

EXPLORING CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN ACADEMIC WRITING FOR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY ACROSS DIFFERENT CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

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Abstract

This study explores the challenges encountered by Jordanian EFL undergraduate students in crafting the problem statement section of academic writing. Categorized into academic skills difficulties and language skills difficulties, the research sheds light on the evident lack of essential skills among both undergraduate and postgraduate students for the effective execution of well-structured research articles. Notably, there is a paucity of prior investigations specifically addressing the challenges faced by Jordanian EFL students in conducting research papers, particularly within the problem statement section. To gather data, twenty Jordanian EFL students underwent a comprehensive research writing skills program, focusing on all sections of the research article, with specific attention to the problem statement section. Participants were allotted a month to complete their research papers. Findings indicate a deficiency in academic skills, particularly in providing a comprehensive topic overview and identifying research gaps within existing literature. Additionally, participants exhibited significant grammatical errors in the formulation of the research problem section. This study underscores the demanding nature of scholarly research articles, emphasizing the need for further attention from researchers and educators to address the challenges faced by learners.

Introduction:

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Research, serving as the cornerstone of human progress, underpins all advancements made over time—both theoretical and empirical. Undertaking scholarly research articles, however, poses considerable challenges for postgraduate students and their mentors, involving simultaneous processes such as crafting research instruments, securing suitable samples, data collection, analysis, and the intricate task of writing (Cuevas et al., 2016; Klein & Boscolo, 2016). Beyond referring to pertinent resources, challenges encompass identifying research problems, discerning research gaps within the literature, analyzing study results, and justifying findings. Executing a research paper stands as a formidable academic endeavor, demanding substantial time and effort, as echoed by Alsied and Ibrahim (2017), who highlight the hard work, insight, and motivation needed for successful research. Phothongsunan (2016) categorizes the challenges in conducting scholarly research into discursive difficulties (language-related), non-discursive difficulties, and other hurdles. Language challenges, encompassing poor vocabulary, grammar violations, and referencing issues, as reported by Okamura (2006) and Fahy (2008), present a pervasive difficulty in research writing. Non-discursive challenges, including plagiarism, motivation, and psychological factors (Canagarajah, 2002; Salager, 2008), compound the complexities. These challenges, along with obstacles related to publication and the peer-review process, underscore the demanding nature of research writing (Lonka et al., 2014).

Numerous definitions of research abound. Pandey and Mishra (2015) conceive it as a continuous search for knowledge, while Krause (2020) defines research writing as a process utilizing evidence to persuade readers about a specific subject. Neville (2007) emphasizes the systematic, methodical, and ethical nature of research, portraying it as a means to solve problems and advance knowledge. Writing a research paper is expected to adhere to systematic steps, exemplified by the Hourglass Model (Swales, 1993), with an introduction, body, and discussion sections. The introduction, framed by establishing territory, niche, and occupation, serves as a roadmap for the paper.

Defining the research problem emerges as a pivotal, yet challenging aspect of research writing, with Al Fadda (2012) emphasizing that non-native English speakers, particularly Chinese students, grapple with procedural challenges. Addressing this, Ifeoma (2019) notes that both undergraduate and postgraduate students face difficulty in identifying research problems. The research problem, central to any study, signifies the subject under investigation and sets the stage for the inquiry (Boudah, 2011).

While research challenges have been explored extensively, notably by Alsied and Ibrahim (2017), Cheung (2013), Ifeoma (2019), Pardede (2018), Phothongsunan (2016), and Qasem and Zayid (2019), a significant gap exists regarding the intricacies of the "research problem" section. This study addresses this void by investigating the challenges faced by English foreign language learners (EFL) in writing the research problem section. The inquiry seeks to shed light on the hurdles encountered by undergraduate students and aims to contribute valuable insights into cross-cultural and educational variations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A considerable body of research has investigated the challenges of encountering learners as well as researchers in writing research. Those studies come up with a general consensus that there are lots of persistent difficulties pertinent to research writing, in the sense that some of the difficulties related to the researcher himself; lack of knowledge on research writing, while other difficulties related to lack of resources that help conduct research (Al-Khairi, 2013).

As it has been mentioned previously, previous literature elucidated the sources of difficulties in conducting a research paper, grouped them into two types; first, discursive difficulties which are pertinent to having poor skills of language such as misuse of vocabulary, violating rules of grammar, bad referencing and citation. Second, non-

discursive difficulties, which are related to plagiarism, motivation, emotional and psychological factors. Below are some of the studies that discussed the difficulties encountered by researchers (Negari, 2011).

Cheung (2013) examines the difficulties encountering first-year undergraduates when writing the discussion of the results section. The study also looks into the extent to which the students perceive the difficulties in writing research. The data for the purpose of the study is collected from a 12-week compulsory course entitled ALS 101 Academic Discourse Skills, offered in the first year of the undergraduate program. The researcher interviews eighteen undergraduate students in order to gain insight into the difficulties they experience in writing the discussion section. The results of the study indicate that the English language, including grammar and vocabulary, constitutes a challenge for the participants. The study also found that the students lack the required knowledge for writing the academic discussion section, where some unnecessary details were mentioned, and important findings ignored.

Sharing the same idea of examining lecturers' challenges when writing a research article, Phothongsunan (2016) interviews eighteen academics from two universities in Thailand. The interviews are made primarily to gain information on the issues that face the participants when writing academic papers for publication and how they tackle them. The findings of the study reveal that the participants in the study confront hindrances related to English language use comprising grammar, choice of vocabulary, organization of sentences and tone. The study also reveals that the participants face difficulties related to time constraints and lack of funding.

Komba (2016) explores the obstacles that postgraduate Tanzanian students struggle with when writing theses and dissertations. In addition, the study seeks to find a remedial solution in order to overcome those challenges. For the purpose of the study, the researcher reviews 39 theses and 64 dissertations from three universities in Tanzania. The findings of the study exhibit that half of the postgraduate students, whose theses and dissertations are reviewed, face various difficulties in writing research, including unsuitable presentation of chapters and having poor academic writing skills. The researcher concludes that research method courses taught at universities have to be revised with respect to their content. In line with Claudius, study, Alsied and Ibrahim (2017) examine the problems that Libyan EFL students face in research writing. In addition, the study investigates the attitudes of instructors regarding their students' skills in research. The sample of the study consists of 42 students and 4 instructors at Sebha University. The results of the study display that the participants face difficulties in writing research exhibited in the field of interest, choice of subject, developing a research problem, review of related literature, and reporting the results of the study. The results also reveal that the instructors look at the students' work negatively due to many reasons, including inadequate motivation and library resources, lack of background information and the need to offer more courses related to research writing.

In a newly issued study, Qasem and Zayid (2019) attempt at understanding the problems that encounter students in writing research projects in English. A total of 60 undergraduate students take part in the study at the University of Bisha. With the aim of collecting the needed data, a questionnaire is utilized, and interviews with teachers and students are done. The results of the study indicate that approximately 70% of the participants face English language-related issues. The study uncovers difficulties relevant to determining the research topic, insufficient background information about the topic, poor methodology and lack of references.

The aforementioned studies have clearly indicated various challenges that researchers encounter when carrying out a research study. Those studies reveal that the difficulties are either internal related to the researcher himself, such as lack of academic skills and having a poor command of the English language or external factors resulting from the unavailability of resources needed for research such as inadequacy of funding and resource books and bad internet connection. The vast majority of studies covering the internal challenges of research writing place

emphases on obstacles in writing all sections of the research articles, while an important part, which is the problem statement section, is either totally neglected or swiftly covered. The research problem is the chief topic that a researcher seeks to investigate or the key issue a researcher is concerned to tackle. Thus, this study is implemented to bridge a gap in the literature by highlighting the problem statement section in order to understand the internal difficulties related to academic skills and language use.

METHODOLOGY

This section presents the methods used in collecting the required data to provide satisfactory answers to the research questions. The section includes two sub-sections, namely the sample of the study and instruments of the study.

Design of the Study

Research design is known as “how the researchers plan their studies so that they can obtain answers to the stated research questions using systematic approaches” (Rezai, 2016). The present study adopts a qualitative method for the purpose of answering the research questions, which is best exhibited by analyzing some research papers written by the participants in the study, with special emphasis on the problem statement section.

Sample of the Study

The sample of the study is comprised of twenty Jordanian EFL students pursuing their bachelor degree in English language and translation. The participants were third and fourth-year students enrolled in a research writing course in the summer semester in the academic year 2019/2020. All the participants are non-native speakers of English, and Arabic is their native language so that they are expected to have similar exposure to English, and the variation between them is not sharp.

Instruments of the Study

In collecting the data required for the present study, the participants are instructed to write a research paper about any topic related to language teaching, language learning or translation. Firstly, the participants subjected to a teaching program extended for two months, in that they were introduced to all details relevant to research writing. Strictly speaking, the students are presented with the steps of writing all research sections including title, abstract, introduction, problem statement, research questions, literature review, data collection, data analysis, results and conclusions. The process of writing each section was explained in details in order to get insight into writing a scholarly paper. Secondly, having introduced a particular section of research, the students were instructed to write a sample section within a specified period of time in order to verify the progress they have made. More specifically, when introducing, for instance, the research questions section, all details about this section are presented, such as the characteristics of a good research question and a bad research questions with illustrative examples and then the students were asked to apply what they have learned. Thirdly, after the end of the teaching program, the students were asked to choose a topic related to their major and start writing a research paper. They were given a period of no less than a month to write the paper. The vast majority of the students submitted their research papers on time, and then the papers were read and analyzed carefully by the researcher in order to explore their progress in research writing, especially the research problem section.

RESULTS

This section seeks to reveal the results of the study with reference to the two research questions that the study raised. To begin with, the section reveals the results pertinent to research question one, then displays the results of research question two. The question is formulated as:

Q1- Do Jordanian EFL students confront difficulties related to the lack of academic skills in the writing research problem section?

To answer this research question, the responses of students regarding writing a problem statement section is divided into three categories, according to the three elements of the research problem.

Table 1 *Academic Skills Pertinent to the Research Problem Section*

	Overview of the ProblemJustification of the ProblemResearch Gap		
Percentage of response	35%	60%	5%
Frequency of response	7	12	1

As it has been mentioned previously that the section of the research problem is comprised of three main components so that when a researcher misses one of those components, the research problem will not be identified, determined and addressed well, which results in making the problem too broad, failure to justify the importance of the problem and inability to locate the study within the current literature. Strictly speaking, the lack of academic skills needed to write the research problem leads to serious deficiencies in the research study as a whole and in turn, keeps the research questions partially or totally unanswered. Table 1 above includes the responses of the participants with respect to providing the three main components of a research problem when writing the research problem section, namely, Overview of the problem, Justification of the problem and Research gap. The results indicate that 35% of the participants overviewed and provided background information of the topic to be investigated, with a frequency of 7 participants out of 20. Table 1 also shows that 60% of the participants in the study provided satisfactory justifications for the topic under investigation, with a frequency of 12 out of 20. In addition, Table 1 displays that only 5% of the participants attempted to locate their study within the current studies or to mention the research gap that their study is supposed to bridge. To be more specific, only 1 participant out of 20 tried to fit his study within the present literature. To gain further insight into the results of question one, it is important to consider pie Figure 1 below.

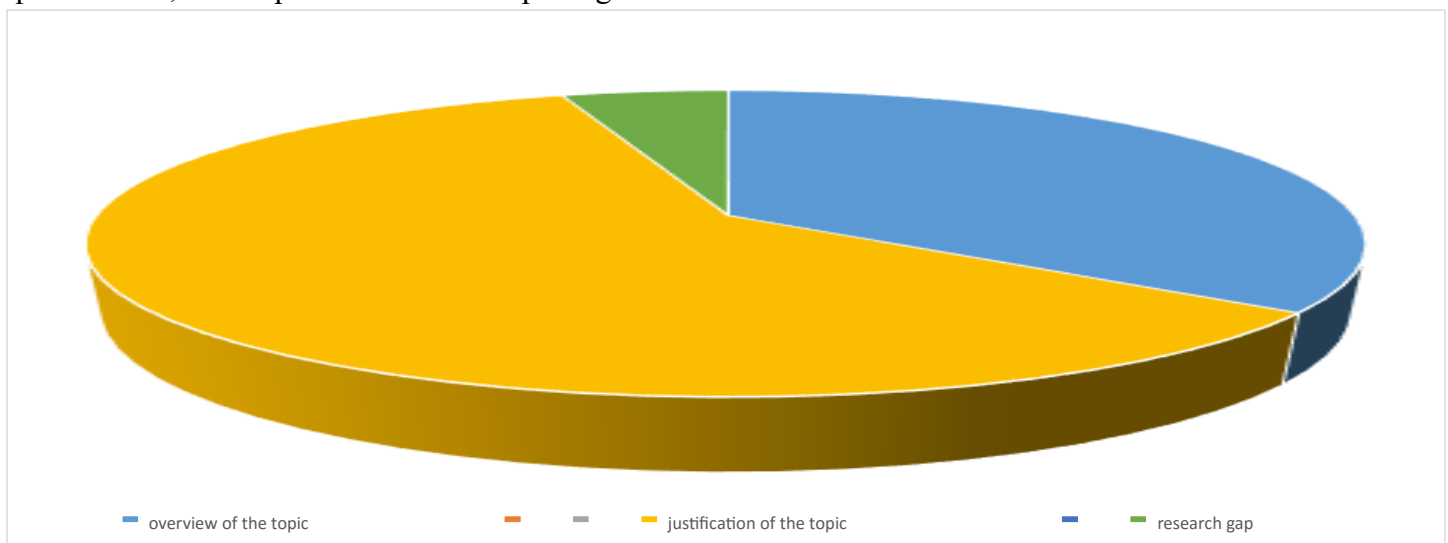


Figure 1 *The Proportion of Academic Skills Pertinent to the Research Problem Section*

It is obvious from Figure 1 that the biggest proportion of the chart is devoted to justification of the topic component, followed by an overview of the topic component, while the smallest proportion of the chart is for the research gap component. Those results indicate that the participants confront serious problems in identifying the research gap when writing the research problem section. The difficulties seem still existing when writing an overview of the topic, while little obstacles encountered by the participants in writing justification of the problem section. To sum up, it is evident that Jordanian EFL students lack the required knowledge of identifying the

research problem in writing a research paper. The results of the research question two are depicted in Table 2 below. Question two is formulated as follows; Q2: Do Jordanian EFL students confront difficulties related to the lack of language skills in the writing research problem section?

To answer this research question, the errors related to language use committed by the participants are divided into two categories, namely grammatical errors and semantic errors. Grammatical errors include error relevant to the use of tense, order of words, agreement and determiners system. Semantic errors comprise errors pertinent to the choice and meaning of words and bigger units like phrases and clauses. Table 2 below depicts the results of the research question two.

Table 2 *Grammatical and Semantic Errors Pertinent to the Research Problem Section*

Percentage of Errors	Frequency of Errors	
Grammatical errors	94%	74
Semantic errors	6%	6

A close look at Table 2 above indicates that grammatical errors account for 94% of the total number of errors committed by the participants in the writing research problem section. The results also show that the frequency of grammatical errors is 74 errors. It is also apparent from Table 2 that semantic errors account only for 6% of total errors with a frequency of 6 errors. For an in-depth analysis of participant's errors related to language use, it is fitting to consider pie Figure 2 below.

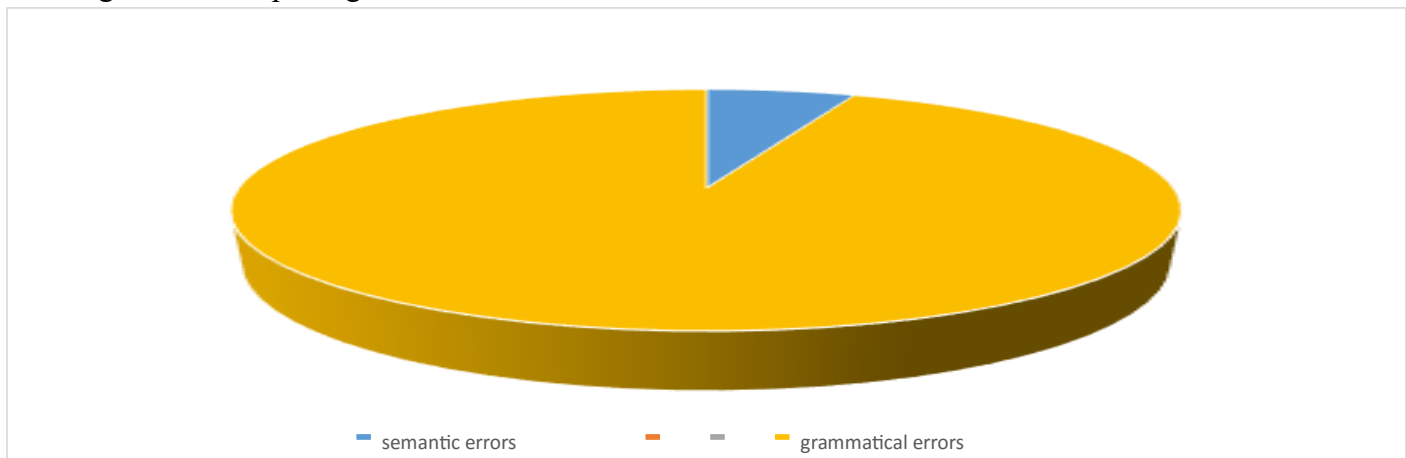


Figure 2 *The Proportion of Grammatical and Semantic Errors Pertinent to the Research Problem Section*

It is evident from Figure 2 that the biggest portion of errors related to language use in the writing research problem section is ascribed to grammatical errors. In contrast, a small portion of errors can be attributed to semantic errors. Those results clearly denote that the difficulties that the participants confront are grammar-related rather than semantic-related difficulties.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study clearly indicate that Jordanian EFL students encounter serious difficulties in conducting the research problem section. Strictly speaking, only 35% of the participants in the study managed to present an overview or background information of the topic under investigation. 60% of the participants justified their research problem clearly and correctly, while only 5% of the participants were able to determine their research gap. This result is consistent with the results of some previous studies, indicating that EFL students, in general, face serious challenges in research writing (Cheung, 2013; Komba, 2016; Phothongsunan, 2016; Qasem & Zayid, 2019). The results also depict that the great majority of language errors made by the participants are grammatical

in nature, while very scant errors are semantic. This result goes with the findings of some studies, which reveal that English is a challenge for the participants when producing any piece of writing (Almahameed, 2017; Qasem & Zayid, 2019). To gain a thorough insight into the nature of difficulties and errors made by Jordanian EFL researchers in the writing research problem section, it is of paramount importance to analyze and discuss those difficulties with illustrative examples.

Difficulties Encountering Jordanian EFL students in Writing Research Problem Section

Having analyzed the research written by the participants, difficulties encountered by them can be grouped into two main categories.

Academic skills difficulties: The following is a sample of the problem statement section written by one of the participants in the study.

“Statement of the problem: In Jordan learning English is still challenging (Abdul Haq, 1982). Wahba, (1998) stated that problems of learning English in Jordanian educational courses (Zughoul and Taminian, 1984). Mostly in making errors in writing, lexis, syntax, and pronunciation. EFL students have many problems in all the language skills such as speaking, reading, listening, and writing. Rababah, (2003) stated that there have been a lot of weakness in English among school students who join the universities as English language majors. In fact, a lot of first-year university courses spent on English grammar vocabulary, oral skill, language use, and writing. Students are accepted in university programs without taking any international standardized tests such as TOEFL, IELTS but they had to take locally designed tests of English which lack of reliability.”

A close look at the research problem above indicates that the writer clearly and abundantly justifies this research problem in that Jordanian EFL students face serious challenges in learning English as a second language. The researcher supports his justification and explanation of the problem with the results of previous research. However, it is evident that the researcher did not provide a general overview of the nature of the topic to be investigated or the challenges confronted by learners. In addition, the researcher has not stated the position of his study within the current literature. More specifically, the researcher did not indicate whether his study contributes actively to the field of investigation, and nothing is said about the gap that the study is supposed to bridge in literature. One more sample of the research problem section written by the participants is below.

“Statement of the problem: Translating the news generally from English into Arabic can be a problematic matter for Arab translators due to the cultural differences between the two languages, Arabic and English, also Psychological problems and lack of self-confidence have a major role in the success or failure of the translation process. Simultaneous translation difficulties from English into Arabic representing by many aspects, including listening, understanding, analysis and reporting the message at a very specific time. Also, the interpreter faces the listener who receives the message from him.”

Analyzing the problem statement section above shows that the researcher describes the challenges that translators face when translating news, and he elaborates on the reasons beyond such difficulty. However, in-depth analysis and overview of the problem is needed, in the sense that the researcher is required to state more details with examples about the nature of problems in translation in order to enhance the understanding of the reader. The researcher is also needed to cite references that support his viewpoint. Furthermore, nothing is mentioned about the gap that the researcher's study attempts to bridge or to fit the study within the present literature.

Language use difficulties: Those difficulties can be either grammatical or semantic. Below are a few examples on the grammatical errors committed by the participants in the writing research problem section.

“Tense study include studying the structure, parts of speech also ”

Two errors are committed in the above sentence. The first one is a subject-verb agreement, in which no final "s" is added to the verb following the singular subject. In addition, the conjunction "and" is missing and should be added to connect the parts of the sentence above. The following is another example of grammatical errors taken from student's research.

"Grammar necessary in order to understand languages linguistic system"

In the above sentence, the verb is missing in that the verb to be "is" is required to make the sentence grammatical. The above-mentioned sentences are examples of grammatical difficulties that the participants encounter in the writing research problem section. That is to say, writing a problem statement section is demanding and needs professional skills to be accomplished well.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The sample of the current study is limited to Jordanian EFL students at Amman Arab University. The study is also limited to investigating the problem statement section, while other research sections beyond the scope of this study. It is recommended that future studies expand the scope of the investigation to other sections of a scholarly research paper, such as the literature review section and the results section. It is also recommended that future studies broaden the sample of the study to include postgraduate students.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined the challenges that Jordanian EFL students confront when implementing the research problem section. A total of twenty English majored students participated in the study. They were instructed to conduct a research article on a language-related topic after being presented to the main components and sections of the research article. Having analyzed the research papers written by the participants, it was found that the participants were unable to overview their research problem and to determine their research gap correctly. In addition, the study revealed that the participants committed a considerable amount of grammatical errors. It is recommended that more emphasis and teaching programs are allocated for teaching research writing skills in general and the problem statement section in particular.

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