

A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW: MALAYSIA'S POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS' CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN ACADEMIC ENGLISH WRITING

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Abstract. This systematic literature review delves deeply into the intricate landscape of challenges and coping strategies in academic English writing among postgraduate students in Malaysia. Through an exhaustive search and meticulous analysis of a wide-range of empirical studies, this review uncovers the multifaceted nature of the obstacles faced by these students. Linguistic proficiency gaps, deeply rooted cultural and academic convention disparities, feelings of isolation, and the complex process of technological adaptation emerge as significant challenges. On the other hand, a variety of coping strategies, including well-designed institutional support systems, peer and supervisor support networks, the utilization of technological tools, innovative pedagogical interventions, and initiatives for cultural and linguistic adaptation, are identified and analyzed in detail. The review not only provides a comprehensive understanding of the current state of affairs but also highlights the need for more tailored, context-specific support systems that take into account both disciplinary and cultural nuances while upholding the highest standards of academic integrity. Based on the findings, practical recommendations for policy - makers, educators, and institutions are put forward to enhance the academic writing proficiency of postgraduate students in the Malaysian higher education context.

Keywords: *academic English writing, coping strategies, Malaysia, postgraduate students*

Introduction

In the globalized academic arena, academic English writing has become an essential skill for postgraduate students worldwide, and this is particularly true in Malaysia. With universities worldwide increasingly adopting English as the medium of instruction (Teng, 2018), Malaysia attracts a diverse cohort of postgraduate students, both local and international, with its growing number of English-medium higher education institutions. These students are expected to communicate their research findings, ideas, and arguments effectively through academic writing, which serves as a key medium for scholarly exchange and knowledge dissemination. However, the journey of mastering academic English writing is often fraught with difficulties for postgraduate students in Malaysia which include limited vocabulary, inappropriate grammar usage, difficulty organizing ideas, and lack of knowledge of academic writing conventions (Foo and Richards, 2019). These challenges can have a profound impact on their academic performance, research productivity, and overall success in their postgraduate programs. Understanding these challenges and the strategies students employ to overcome them is crucial for educators, administrators, and policymakers in the Malaysian higher education system. This systematic literature review aims to provide a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the existing research on the challenges and coping strategies in academic English writing among postgraduate students in Malaysia. By synthesizing the

findings from multiple studies, this review seeks to identify common themes, patterns, and areas for improvement, ultimately contributing to the development of more effective support mechanisms for these students.

Materials and Methods

Database selection and search strategy

A comprehensive search was conducted across multiple academic databases to ensure a wide-reaching and inclusive collection of relevant studies. The databases selected included ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center), which is a rich source of education-related research; ResearchGate, a popular platform for academic networking and sharing of research; and PubMed, which, although mainly known for medical research, also contains studies on educational aspects related to health sciences students who are part of the postgraduate population in Malaysia. The search strategy employed a combination of keywords related to the main concepts of the study. The keywords used were "academic English writing," "postgraduate students," "Malaysia," "challenges," and "coping strategies." These keywords were used in various combinations, both individually and in phrases, to capture a broad spectrum of relevant studies. For example, search terms such as "academic English writing challenges postgraduate students Malaysia," "coping strategies for academic English writing among Malaysian postgraduate students," and variations of these were utilized.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria were established to ensure the relevance and quality of the studies selected for the review. Only peer-reviewed studies were considered, as this ensures a certain level of academic rigor and validity. Studies were included if they were published between 2015 and 2025, as this time frame was chosen to capture the most recent research and developments in the field, taking into account the evolving nature of academic writing and the educational landscape in Malaysia. Additionally, the studies had to focus specifically on postgraduate students in Malaysia and address either the challenges they face in academic English writing or the coping strategies they employ. Exclusion criteria were also applied. Studies that did not meet the language requirement (i.e., not in English), studies that focused on undergraduate students or other educational levels, and studies that were not related to the Malaysian context were excluded. Furthermore, studies that were not empirical in nature (e.g., opinion pieces, editorials) were also excluded from the review.

Study selection and data extraction

The initial search yielded a large number of studies. The titles and abstracts of these studies were screened first to determine their potential relevance based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies that seemed relevant based on the title and abstract were then retrieved in full-text for a more detailed assessment. During the full-text review, the studies were carefully examined to ensure they met all the inclusion criteria. Data extraction was carried out systematically. For each included study, information such as the study design (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods), the sample size and characteristics of the participants (e.g., nationality, discipline of study), the main

findings related to challenges and coping strategies, and the research methods used were extracted. This data was recorded in a standardized format for further analysis.

Data analysis

The extracted data was analyzed thematically. The main themes of "challenges" and "coping strategies" were identified as the overarching categories. Within these categories, sub-themes were further developed based on the commonalities and differences in the findings of the studies. For example, under the theme of "challenges," sub-themes such as "linguistic proficiency gaps," "cultural and academic convention disparities," "isolation and lack of support," and "technological adaptation" emerged. Similarly, for the theme of "coping strategies," sub-themes like "institutional support systems," "peer and supervisor support," "technological tools and resources," "pedagogical interventions," and "cultural and linguistic adaptation" were identified. The data was then coded and grouped according to these themes and sub-themes to facilitate a comprehensive and organized analysis.

Results and Discussion

Challenges in academic English writing

Linguistic proficiency gaps: Grammatical and syntactical difficulties

A significant number of postgraduate students in Malaysia, especially those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, grapple with fundamental grammatical and syntactical issues in their academic writing. For instance, in a study by Almatarneh et al. (2018), Jordanian postgraduate students studying in Malaysia reported frequent errors in verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, and sentence structure. These students, who had received their prior education in Arabic-medium institutions, found it challenging to translate their complex ideas accurately into English while adhering to the strict grammatical rules of academic writing. Another study by Zhang and Hasim (2023) focused on Chinese study-abroad graduate students in Malaysia. It revealed that Chinese students often struggled with the use of articles (e.g., "a," "an," "the"), which are absent in the Chinese language. This led to inconsistent and incorrect usage in their academic writing, affecting the clarity and coherence of their arguments. Moreover, the different syntactical structures between Chinese and English languages posed a major hurdle. Chinese sentences typically follow a subject-verb-object order, but English allows for more flexibility, especially in complex academic writing. As a result, Chinese students often produced sentences that were grammatically incorrect or sounded awkward in English.

Vocabulary limitations

Vocabulary limitations are also a major concern for postgraduate students. Academic writing requires a specialized and extensive vocabulary that is often different from everyday English. Many students, both local and international, lack the depth and breadth of vocabulary necessary to express their ideas precisely. For example, in technical and scientific disciplines, students need to use highly specialized terminologies. A study by Jeyaraj (2020) found that postgraduate research students in

Malaysia, regardless of their nationality, struggled to use appropriate technical terms accurately. This not only made their writing less professional but also led to misunderstandings in communicating their research findings. In addition, idiomatic expressions and collocations, which are an important part of natural-sounding academic English, are often difficult for non-native speakers to master. Students may use words in combinations that are incorrect or inappropriate in the academic context, resulting in writing that lacks fluency and sophistication.

Academic tone and style

Mastering the appropriate academic tone and style is yet another aspect where postgraduate students face difficulties. Academic writing requires a formal, objective, and impersonal tone. However, students from different cultural and educational backgrounds may be accustomed to more informal or subjective writing styles. For example, some students may tend to use overly personal language or make unsupported claims, which are not acceptable in academic writing. A study by Singh (2015) on international graduate students in Malaysia found that students from collectivist cultures often had trouble adopting an assertive and critical tone in their writing. In their home cultures, direct criticism and self-promotion may be considered inappropriate, but in Western academic writing, it is essential to present arguments forcefully and evaluate existing literature critically. This cultural clash made it difficult for these students to develop the right academic tone and style in their English writing.

Cultural and academic convention disparities

Differences in communication style

Cultural differences in communication styles have a significant impact on academic English writing. In collectivist cultures, which are prevalent in many Asian countries, including Malaysia, communication often emphasizes harmony, respect for authority, and group consensus. In contrast, Western academic writing values individualism, critical thinking, and assertive argumentation. For local Malaysian students, the transition from their culturally influenced communication styles to the requirements of academic English writing can be challenging. For example, in their native languages and cultural contexts, they may be more accustomed to using indirect language and avoiding direct confrontation or criticism. In academic writing, however, they need to be more direct and explicit in presenting their arguments and challenging existing theories. A study by Kotamjani et al. (2018) on international postgraduate students in Malaysian public universities also highlighted this issue. Students from various cultural backgrounds found it difficult to balance their cultural values with the demands of Western-style academic writing, which often led to weak or unclear arguments in their papers.

Variations in academic norms

Academic norms, such as citation practices, research methodologies, and the structure of academic papers, also vary across cultures. In Malaysia, with its diverse student population, international students often face difficulties in adapting to the academic norms of their host institutions. For instance, citation styles like APA, MLA, or Chicago, which are commonly used in Malaysian universities, may be unfamiliar to

students from countries with different citation traditions. Ahmed (2018) studied student perceptions of academic dishonesty in a private Middle Eastern university. Although the study was not directly focused on Malaysia, the findings are relevant as they highlighted the challenges students face in understanding and adhering to Western-style citation practices. Many students, due to a lack of awareness or understanding of proper citation methods, may inadvertently commit plagiarism, which can have serious consequences for their academic careers. In addition, the structure and organization of academic papers also differ. Some cultures may prioritize a more narrative or descriptive approach, while Western academic writing typically requires a more logical and structured format, with clear introductions, literature reviews, methodologies, results, and discussions. Students need to learn and adapt to these different norms to produce high-quality academic work.

Isolation and lack of support

Solitary nature of research writing

Research writing at the postgraduate level is inherently a solitary activity. Students spend long hours working on their theses, dissertations, or research papers, often in isolation. This isolation can have a negative impact on their motivation, productivity, and overall, and well-being. A study by Chan et al. (2022) on the post-pandemic challenges in private higher education in Malaysia noted that the solitary nature of research writing was exacerbated during the pandemic, as students were forced to work from home without the usual face-to-face interactions with peers and supervisors.

Limited access to writing support systems

Many postgraduate students in Malaysia lack access to adequate writing support systems. While some universities may have writing centers or offer writing courses, these resources may not be sufficient to meet the needs of all students. In addition, students in off-campus or private institutions may have even more limited access to such support. A study by Jeyaraj (2020) found that a significant number of postgraduate research students in Malaysia reported a lack of structured writing guidance. They often had to rely on their own efforts or the limited feedback from their supervisors, who may not have the time or expertise to provide in-depth writing support.

Insufficient supervisor-student interaction

Supervisor-student interaction is crucial for the development of academic writing skills. However, in many cases, supervisors may be overburdened with their own research and teaching responsibilities, leaving little time for in-depth discussions and feedback on students' writing. A study by Singh (2015) on international graduate students in Malaysia found that students often felt that their supervisors did not provide enough detailed feedback on their writing, especially in terms of language and style. This lack of interaction made it difficult for students to improve their writing skills effectively.

Technological adaptation

Traditional cultural elements in historical and mythological films

The advent of AI-assisted writing tools, such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Scispace, has brought both opportunities and challenges for postgraduate students. On one hand, these tools can help students with grammar checking, vocabulary suggestions, and even generating initial drafts. For example, Grammarly can quickly identify and correct common grammatical errors, while Scispace can assist in formatting scientific papers according to specific journal requirements. However, on the other hand, the misuse of these tools is a growing concern. Some students may over-rely on AI-assisted writing tools, using them to generate entire sections of their papers without proper understanding or critical thinking. This not only undermines the learning process but also raises serious issues of academic integrity. A study by Zhang and Hasim (2023) on Chinese study-abroad graduate students in Malaysia found that some students were using AI tools to write their papers, but they lacked the skills to edit and adapt the generated content to their specific research needs, resulting in papers that did not accurately reflect their own ideas and research. The transition to online learning, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted the digital divide among postgraduate students in Malaysia. Students in rural areas or those from low-income backgrounds often faced difficulties in accessing the necessary digital resources, such as high-speed internet, computers, and software. This limited their ability to use online writing tools, participate in virtual writing workshops, or access online libraries and research databases. A study by Chan et al. (2022) on private higher education in Malaysia during the pandemic found that students in remote areas struggled to keep up with their academic writing tasks due to poor internet connectivity and lack of access to suitable devices.

Coping strategies

Institutional support systems

Academic writing workshops and courses

Many Malaysian universities have recognized the importance of providing academic writing support to postgraduate students and have implemented academic writing workshops and courses. For example, Universiti Sains Malaysia offers a series of academic writing workshops throughout the academic year. These workshops cover a wide range of topics, including grammar and punctuation, academic vocabulary, thesis structure, and literature review writing. The workshops are designed to be interactive, with opportunities for students to practice their writing skills and receive feedback from instructors. Similarly, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) has developed comprehensive academic writing courses for postgraduate students. These courses are tailored to the specific needs of different disciplines, ensuring that students learn the writing skills relevant to their fields of study. The courses also incorporate elements of critical thinking and research methodology, as these are essential components of academic writing.

Writing centers and tutoring services

Writing centers are another important form of institutional support. These centers provide one-on-one tutoring services to students, where they can receive personalized feedback on their writing. For example, the writing center at Universiti Malaya offers appointments with trained writing tutors who can help students with various aspects of

their writing, from brainstorming ideas to revising and editing their final drafts. The tutors are not only knowledgeable about grammar and style but also about academic writing conventions and can provide valuable advice on how to structure arguments and present research findings effectively. In addition, some universities also offer online tutoring services, which are especially beneficial for students who are unable to visit the writing center in person. These online services use video conferencing tools to connect students with tutors, allowing for real-time feedback and discussion.

Faculty development programs for writing instruction

To ensure that faculty members are equipped to provide effective writing instruction, many universities in Malaysia have implemented faculty development programs. These programs focus on enhancing faculty members' knowledge of academic writing pedagogy, as well as their ability to provide constructive feedback to students. For example, a faculty development program at a leading Malaysian university may include workshops on teaching academic writing, sharing of best practices in writing instruction, and training on how to use writing assessment tools. By improving the writing instruction skills of faculty members, universities can better support students in their academic writing endeavors.

Peer and supervisor supports

Peer support groups

Peer support groups have emerged as an effective coping strategy for postgraduate students. These groups provide a platform for students to share their writing experiences, exchange ideas, and offer mutual support. For example, at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, students have formed self-organized peer support groups for academic writing. In these groups, students meet regularly to discuss their writing projects, share drafts, and provide feedback to each other. The peer feedback is often valuable as it comes from students who are in a similar academic situation and can offer fresh perspectives on the writing. Moreover, peer support groups can also help reduce the feelings of isolation that postgraduate students often experience. By working together with their peers, students feel more connected and motivated in their writing tasks.

Supervisor-student mentorship

Supervisor-student mentorship is crucial for the development of academic writing skills. A good supervisor can provide guidance on research design, help students formulate research questions, and offer feedback on the structure and content of their writing. For instance, in the early stages of a postgraduate project, supervisors play a pivotal role in helping students identify relevant research topics. By leveraging their extensive knowledge of the field, supervisors can direct students towards areas that are both academically significant and feasible for a postgraduate-level study. This guidance is not only about choosing a topic but also about formulating research questions that are clear, focused, and capable of driving the research forward. When it comes to the actual writing process, supervisors can offer detailed feedback on various aspects. They can help students organize their thoughts and arguments in a logical manner, ensuring that the paper flows smoothly from one section to another. For example, in the literature

review section, supervisors can assist students in critically analyzing existing research, identifying gaps, and demonstrating how their own research contributes to the field. In the results and discussion sections, supervisors can guide students on how to present data effectively and draw meaningful conclusions. However, as noted in previous studies, there are often challenges in supervisor-student mentorship. Time constraints are a major issue. Many supervisors in Malaysian universities are involved in multiple research projects, teaching a heavy course load, and administrative duties. This leaves them with limited time to provide in-depth and timely feedback on students' writing. To address this, some universities have started implementing policies to ensure that supervisors allocate a certain amount of dedicated time for student mentorship. For example, setting aside specific office hours each week for one-on-one meetings with postgraduate students. Another aspect that can enhance supervisor-student mentorship is training supervisors in academic writing pedagogy. A study by Driscoll and Yacoub (2022) found that supervisors who received training in how to teach writing were more effective in helping students improve their writing skills. Such training can cover topics like providing constructive feedback, understanding common writing difficulties faced by students, and using writing assessment rubrics.

Technological tools and resources

Educational software and platforms

In addition to AI-assisted writing tools, there are other educational software and platforms that can support postgraduate students in their academic English writing. For example, online grammar and vocabulary learning platforms like Busuu and Duolingo offer courses specifically designed for academic English. These platforms use gamification techniques and interactive exercises to make the learning process more engaging. Students can practice grammar rules, learn new academic vocabulary, and receive instant feedback on their performance. Learning management systems (LMS) such as Moodle and Blackboard are also widely used in Malaysian universities. These platforms can be customized to include writing-related resources such as sample academic papers, writing guides, and assignment submission portals. Instructors can use the LMS to create discussion forums where students can share their writing ideas, ask questions, and receive feedback from their peers and instructors. Some LMS also have built-in plagiarism detection tools, which not only help in maintaining academic integrity but also educate students on proper citation practices.

Digital libraries and research databases

Access to digital libraries and research databases is essential for postgraduate students to conduct in-depth research and write high-quality academic papers. Malaysian universities subscribe to a variety of international databases such as JSTOR, Elsevier, and Web of Science. These databases provide students with access to a vast collection of scholarly articles, books, and research reports from around the world. However, as mentioned earlier, there are issues related to the digital divide. Some students, especially those in remote areas or from disadvantaged backgrounds, may face difficulties in accessing these resources due to poor internet connectivity or lack of appropriate devices. To overcome this, universities are taking steps such as providing off-campus access to databases through VPN services, and setting up computer labs with high-speed internet in rural campuses. Additionally, some institutions are

collaborating with local communities to provide access to digital resources in community centers, ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to access the necessary materials for their academic writing.

Pedagogical intervention

Genre-based instruction

Genre-based instruction has emerged as an effective pedagogical approach in teaching academic English writing. This approach focuses on familiarizing students with different genres of academic writing, such as research articles, literature reviews, and dissertations. By understanding the conventions, structures, and language features of each genre, students can better meet the expectations of academic writing in their respective fields. In Malaysian universities, genre-based instruction is being increasingly adopted. For example, in a postgraduate course on social sciences research methods, instructors use a series of sample research articles from top-tier journals in the field to analyze the genre conventions. Students are taught how to identify the research question, the methodology section, the results presentation, and the discussion in these articles. They then practice writing their own sections following the same genre patterns. This hands-on approach helps students develop the necessary skills to write in a specific genre effectively.

Task-based learning

Task-based learning is another pedagogical strategy that has shown promise in improving academic writing skills. In this approach, students are given real-world tasks related to academic writing, such as writing a grant proposal, a conference abstract, or a research report. These tasks require students to apply their knowledge of research methods, academic writing conventions, and language skills in a practical context. For instance, in a postgraduate course on environmental science, students are assigned the task of writing a research proposal for a potential project. They need to conduct a literature review, design a research methodology, and present their ideas clearly and persuasively. Through this task, students not only improve their writing skills but also develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and project management skills. Instructors provide guidance and feedback throughout the task-completion process, helping students refine their work and learn from their mistakes.

Cultural and linguistic adaptation

Cross-cultural communication training

Given the significant impact of cultural differences on academic English writing, cross-cultural communication training has become an important coping strategy. Some Malaysian universities offer workshops and courses on cross-cultural communication specifically tailored for postgraduate students. These training programs aim to help students understand the cultural differences in academic communication styles, values, and norms. For example, a cross-cultural communication workshop may include sessions on how to balance assertiveness with respect in academic writing, how to approach citation practices in different cultural contexts, and how to adapt to the Western-style academic writing requirements while maintaining their cultural identity.

Through case studies, group discussions, and role-plays, students learn to navigate the cultural challenges in academic writing more effectively.

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses are a cornerstone of cultural and linguistic adaptation for postgraduate students in Malaysia. These courses are designed to meet the specific English language needs of academic study. EAP courses cover a wide range of topics, including academic vocabulary, grammar for academic writing, reading academic texts, and presentation skills. For international students, EAP courses often start with an assessment of their English language proficiency to determine their individual learning needs. The courses then progress to more advanced topics such as academic argumentation, critical reading, and writing research papers. Some EAP courses also focus on discipline-specific language requirements. For example, EAP courses for science students may include specialized vocabulary and writing conventions used in scientific research, while courses for humanities students may emphasize critical analysis and literary citation styles.

The challenges and coping strategies identified in this systematic literature review paint a complex picture of academic English writing among postgraduate students in Malaysia. The challenges are multi-faceted, stemming from linguistic, cultural, social, and technological factors. Linguistic proficiency gaps are not only about basic grammar and vocabulary but also about mastering the unique tone and style of academic writing. Cultural and academic convention disparities further complicate the situation, as students from diverse backgrounds struggle to adapt to the Western-dominated academic norms in Malaysian universities. The feelings of isolation and lack of support, especially in the context of research writing, can have a detrimental impact on students' motivation and academic performance. The rapid development of technology, while offering new opportunities, also brings challenges such as the misuse of AI-assisted writing tools and the digital divide. On the other hand, the coping strategies identified offer a glimmer of hope. Institutional support systems, when well-designed and effectively implemented, can provide students with the necessary resources and guidance. Peer and supervisor support can create a collaborative and nurturing environment for learning. Technological tools and resources, if used appropriately, can enhance the writing process. Pedagogical interventions such as genre-based instruction and task-based learning can help students develop the specific skills required for academic writing. Cultural and linguistic adaptation strategies can assist students in bridging the gap between their home cultures and the academic culture in Malaysia.

However, there are still several areas that require further attention. Firstly, more research is needed to understand the specific challenges faced by local Malaysian postgraduate students. Most of the existing studies focus on international students, leaving a gap in our understanding of the local student population. Secondly, the long-term impact of technological tools, especially AI-assisted writing tools, on students' independent writing skills needs to be evaluated. There is a concern that over-reliance on these tools may lead to a decline in students' ability to think critically and write creatively. Moreover, while many coping strategies are in place, there is a need for better coordination and integration among different stakeholders. For example, there should be more collaboration between writing centers, faculty members, and technology support units to ensure that students receive comprehensive support. Additionally, the

effectiveness of the current coping strategies should be continuously evaluated and improved based on student feedback.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review has provided a comprehensive overview of the challenges and coping strategies in academic English writing among postgraduate students in Malaysia. The challenges are significant and diverse, but with the right combination of strategies, they can be overcome. Institutions, educators, and policymakers need to work together to develop more tailored and effective support systems. Future research should focus on filling the existing gaps in knowledge, evaluating the long-term impact of various interventions, and exploring new and innovative ways to support postgraduate students in their academic writing journey. By doing so, Malaysia can enhance the academic writing proficiency of its postgraduate students, enabling them to contribute more effectively to the global academic community and achieve greater success in their academic and professional careers.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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