

Importance of learning grammar for academic writing: Difficulties faced by TESL students in academic writing

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Abstract

The recently commenced TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) degree programme at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka has attracted students in the Humanities faculty towards the course. When students are enrolled for the course, they find it difficult to successfully cope with the course because of the writing difficulties which are usually associated with inadequate English language proficiency, especially the grammatical knowledge. The department has arranged academic writing skills courses for the students to enhance their writing skills but students request for direct teaching of grammar, which the department is hesitant to do. Explicit teaching of grammar has now drawn the attention of linguists for its usefulness for second language acquisition and has been a subject for debate. This study analyses the importance of learning grammar for academic writing from the point of view of learners and language instructors and assesses the impact of the two different approaches to teaching grammar: inductive vs deductive approach for enhancing the academic writing skills. The study collected data from almost all the TESL students in the year 2021 attached to the department. A questionnaire survey, followed by discussions with the students and the ESL instructors, was used to collect data. The study revealed the complicated nature of grammatical knowledge needed for academic writing and identified a mismatch between students' expectations and instructors' practice. The study suggests that instructors could help the students understand the required grammatical knowledge needed for academic writing and design their academic writing courses with more emphasis on grammatical components that are in frequent use.

Keywords: Academic writing, Deductive approach, Grammar instruction, Inductive approach, TESL students.

1. Introduction

The TESL degree programme was commenced at the Department of English Language Teaching of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka to produce competent English teachers who could fill the dearth of knowledgeable English teachers in Sri Lanka. Even though students with adequate language proficiency are selected for this degree programme, after enrolment many students find difficulties in following the course successfully, mainly due to lack of writing skills. This problem could usually be associated with their grammar knowledge though other reasons like academic literacy also influence students' writing skills. Writing is the most difficult skill for any ESL learners (Celce-Murcia, 1991) so is it for the TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) students at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. Realizing this need over the years the department has arranged academic writing as an additional course for the benefit of the students. Hence, it has been observed that students still struggle to cope-up with their writing and have suggested that the department should teach them grammar so that they could do better. Instead, instructors

feel it is not necessary to teach more direct grammar and they consider inadequate grammar knowledge is not the only reason for poor academic writing but they consider lack of exposure to academic writing skills and its conventions along with limited vocabulary are the reasons. However, none of these claims has so far been investigated empirically. According to Zhou (2009) grammar should include both syntactical component as well as lexical component and therefore teaching grammar means both grammatical components as well as vocabulary. Ellis (2006) defined *grammar teaching* as involving ‘any instructional technique that draws learners’ attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helps them either to understand it metalinguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they could internalize it’ (p. 84).

Even though students in academic writing classes, in general, prefer to have direct grammar instruction, there has always been a mismatch between students’ expectation and instructors’ views (Zhou, 2009). Instructors always consider that students are unable to express their real issues and need. Hence, the language instructors think that their main task is to teach the content in academic courses but not imparting grammar. However, ESL instructors should have a balanced approach when teaching academic writing to strike a balance between the academic content and grammar. Therefore, the teaching should be beneficial for the students to satisfy their needs and should motivate them to learn.

There are plenty of studies concerning teaching and learning of grammar but the studies that deal with both academic writing and grammar instruction are limited. Hence, this study attempts to investigate the need of the TESL students and instructors’ point of view to overcome the difficulties of the students with their academic writing. This study is important as it addresses an ongoing issue faced by the students. No previous studies in Sri Lanka have investigated academic writing difficulties with an emphasis on grammar instruction.

A previous study by the researcher (Navaz & Sama, 2017) on teaching and learning of grammar in the Sri Lankan context revealed that traditionally in the Sri Lankan context teaching English means teaching tenses and focusing on the word classes such as verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, etc. English classes of schools usually give more importance to grammar rules. They have also explored that the teaching pattern has been changed later with the introduction of the communicative language teaching approach which maintained the balance among different skills such as writing, reading, grammar, and vocabulary skills. They conclude that students in their study prefer to learn grammar but at the same time they also feel learning grammar is boring if it is taught alone. The students in their study claim that grammar should be taught along with other skills. That is, students have always regarded grammar instruction as important. Hence, this study investigates the attitude of students who have acquired limited language competency and have already been recruited to follow a degree in TESL. Furthermore, this study investigates the requirements of students for developing academic writing skills, especially the grammatical components. In addition, it looks into their preferred teaching approach for grammar instruction too. Hence, the present study has the following research questions.

1.1 Research Questions:

RQ1: What do the TESL students consider important for their academic writing?

RQ2: What do the TESL students and their instructors think about the role of grammar in academic writing?

RQ2: What impact do the students feel when they learn the grammar through both deductive and inductive approaches?

2. Literature review

Focus on academic writing has been gaining recognition among the universities in the western countries where international students study in EMI and where there was a need to enhance their language skills, especially academic writing skills. These students just like the ESL learners in the Sri Lankan context previously lacked these skills from their secondary education. Further, academic writing has been a challenge for tertiary level students (Giridharan & Robson, 2011). The problems in academic writing have been connected to students' lack of grammatical and vocabulary competency. Giridharan and Robson confirm that “[u]ltimately both context and inadequacies of English language proficiency compound the academic writing difficulties experienced by ESL students at tertiary levels (2011, p.2).

In another study, Giridharan (2012) noted that both undergraduate and postgraduate students had difficulties in academic writing and it is caused mainly by poor grammar knowledge and inadequate vocabularies. He further elaborated those students had difficulties in organizing paragraphs and ideas.

Abdulkareem (2013) studied the difficulties in academic writing among the Arab speaking postgraduate students at UTM (Universiti Teknologi Malaysia) in Malaysia. 85 Arab speaking postgraduate students participated in the study and a questionnaire survey was administered. The study revealed that the students had difficulties in sentence construction and vocabulary use. Similarly, Al-Fadda (2012) also reported that the main problem of the students was grammar concerning the subject-verb agreement and sentence structure. There are issues other than grammar problems that influence academic writing such as maintaining logical organization, cohesion, and coherence of a paragraph, rhetorical differences between English and the mother tongue, generating ideas and expressing ideas. However, grammar competence stands out as a prominent one (Srikrai, Lin, Lakaisone, & Sirinthorn, 2016).

Similar findings were identified in Indonesia too (Ratnawati, Faridah, Anam & Retnaningdyah, 2018) where more than 60% of the tertiary students studying EFL (English as a Foreign Language) courses at a private university reported difficulties in academic writing. Some of the problems reported by the students were difficulties in using correct tenses, subject-verb agreements, reporting verbs and preposition. Pineteh (2014) revealed a similar outcome in a study conducted among the undergraduate students at Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), South Africa. The study further revealed that students' linguistic and general literacy backgrounds and their attitudes toward academic writing highly influenced academic writing.

Difficulties in academic writing have become a serious concern for all ESL practitioners and researchers. Celce-Murcia (1991) describes that plenty of grammar errors in ESL students' academic writing make their performance weaker or sometimes they fail the examinations. An alternative to overcome this is teaching grammar along with other study skills to improve students' writing. Grammar has always been considered important for writing, especially academic writing. However, the debate has been going regarding the extent to which direct conveying of grammatical instructions helps in academic writing (Zhou, 2009). In addition, learners' perceived needs are often ignored.

Traditionally, teaching grammar falls into two major approaches: the inductive and the deductive approaches to teaching grammar. A previous study by the researcher (Navaz & Hanan Khathoon, 2020) explains these approaches in detail. The inductive approach uses an implicit way of teaching grammar where students are taught communicatively and students derive the rules from the content, whereas deductive approach is rule based where rules are taught directly to the students. Previous study also revealed that ESL students liked to learn grammar deductively while their teachers at the university liked teaching inductively.

Therefore, this study investigates the students on a TESL degree programme and their learning needs to enhance the academic writing skills. Grammar instruction is considered to be important for student speaking and writing. When it comes to academic writing, the need for grammar increases. Despite the importance of teaching grammar, the questions being discussed are how to teach and what to teach. This study tries to answer from the perception of university students who major in the TESL degree programme what grammar items are perceived to be important for academic writing and what method of grammar instruction could be useful for learning those grammar items.

3. Method:

This study used mixed methods approach. Initially students' questionnaires were circulated among the students, followed by student discussions and teacher interviews.

3.1 Participants and study site

This study was conducted at the Department of English Language Teaching of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, which is one of the national universities in Sri Lanka, lying in the eastern coastal belt. The department offers a special degree in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) which was started a few years back. Fifty-four students out of fifty-eight following this TESL degree were the participants for the study. There are only six male students and the rest are female students. The intake of students to the faculty also followed a 90:10, female to male ratio. These students had studied in their mother tongue Tamil up to the GCE A/L (General Certificate in English Advanced Level) which was the entry-level examination for university admission. They were admitted to the programme from the first year onwards. Thus, there were students in the first, second, third and fourth years, as shown below. Only four 4th year students could not respond on time.

Table 1: Total number of students on the TESL degree

	No of students	Female	Male
1 st year	18	18	00
2 nd year	16	14	02
3 rd year	12	09	03
4 th year	12	11	01
total	58	52	06

3.2 Data collection and analysis

At the time of administering the questionnaire, the university was partially open due to COVID - 19 pandemic and only the students who reside near the university were available at the university. Therefore, a questionnaire survey was circulated using google form as online questionnaire and four of the 4th year students did not submit the filled questionnaire, bringing the submission rate to 93%. The survey questionnaire consisted of both closed and open-ended questions. The students were explained the purpose of the survey and the anonymity was maintained across the research study. Hence, they did not fill in their names. Following the questionnaire survey, students were contacted by using their pre-established WhatsApp groups for a discussion on the research questions. Students have WhatsApp groups created year-wise and they are for official communications (e.g., sharing zoom links or answering any tutorial questions).

In addition, two instructors who taught academic writing courses to the students were interviewed by the researcher.

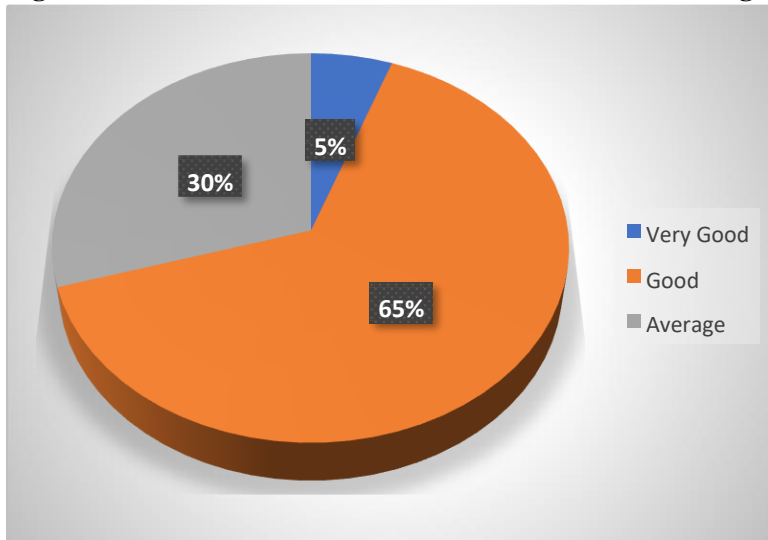
Data were analyzed with the help of an assistant. Thematic analysis was done for interview data and for the data from the students' and instructors' open-ended questions. A statistical analysis was run for finding the significance of variables and students' preference, especially the importance of grammar components and vocabulary for academic or general writing.

4. FINDINGS

Students' self-assessment of their academic writing skills

When the students were asked to self-assess their writing skills, 38 out of the 54 students (70%) assessed themselves to be good or very good. Rest of them evaluated that they belonged to the average category. Figure 1 exemplifies this.

Figure 1: Students' self-assessment of their academic writing skills



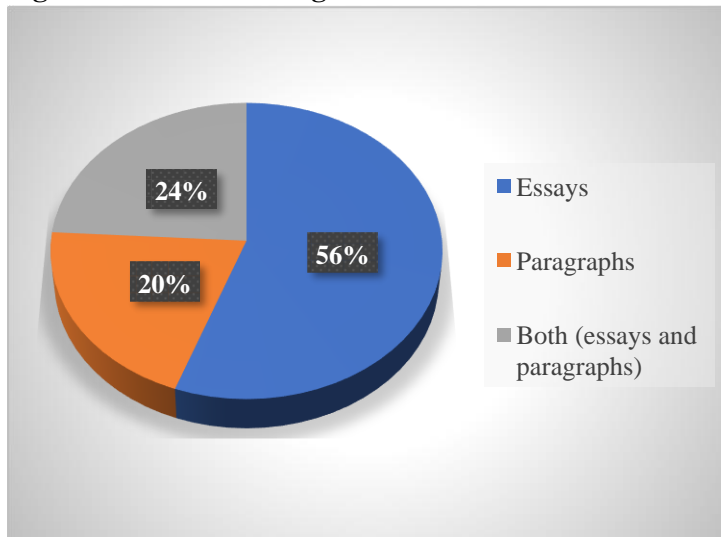
When the reasons for difficulties in writing were asked from the students, they came out with different reasons. Many of the students reported that they lacked grammar knowledge so creating sentences becomes difficult for them. Students also reported that they lacked vocabulary knowledge and their poor reading skills caused the limited vocabulary knowledge. In addition, students stated that they lacked enough practice in writing skills and therefore they had difficulties in organizing ideas. Many of their view was that poor grammar knowledge and inadequate stock of vocabulary along with limited knowledge of sentence construction could lead to difficulties in academic writing. Some of the students considered that lack of practice in using grammatical structures made the academic writing difficult.

In addition, 90% of the students said despite the difficulties in writing, they enjoyed academic writing activities in the classroom. Only 10% reported that they somewhat liked it.

The genre of writing in classes

The genres of writing students undertake in classes were found to be essays (56%), followed by paragraphs, while 24% of the students claimed that they write both, as shown in figure 2.

Figure 2: Genre of writing in classes



Reasons for writing difficulties

Most of the students (61%) felt that lack of grammar knowledge was the major issue for writing difficulties. Around 20% felt that both vocabulary and grammar were the causes of the writing difficulties, while 9% claimed that vocabulary is the cause of the error. All the students reported that they needed grammar knowledge for successful academic writing. Further elaboration with the students revealed that lack of knowledge on tenses caused the difficulty along with the dearth of knowledge on sentence construction, word classes, etc.

Grammar components needed for academic writing

The grammar components students considered important are given in Figure 3 below. Majority of the students stated that they wanted to learn tenses, followed by word classes. The other categories are sentence construction and discourse markers. A few of them opted for all grammar components.

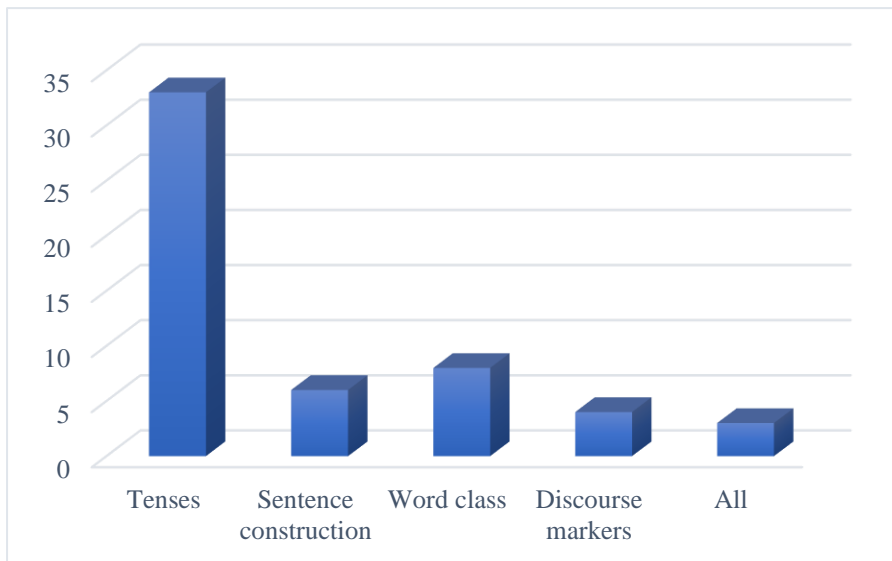


Figure 3: Grammar components needed for academic writing

Learning grammar by students

It was also revealed in the study that students learnt grammar with a teacher while a few students (17) had learnt by themselves too. Thirty-five percent of the students studied grammar using both self-learning and from a teacher.

Difficult areas of grammar that students need assistance

When the students were asked about the difficult areas of grammar they needed assistance, they came out with different answers as shown in Figure 4. Many of them wanted assistance in using tenses, sentence constituents and sentence construction, etc.

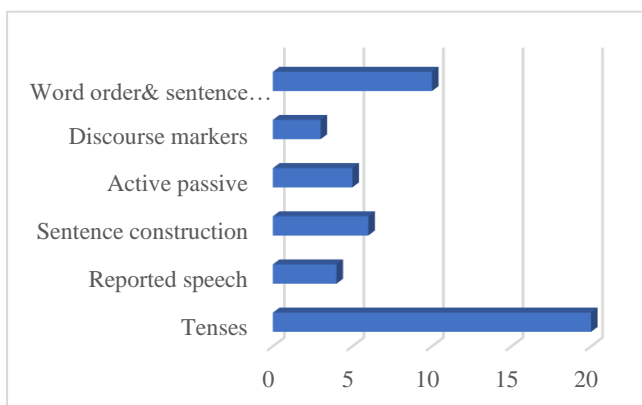


Figure 4: Difficult areas of grammar

These findings corroborate the previously mentioned students' requirements that students wanted to learn tenses and sentence construction and they treated them as difficult areas.

Peer discussion in academic writing

Students also reported that they sometimes seek the assistance of their colleagues in writing. This kind of help is connected to grammar issues, selection of vocabulary, etc. But the percentage of students who seek assistance from the colleagues is only around 40%.

Difference between general writing and academic writing

Students felt that general writing focuses on general ideas but does not focus on any specific readers. Hence, it uses general vocabulary. On the other hand, academic writing focuses on a specific idea that relates to a specific theme. It focuses on specific set of readers for specified purpose. Students also felt that for academic writing more input is needed on the part of the students. Students further reported the following:

Yes, well I think that academic writing is quite advanced where learners are made to practice with simple structure of sentences, and paragraphs.

It also helps students when they go through the thesis. Hence in general writing we just write what comes into our mind.

We don't think of errors or the structure, rules, styles when compared to academic writing. But when it comes to academic writing we should consider on the structure, rules and how far it should reach the audience to understand our piece of writing.

Academic writing classes and learning grammar

All the students claimed that academic writing classes have been helpful for them and also all of them wanted to learn grammar as part of their academic writing course. However, when the students were asked whether they could learn grammar by themselves, their opinion of self-learning of grammar was divided into two. Only half of them agreed that self-learning of grammar was possible.

Importance of academic writing classes

Fifty-two of the fifty-four students reported that academic writing classes they followed were useful for them and in what ways they were useful are described below.

Students felt that academic writing classes helped them practice the grammar learnt. In those classes they learnt the vocabularies related with academic writing. In addition to improving their writing, students contended that academic writing would help them with their thesis writing in the future too. Further, academic writing classes helped identify errors in their writing and also how to correct those errors. It was reported that academic writing classes helped organize their writing more precisely and cohesively.

Some other benefits of academic writing classes as reported by the students were:

It was helpful in getting to know the referencing methods, and it gave me a basic idea that (how) the writing needs to be organized.

Academic classes especially helped me to structure my writings also it helped, how I (can) write an article with coherence.

To maintain flow and unity in our writings and it also helps to construct sentences in appropriate ways. It's very helpful for developing my writing skills. I got to know the structure of academic writing.

It gave many practices and It gave the chance to get to know more grammar rules and sentence pattern

They guide me how to write a particular genre and taught me practically with authentic writings.

Learning grammar as part of academic writing course

All the surveyed students stressed the point that grammar lessons should be a part of their academic writing classes. The reasons the students mentioned were that the main difficulty students face in academic writing is connected to grammatical issues. As a result, students wanted to learn grammar as part of the academic writing.

In addition, when the students were asked in general whether they can learn grammar by themselves, half of the students stated that they could learn it by themselves.

Exposure to deductive and inductive approaches and students' preference

There are two different approaches to teaching grammar: deductive and inductive approaches. In the former grammar is presented by explaining the grammar rules explicitly, while in the latter grammar is presented communicatively and students should derive the grammar rules from the lessons (Thornbury, 1999). As part of the study, students were exposed to teaching grammar lessons both deductively and inductively for three lessons each. Then, their experience during the lessons was obtained. After the completion of lecture delivery only, students were told about the two different approaches. Initially students were asked to differentiate the mode of delivery between the lessons that were delivered deductively and inductively. The basic feature the students identified about the delivery was that in one set of lessons grammar rules were taught directly. In the other one, lessons were taught communicatively and subsequently students derived the grammar rules. Later, students were told the names of these two approaches; deductive and inductive approaches. However, the final year students were aware of these two approaches due to their following a course on teaching grammar in TESL programme. Students also reported that when they learnt complicated grammatical items, they wanted to learn deductively, by the presentation of grammar rules explicitly. On the other hand, they could learn easy grammar items inductively.

Students' preferences between these two approaches were divided. Only a few students (10%) liked either of these approaches each, whereas the rest (80%) opted to learn grammar using both the approaches. That means, the majority wanted their teachers to deliver their grammar lessons using both these deductive and inductive approaches.

Importance of the grammatical components and vocabulary for general/academic writing

The students were asked to select what grammatical components are important for general writing and academic writing and the findings are presented below in Table 2. In addition, their significance was tested and is given as P value.

Table 2: Importance of learning different grammatical components and vocabulary for writing

Grammatical components vocabulary	Important & general writing	for Important academic writing	for P value
Adverbs/adjectives	29 (54%)	25 (46%)	0.683
Articles	24 (44%)	30 (56%)	0.479

Nouns	33 (61%)	21 (39%)	0.134
Prepositions	24 (44%)	30 (56%)	0.497
Verbs	23 (43%)	31 (57%)	0.341
Subject-verb agreement	06 (11%)	48 (89%)	0.000
Pronouns	31 (57%)	23 (43%)	0.341
Sentence construction	01 (2%)	53 (98%)	0.000
General vocabulary	43 (80%)	11 (20%)	0.000
Academic vocabulary	02 (4%)	52 (96%)	0.000

Students' preference for teaching approach to learn the grammar components

Table 3 explains the students' preference for learning different grammar items and vocabulary through three different approaches: deductively, inductively and through self-study.

Table 3: Students' preference for teaching approach to learn the grammar components

Grammatical components & vocabulary	Like to learn in the class- taught by a staff deductively	Like to learn in the class-taught by a staff inductively	Like to learn through self-study	P value
Adverbs/adjectives	23 (43%)	21 (38%)	10 (19%)	0.066
Articles	25 (46%)	20 (38%)	09 (16%)	0.024
Nouns	19 (35%)	22 (41%)	13 (24%)	0.311
Prepositions	28 (52%)	18 (33%)	08 (15%)	0.004
Verbs	24 (44%)	22 (41%)	08 (15%)	0.015
Subject-verb agreement	28 (52%)	24 (44%)	02 (4%)	0.001
Pronouns	18 (33%)	25 (47%)	11 (20%)	0.066
Sentence construction	32 (59%)	21 (39%)	01 (2%)	0.000
General vocabulary	19 (35%)	19 (35%)	16 (30%)	0.846
Academic vocabulary	28 (52%)	24 (44%)	02 (4%)	0.001

Students did not show interest in learning grammar items through self-study. They liked either deductive method or inductive method to learn grammar. The statistical analysis revealed a significant association between the variables. Students liked to learn articles, prepositions, verbs, subject-verb agreement, sentence construction and academic vocabulary deductively. These variables showed a significant relationship.

Instructors' views

Instructors' views on academic writing difficulties of the students were different from those of students. Instructors considered that grammar has a marginal role in students' academic writing but they treated other

skills connected to academic writing as important than the grammar. Some of them are paraphrasing, ideas, presentation, conventions, organization, word choice, and sentence fluency. They also felt that students are not exposed to these kinds of writing in the schools. This may be a reason for students' difficulties. Regarding grammar instruction, they agreed that they did teach some essential grammar items as and when necessity arose. They had the opinion that considering the nature of the students only inductive approach would be suitable for them and many of the time when grammar instructions took place deductively, some students did not like the lesson.

5. Discussion

The study was conducted to investigate the reasons for the difficulties in academic writing with an emphasis on grammar. The findings of the study revealed some interesting outcomes. Students on the TESL degree programme had difficulties in academic writing and most of them claimed that the difficulty arose from inadequate grammar knowledge. Students also identified different grammar areas that were found to be difficult for them and that subsequently affected their academic writing skills.

The difficulties in grammar knowledge influence the successfulness of academic writing and it was also revealed in the studies by Giridharan and Robson (2011) and Giridharan (2012). Abdulkareem (2013) also had a similar finding in his study in Malaysia among the Arab postgraduate students. He found difficulties in sentence construction and vocabulary. In the present study also, students reported the vocabulary issues too, mainly the vocabularies related to academic writing. Similar to the findings by Ratnawati et al. (2018), in the present study also students had difficulties in sentence construction and the correct use of tenses.

Even though students revealed that grammar was important for academic writing, none of them stated that they lacked the conventional knowledge of academic writing like paraphrasing, citation, referencing, summarizing, etc. The students considered the grammar knowledge as more important. Except for the knowledge of the vocabulary, they did not mention any of these skills as important for academic writing. On the other hand, the instructors interviewed had different opinion. They considered that lack of grammar knowledge is only one aspect of students' academic writing difficulties, and they further prioritized some specific skills students need to develop competency in academic writing. Some of the skills the instructors felt students needed to develop were paraphrasing presentation, conventions, organization, word choice, and sentence fluency.

This is where the opinions of the students and the instructors varied. Students treated grammatical knowledge as the stumbling block of their academic writing but instructors treated other skills to have affected their academic writing skills. Both students and instructors, however, agreed on the importance of vocabulary. This mismatch on importance of grammar seemed to influence the successfulness of academic writing. Instructors think that the students are unable to identify the real needs of the students, whereas students feel that lack of grammar instruction influences their academic writing.

In addition, students expressed their preferred teaching approach of grammar lessons too. They wanted to learn complicated lessons to be taught deductively and others inductively. The deductive approach has a direct explicit grammar instruction commencing from teaching the rules, whereas in inductive approach students have to learn communicatively. Students also expressed their willingness to learn some grammar items by themselves such as nouns and general vocabulary, albeit a small percentage of students only preferred this.

6. Conclusion

This study revealed the complex nature of perception of students and instructors for the academic writing difficulties. Even though grammar knowledge seemed to influence the success of academic writing, the scale of the influence appeared to be different. Students considered it as the most important factor while the instructors treated it as less important than the other skills related to academic writing. Unless instructors convince the students of the real issues in their academic writing, students would be having the same negative attitude that academic writing would be difficult for them because of their poor grammatical knowledge. Therefore, instructors should work closely with the students and teach them other skills along with the necessary grammar instruction. Though this study was undertaken as a perception study and had limited feedback from the students, the findings of the study inform the instructors that students' needs should be identified and addressed in order to enhance students' academic writing skills as well to develop their confidence in academic writing skills. Hence, a future study is needed to analyze the mechanics of students' academic writing to understand the depth of the problems in academic writing.

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