

**ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACADEMIC WRITING
DIFFICULTIES EXPERIENCED BY YEMENI
POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS AT PUBLIC
UNIVERSITIES IN MALAYSIA**

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by

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**KESUKARAN PENULISAN AKADEMIK BAHASA INGGERIS YANG
DIHADAPI OLEH PELAJAR SISWAZAH YAMAN DI UNIVERSITI AWAM
MALAYSIA**

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meniasat tentang kesukaran penulisan akademik yang dihadapi oleh siswazah Yaman di universiti awam di Malaysia. Ini merupakan kajian kaedah campuran iaitu kedua-dua data kuantitatif dan kualitatif dikumpul, dianalisis dan ditafsirkan. Data kuantitatif dikumpul melalui soal selidik yang dilengkapkan oleh 65 siswazah Yaman daripada lima universiti awam di Malaysia manakala data kualitatif dikumpul menggunakan temu bual kumpulan tumpuan. Semasa data kuantitatif dianalisis menggunakan Pakej Statistik bagi Sains Sosial (SPSS), data kualitatif dianalisis melalui analisis kandungan iaitu data disalin dan dikodkan secara tematik. Kajian ini meniasat tentang kesukaran penulisan akademik dan memberi peluang kepada siswazah Yaman untuk menyatakan pandangan mereka tentang kesukaran tersebut dan strategi yang digunakan bagi mengatasinya. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa penulisan akademik pada peringkat universiti merupakan tahap tinggi dengan berbeza jenis kerana ia mempunyai berbeza genre seperti kertas penyelidikan, penulisan kreatif, penulisan jurnal, ringkasan pendek artikel dan esei peribadi. Kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa kesukaran penulisan akademik yang dihadapi oleh siswazah Yaman dalam pembelajaran akademik termasuk menghubungkan ayat dengan baik dan menulis perenggan yang rapi dan menunjukkan kelemahan pelajar dalam sesetengah kemahiran bahasa bagi menghasilkan teks yang saling berhubung. Bagi menangani kesukaran ini, siswazah Yaman di universiti awam Malaysia menggunakan strategi seperti menyertai

kursus intensif Bahasa Inggris, menyertai bengkel yang dikendalikan oleh universiti dan membaca buku yang berkaitan dengan penulisan akademik. Kesukaran penulisan sangat berkait rapat dengan pembangunan dan penguasaan kemahiran penulisan akademik maka sokongan bahasa kepada pelajar antarabangsa dapat membantu mereka. Salah satu daripada fokus utama kajian ini ialah pemahaman komprehensif kesukaran yang dihadapi oleh pelajar siswazah Yaman agar dapat merancang sistem sokongan yang efektif untuk pelajar tersebut dan membantu mereka menangani kesukaran penulisan akademik.

**ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACADEMIC WRITING DIFFICULTIES
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates academic writing difficulties experienced by Yemeni postgraduate students at public universities in Malaysia. It is a mixed methods study in which both quantitative and qualitative data were collected, analyzed and triangulated. The quantitative data were collected through questionnaires that were completed by 65 Yemeni postgraduate students from five public universities in Malaysia, while qualitative data were collected using focus group interviews. While quantitative data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), qualitative data were analyzed through content analysis in which data were transcribed and coded thematically. The current study investigated these academic writing difficulties. The Yemeni postgraduate students were given the opportunity to express their views about these difficulties and the strategies they use to overcome them. The findings of this study also reveal that academic writing at the university level is a higher level with different nature because it includes different genres which may include brief research papers, creative writing, explanation of graphs, brief reports or descriptions of class activities, academic essays, journal writing, brief summary of articles and personal essays. This study shows that academic writing difficulties faced by Yemeni postgraduate students in their academic studies include linking sentences smoothly and writing coherent paragraphs and also reveals students' lack of some specific advanced language skills to produce connected texts. To overcome academic writing difficulties, Yemeni postgraduate students in public

Malaysian universities use strategies such as joining some intensive English language courses, attending workshops conducted by their respective universities and reading books on academic writing. Writing difficulties are completely related to developing and mastering academic writing skills, consequently, language support to international students can be helpful for them. One of the main focuses of the current study is a comprehensive understanding of the difficulties experienced by Yemeni postgraduate students in academic writing difficulties so as to devise an effective support system for these students and help them to overcome their academic writing difficulties.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the general background to the study, which includes the English language situation in Yemen. It introduces the official attitudes towards English language in Yemen, the status of ELT in the school system, and the role of English language in the Yemeni society. In addition, the chapter includes the statement of the problem under study, the significance of the study, and limitations of the study. The terms that are used for the study are explained and research questions and objectives are stated.

1.2 Background to the Study

This study investigates the academic writing difficulties of the Yemeni postgraduate students pursuing their higher education studies at five public universities in Malaysia. The Yemeni postgraduate students were given the opportunity to express their views about these difficulties and the strategies they use to overcome them.

Due to the importance of higher education as an essential tool for developing a knowledge-based society, there has been a rapid increase in the number of international students pursuing higher education worldwide. This increase comes from the realization of the great benefits that these students can gain by studying abroad. Different countries in the world, especially USA and UK, have already developed various programmes to include international students (Sugimura, 2008).

This increase in the number of international students has been beneficial to both the host countries and the students themselves. The host countries that attract international students can improve their economy which will lead to the improvement of the reputation of the institutions of higher education in these countries.

International students whose educational and cultural backgrounds are different from the background of Malaysia come across some difficulties academically, socially and culturally during their stay in Malaysia.

1.3 English Language in Yemen

Since this study was conducted on Yemeni postgraduate students studying in Malaysian public universities, it is important to provide some information on the educational system in the republic of Yemen and the status of English language in Yemen..

English language is the most used and important language among other languages in the world. It can be regarded as the “world language” through which a considerable number of people, either native or non-native speakers, are communicating with each other. Given its importance, English as a foreign or a second language is a main source of research topics for educators, teachers, and policy makers. This section tries to highlight the importance and role of English language in Yemen by shedding light on the English language teaching and learning process in primary, secondary, and tertiary education before and after the unification in 1990; it highlights the significance of English language teaching in the country embodied by the changes it has passed through since 1960s up to now.

1.3.1 English in Yemen before Unity

Yemen is an Arabic country situated in the Arabic peninsula and bordered by Saudi Arabia from the north, Oman from the east, Arabian Sea from the south and from the west the Red Sea. Yemen was divided into two parts before 1990 but in 1990 the two parts were united under the name of Republic of Yemen. Before the unity Sana'a was the capital of the north and Aden the capital of the south. Although Aden was occupied by the British Empire from 1839 to 1967, the impact of the existence of the British in terms of language was not so strong. The people in Yemen were so reserved in using the language of the colonists except when necessary (Badroos, 1998). Therefore, after the departure of the colonists, English was not playing any prominent linguistic role in Yemen except for very restricted activities. Meanwhile the educational system in the north part of Yemen specially before 1962 was of a religious nature and there was no place for foreign languages in the syllabus. After the revolution of 1962 the ruling family was overthrown and a republic was established. This paved the way for modern education and English language was given a relative standard (Badroos, 1998).

1.3.2 The Official Attitudes towards English Language after Unity

On 22nd May 1990 Yemen achieved the unity. North and South Yemen became one country. Curriculum went under some changes to meet the new country's requirements. However the change was not very radical as some syllabuses from the past era remained dominant for some time including the English syllabus "English for Yemen" which was used in the northern part for the primary and secondary levels and lasted until 1995. Students graduated from high school with very weak English

language skills, which prevented them from being able to manipulate the language (Bose, 1999).

After the unification of the two parts of Yemen in 1990, the Ministry of Education issued a decree stating that the English should be taught as a compulsory subject from grade 7 in the primary schools (Rababah, 2003).

The teaching of English in governmental schools starts at the seventh grade of basic education and continues for six years, i.e. until the end of the secondary stage. Learners begin basic education at the age of six, but the learning of English starts at the age of twelve or thirteen years. This evidently makes the acquisition of the foreign language a bit challenging (Rababah, 2003).

Secondary Education is of three years duration. English is taught all through the three years of study in two sections, the scientific section and the literary one. The syllabus and the textbooks were designed by Oxford University Press for English language teaching in the Arab world. Since the 1970s, English has no longer become the medium of instruction at the school level in Yemen. The Yemeni government has taken the decision of replacing English with Arabic as the medium of instruction at the school level.

1.3.3 English Language Teaching Problems and Challenges at the University Level

English language teaching in secondary schools in Yemen has been affected by many difficulties and challenges that hindered its application in an effective way, given the circumstances explained earlier. This, in turn, negatively impacted the process of English language teaching and learning at the university level according to the body

of literature discussed on English language's teaching and learning difficulties and challenges in Yemen along with the experiences and observations in this field too. English language teaching and learning at the undergraduate level faces many problems which are clearly reflected in its outcomes effectiveness and efficacy. In Yemen, the situation is almost the same as in the other developing countries. Khalid (1998) (as cited in Nureen, Kayani, & Jabeen, 2011, p 287) also noted that "something like a revolution in the methodology of English taught in our colleges of education is needed. The level of students at the university level is not satisfactory".

Al-Mehwari (2005) revealed that the most affecting problems faced by both teachers and students in teaching and learning English at the college level were the teaching methods used by teachers, the problems related to students themselves, problems related to the content of the course, and those related to the assessment methods followed. Al-Refa'ai (2001) showed that teaching methods, the courses adopted, teaching materials, and the assessment used by teachers were the main factors that caused students' low achievement in English language in Aden College of Education which is considered the oldest college in Aden University. In regard to specific subjects taught at a college level, it was noted that teachers teaching subjects like translation in Aden University, Yemen, faced many problems as revealed by Al-Fatimi (2009).

Al-Mansori (2008) proved that the most important reasons of undergraduate students' weakness- in Scientific Departments- in English language at the faculties of education were the methods of teaching used by teachers in such colleges. Therefore, it is obvious that traditional, out of date methods used by teachers were the main reason that caused students' weakness in English at the college level. This in turn

reflects that there had been no teacher training programs that train and develop their teaching competencies and skills. The weakness of English language learners in general, and English language department majors/graduates more specifically, can be attributed to various factors. According to Suleiman (1983) these factors are lack of pertinent information on the part of school graduates when they join the university, curricula, teaching methodology, lack of the target language environment, and the learners' lack of motivation. Thus, there is a consensus that English language teaching and learning face glaring critical problems that form obstacles and challenges for both students and teachers that need to be probed and tackled to improve the situation of English language teaching and learning in the country as a whole because universities are the main source that trains and prepares English teachers.

1.3.4 Language Problems of Yemeni Learners of English

Arab EFL learners encounter many problems in the four language skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing. This fact has been clearly stated by many researchers, e.g. Abdul Haq (1982), Harrison, Prater and Tucker (1975), Abbad (1988) and Wahba (1998). Yemeni postgraduate students in Malaysia experience problems and difficulties regarding learning English language in general and academic writing difficulties in particular because they come from cultural and social background in which English language is not the medium of instruction and it is a foreign language.

Several studies (Abbad, 1988; Hisham, 2008; Rababah, 2003; Zughoul and Taminian, 1984) have been conducted in the Arab world to investigate the problems of acquiring English among Arab learners. Zughoul and Taminian (1984: p. 4) found

that “Jordanian EFL students commit serious lexical errors while communicating in English”. Many studies have been conducted in Jordan to investigate lexical, syntactical and phonological errors made by Jordanian school learners of English (e.g., Abdul Haq, 1982; Zughoul and Taminian, 1984). As for Sudan, Kambal (1980) analyzes errors in three types of free composition written by first-year Sudanese university students. The study gives an account of the major syntactic errors in the verb phrase and the noun phrase made by these students in an attempt to improve the quality of the remedial English program in the context of Arabization in the Sudan.

1.4 Academic Writing Difficulties of International Postgraduate Students in Malaysia

While international students often achieve good qualifications in academic achievement in their home country, many struggle with the cultural or social as well as academic adjustments to a foreign university, to a different culture and to the requirements of undertaking research and writing in a second or foreign language. More detailed discussions and citations of previous studies on language difficulties that international students face are included in the literature review of this study.

The growing presence of Arab postgraduate students is also associated with cultural and language barriers which affect the academic performance of these students. The notable increasing growth of Arab and other nationalities of Middle East students in Malaysia started a few years after the event of “9/11” in 2001. Although, there is no exact statistical number of Arab students in Malaysia, this growing number is significant. Also they have growing requirements of better support to assist a range of problems and challenges linked to adjusting to academic life in their host country. These students need opportunities to understand culture, to improve language skills,

to understand the new academic system, and to possess a contextual awareness of new communities (Ali Alghail, 2012).

The Malaysian Higher Education Ministry set up an international students division to cope with the increasing number of Arab and other foreign students pursuing higher education in Malaysia and turning the country into a centre of educational excellence. The division has been operating since 2007 to facilitate the entrance and management of foreign students who are distributed in 20 public and 35 private universities all over Malaysia (Ali Alghail, 2012).

Many Arab postgraduate students in general and Yemeni students in particular who come to Malaysia find it difficult to adjust to the English language and the education system in the country. It is well known that for many international students to study in a new country is associated with several language problems. Some universities around the world have taken steps to help new students to adjust to these problems. Research indicates that many international students have difficulties and barriers with various aspects of English. For many international students, poor English is a major stress and can create significant problems and barriers when trying to function and succeed in Malaysia (Ali Alghail, 2012).

Evidence of the growing importance of English L2 writing is becoming increasingly dominant in both educational programs and in professional writing in non-English dominant countries (Leki, 2001). Academic writing is a much desired skill in tertiary students, however for international students academic writing is often perceived as overwhelming mainly due to students' lack of grammatical and vocabulary competency. In an Arab and Asian context, most students have not engaged in academic discourse in their formal writing courses during secondary school

education, and are often introduced to academic writing at university. Yemeni students may have difficulty adjusting to the various accents of instructors along with their different teaching styles. They may have difficulty understanding class lectures, making them feel reluctant to participate in class discussions. Moreover, they may find test constructions difficult to comprehend, and they may be unfamiliar with testing and grading systems of the university.

1.5 Statement of the Problem

In recent times there has been a rapid increase in the number of Yemeni postgraduate students in Malaysian universities which typically expect international students to submit dissertations in English. This study aims to investigate the academic writing difficulties of Yemeni postgraduate students at five public universities in Malaysia and to provide solutions to these difficulties. Writing is a most difficult skill to practice for both professional writers and postgraduate students.

In most of the Yemeni universities, high school graduates are still accepted to pursue a program, such as English Studies, in spite of their weaknesses in that language. Yemeni learners find it difficult to communicate freely in English. This is what happens in most of the developing nations' universities including those in Arab countries. Khalid (1998) (as cited in Nureen, Kayani, & Jabeen, 2011, p. 287) also noted that the methodology of English taught in our colleges of education need to be developed completely as the level of students at the university level is not satisfactory.

Yemeni students appear to have many problems when writing in English, like not knowing how to organize their ideas, because it is a new experience for them. For students to succeed in a foreign language generally, and writing skills specifically,

they need to surround themselves in a language learning environment but in the case of Yemeni learners, they have little opportunities to use the foreign language in their society. As a result, many problems occur when they study at a university where the medium of instruction is a foreign language like English (Ali Alghail, 2012).

Yemeni students have less exposure to academic English so the English they have does not match the academic writing skill required when they write their thesis and assignments in the research mode or in writing their assignments in the course work or mixed mode programme.

Like any ESL and EFL learners, Arab learners in general and Yemeni learners in particular face many problems in acquiring English. Rababah (2003) emphasized that there were problems of acquiring English among Arab learners because of formal instruction by language teachers who are native speakers of Arabic. Another reason given by Rababah (2003) was the limited opportunities Arab learners have to learn English through natural interaction in English since they only encounter native speakers of English who come to the Arab world as tourists. Hisham (2008) investigated the problems that Arab students of business might have at University Utara Malaysia. He found that those students face problems in vocabulary register, grammar, and referencing.

Yemeni postgraduate students encounter many problems not only in academic writing but also in the four language skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing and the reasons that lie behind these problems are many such as: English is not the mother tongue of the Arab EFL learners, Yemeni learners use Arabic as their formal language of communication, the Yemeni EFL learners' preference for using Arabic in EFL classrooms rather than English, the lack and weakness of the input in

their language teaching context, the lack of Yemeni EFL learners' personal motivation, the inappropriateness and weakness of the English language curricula adopted by some academic institutions, etc.

As a result, and regarding academic writing, Yemeni postgraduate students face problems in relation to vocabulary register, organization of ideas, grammar, spelling, and referencing (Ali Alghail, 2012).

At the postgraduate level, the most crucial academic skill postgraduate students have to develop is academic writing because postgraduate students' performance in written assignments, tests, thesis and examinations is largely evaluated based on the quality of the written texts they produce (Leki & Carson, 1994; Zhu, 2004). Most of studies conducted on international students in Malaysia have stressed the general academic difficulties of international students and one of these difficulties is academic writing that international students face (Kaur & Sidhu 2009).

It is well known that for many international students to study in a new country is associated with several language problems. Some universities around the world have taken steps to help new students to adjust to these problems. For many international students, poor English is a major stress and can create significant problems and barriers when trying to function and succeed in Malaysia (Ali Alghail, 2012).

Yemeni postgraduate students undertaking postgraduate study in Malaysia typically confront particular language difficulties that may affect their academic performance. Some studies on the performance of Arab postgraduate students writing in English in Malaysia such as Hisham (2008) and Al-Khasawneh (2010) investigated the writing difficulties faced by Arab students at Universiti Utara Malaysia. Thus, this study will fill a gap in literature, as all previous studies did not investigate writing difficulties of

Yemeni postgraduate students in Malaysia in particular, but it investigated similar contexts in which English language is a foreign language.

1.6 Objectives of the Study

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To determine English academic writing difficulties experienced by Yemeni postgraduate students at public universities in Malaysia.
2. To find out the causes of academic writing difficulties among Yemeni postgraduate students at public universities in Malaysia.
3. To examine the coping strategies employed by Yemeni postgraduate students to overcome their academic writing difficulties.

1.7 Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the English academic writing difficulties experienced by Yemeni postgraduate students at public universities in Malaysia?
2. What are the causes of academic writing difficulties among Yemeni postgraduate students at public universities in Malaysia?
3. What are the coping strategies employed by Yemeni postgraduate students to overcome their academic writing difficulties?

1.8 Significance of the Study

This study highlights English academic writing difficulties faced by Yemeni postgraduate students at public universities in Malaysia and makes recommendations and generalizations regarding these difficulties. This study by itself is important for educators and policymakers in Yemen and in Malaysia in order to look into these academic writing difficulties faced by these students and also find solutions to such problems.

The findings of this study can contribute to increasing the awareness of the stakeholders for example; it will draw the attention of the policymakers and curriculum designers to provide EFL teachers with suitable teaching facilities that help them to teach writing courses effectively and look into writing difficulties faced by these students and find solutions to such problems.

The study can also help ministry of education in both Malaysia and Yemen by identifying the types of writing difficulties encountered by Yemeni students and help ministries of education in both countries to provide the most effective procedures to solve the academic writing difficulties encountered by Yemeni postgraduate students who come to study in Malaysia. This study will provide a useful feedback for EFL university teachers in Yemen to teach the writing skills and to improve the quality of teaching procedures for teaching writing courses. The findings of this study that are related to the research objectives of this study will help faculty and administrators in Malaysia to provide relevant programmes and services to address the needs and concerns of Yemeni postgraduate students and other international students in respect of the academic writing difficulties which they face.

In addition, this study is also significant because it is better to examine learners' difficulties through gaining insights into students' actual perceptions. This study can also help lectures at public universities in Malaysia to realize the various types of academic writing difficulties encountered by international students in general and Yemeni students in particular.

1.9 Limitations of the Study

The present study has some limitations. First, the respondents in this study were only 65 Yemeni postgraduate students pursuing their M.A and PhD studies at five public universities in Malaysia. Therefore, the results may not be generalized to all international postgraduate students in Malaysia.

Due to the similar educational and cultural backgrounds which Yemeni postgraduate students have, this study focuses only on their academic writing difficulties and the strategies they use to overcome them at five public Malaysian universities. However, the results may very well be generalized to other contexts having similar characteristics. Other contexts can be other Malaysian universities.

1.10 Definitions of Terms

Academic Writing

It refers to writing for academic purposes in which postgraduate students produce different types of academic texts that include research articles, theses, reports and assignments. Academic writing is a term used to refer to “any writing done in college or university, or on tests specifically geared to college entrance” (Hamp-Lyons, 1991, p. 331).

International Students

International students are those students who chose to undertake all or part of their tertiary education in a country other than their own and move to that country for the purpose of studying (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Academic Writing Difficulties

Academic writing difficulties are problems learners encounter in the process of writing academically. It is generally recognized that many second or foreign language learners have difficulties with academic writing in English (Wu & Chen, 2007).

Postgraduate students

In simple terms, a postgraduate student is anyone who is studying a course, including a master's course, an MPhil and a PhD, that requires an undergraduate degree as part of the entry requirements (Collis & Hussey, 2013).

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

Several studies have been done in the field of English academic writing difficulties to identify the common problems of students' writing skill. This chapter sheds light on previous studies and reviews relevant literature.

2.2 Definition of Academic Writing

Academic writing is a mental and cognitive activity, since it is a product of the mind. The image of an individual working alone in a quiet environment has furthered the view of writing as a mental and cognitive activity. However, as has been pointed out, "writing can be understood only from the perspective of a society rather than a single individual" (Burke, 2010). Writing is not only a mirror of one's thought but it contributes newness to established information (Weigle, 2002). Brooks and Grundy (1998) define writing as a tool to communicate ideas in a target language. Hyland (2003) considers writing as a visual print coherently knitted into structured language. An academic English writing course focuses on transition from simple essay writing to more complex and sophisticated exposition organized according to the rhetorical patterns requiring direct quotation and in-text citation. Cohesion is emphasized as its fuller development of ideas through various techniques of support. Writing is arguably the most important language skill at university because students' grades are largely determined by their performance in written assignments, tests and examinations Leki & Carson (1994), Zhu (2004).

In general, academic English writing courses are designed to provide students with the composition and grammar skills necessary to advance to freshmen courses. Tarnopolsky (2005) advocated that academic writing is the most creative writing which needs critical thinking to develop ideas in the target language. Fujioka (2001) surveyed how Asian ESL students acquired academic writing skills. She found Asian students lack critical thinking rather than the lexical problems in writing. Another researcher Izzo (2001) also reported that Japanese students at university level lack organizational feature in their academic writing and these difficulties were due to their translating habit from Japanese to English language in their writing discourses (Hirose, 1998).

2.3 Academic Writing Difficulties

Nowadays, English plays an important role in education and students are expected to communicate effectively in institutions where English is the medium of instruction. Neimat Idris Moh. Saeed Omer (2018) points out that English becomes the international communication since it has successfully dominated the world of globalization. This language spreads automatically and has made big changes over the centuries. As an International language, English has the crucial factor to handle the language instruction in many fields, including education, economics, business, social, culture, and others.

Usaha (2012) agrees that second language (SL) students are influenced by their first language rules that guide them to make errors in their academic writing. According to this, many studies agree that first language is the main factor that affects students' performance in writing. According to Atashian (2018) many studies recommend that teachers should keep in mind many useful ways and strategies to improve students'

writing. Consequently, it is important when teachers help students to succeed in their writing skill by working as one team and that will make a difference in students' performance later.

Writing abilities are a critical part of communication for the students all through their academic life since it permits them to arrange their sentiments and thoughts obviously and additionally to pass on significance through well - developed content. Academic writing appears to be one of the most important, yet a problematic academic ability for university students to learn (Amin Ali Al Mubarak, 2017).

Ibtisam Ali Al Badi (2015) states that besides writing teaching methods, the challenges of academic writing are another concern that has been noticeably considered by scholars. Academic writing is not an easy skill to be achieved especially in a second language. In postgraduate study, students including L2 students are often required to write a thesis and, as a growing literature (e.g. Amin Ali Al Mubarak, 2017; Al Mukdad, 2019) reveals that L2 students often experience difficulties in the writing of this genre.

In the academic context, Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998) point out that the students are required to produce specific writing genres such as essay, summary, critical review, and research paper. However, focus on the distinguishing regularities of structure of different text types can help learners build a repertoire of the organization and the relevant language forms of different genres. It can also make learners aware of the socio-linguistic role that texts play in particular discourse communities. English is a global language (Crystal, 2003). In the globalised higher education sector, English has become even more important (Sidek, 2012). Among English language skills, writing is one of the most important methods of communication (Reigstad, 2008). Writing

proficiency is invaluable to support academic communication and academic performance and success (Stoynoff, 1997 cited in Sidek, 2010). According to Kellogg and Raulerson (2007), effective writing skills are essential for success in higher education. The importance of writing lies in its extensive use in education and in the workplace. In education, writing is the way by which students communicate professionally with instructors and peers, and participate in teaching and learning activities. According to Reigstad (2008), “we acquire knowledge through reading the written word, and we express ourselves to others through the use of the written word”. In the workplace, college graduates should have effective communication and writing skills to be able to manage daily operations, make decisions, and document and report large amounts of complex information (Jones, 1995).

Al-Mukdad in her study (2019) states that knowing any language requires mastering its different skills, and writing is one of the most important amongst other skills because it is clear evidence of being in control of the foreign language. Yet, it is one of the most perplexing skills to many students; they suffer greatly in developing their writing skills which can result in causing many problems in their writing attempts and can develop a negative impact on their overall written output.

For university students of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the ability to write academic text effectively is one of the most important skills required. In Yemen and other Arab countries, English is taught as a foreign language at schools and universities. This only complicates the problem of written English proficiency.

Difficulties encountered by L2 student writers at a wide range of proficiency levels have been the subject of on-going research for more than forty years (Braine, 1989;

Braine, 1995; Hamp-Lyons, 1991; Johns, 1990; Johns, 1993; Johns, 1995). While much attention has been given to identifying difficulties at the sentence and paragraph levels in undergraduate and postgraduate coursework papers, less research has investigated the extent to which these difficulties continue to be problematic for postgraduate L2 students writing a thesis in English. More recently, investigations have begun to examine whether, and the extent to which, such students also experience difficulties in understanding and meeting the genre requirements of the thesis. Research conducted in the past decade indicates that academic writing is the principal source of difficulty for undergraduates and postgraduates (Bhatia & Candlin, 2001; Hyland, 1997; Littlewood & Liu, 1996). The importance and difficulty of writing in English at university are reflected in the emphasis given to academic writing skills in the current study.

In non-Malaysian contexts, studies that have focused on the challenges of L2 students in writing their dissertation/ thesis focus on language-related difficulties at sentence and paragraph levels are survey studies by Casanave and Hubbard (1992), Cooley and Lewkowics (1997) and Dong (1998).

Focusing on 85 supervisors in 28 departments at Stranford University, Casanave and Hubbard (1992) reported that L2 doctoral students usually have more problems at the sentence level (grammatical accuracy and appropriateness, spelling and punctuation accuracy) than at the paragraph level. In Cooley and Lewkowicz's (1997) survey, 26% of the L2 students thought that they had serious difficulties using English. Cooley and Lewkowicz (1997) found that L2 students' major problems were related to organizing ideas and arguments, using the appropriate style of writing and expressing their thoughts clearly in English. In another study, Dong (1998) revealed

that all of the L2 students perceived vocabulary choice as important for expressing ideas and arguments. In addition, Dong indicated that most of the students believed that they have difficulty with grammar and mechanics.

According to Al-Mukdad (2019) students tend to perceive all aspects of academic writing to be difficult. One reason is that they poorly recognize the difference between academic and general English writing due to the lack of background knowledge about writing academically. Another prime reason is attributed to having problems in different linguistic elements even at this supposedly high proficiency level.

Evidence of the growing importance of English L2 writing is becoming increasingly dominant in both educational programs and in professional writing in non-English dominant countries (Leki, 2001). Academic writing is a much desired skill in tertiary students, however for international students, academic writing is often perceived as overwhelming mainly due to students' lack of grammatical and vocabulary competency. In an Arab and Asian context, most students have not engaged in academic discourse in their formal writing courses during secondary school education, and are often introduced to academic writing at university. Ultimately both context and inadequacies of English language proficiency compounds the academic writing difficulties experienced by international students at tertiary levels.

Evans and Green (2007) argue that students may perceive all aspects of academic writing to be difficult. They further argue that while earlier research has confirmed L2 students' perceptions of academic writing as difficult, much of the information presented was at the macro level rather than at the micro level, and the nature of their problems (e.g., problems with cohesion, writing styles, and research planning) was

not discussed. They found that students perceived language-related components of academic writing to be more difficult than structure/content-related components. The former type includes difficulties in communicating ideas ‘appropriately,’ ‘accurately,’ and ‘smoothly,’ while the latter type includes ‘writing the method sections,’ ‘writing references,’ and ‘writing results section.’ This is supported by the results of Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) and Dalsky and Tajino (2007), in which students experienced problems and difficulties in organizing ideas and arguments, using appropriate styles of writing, and expressing thoughts clearly in English. On the other hand, other studies (Marshall, 1991; Kubota, 1998) have demonstrated different results. Marshall (1991), for example, suggests that students may have difficulties with the structure of a paper more often than the language-related components. Kubota (1998) suggests that L2 writing difficulties may be caused by teachers’ instructional emphasis on accuracy at the sentence level rather than on discourse organization.

Atashian (2018) states that writing plays an integral role in English students’ academic life. Background study reveals that ‘grammar’ is one of the most significant challenges concerning students’ academic writing performance and many researchers have thoroughly conducted and investigated grammar difficulties in academic writing that a great number of ESL students face. These difficulties show their impact on students’ performance in writing skills.

Writing is “a complex process” as Al Badi (2015) describes it and according to Al Fadda (2012), “Academic writing in English at advanced levels is a challenge even for most native English speakers”. Academic Writing has a very important role to play in acquiring a foreign language. It includes a number of essential elements such

as critical thinking and self-expression. Also, techniques that involve paraphrasing and summarizing cannot be overlooked in academic writing (Abdulkareem, 2013).

One of the difficulties of writing in a second or additional language is that it is generally believed to require some mastery of writing in the first language. There seems to be a perception that once learners can write sentences and paragraphs in their first language, they will automatically transfer such skills to other languages. However, it has been noted that this may be possible only if a certain degree of proficiency in the first language is attained (Kereni, 2004). Instructors continuously complain about the lack of knowledge and certain skills necessary for academic writing among non-native speakers of English. Some of these skills involve outlining, paraphrasing, and summarizing (Al-Shabanah, 2005). Academic writing often requires students to write from an expert position, even when they do not consider themselves experts on their topics (Tardy, 2010). Essays and related written work provide opportunities for students to demonstrate some of the most demanding learning outcomes; however, students are often more confused about what constitutes a good essay than they are about the criteria for other types of assignments (Elander, Harrington, Norton, Robinson & Reddy, 2006).

The lecturers struggled in their role of assisting international students with academic writing. While they all acknowledged that it was important to offer students assistance in the form of criteria sheets, they also indicated that they found it challenging to give advice to students on academic writing, and regarded themselves as being unclear about what that advice should be (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010). Writing usually suffers from a lack of interaction, which stimulates oral production in conversation (Shafie, Maesin, Osman, Nayan, and Mansor, 2010). Often, in higher

education, writing tasks require students to draw on outside sources and adopt the styles and genres of academic discourse (Tardy, 2010).

Additionally, poor language proficiency remains an issue. Novice writers have particularly poor language proficiency, and, due to this factor, cannot conduct effective discussions in the target language. Teachers, then, have an important role in helping students develop their awareness of the effects of self-mentioning, and enabling them to recognize both the choices available to them and the impact of those choices. With this understanding, our learners will be better able to gain control over their writing and meet the considerable challenges of academic writing in a second language (Hyland, 2002).

2.4 Academic Writing Difficulties of International Students in Malaysia

In postgraduate studies in Malaysia, as pointed out by Baskaran (1983), English plays a vital role in helping to initiate students into the academic community in acquiring not only the language proficiency necessary but the specific genres pertaining to these communities.

International students' mobility has grown considerably over the past 20 years but the pattern has changed dramatically since the 1990s. Other perspectives of some studies lie in the projected increase of the flow of international students in the future as a result of several mega trends in international higher education, particularly in relation to specific developments in the Asia Pacific region.

Recently, there have been detailed research reports from the UK (e.g. the British Council, the Observatory on Higher Education) and Australia (e.g. IDP Education Pty. Ltd.) seeking to provide international students mobility forecasts over the next