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Challenges in Academic English Writing: Evidence from Kazakhstani EMI University

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Abstract: This small-scale research explores the most challenging aspects of the Academic English Writing course experienced by undergraduate students of the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) program within an English-Medium Instruction (EMI) university in Kazakhstan. The study aims to identify the students' difficulties in academic writing and describe key factors contributing to them as well as to develop evidence-based recommendations for improving course design and delivery. Data were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire, which combined multiple-choice and open-ended items addressing students' perceived challenges and underlying causes related to writing structure, coherence, argumentation, and source integration. In addition, the academic writing instructors were interviewed to elicit information on the strategies they used to develop the students' academic literacy. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, version 20, while qualitative responses were examined thematically to capture teachers' perspectives and suggestions for course enhancement. The findings reveal recurrent challenges in critical thinking, academic vocabulary use, and adherence to academic conventions—issues that are often intensified by the EMI context and limited prior exposure to academic discourse in English. Teachers similarly emphasize the need for earlier and extended writing instruction, integration of practical assignments, and adaptive pedagogical approaches to meet EMI students' academic and professional needs. Based on the results, practical recommendations are proposed for writing instructors, curriculum developers, and program coordinators to strengthen academic writing support within EMI-based teacher education programs.

Keywords: Academic Writing; English Medium Instruction; Challenges; Higher Education

1. Introduction

Writing is widely recognized as one of the most demanding skills for foreign and second language learners to develop [1–5]. Upon entering the academic environment, university students encounter new challenges as they are expected to produce written work in a formal academic register. Academic writing (AW) poses particular difficulties for learners from non-Anglicized linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including Asian students, who may not have been exposed to Anglo-American academic conventions [6–8]. As defined by Morley-Warner [9], academic writing is a formal mode of communication that requires the ability to construct well-organized arguments using advanced grammar, precise vocabulary, and complex syntactic structures. It is also a cognitively demanding process that involves careful thought, discipline, and sustained concentration [10].

In the context of Kazakhstan, research on academic writing remains limited, despite the growing emphasis on English proficiency within the national trilingual education policy. Although English is introduced from the early grades, many Kazakhstani EFL learners continue to struggle with written expression in academic contexts.

Existing studies have primarily examined writing difficulties among secondary school students [11] or focused on improving academic skills through specific teaching methods such as the Callan approach [12]. However, few studies have investigated academic writing challenges and their underlying factors at the tertiary level, particularly within English-Medium Instruction (EMI) environments.

Given the increasing implementation of EMI programs in Kazakhstani higher education, universities across the country incorporated Academic Writing courses (AWC) in their curricula to assist students in developing academic writing skills. To enhance the students' positive outcomes, it is essential to understand their perceptions of the AWC, their challenges in AWC and factors behind them.

Therefore, this study aims to:

- 1) Identify the students' attitudes towards AWC and its attributes as well as perceptions of their own AW proficiency;
- 2) Explore the most challenging aspects of academic writing and key factors contributing to these difficulties from the perspectives of students and academic writing instructors;
- 3) Identify the correlation between the students' satisfaction with AWC and their perceptions of AW challenges;
- 4) Identify the correlation between the overall AW course rating and the perceived quality of its attributes.

1.1. Understanding Academic Writing in English-Medium Contexts: Definitions and Key Features

Academic writing is distinct from other forms of written communication due to its unique combination of complexity, responsibility, formality, objectivity, explicitness, accuracy, hedging, and evaluative stance [13–16]. Despite the extensive body of literature devoted to this area, there is no single universally accepted definition of academic writing, as linguistic, disciplinary, and cultural factors influence it. In this paper, academic writing is understood as a complex cognitive process that involves the ability to critically analyze, synthesize, and communicate information in a structured, coherent, and logical manner. It is closely related to broader notions of academic literacy, which require *“higher-order thinking: conceptualizing, inferring, inventing, and testing”* [17]. As Korotkina asserts, *“academic writing is mostly about communicating knowledge through clear, coherent, economical, and effective argumentation supported by relevant evidence, regardless of the language used to deliver the argument”* [18].

According to Swales and Feak, academic writing is *“a product of many considerations: audience, purpose, organization, style, flow, and presentation”* [16]. Its formal and detached nature is often reflected in the avoidance of personal pronouns, the preference for passive constructions, and the exclusion of emotional or affective vocabulary [19]. Taken together, these characteristics highlight academic writing as both a mental and cognitive activity, representing a disciplined intellectual process and *“a product of the mind”* [8].

In EMI contexts, such as those increasingly implemented in Kazakhstani higher education, mastering these features presents additional challenges. Students are required not only to demonstrate academic literacy but also to operate in a non-native language, often without full familiarity with Anglo-academic discourse conventions. Moreover, students have to engage with subject-specific content in English and complete rather demanding tasks that necessitates the academic writing competence. Thus, the success in EMI program is directly linked to their academic writing skills. Therefore, understanding the defining features of academic writing is essential for addressing the challenges emerged in AWC by developing effective teaching strategies and supporting students' academic achievements within EMI environments.

1.2. Common Difficulties in Academic Writing

Research conducted in non-Anglophone EFL and ESL settings indicates that students' difficulties in academic writing (AW) tend to be similar across contexts. Based on a review of the literature, these difficulties can be broadly categorized into two main types: language-specific (linguistic) and academic literacy-related (meta-linguistic) challenges—a distinction that, to the best of our knowledge, has not been explicitly formulated before.

Linguistic difficulties concern language use and surface-level accuracy. They include problems with paraphrasing, summarizing, morphology (tense choice, subject–verb agreement, articles, and prepositions), syntax (sentence structure, word order, use of linking words), and punctuation. In contrast, meta-linguistic difficulties relate to higher-order aspects of academic discourse such as adherence to academic style conventions, hedging, citational patterns, information organization, evaluation and critique, appropriate academic vocabulary, and overall coher-

ence and cohesion.

Tang further highlights the role of psychological or mindset-related issues, which can also be viewed as meta-linguistic [7]. These stem from students' previous educational traditions where the emphasis was primarily on knowledge reproduction rather than on critical and analytical thinking. In such cases, students face not only linguistic barriers but also the cognitive challenge of adapting to the expectations of academic argumentation and critique.

A large body of research on academic writing conducted in the Arab world has primarily focused on linguistic issues rather than academic style or rhetorical conventions [20–23]. For instance, Abdulkareem identified common problems such as limited vocabulary, spelling mistakes, difficulties in expressing ideas, and organizing paragraphs [20]. Similarly, Al Mubarak reported that undergraduate students encountered challenges with articles, prepositions, verb tense, pluralization, punctuation, and sentence consistency [23].

By contrast, studies that explore meta-linguistic aspects highlight challenges related to academic style, argument structure, and critical engagement. Manjet Kaur [4] reported students' difficulties with writing literature reviews and presenting findings using appropriate academic conventions, while Sri Rezeki [24] observed incorrect citation and insufficient critical thinking in student research proposals. Likewise, research from post-Soviet contexts reveals that problems often arise from unfamiliarity with academic style and rhetoric rather than from purely linguistic errors [25–28].

The reasons behind these persistent challenges are diverse. Merkulova [3] classifies them into several groups: (1) those rooted in the Soviet-era lingua-didactic tradition of foreign language teaching; (2) those connected with the relatively low prestige of research activity among both students and teachers; and (3) those specific to institutional contexts. Other researchers emphasize the inherent complexity of academic writing itself, as well as the differences between international and local academic conventions. Korotkina [2] argues that many difficulties stem from the deficiency of meta-linguistic knowledge in producing academic writing which can be considered as a social practice. Similarly, Nikolenko et al. identify "native language interference, the lack of English academic writing knowledge, and insufficient English grammar" as major sources of error [29].

In the Kazakhstani context, where English is taught as a foreign language and EMI is increasingly adopted in higher education, the Academic Writing Course (AWC) has been introduced relatively recently. However, scholarly attention to students' specific writing challenges remains limited. Ismagulova et al. examined the level of academic writing skills among TEFL students and highlighted the need to strengthen academic literacy through specialized courses [30]. Another study focused on graduate EMI students' academic reading and writing challenges [31]. Having examined Master's and PhD students' experiences in EMI programs, the local researchers identified the difficulties of personal-psychological and sociological nature. While both studies contributed to understanding the broader context of academic writing instruction, they did not focus on identifying the specific linguistic and meta-linguistic challenges undergraduate EMI students face.

To achieve desirable results, EMI students are expected to demonstrate disciplinary knowledge in academic English that requires both linguistic and subject-specific competence. Academic Writing Course is intended to assist them in mastering written academic genres to succeed in other subjects. However, many students face significant challenges in completing written assignments that further might hinder the overall performance of students in other EMI courses.

Therefore, there is a clear need to systematically identify and analyze the difficulties experienced by Kazakhstani university students in academic writing within EMI programs. Understanding these challenges and their underlying causes is a crucial first step toward developing effective pedagogical strategies and curriculum innovations that can enhance students' academic writing competence and support their success in EMI environments.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of the present study is grounded in the three models of student writing proposed by Lea and Street: the Study Skills Model, the Academic Socialization Model, and the Academic Literacies Model [32]. Together, these models provide a comprehensive lens for understanding the nature and sources of students' academic writing challenges, particularly within EMI contexts. The Study Skills Model emphasizes the formal features of written academic language, such as grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, and vocabulary use. It views writing difficulties primarily as surface-level linguistic problems that can be addressed through explicit instruction

and practice. The Academic Socialization Model, on the other hand, focuses on students' induction into the specific genres, discourses, and epistemological practices of their disciplines. It highlights the importance of understanding the conventions and communicative norms of academic communities, recognizing that writing is not merely a skill but also a process of social and cognitive development within a disciplinary culture. The Academic Literacies Model integrates and extends the previous two. It conceptualizes writing as a socially situated practice shaped by institutional policies, pedagogical approaches, and broader academic values. This model underscores the interrelationship between language use, identity, power, and institutional expectations, suggesting that students' writing difficulties often reflect tensions between institutional demands and their prior learning experiences.

Taken together, these three models provide a useful analytical framework for the current study. They help explain the origins of students' academic writing challenges, ranging from difficulties in language use (Study Skills) to challenges in adopting disciplinary conventions (Academic Socialization) and broader institutional influences on writing development (Academic Literacies). Within the EMI context of Kazakhstani higher education, the Academic Literacies Model is particularly relevant, as it accounts for how teaching strategies, syllabus design, curriculum requirements, and institutional language policies collectively shape students' academic writing competence. Therefore, the framework adapted from Lea and Street's (1998) models offers an appropriate theoretical basis for analyzing the factors underlying students' academic writing difficulties and for proposing context-sensitive pedagogical improvements.

In view of the theoretical framework discussed above and in accordance with the research aims, the current study seeks to address the following research questions:

- 1) How do students rate their academic writing proficiency and the attributes of the Academic Writing Course (AWC)?
- 2) What are students' perceptions of academic writing difficulties and the factors underlying them?
- 3) What are teachers' perceptions of their students' academic writing challenges and the factors contributing to these challenges?

Based on these questions, the study formulates the following hypotheses:

H1. *There is a positive correlation between students' satisfaction with the Academic Writing Course and their perceptions of academic writing challenges.*

H2. *There is a positive correlation between the overall course rating and the perceived quality of its attributes.*

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study employed an explanatory mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' and teachers' perceptions of the AWC within an EMI university.

The quantitative component involved administering a semi-structured questionnaire to undergraduate students to identify the most challenging aspects of academic writing and the factors contributing to them. The qualitative component, consisting of semi-structured interviews with AWC instructors, complemented the survey findings by providing contextualized insights into teaching practices, course design, and institutional factors influencing students' academic writing development.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee (Approval No.10). All participants were informed of the voluntary nature of participation and assured of confidentiality.

2.2. Context of the Study and Course Description

The AWC is a core component of the TEFL program at Kazakhstani universities. The course aims to develop students' academic literacy and equip them with the skills required to write diploma projects, master's theses, and PhD dissertations. Offered in the third year of study as a pre-requisite for the Research Methods course, AWC runs for one semester, comprising three academic hours per week (45 h in total).

2.3. Participants

A total of 89 undergraduate students and five AWC teachers from the Department of Language Education participated in the study. Convenience sampling was employed due to accessibility [33]. Students: 85.4% female, aged between 19 and 23 years. The majority (93.3%) identified as Kazakh, with smaller numbers of Russian, Uzbek, Uyghur, and Azerbaijani students (**Table 1** below):

Table 1. Student participants.

| Demographics | Sub-Categories | N | % |
|--------------|----------------|----|-------|
| Gender | Male | 13 | 14.6% |
| | Female | 76 | 85.4% |
| | Kazakh | 83 | 93.3% |
| Nationality | Russian | 2 | 2.2% |
| | Uzbek | 2 | 2.24% |
| | Uyghur | 1 | 1.1% |
| | Azerbaijani | 1 | 1.1% |

Teachers: Five instructors (2 male, 3 female) teaching the AWC were interviewed at the end of the Spring 2024 term to obtain complementary qualitative data (**Appendix B**).

2.4. Instruments

2.4.1. Questionnaire

The student questionnaire was adapted based on prior research [1,5,8,20] and piloted before administration. It consisted of three sections: perceived academic proficiency and course satisfaction; difficulties in language use and academic style; factors contributing to academic writing challenges (**Appendix A**). The Likert-scale items (1 = most difficult, 5 = easiest) were grouped into two clusters: Language Use (LU): paraphrasing, summarizing, morphology, syntax, and punctuation; Academic Style (AS): hedging, citation, information grouping, evaluation, academic vocabulary, and organization. The responses were analysed via SPSS, version 29.0.0.0 (241), through descriptive (means, frequencies, standard deviations) and inferential statistics (Pearson correlations) to test hypotheses on relationships between course satisfaction, perceived proficiency, and course attributes. Reliability of the questionnaire items was validated by calculating Cronbach's alpha (**Table 2** below):

Table 2. Reliability of the students' questionnaire.

| Questionnaire's Cluster | N of Items | Cronbach's Alpha Value |
|---|------------|------------------------|
| Students' agreement with course attributes | 7 | 0.900 |
| Difficulty levels of issues (Language Use and Academic Style) | 13 | 0.808 |

2.4.2. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with AWC instructors to gain deeper insights into students' challenges, instructional practices, and curriculum design in EMI settings (see **Appendix B**). The interview protocol was developed based on key issues identified in the literature, including difficulties with paraphrasing, summarizing, academic vocabulary use, and citation conventions. Each interview lasted approximately 30–40 min, was audio-recorded with participants' consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis.

3. Results

This section presents the quantitative and qualitative findings of the study. The results are organized into four major subsections: (1) student perceptions of academic writing proficiency and course satisfaction, (2) challenges in language use and academic style, (3) factors contributing to writing difficulties and preferred assignments, and (4) qualitative insights from instructors. The mixed-methods analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of students' experiences and instructors' perspectives on academic writing instruction within an EMI context.

3.1. Students' Perceptions of Academic Writing Proficiency and Course Satisfaction

Table 3 below presents students' self-assessments of their academic writing proficiency and overall satisfaction with the AWC. The majority of respondents evaluated both their writing proficiency and the course quality positively, with most ratings falling between Good and Very Good. The mean scores of 3.44 (SD = 0.852) for self-assessed proficiency and 3.74 (SD = 0.983) for course satisfaction indicate a generally favourable perception of both their own abilities and the effectiveness of the course. The slightly higher variability in the course rating suggests that while most students were satisfied, individual experiences varied, possibly reflecting differences in engagement levels or instructional approaches across groups:

Table 3. Student Ratings on academic writing proficiency and course satisfaction.

| Question Item | Poor | Fair | Good | Very Good | Excellent | Mean | SD |
|---|------|------|-------|-----------|-----------|------|-------|
| How would you rate your academic writing proficiency? | 2.2% | 9% | 39.3% | 41.6% | 7.9% | 3.44 | 0.852 |
| What overall rating would you give for the Academic Writing course? | 2.2% | 9% | 23.6% | 42.7% | 22.5% | 3.74 | 0.983 |

Table 4 below summarizes students' levels of agreement with specific course attributes. The results reveal consistently high levels of satisfaction with course clarity, delivery, and organization. The highest mean scores were reported for clarity of course objectives (M = 4.12, SD = 0.766) and students' comfort in voicing opinions in class (M = 4.12, SD = 0.963), indicating a supportive and transparent learning environment. Course materials (M = 4.06, SD = 0.831) and assignment appropriateness (M = 4.11, SD = 0.897) also received strong agreement, underscoring the perceived pedagogical alignment of course content and tasks.

Table 4. Student agreement with course attributes.

| Question Item: Please, Indicate Your Level of Agreement with the Following Statements | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neither Agree nor Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree | Mean | SD | Level of Agreement |
|---|-------------------|----------|----------------------------|-------|----------------|------|-------|--------------------|
| The course objectives were clear | 1.1% | 2.2% | 10.1% | 56.2% | 30.3% | 4.12 | 0.766 | high |
| The course materials were clear and well delivered | 2.2% | 1.1% | 14.6% | 52.8% | 29.2% | 4.06 | 0.831 | high |
| The assignments were appropriate for the level of this class | 2.2% | 3.4% | 11.2% | 47.2% | 36.0% | 4.11 | 0.897 | high |
| The course increased my interest in the subject | 5.6% | 10.1% | 25.8% | 29.2% | 29.2% | 3.66 | 1.167 | moderate |
| The course corresponded to my expectations | 1.1% | 6.7% | 13.5% | 36.0% | 42.7% | 3.81 | 0.999 | high |
| I felt comfortable with voicing my opinion in class. | 1.1% | 6.7% | 13.5% | 36% | 42.7% | 4.12 | 0.963 | high |
| The homework assignments were useful to understand the material. | 2.2% | 9.0% | 11.2% | 42.7% | 34.8% | 3.99 | 1.017 | high |

However, students demonstrated a comparatively moderate level of agreement that the course increased their interest in the subject (M = 3.66, SD = 1.167), suggesting room for more engaging, discipline-relevant tasks or applied projects. Although homework assignments were regarded as useful for understanding the material (M = 3.99, SD = 1.017), the slightly higher standard deviation may indicate variability in workload management or perceptions of task relevance. Overall, these results demonstrate that the AWC was well-received, particularly regarding its structure and instructional clarity, though fostering intrinsic motivation remains an area for improvement.

Table 5 below presents the Pearson correlation matrix examining relationships between students' overall course ratings and individual course attributes. The findings reveal strong and statistically significant positive correlations between the overall course rating and all measured attributes ($p < 0.001$). This suggests that as students' perceptions of course features improve, their overall satisfaction correspondingly increases. The strongest correlations were observed between overall course rating and the course's correspondence to expectations ($r = 0.632$), clarity of materials ($r = 0.575$), and the extent to which the course increased interest in the subject ($r = 0.577$).

These results indicate that student satisfaction with AWC is most strongly influenced by how well the course meets their expectations and engages them intellectually. Moderate to strong correlations with assignment appropriateness ($r = 0.497$) and clarity of objectives ($r = 0.465$) further highlight the importance of transparent course design and task relevance in enhancing learners' overall experience. All relationships are statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), reinforcing the robustness of these associations and supporting the hypothesis that course satisfaction is positively linked to perceptions of course quality and design.

Table 5. Pearson correlation matrix for overall course rating and its attributes.

| Question Items | | What Overall Rating Would You Give for the Academic Writing Course? | The Course Objectives Were Clear | The Course Materials Were Clear and Well Delivered | The Assignments Were Appropriate for the Level of This Class | The Course Increased My Interest in the Subject | The Course Corresponded to My Expectations | I Felt Comfortable with Voicing My Opinion in Class |
|--|-----------------|---|----------------------------------|--|--|---|--|---|
| The course objectives were clear | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.465** <0.001 | -- | | | | | |
| The course materials were clear and well delivered | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.575** <0.001 | 0.685** <0.001 | -- | | | | |
| The assignments were appropriate for the level of this class | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.497** <0.001 | 0.409** <0.001 | 0.525** <0.001 | -- | | | |
| The course increased my interest in the subject | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.577** <0.001 | 0.543** <0.001 | 0.723** <0.001 | 0.449** <0.001 | -- | | |
| The course corresponded to my expectations | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.632** <0.001 | 0.685** <0.001 | 0.684** <0.001 | 0.544** <0.001 | 0.685** <0.001 | -- | |
| I felt comfortable with voicing my opinion in class. | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.346** <0.001 | 0.518** <0.001 | 0.531** <0.001 | 0.431** <0.001 | 0.391** <0.001 | 0.592** <0.001 | -- |
| The homework assignments were useful to understand the material. | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.497** <0.001 | 0.600** <0.001 | 0.593** <0.001 | 0.624** <0.001 | 0.485** <0.001 | 0.759** <0.001 | 0.616** <0.001 |

Note: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

3.2. Challenges in Language Use and Academic Style

To better understand the specific areas in which students experience challenges during the AWC in EMI context, quantitative data were analyzed across two key dimensions: language use and academic style. **Tables 6** and **7** below summarize the frequency distributions, mean scores, and standard deviations for each category, highlighting the relative difficulty levels perceived by the participants.

Table 6. Frequencies and mean averages of the difficulty levels of issues in language use.

| Question Item: What Issues Have You Found the Most Difficult or Easy in the Course? | The Easiest | Easy | Neither Difficult nor Easy | Difficult | The Most Difficult | Mean | SD | Level of Agreement |
|--|-------------|-------|----------------------------|-----------|--------------------|------|-------|--------------------|
| Paraphrasing | 10.1% | 37.1% | 31.5% | 18.0% | 3.4% | 2.67 | 0.997 | moderate |
| Summarising | 4.5% | 49.4% | 27.0% | 18.0% | 1.1% | 2.62 | 0.873 | moderate |
| Morphological issues: tense choice, subject-verb agreement, articles, prepositions, etc. | 7.9% | 27.0% | 31.5% | 28.1% | 5.6% | 2.97 | 1.049 | moderate |
| Syntactic issues: sentence structure, word order, linking elements | 7.9% | 29.2% | 31.5% | 25.8% | 5.6% | 2.92 | 1.047 | moderate |
| Punctuation (use of commas, semicolons, etc.) | 13.5% | 22.5% | 30.3% | 20.2% | 13.5% | 2.98 | 1.234 | moderate |

Table 7. Frequencies and mean averages of the difficulty levels of issues in academic style.

| Question Item: What Issues Have You Found the Most Difficult or Easy in the Course? | The Easiest | Easy | Neither Difficult nor Easy (or Uncertain) | Difficult | The Most Difficult | Mean | SD | Level of Agreement |
|---|-------------|-------|---|-----------|--------------------|------|-------|--------------------|
| Hedging (cautious language) | 3.4% | 28.1% | 44.9% | 20.2% | 3.4% | 2.92 | 0.869 | moderate |
| Integrating sources (quoting) | 3.4% | 31.5% | 27.0% | 28.1% | 10.1% | 3.10 | 1.066 | moderate |
| Grouping information | 2.2% | 28.1% | 42.7% | 23.6% | 3.4% | 2.98 | 0.866 | moderate |
| Critical thinking (expressing your voice) | 4.5% | 36.0% | 31.5% | 23.6% | 4.5% | 2.88 | 0.975 | moderate |
| Using appropriate academic vocabulary | 3.4% | 28.1% | 29.2% | 33.7% | 5.6% | 3.10 | 0.989 | moderate |
| Text organization (structure) | 2.2% | 32.6% | 38.2% | 20.2% | 6.7% | 2.97 | 0.947 | moderate |
| Using citation patterns (narrative, parenthetical) | 7.9% | 20.2% | 37.1% | 20.2% | 14.6% | 3.13 | 1.140 | moderate |
| Being formal (avoiding I, we, contractions, direct questions, etc.) | 15.7% | 22.5% | 37.1% | 14.6% | 10.1% | 2.81 | 1.176 | moderate |

Table 6 summarizes students' perceptions of difficulty regarding specific issues in language use during the Academic Writing Course (AWC). The findings reveal that all listed aspects were perceived as moderately difficult,

suggesting that while students did not experience severe difficulties, they still encountered consistent challenges in core linguistic areas. Among the items, paraphrasing ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 0.997$) and summarizing ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 0.873$) were rated as moderately challenging, indicating that students struggled to reformulate and condense information without losing meaning or risking plagiarism—skills essential in academic discourse. Morphological issues, such as tense choice, subject-verb agreement, and article usage ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.049$), and syntactic issues ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.047$) involving sentence structure and word order, were also perceived as moderately difficult, suggesting that many learners face challenges in producing structurally accurate academic sentences. Finally, punctuation ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.234$) received a similar difficulty rating, reflecting uncertainty in the application of academic conventions such as commas and semicolons. The overall moderate difficulty levels across these dimensions highlight the need for systematic reinforcement of grammatical accuracy and sentence cohesion in the AWC curriculum, especially within EMI (English-Medium Instruction) contexts where linguistic precision supports disciplinary learning:

Table 7 presents students' evaluations of difficulties encountered in academic style conventions, including features such as hedging, source integration, critical thinking, and text organization. Across all items, students reported moderate difficulty levels, indicating general awareness of academic norms but inconsistent mastery in their application. Among stylistic elements, using appropriate academic vocabulary ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.989$) and integrating sources through quotation and citation ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.066$) emerged as the most challenging areas. This reflects students' struggles with selecting discipline-appropriate lexical choices and embedding external sources accurately within their own arguments. Similarly, using citation patterns ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.140$) and text organization ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 0.947$) were rated as moderately difficult, suggesting that academic conventions, particularly those involving structural and referencing norms, require further pedagogical emphasis. In contrast, hedging ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 0.869$) and grouping information ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.866$) were perceived as relatively manageable, implying partial familiarity with strategies for expressing cautious claims and logical information sequencing. However, critical thinking and authorial voice ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 0.975$) remained a notable area of concern, indicating challenges in developing an independent academic stance—a key skill in EMI university contexts. Furthermore, maintaining formal tone ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.176$) was also problematic for some students, with over one-third indicating difficulty in avoiding personal pronouns, contractions, and conversational language:

Overall, these findings suggest that while students possess a foundational awareness of academic style, they still require structured instruction and practice to internalize formal academic conventions and demonstrate an autonomous, critically engaged writing voice. For EMI universities, this reinforces the need to scaffold stylistic and rhetorical competence through explicit modeling, feedback, and discipline-relevant writing practice.

3.3. Factors Contributing to Writing Difficulties

To further explore the underlying causes of students' challenges and identify the most beneficial instructional practices, a frequency analysis was conducted on two dimensions: (1) factors contributing to difficulties, and (2) types of writing assignments perceived as most useful. The results are presented in **Tables 8** and **9** below.

Table 8. Frequency analysis of the factors that caused the difficulties during the AWC.

| Factors | Responses | | Percent of Cases |
|---|-----------|---------|------------------|
| | N | Percent | |
| Influence of L1 (mother tongue) | 30 | 12.4% | 33.7% |
| Influence of other foreign language | 9 | 3.7% | 10.1% |
| Insufficient knowledge of style conventions | 29 | 12.0% | 32.6% |
| Insufficient theoretical background | 30 | 12.4% | 33.7% |
| Poor training (teacher's strategies and methods) | 22 | 9.1% | 24.7% |
| Absence of writing courses in previous years of study | 44 | 18.2% | 49.4% |
| Lack of practice in the course | 47 | 19.4% | 52.8% |
| Lack of motivation and interest to study the course | 31 | 12.8% | 34.8% |
| Total | 242 | 100% | 271.9% |

Table 8 summarizes the frequency analysis of the key factors contributing to students' difficulties in the AWC. The data indicate that the most frequently cited issues include the absence of prior writing courses, lack of practice, and insufficient theoretical background, each accounting for approximately 18–20% of responses. Other notable

factors include the influence of the mother tongue (L1), insufficient knowledge of style conventions, and the influence of other foreign languages, reported by roughly 10–13% of respondents. In addition, poor training, linked to instructional methods and teacher strategies, was mentioned by about 9%, while lack of motivation and interest appeared in 13% of cases. These findings suggest that both curriculum design and pedagogical approaches play a substantial role in shaping students' experiences and performance in the course:

Table 9. Writing assignments.

| Assignments | Responses | | Percent of Cases |
|--|-----------|---------|------------------|
| | N | Percent | |
| Paraphrasing the informal text to formal | 51 | 24.4% | 57.3% |
| Using citation patterns | 53 | 25.4% | 59.6% |
| Synthesis essay | 31 | 14.8% | 34.8% |
| Annotated bibliography | 20 | 9.6% | 22.5% |
| Literature review | 54 | 25.8% | 60.7% |
| Total | 209 | 100% | 234.8% |

Table 9 illustrates students' perceptions of the most beneficial writing assignments in improving their academic writing competence. The results reveal that literature reviews, using citation patterns, and paraphrasing informal text into formal style were regarded as the most valuable tasks, each constituting around 25–26% of responses. These assignments likely provided students with direct opportunities to practice academic conventions, strengthen source integration skills, and develop formal academic style. In contrast, synthesis essays (15%) and annotated bibliographies (10%) were perceived as less helpful, possibly due to their higher cognitive and structural demands.

Taken together, these findings underscore the need for a more scaffolded and systematic approach to teaching academic writing at EMI universities in Kazakhstan.

3.4. Teachers' Perceptions

A thematic analysis of responses from five AW instructors, conducted using Attride-Stirling's [34] thematic network approach, revealed key insights into the challenges and pedagogical strategies shaping academic writing instruction in the EMI university context. This analytical framework allowed for the systematic organization of data into global, organizing, and basic themes, thereby facilitating a comprehensive understanding of both issues and solutions (**Table 10** below).

A major global theme emerging from the data concerned student engagement challenges, primarily linked to motivational factors. Teachers consistently reported a lack of motivation among students, describing limited willingness to engage with writing tasks. This lack of engagement was frequently attributed to students' perceptions of academic writing as irrelevant or overly scientific. Many believed they already possessed sufficient writing skills, leading to an underestimation of the course's importance and a misalignment between student expectations and the intended learning outcomes.

Another global theme identified was the need for curricular relevance and alignment with students' academic and professional goals. Teachers emphasized that academic writing instruction should extend beyond linguistic skills, integrating tasks that prepare students for research-oriented and professional communication. Instructors noted that strengthening the connection between the AWC and subsequent modules, such as Research Methods, would better equip students for future scholarly and professional writing demands.

Language and communication barriers also emerged as a significant theme. Teachers reported persistent difficulties among students in mastering academic vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, alongside challenges in maintaining coherence and cohesion in writing. The complexity of academic English, compounded by limited exposure to academic discourse in earlier stages of study, was highlighted as a key obstacle. Moreover, issues related to academic integrity, such as improper citation, plagiarism, and limited understanding of research conventions, were noted as continuing concerns that require systematic attention and reinforcement through explicit instruction.

Table 10. Extracted themes from AW teachers' responses.

| Global Themes | Organising Themes | Basic Themes | Examples of Quotes |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|--|---|
| Student Engagement Challenges | Motivational Challenges | Lack of student motivation | "I think the main problem is a lack of motivation because they are not willing or planning to write any type of papers" (Teacher #1) |
| | | Perception of irrelevance of academic writing | "Most of them, they think that they already know how to write essays...they do not see the purpose of that" (Teacher #1) |
| | | Underestimation of academic writing importance | "Generally, the students don't like academic writing because they think that this is very scientific and they will not use it in future" (Teacher #5) |
| | Curricular Relevance | Alignment with professional and academic needs | "Academic writing, as you know, we do not teach English, just English...we try to train our students how to write academically" (Teacher #3) |
| | | Integration with future coursework | "I think like writing the short literature review, because the next lesson that they are going to have on the second semester, or they, now they have that lesson..." (Teacher #1) |
| Language and Communication Skills | Language Barriers | Practical applications of writing skills | "They need to improve their understanding of some research methods as well, I think." (Teacher #2) |
| | | English proficiency issues | "They are not experienced in using academic language or writing academic texts." (Teacher #2) |
| | | Academic language complexity | "The main predominant feature is to teach our students how to use headdresses, boosters, and how to write academically." (Teacher #4) |
| | Academic Integrity | Problems with grammar and syntax | "Sentence structure, word order, linking words, punctuation, all of them are language use." (Teacher #3) |
| | | Emphasis on proper citation | "They were taught how to cite properly and how to reference properly according to the APA 7 style." (Teacher #4) |
| | | Plagiarism avoidance | "The focus is on the supporting information that students are going to use in their writing and mostly how to write down more reliable essays." (Teacher #1) |
| Teaching and Learning Strategies | Pedagogical Methods | Teaching research methods | "And they also need to improve their understanding of some research methods as well, I think." (Teacher #2) |
| | | Use of collaborative learning | "One assignment focused on writing a collaborative research paper where they had to work collaboratively with the peers." (Teacher #2) |
| | | Peer teaching and workshops | "The students were provided a list of topics related to academic writing and as a group they conducted a workshop to each other." (Teacher #5) |
| | Technological Impacts | Seminar and practical exercises | "Firstly, we review on what we learned during the lecture time. Then, for example, if there was a topic sentence, so firstly, we review the theoretical part, then I give some exercises." (Teacher #1) |
| | | Dependence on digital tools and AI | "And because we have these artificial intelligence tools, it worsens the situation." (Teacher #1) |
| | | Effects on student writing habits | "Nowadays everything is digital, electronic and our students, new generations, are not patient enough to be able to sit on their chair in front of the table and write." (Teacher #3) |
| | | Challenges with maintaining academic integrity | "The main struggle of our students was in completing the literature review task, since the students know how to paraphrase and summarize, but they were still struggling how to synthesize these materials." (Teacher #4) |

The thematic analysis also revealed that instructors are experimenting with innovative pedagogical approaches to mitigate these challenges. Strategies such as collaborative writing, peer-led workshops, and seminar-style practical exercises were reported to enhance student engagement and comprehension. Nonetheless, the growing reliance on digital and AI-based tools emerged as a double-edged sword. While these tools facilitate access to resources and assist with writing mechanics, they have also led to superficial engagement with content, reduced writing fluency, and increased risks of academic dishonesty. Teachers voiced concerns that excessive dependence on AI paraphrasing tools undermines deep learning and critical thinking.

In summary, both quantitative and qualitative findings reveal that, while students generally express positive perceptions of the AWC, they face persistent difficulties with language proficiency, academic style, and motivation. Teachers similarly emphasize the need for earlier and extended writing instruction, integration of practical assignments, and adaptive pedagogical approaches to meet EMI students' academic and professional needs.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This small-scale study has shed light on the challenges faced by Kazakhstani students in mastering academic writing in EMI context. The research identified a range of difficulties students encounter, examined the factors

contributing to these challenges, and proposed recommendations to improve the course content and delivery. Although the limited sample size restricts the generalizability of the findings, the results nonetheless offer valuable insights into the current state of academic writing instruction in Kazakhstani higher education.

A review of the literature confirmed that academic writing poses persistent challenges for students learning English as a second or foreign language. Despite its significance, there remains a notable scarcity of research on this topic in Kazakhstan. Therefore, replicating the study on a larger scale with a more diverse participant pool would enhance the validity and reliability of the findings.

The results of the present research revealed that most TEFL students experienced difficulties both in language use and academic style. The most problematic areas in language use included paraphrasing scientific texts and summarizing main ideas, which is consistent with the findings of Abdulkareem [20] and Al Mubarak [23]. Difficulties in academic style were most evident in using citational patterns, choosing appropriate academic vocabulary, and expressing critical evaluation. These meta-linguistic challenges were also reported to be difficult in the studies of Rezeki [24], Manjet Kaur [4] and Tajik et al. [31].

Two major contributing factors were identified: the absence of prior writing courses and insufficient knowledge of academic style conventions. These findings point to gaps in both theoretical and practical training, emphasizing the need to strengthen academic writing instruction and provide systematic exposure to scientific writing conventions earlier in the TEFL curriculum. Similar suggestions were given by Abdulkareem [20], who pointed out that writing instructors should focus on “daily writing practice” (p. 1557), involving such activities as brainstorming, mind-mapping, discussions, group works.

Overall, the study underscores the necessity of curriculum revision within the TEFL program to ensure that academic writing instruction is better aligned with students’ needs and professional goals. While this investigation represents only a small step toward understanding a broader issue, it opens up important directions for future inquiry. The authors hope that this research will encourage further, more extensive studies on academic writing in Kazakhstan and contribute to the development of more effective pedagogical approaches to teaching academic writing to EFL students at EMI universities.

5. Recommendations and Pedagogical Implications

Drawing on the findings, several recommendations are proposed for program coordinators, curriculum developers, and EFL instructors involved in academic writing instruction. First, for curriculum planners, the AWC should be offered earlier as a prerequisite to the Research Methods course. This sequencing would equip students with essential writing foundations before engaging in research-based tasks. Extending the AWC to two semesters would also allow instructors to address both linguistic accuracy and stylistic conventions, offering more time for practice and feedback on challenging areas.

In addition, writing-focused courses should be introduced from the first year to build a consistent progression of writing skills throughout the TEFL program. A balanced curriculum integrating academic and subject-specific competencies would ensure that students develop proficiency across diverse academic genres. To maintain curriculum relevance, regular, anonymous end-of-term surveys among teachers and students are recommended to identify issues and guide continuous improvement.

For EFL teachers and writing instructors in EMI contexts, the use of modern, motivating teaching techniques is essential. Assignments should be challenging yet achievable, promoting engagement and self-monitoring of progress. Greater emphasis should be placed on practical writing activities such as thesis formulation, research question development, and citation practice, rather than purely theoretical instruction. Collaborative projects can also enhance writing fluency and peer interaction.

Course content should be tailored to students’ needs, including IELTS writing preparation, and adjusted based on regular classroom feedback. Instructors should devote focused attention to common problem areas (paraphrasing, summarizing, and academic style) through explicit instruction, guided practice, and timely feedback. The integration of authentic model texts is strongly encouraged, as analyzing well-written examples helps students internalize academic structure and style, improving their ability to produce coherent, discipline-appropriate texts in EMI settings.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, S.T. and M.B.; methodology, S.T. and M.B.; software, M.B.; validation, D.G. and G.K.; formal analysis, G.K.; investigation, S.T.; resources, S.T.; data curation, D.G.; writing—original draft preparation, S.T.; writing—review and editing, M.B. and G.K.; visualization, D.G.; supervision, S.T.; project administration, S.T. and D.G.; funding acquisition, D.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The authors will provide the raw data underlying the findings of this article without any unnecessary restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A. Students’ Questionnaire

Difficulties in the Academic Writing Course

1. What overall rating would you give for the Academic Writing course?
 - Excellent
 - Very good
 - Good
 - Fair
 - Poor
2. Please, indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:
 - The course objectives were clear
 - The course materials were clear and well delivered
 - The assignments were appropriate for the level of this class
 - The course increased my interest in the subject
 - The course corresponded to my expectations
 - I felt comfortable with voicing my opinion in class.
 - The homework assignments were helpful in understanding the material.
3. What issues have you found the most difficult or easiest in the course? Please, point to the scale.

Table A1. Academic writing issues.

| Indicate the Level of Difficulty of These Issues | The Most Difficult | Difficult | Neither Difficult nor Easy (or Uncertain) | Easy | The Easiest |
|---|--------------------|-----------|---|------|-------------|
| <i>a. Language use:</i> Paraphrasing Summarizing Morphological issues: tense choice, subject-verb agreement, articles, prepositions, etc. Syntactic issues: sentence structure, word order, linking elements Punctuation (use of commas, semicolons, etc.) <i>b. Academic Style</i> Hedging (cautious language) Integrating sources (quoting) Grouping information Critical thinking (expressing your voice) Using appropriate academic vocabulary Text organization (structure) Using citation patterns (narrative, parenthetical) Being formal (avoiding I, we, contractions, direct questions, etc.) | | | | | |

4. What factors do you think caused these difficulties? You can choose several answers and/or add your own:
- Influence of L1 (mother tongue)
 - Influence of other foreign language
 - Insufficient knowledge of style conventions
 - Insufficient theoretical background
 - Poor training (teacher's strategies and methods)
 - Absence of writing courses in previous years of study
 - Lack of practice in the course
 - Lack of motivation and interest to study the course
 - Any other _____
5. What writing assignments helped you to develop and improve your academic writing skills? (multiple options)
- Paraphrasing the informal text to formal
 - Using citation patterns
 - Synthesis essay
 - Annotated bibliography
 - Literature review

Appendix B. Interview Protocol for Teachers

Table A2. Interview protocol for teachers.

| Themes for Interview Guide | Question Examples |
|------------------------------|--|
| Course coverage | What are the most predominant features of the course? Could you elaborate on the activities, content and assignments given? What strategies did you use to develop the AW skills of your students? |
| Challenges | What difficulties, in your opinion, do students face during the course? Which of the assignments were the most challenging/the most effective/the least effective for the students? |
| Factors | What factors do you think caused these difficulties? |
| Benefits | What AW skills, in your view, do students develop during the course? What are the benefits that students receive during the course? |
| Satisfaction and Suggestions | What changes/modifications are needed to make the AW course effective? |

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