

## **7. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Using a mixed-methods approach, this study investigated the challenges for effective English in academic writing among undergraduate students at a Saudi Arabian institution. The data indicate that language and cognitive obstacles are the most major barriers to writing performance, followed by institutional constraints, affective problems, culturally disparities, and technology abuse.

To address these concerns, numerous suggestions are proposed:

1. Curriculum Improvement: Create specialized academic writing classes that emphasize vocabulary growth, grammatical accuracy, essay structure, paraphrase, and citation abilities.
2. Smaller groups and writing centers: Minimize instructor-to-student ratios or set up writing centers that offer customized feedback and assistance.
3. Teacher Training: Provide educators with methods for identifying and addressing emotional obstacles including anxiety and motivation.
4. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Teach students about the rhetorical distinctions between English and Arabic academic writing to assist them overcome cross-cultural expectations.
5. Technology Integration: Teach students to utilize translation machines and grammar tools carefully, emphasizing that they support rather than substitute active learning.

The study is not without limits. One significant disadvantage is that the sample was limited to undergraduate students at a particular university. As a consequence, the data may not accurately reflect students' experiences at different institutions and cultural contexts. Another disadvantage is the dependence on self-reported data from surveys, which may be biased

since participants do not always offer precise or thorough replies. Additionally, the study was cross-sectional, capturing the views of students at one point in time rather than investigating how these perceptions change over time.

These restrictions, however, create potential for future research. Increasing the sample to encompass students from different universities and areas might improve the ability to generalize of the findings. Future research might also use longitudinal designs to investigate modifications to academic writing issues over time. Furthermore, integrating quantitative methodologies with qualitative approaches like focus groups, or classroom observations may yield more detailed insights on students' writing practices and the institutional variables that influence them. By addressing these issues, future research might provide a more thorough knowledge of the challenges and supports that influence academic writing in institutions.

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