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Chinese ESL Students' Perceptions of Academic Writing in English in Malaysian Universities

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Abstract

The literature suggests that academic writing skills have a significant impact on the academic success of university students. Many Chinese ESL students, in particular, struggle with mastering these skills while studying abroad. The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to explore Chinese international students' perceptions of academic writing challenges in English as well as to identify the strategies they use to overcome these challenges. The study surveyed 200 Chinese international students studying in Malaysian universities. Qualitative follow-up interviews were also conducted with 12 students to uncover their perceived challenges and coping strategies. The study found that students felt their limited academic writing skills and language problems hindered their ability to write. Nonetheless, the course materials and the additional handouts provided by instructors helped students improve their academic writing skills. Moreover, students considered both instructor-centered learning and peer

guidance as effective approaches to improving their academic writing skills. The study concludes with a detailed explanation of the difficulties associated with academic writing skills among ESL students.

Keywords: academic writing difficulties, academic writing skills, Chinese ESL students, student perceptions, university

Introduction

Academic writing is considered as essential for success in higher education. Indeed, academic writing is one of the most difficult challenges for university students (Zaki & Yunus, 2015). It is therefore unsurprising that students from non-English-speaking countries often face significant challenges when studying in native-English speaking countries where English is the medium of instruction (Mallia, 2017). As a result, it is likewise only to be expected that there are significant differences between L1 and L2 writers (Hyland, 2019). Most ESL students struggle to bridge the gap between their first language and English (Cai, 2017). This has been attributed to ESL students' limited vocabulary and poor mastery of grammar as a result of lack of English academic writing courses in high school prior to attending university (Giridharan, 2012). Realistically, there is no one single approach that is considered best practice in teaching academic writing (Caldwell, 2012), where instructors may need to teach students a wide range of skills such as content writing, writing processes, language structures, and more (Hyland, 2019).

Students' educational experience, second language competency, and cognitive development all influence their academic writing proficiency (Giridharan, 2012). Academic writing often requires students presenting their argument in an academic and serious tone (Zaki & Yunus, 2015). Academic writing skills, as defined by Dehkordi and Allami (2012), are the ability to access, evaluate, organize, and develop ideas from relevant information and explain them in one's own words. Other important aspects of academic writing include organizing ideas, formulating a thesis statement, developing sentences, and editing an essay, including punctuation (Ahmed & Alamin, 2012).

Clearly, the complexity of academic writing has hindered the academic performance of ESL students.

Many students, particularly Chinese ESL students, face difficulties with academic writing. Because of the spread of globalization, an increasing number of Chinese students are choosing to study abroad (Xiang, 2017). Malaysia is arguably one of the most popular educational destinations in the Asian region due to its high quality and low-cost education. Nevertheless, Chinese students learning English as a second language (ESL learners) face many challenges when studying abroad (even in Malaysia) such as language barriers, culture shock, and educational inequalities (Xiang, 2017). This is largely because most courses, assignments, projects, and assessments in tertiary education require them to write in English, but their academic writing proficiency is relatively low (Cai, 2017).

Because of cultural differences in teaching styles, students from Chinese educational contexts have relatively low levels of mastery in academic writing (Chou, 2011). In China, the emphasis is on grammar drills rather than academic writing skills (Zhang & Luo, 2004). Most tertiary English courses highlight the language's common objectives but focus less on the academic writing aspect (Cai, 2017). Many ESL students have a general understanding of grammar rules, but their academic writing skills are not up to the university standard (Giridharan, 2012). As a result, Chinese ESL students are often better at recognizing grammatical errors but struggle with choosing tenses for contexts (Cai, 2013). According to Al Fadda (2012), the most difficult challenges for ESL learners are distinguishing between the use of words and phrases, subject-verb agreement, and sentence coherence. Furthermore, the effect of first language interference in Chinese students is another factor that contributes to academic writing difficulties (Chou, 2011). For instance, when writing English essays, Chinese students often use Chinese syntactic rules to construct English sentences or even directly translate words or phrases from their first language (Li, 2014).

While previous research has looked into the challenges that Chinese students face when writing in English (Cai, 2017; Chou, 2011;

Fareed et al., 2016; Li, 2014; Zhang, 2018), there has been less focus on the impact of English as a language of instruction on Chinese students' academic writing skills. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify perceived challenges in academic writing and how Chinese ESL students in Malaysian private universities overcome these challenges. Considering this, the following research questions were posed:

1. What are the perceived academic writing challenges faced by Chinese ESL students at Malaysian private universities?
2. What strategies do Chinese ESL students use to overcome academic writing challenges?

Literature Review

To write well in academic English, students should be able to go through the process of researching ideas, expressing thoughts, joining and writing down ideas, editing and ultimately producing the final write-up seamlessly (Ariyanti, 2016). Although the processes of academic writing skills have been extensively discussed (Ningrum, Latief, & Sulisty, 2016; Nurhayati, 2016), few people can perform the task well. Writers are expected not only to convey their thoughts and feelings effectively, but also to logically link and compose their writing in a coherent manner (Setyowati, 2016). Academic writing, according to Al Fadda (2012), is a mind-driven activity. It is critical that the academic discourse composed by students expresses their thoughts within the context of their disciplinary knowledge, and that their writing engages readers (Giridharan, 2012). Writing allows the writer to communicate feelings, ideas, and knowledge to the readers (Oktafikrani, 2020).

However, academic writing is regarded as a difficult skill to learn, especially for non-native speakers (Fareed et al., 2016). Most ESL students struggle to master the elements of writing such as linking ideas, constructing sentences, using correct words, and conveying intended meaning in writing (Kanglong & Afzaal, 2020). To write an academic text, one must be able to access, evaluate, and rearrange relevant information in order to formulate ideas in one's own words

(Dehkordi & Allami, 2012). Other elements of writing include creating an outline, analyzing, paraphrasing, structuring sentences, editing examples, and using proper punctuation (Ahmed & Alamin, 2012). Aside from that, students are expected to outperform in academic writing tasks by having a strong command of vocabulary (Sulaiman, 2017), good idea management (Yee & Kee, 2017), and an understanding of writing mechanics (Anita, 2016; Hapsari & Sukavatee, 2018).

Not only that, writing well requires consistent effort even in the context of a first language, let alone learning English as a second language for ESL students (Setyowati & Sukmawan, 2016). Because of the requirement to use formal vocabulary and grammar when writing, it takes additional efforts and conditions for success (Chea & Shumow, 2014). As reported in Cai's (2017) study, students perceived structural components and text coherence as two factors that hindered academic writing, while others claimed they lacked confidence in their language use in academic writing. Such circumstances are indeed concerning, as these factors have dampened the students' motivation to write, potentially preventing them from becoming independent learners (Dörnyei, 2001). Worse, some ESL students perceive writing negatively and view it as a difficult task to complete (Setyowati & Sukmawan, 2016). Not every educator would tailor his or her teaching style to the needs and interests of students (Ahmed et al., 2013). As a result of instructors' ineffective pedagogical approaches, many students will struggle with spelling, plurals, syntax and grammar, and paragraphs and argument development (Mwangi, 2017). In some cases, educators may even be illiterate in English (Cai, 2017).

Fareed et al. (2016) discovered the same finding when they studied ESL learners from Pakistan at the undergraduate level. The most common challenges reported were a lack of mastery of linguistic elements, interference from first language (L1), writing anxiety, and poor organizational skills. The study revealed that the main causes of these challenges are inexperienced teachers, ineffective pedagogical approaches, an inefficient examination system, and large class sizes. Similarly, Al Mubarak (2017) asserted that Sudanese ESL students struggled more with various aspects of grammatical skills, such as

incorrect use of articles, punctuation, prepositions, irregular verbs, and sentence structures. When these findings are combined, it is possible to deduce that academic writing skills are never easy for ESL students, let alone the many extensive academic writing tasks that are required of them at the tertiary level.

Moreover, although many people believe that this problem only affects undergraduate ESL students, it in fact also affects postgraduate ESL students. For instance, Yuen and Mussa (2015) examined the types of academic writing difficulties encountered by Iraqi postgraduate students in Malaysian universities and reported that the most significant barriers to writing were language and organizational problems. The former was caused primarily by vocabulary issues, grammatical errors, and poor paraphrasing skills, and the latter were caused by mis-referencing, poor organizational skills, and poor idea expression. In another study, Al-badi (2015) investigated the challenges faced by postgraduate students from four different countries. Most of these students reported difficulties with language, establishing coherence and cohesion, creating an appropriate voice in writing, finding relevant topics, sourcing information, and referencing and citation. The main causes of the difficulties were also cited as a lack of experience and knowledge of formal academic writing, as well as the requirements of the institution. Many may extrapolate that postgraduate ESL students have a flair for academic writing because of their higher educational level, but this is not the case for ESL students as learning to write in a second language is a universal challenge for them, as evidenced by these studies mentioned above.

Chinese ESL students studying English as a second language face similar difficulty. It is well known that English is intensively taught in Chinese technical schools in order to prepare students for the College English Test (CET) or the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), also known colloquially as Gaokao (高考). Thus, English instruction has focused on grammar drills rather than academic writing skills (Zhang & Luo, 2004). Such exam-driven English instruction has resulted in a test-driven learning style among students. Large class sizes and incoherent teaching have also

hampered student learning (You, 2004). As a result, Chinese ESL students have a low level of academic writing (Cai, 2013).

Many ESL students struggle to bridge the gap between their limited knowledge of English academic literacy and their much more developed academic literacies in their native language (Cai, 2013). Because of its limited use, English receives less attention in academic writing. Chinese students may also encounter interference from their first language. Students are subjected to L1 interference due to their diverse language systems, cultures, and ways of thinking. Often, students construct English sentences using the grammar rules of their native language, which causes reader and writer confusion (Shi, 2015). It is not surprising that Mohammed et al. (2004) found that Chinese students make errors in verbs, prepositions, spelling, overgeneralization, and simplification. Indeed, it is possible to conclude that L1 interference has contributed to these writing errors.

Despite having faced numerous challenges in academic writing skills, it is important to note that students are known to deal with any obstacle that stands in the way of their studies. Many Chinese students improve their academic writing skills by referring to writing manuals or directly copying the style and format of published articles (Xia, 2014), whereas others refer to textbooks or journal articles to learn helpful phrasing (Li & Schmitt, 2009). Cho and MacArthur (2011) also found that students who reviewed sample research papers outperformed than those who only read the materials on subsequent writing assignments. Furthermore, students who took part in a defamiliarization study improved their academic writing and critical thinking skills (Hibbert & Foncha, 2019).

Moreover, non-native students frequently use implicit messages rather than linking words to demonstrate logic and cohesion. According to Zhang (2018), students from China are heavily influenced by their culture in their approaches to academic writing skills. Top-down, implicit, pragmatic, and descriptive dominance are examples of these approaches. Usually, background information is written first, then examples, evidence, and discussion, and finally the conclusion.

It may seem that academic writing challenges are solely the responsibility of students. However, this is not the case because students do not have to face academic writing challenges alone as instructors also play a crucial role. In the L2 classroom, it is critical to be aware of both learner's and instructor's styles (Hyland, 2019). Li and Schmitt (2009) found that constructive feedback from native-speaking instructors and clear pedagogical approaches lead to effective student writing correction. Also, one-on-one assistance from a qualified tutor who provides real-time feedback, explanations, and clarifications of writing errors is extremely beneficial (Ferris et al., 2005). Students who received feedback improved their research report writing using both simple and complex paragraphs (Greenberg, 2015).

Method

Research Design

Using a sequential mixed-methods design, this study examined how Chinese ESL students perceive English academic writing challenges and how they overcome them while studying in Malaysian universities. Pragmatists such as James, Peirce, and Dewey proposed this design, which is supported by modern neo-pragmatists such as Rorty, Putnam and Rescher (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This research design seems to answer research questions using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. The quantitative data was collected first using questionnaires and the qualitative phase was launched based on the quantitative results. The qualitative element was needed because as pointed out by Creswell and Garrett (2008), questionnaires with Likert scales and short answers cannot capture the breadth of human experience. Understanding experience (or the appearance of things) by examining the meaning and nature of those experiences for a person or group is at the heart of qualitative research (Husserl, 1970). In order to elicit the participants' experiences with academic writing in English, a phenomenological interview was selected. This qualitative phase supplemented and illuminated the quantitative findings.

Participants

The target population was Chinese university students studying at private universities in Malaysia. A total of 200 students completed questionnaires. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. Participants had to be (1) from China, (2) studying in Malaysia, (3) at least 18 years old, (4) enrolled in academic courses with English as the medium of instruction, (5) experienced in academic writing in English, and (6) able to speak and read English. Participants ranged in age from 20 and 27 years, and were 49.5% female and 50.5% male, with a mean age of 22.42 years (SD = 1.75). Of the total sample, 33.3% were Year 1 students, 25% were Year 2 students, and 41.7% were Year 3–4 students. Most participants (97.5%) were currently enrolled in a bachelor's degree course, with the remaining 1.5% enrolled in a master's degree course. The following academic disciplines were represented among the participants: 34.5% were in business and information sciences, 19% in applied sciences, 15.5% in social sciences and liberal arts, 10.5% in hospitality and tourism management, 10% in medicine and health sciences, 5.5% in creative arts and design, and 5% in music.

Measures

This study, as previously stated, was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, online questionnaires were used to obtain a broad picture of Chinese ESL students' perceptions of academic writing in English. Since this study was an exploratory study, we adopted questionnaires from a previous study that dealt with a similar topic (Jing, 2013). The surveys were divided into four sections: academic writing skills, language problems, writing course materials, and teaching and learning in writing classes (see Results section for survey questions). The first two sections were intended to assess university students' perceptions of academic writing challenges in relation to academic writing skills and language competence. It is widely assumed that academic writing skills and language fluency are not always proportional, so both aspects need to be assessed as sources of challenges for students' academic writing. In addition, the section

‘materials used in writing classes sought to assess students’ perceptions of the limitations of existing instructional materials in teaching academic writing skills. In the final section, participants were asked to report on which teaching and learning activities they thought were more effective in improving their writing experience. The response method was a 5-point Likert scale with students checking the appropriate box. Because the scale items were not homogenous in nature, assessing the scales’ reliabilities were impossible (Jing, 2013). To limit person-to-person contact amid the pandemic, the questionnaires were distributed online. Students from two private universities completed online surveys from April 20 to May 20, 2021. Students were contacted, given full information about the study, and asked to participate voluntarily. They were fully informed of the objectives of the study and the confidentiality of the data. They were also assured that the data would be used solely for the purposes of the study and that their refusal to participate would have no impact on their current or future studies. A reminder email was sent to participants two weeks after the initial email in case some had missed the invitation. Following the survey, participants were given the option to self-nominate for follow-up interviews. A total of 200 university students volunteered to take part in the study and fill out online questionnaires.

Since the primary goal of the survey items was to identify biographical and general attitudes toward academic writing and their coping strategies, the explanations of their perspectives on the challenges of academic writing and the reasons they choose to overcome those challenges were lacking. Therefore, follow-up interviews are particularly useful in this context. Following the survey, nine students who expressed interest in participating in the study were interviewed in semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was developed based on trends identified in the survey data (see Appendix 1 for interview questions). Students’ perceptions of English academic writing challenges and coping strategies were thoroughly explored (Codó, 2008). To minimize person-to-person contact, interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted via Zoom in the month

following the qualitative phase. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The study was ethically approved by the university of the first author, and all participants were made aware of the study's purpose and procedures. It took three months to collect all the data, both quantitative and qualitative.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Science, version 24, was used for quantitative analyses. To generate results appropriate for the type of data, the analyses used standard statistical procedures, such as percentages and frequencies for categorical variables and means and standard deviations for continuous variables. Thematic coding, a six-step process proposed by Newell and Burnard (2006), was used to analyze qualitative data from interviews. The first author transcribed the semi-structured interviews. The transcripts were cross-read by the second and third authors for validation. The transcripts were given wide margins and line spacing so that they could be coded and annotated later. Each author then read the transcribed data independently to familiarize themselves with the interviews. After familiarization, open coding was conducted by noting initial codes in the margins of the transcript to identify common themes. Once all interviews had been coded, all authors met several times to share and discuss the initial markings or codes to ensure consistency across the team. After reaching consensus, all overlapping similar 'open codes' were sought and grouped into higher-level categories or codes using a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning. As a result of this procedure, the number of codes was reduced. These codes were compared to the interview text to ensure accuracy. The resulting categories were then analyzed and grouped into potential themes, with names assigned to each. The themes were then returned to the participants for further discussion. Once the themes were identified, the qualitative data results were used to shed light on the interpretation of the survey data. Excerpts from the data that embodied each theme are presented in the results section of this paper.

Results

What are the perceived academic writing challenges faced by Chinese ESL students at Malaysian private universities?

Academic Writing Skills

Mastering academic writing skills was mentioned as a challenge by students. Following that, the responses to each scale item are presented in a series of tables. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for each item in the Academic Writing Skills subscales. As shown in the table, the higher the mean score, the greater the students' proficiency. On a 5-point scale, with 5 representing very difficult, participants rated writing references/ bibliography (M =3.26), writing the methods section (M =3.09), and looking up sources as the most difficult (M =3.08). In contrast, when participants learned academic writing skills, they found it easier to write an introduction, proofread, summarize, and present their data.

Table 1

Analysis for Academic Writing Skills

Scale Items	Mean	SD
Writing introductions	2.83	1.43
Searching for appropriate literature using databases and library resources	3.03	1.42
Referring to sources	3.08	1.37
Reviewing and critiquing the previous research and creating a research space (gap)	3.01	1.39
Designing the research methods	3.01	1.45
Writing up the methods section	3.09	1.48
Summarizing and presenting the data	2.94	1.35
Commentaries and discussions on the data	3.03	1.40
Writing references/ bibliography	3.26	1.38
Writing conclusions	3.05	1.35
Proof-reading written assignments	2.86	1.40

In the semi-structured interviews, participants indicated that the difficulty in obtaining relevant materials to use in writing instruction caused difficulties in academic writing. As observed in the qualitative findings that supplemented the quantitative findings, students indicated that it was challenging for them to find appropriate research materials to support their research, and some mentioned difficulties in determining which materials to use in their writing.

'Finding the materials is difficult because there are fewer research papers to support the research. If I can't find an appropriate study to refer to or support my point, my writing becomes simple.' (P4)

'In fact, it's very easy. I just Google what I want, but I'd also read the content to distinguish between true and false. It is hard because I have a lot of studies to read.' (P6)

'In my opinion, the format of the research paper I found is sometimes different from what my lecturer taught me. So, I'm having difficulty selecting materials.' (P8)

Language Problems

Another challenge found was difficulties with the English language. An examination of the results in Table 2 shows that the most difficult problems they faced were using correct grammar and using correct academic language and vocabulary, with both factors having the same mean score. However, most students indicated that using appropriate lexical expressions freely and summarizing/ paraphrasing were easy.

Table 2

Analysis for Language Problems

Scale Items	Mean	SD
Understanding the specific language features of the academic genre	2.97	1.44
Using appropriate lexical phrases freely to build up the sentences and paragraphs	2.89	1.42
Summarizing/ paraphrasing	2.89	1.37

Scale Items	Mean	SD
Writing coherent paragraphs	2.92	1.41
Linking sentences smoothly	2.94	1.42
Using proper academic language and vocabulary	3.06	1.38
Using the proper grammar such as correct tenses, agreements, reporting verbs, and prepositions	3.06	1.44

The 12 interviewees reported experiencing language difficulties. Most students mentioned that their poor command of grammar and lack of vocabulary had a significant impact on their writing process. Moreover, the qualitative findings revealed that students shared their experiences with difficulty completing academic writing tasks. They mentioned that they were not familiar with the English language's rules and verbs, which led them to believe that academic writing was challenging. Some students believed that using appropriate vocabulary for their sentences was difficult. This is because they do not have a large enough vocabulary to express themselves. Some of the participants also mentioned that they lacked the required knowledge to answer the questions themselves. This was clearly expressed in the examples below.

'I think my language problems have affected my writing because I keep using the same word to express the same meaning in writing, which seems boring and monotonous.' (P1)

'I struggle a lot with writing in English. Maybe I can learn academic writing, so that the structure of my articles isn't so messy. However, I have a lot of problems with some words and grammar in my writing, and sometimes the occurrence of some words makes my whole article look unprofessional.' (P2)

'I struggle with English grammar and making sure my sentences are coherent. I tend to use the same words in my academic writing, and it is difficult for me to find synonyms for what I want to include in my writing.' (P9)

Furthermore, interference with the first language was identified as one of the language problems in the qualitative results. Students shared how the Chinese language affected their learning and writing of

academic assignments in English. They talked about the differences between the two languages.

'I prefer writing in Chinese. It is sometimes difficult for me to express myself properly in English. We don't have past tenses in Chinese, but we do in English. (P3)

'I find writing difficult because it is influenced by my mother tongue. I usually use the Chinese language system when writing essays in English. So I discovered that the sentences I write in Chinese differ from the sentences I write in English.' (P7)

'I unconsciously use my mother tongue to translate English words at times. So every time I write, I use the incorrect sentence structure because the sentence structures in Chinese and English are completely different.' (P8)

Materials Used in the Writing Classroom

One of the challenges raised was the nature of the materials used in the writing classroom. As shown in Table 3, other supplementary handouts were the most preferred. Paradoxically, students were found to prefer supplementary exercises the least.

Table 3

Analysis for Materials Used in the Writing Classroom

Scale Items	Mean	SD
The key textbook used in class	3.11	1.44
Other supplementary handouts	3.25	1.40
Supplementary authentic research papers as models	3.16	1.35
Supplementary exercises	3.07	1.36

When analyzing the qualitative results, students in the writing classes frequently refer to course workbooks or course materials such as presentation slides or exercises provided by instructors. However, most participants felt that textbooks should not be the only source of reference for learning academic writing skills. They stated that the limitations of textbooks were a lack of up-to-date information and

limited examples. Therefore, they did not consider it sufficient to refer only to the course materials, they used other supplementary materials. Some of the interviewees' responses are as follows:

'For me, it's about using textbooks for different topics in class. Since there are different writing classes, these textbooks help me in writing better and expressing my ideas. But sometimes I feel like I want to know more, and the textbooks have limited examples, so, I also need to supplement the word books and grammar books that can help me quickly learn the words I need in the writing process and find grammar problems.' (P2)

'I always use the resource books recommended by the teachers, but they are not enough. I'd like to refer to more examples. So, I usually look for materials on the website too. They help me in improving my writing.' (P3)

'I don't just use my textbooks; they have very little information. I need more references like writing examples and good sentences. When I can't think of a word, I use Google/Baidu and the online dictionary to look it up.' (P9)

What strategies do Chinese students use to overcome academic writing challenges?

Teaching and Learning in the Writing Classroom

According to the survey results, classroom activities were important in helping students to overcome their difficulties in writing academic texts. As can be seen in Table 4, student oral presentations, group discussion on tasks, and teacher-centered lectures received mean scores of 3.32, 3.05 and 3.04, respectively. They were the three most popular activities among students. Students, on the other hand, reading and analysing authentic research papers and academic reading exercises to solve their writing problems were relatively less preferred.

Table 4*Analysis for Teaching and Learning in the Writing Classroom*

Scale Items	Mean	SD
Teacher-centered lecturers	3.04	1.41
Student oral presentations	3.32	1.44
Group discussions on tasks	3.05	1.37
Academic grammar drills	2.99	1.42
Academic vocabulary drills	2.99	1.43
Academic writing exercises	3.00	1.36
Academic reading exercises	2.96	1.41
Reading and analyzing authentic research papers	2.92	1.49

When asked about their efforts in dealing with academic writing difficulties during the interview, many of them were proactive in taking positive steps to improve their writing skills. Students used three main strategies: guidance from others (academic staff, peers, and tutoring service providers), imitation, and obtaining materials from the internet.

Guidance from Others

When they were having difficulties with their academic writing skills, many students turned to their lecturers and friends for assistance and clarification. The excerpts below clearly show the student's thoughts.

'I had assistance from my friends. When we have ambiguities in class, we talk about them after class. I don't always consult with the teachers. They are busy, and I am sometimes hesitant to ask.' (P1)

'I think it's from the lecturer. In class, the lecturer shows the PPT, which contains many steps and techniques for academic writing. Of course, if I still don't understand, my classmates will help me understand exactly what the lecturers have told me.' (P6)

'I usually seek assistance from the teachers. They are very helpful. They pointed out my mistakes and guided me on how to improve my text.' (P7)

Imitation

Imitating other academic materials was another effective strategy. Students who want to improve their writing skills, understandably, look for examples or templates that will help them write better. The interviewed students shared similar views; they usually searched for academic materials, examined their writing styles, and then imitated them. This was evident in the quotes taken from the interview.

‘When I am having difficulty writing, I consult with friends, search for information on the internet, and follow the guidelines or rubrics provided by the lecturer. All of this gives me more confidence in writing because, unlike last time, I can write well.’ (P5)

‘I read other academic papers and take note of how they have worded their essays. I often study their writing style and apply it to my own. This helps me to write better,’ (P8)

‘I read my friend’s academic papers and think about how I can improve my own work.’(P9)

Sourcing for Online Materials

The other identified strategy was materials sourcing. Some students reported that another method for overcoming academic writing difficulties was to search for related materials on the internet. These included tutorials, websites that teach writing, and other useful materials. The following student excerpts demonstrate how they dealt with the difficulties.

‘For vocabulary, I watch videos made by English speakers and read news articles in English. This improves my writing.’(P8)

‘I watch online videos about academic writing. I pay attention to what they teach. They teach me a lot. The videos are very good. They are extremely beneficial to me because I can’t learn everything in class. The videos are useful for learning outside of the classroom.’(P10)

‘No, Google is the method I always use to solve my writing problem. I refer to the different writing websites. They show how to write. They provide examples. I copy how they write. I make use of them in my writing.’(P11)

Academic Text Types Preference

The questionnaire included a separate section on student preferred academic text types to explore their perception of the text types or content that students are more likely to absorb, prefer, and teach in an academic writing class. As shown in Table 5, more than half of the students chose “writing research papers/ reports”, “writing review articles”, and “writing case studies”. On the other hand, students felt that among the eight text types, “writing critique” and “writing short summaries” should be prioritized the least.

Table 5

Frequency and Percentage for Academic Text Types Preference in the Writing Class

Scale Item	Frequency	Percent
Writing research papers/ reports	102	51%
Writing research proposal	98	49%
Writing thesis	98	49%
Writing general argumentative essays	100	50%
Writing review articles	109	54.5%
Writing critiques	93	46.5%
Writing case studies	103	51.5%
Writing short summaries	95	47.5%

Discussion

Academic writing has always been a difficult task for Chinese students studying abroad (Cai, 2013). Academic writing skills are essential in both disciplines and subject discourse at universities. Nonetheless, students in higher education struggle to maintain their academic writing standards for several reasons (Cai, 2013). The educational environment in China, where English is taught as a second language, has a strong influence on this scenario. Chinese ESL students appear to be influenced by their first language due to the differences in language systems between English and Chinese. This study investigates the perceived academic writing challenges that

Chinese students face while studying at private universities in Malaysia, as well as strategies for overcoming these challenges.

The quantitative data revealed that Chinese students perceived academic writing skills to be difficult, particularly in the design of the methods section and reference writing. However, the interviews showed that obtaining appropriate supplementary materials was considered difficult. This finding is in line with Al-Badi (2015) who found that students struggled to find materials and prepare references and citations because academic writing conventions are perceived as foreign to many non-native English learners. This scenario explains the difficulties that Chinese ESL students face when learning academic writing skills, which require a combination of a few dynamic processes such as cognitive skills, memorization, and verbal communication to express ideas (Ariyanti, 2016; Nickerson et al., 2014). By highlighting the difficulties in each section of academic writing, students and teachers can develop strategic approaches to improving classroom teaching and learning. In addition, the participation of other stakeholders such as schools and parents are critical in providing students with the necessary support and resources.

Another important finding from the questionnaire and interview was that language issues, such as a lack of grammar mastery, a lack of vocabulary, and inability to use academic language correctly, have a significant impact on students' academic writing skills. These findings are consistent with those of Mohamed et al. (2004) and Chea and Shumow (2014), who identified similar grammatical issues in Chinese students' English writing. According to Cai (2013), students frequently struggled to bridge the gap between their first language and English. This was due to differences in L1 and L2 writing styles (Hyland (2019). This claim is not entirely unfounded, according to Zhang and Luo (2004), grammar drills are prioritized in the Chinese education system to prepare students for the College English Test (CET) or National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) admission, also known as *Gaokao* (高考). Improving grammar and expanding vocabulary help students master the structural foundations of academic writing, allowing them to communicate meaning and ideas more effectively and

professionally (Giridharan, 2012). Based on these findings, instructors can also offer remedial courses in academic writing skills, academic language, and academic writing grammar.

Language issues are expected to impede students' writing experiences because academic writing requires the ability to evaluate, synthesize, and restructure before preparing essays (Dehkordi & Allami, 2012). This finding is useful in highlighting and categorizing the types of language problems so that practical strategies, such as designing a curriculum that meets the standards of Chinese students in academic writing in English during their higher education, can be developed.

It should also be noted that classroom materials had a significant impact on students' ability to learn academic writing skills. They reported that supplementary handouts and course materials supplemented with academic writing conventions and examples served as templates to reinforce their writing skills. To learn academic phrases in their writing, many Chinese students preferred physical handouts (Li & Schmitt, 2009; Xia, 2014) which give them a better understanding of the concepts and requirements of academic writing (Cho & MacArthur, 2011). This finding suggests that students benefited from different writing examples in reference books or textbooks that were tailored to the students' various proficiency levels and backgrounds. As a result, standard academic supplementary materials should be prioritized and incorporated into academic writing instruction.

Another significant finding from this study was that students prefer teacher-centered lectures for learning academic writing skills. As expected, Chinese students continue to prefer traditional classroom arrangements in which teachers are the sole source of knowledge for students (Chou, 2011; Li, 2014; Zhang, 2018). The findings reaffirmed that a teacher-centered lecturing approach is generally preferred by students from a high-power distance society in which communication between teachers and students is typically one-way. Li and Schmitt (2009) also discovered that positive feedback from instructors and engaging teaching have a positive impact on students' writing. However, although Chinese ESL students prefer the teacher-centered instructional model, instructors in positions of authority should avoid

spoon-feeding students as passive recipients of lectures. Indeed, relationship between teacher-centered style and academic writing merits further investigation in order to estimate the amount of support that teachers should ideally provide to help students in achieving maximum outputs in academic writing. Separately, teachers should consider incorporating cooperative learning into their classrooms to help students improve their English academic skills (Loh & Ang, 2020), as students reported they were more likely to seek help from their peers when teachers are unavailable

Overall, this study gives teachers, students, and stakeholders a more complete picture of the challenges that Chinese students face while studying abroad. Therefore, strategies for addressing various problems associated with academic writing in English among Chinese students can be developed. Educators may be unaware of the difficulties students face when attempting to find the correct language, grammar, and appropriate academic vocabulary to write accurate academic papers. Several important aspects of academic writing skills, such as teaching proper writing conventions and locating appropriate instructional materials, may also be overlooked by teachers.

Limitations & Suggestions

Although it is not surprising that learning academic writing skills is difficult for Chinese students, there are some limitations to presenting the full range of difficulties they face. Moreover, because the academic background of the students was not investigated, the types of language problems identified in the current study are not sufficient to explain the entire scenario. Furthermore, this study is limited to the context of teaching writing to non-native speakers in private universities in Malaysia. More importantly, there may be a bias in their responses because the students came from a completely different learning environment and cultural context where academic writing was not emphasized in their studies

Despite these limitations, this study makes some recommendations. First, further studies should be conducted to investigate various types of academic writing difficulties so that

appropriate pedagogical methods can be offered to effectively address the problems. Inadequate and ineffective academic writing teaching instructions can eventually lead to professional difficulties (Weideman, 2013). In addition, future studies could compare students' academic backgrounds and academic writing difficulties to provide a more meaningful overview of the topic. Gaining a general understanding of the interrelationships between these variables allows for proper academic writing skill intervention in assisting ESL learners in better dealing with their studies given the urgency of academic writing skills in completing their studies (Ariyanti, 2016). Furthermore, more research is needed to examine the differences between public and private universities for non-native English language learners. In doing so, stakeholders and practitioners from both academic environments would be able to provide best practice instruction to ESL students. Further research with a stronger focus on comparing the different learning experiences in home countries with university host countries is also strongly recommended in order to provide a more complex overview of the types of academic writing challenges students face. As there is no definitive canon of best practice for teaching academic writing skills, this will promote academic literacies from various possibilities adopted from other educational contexts that help to deal with students with low academic writing skills (Caldwell, 2012; Pineteh, 2014)

Conclusion

Regardless of students' nationality or geographical location, academic writing is essential in tertiary education for communicating and conveying ideas. It contributes significantly to students' success during their university studies. This study concludes that Chinese ESL students struggle to write well, especially in academic writing, due to language barriers and the materials used in writing classes. It is important to note, however, that students are not paralyzed by the challenges they face. Students took the initiative to address these critical issues by seeking help from others, imitating academic writing

materials, and seeking academic writing materials in order to improve their ability to write academically in English.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions

Academic writing skills

1. What are your thoughts on academic writing skills? Is it difficult for you to learn? If so, why? If not, why not?
2. Which aspect of academic writing do you find the most difficult to grasp?
3. What, in your opinion, are the factors that contributed to this difficulty?
4. How have your difficulties in mastering academic writing skills affected your writing performance?

Language problems

1. Do you have any problems writing in English?
2. What kinds of language problems do you encounter in academic writing?
3. Do you think your language problems have impacted your writing? If so, how so? If not, why not?
4. What other language problems do you think have contributed to the difficulties in writing?

Materials used in the writing classroom

1. What kinds of materials do you use in the classroom to learn academic writing?
2. What other supplementary materials do you use to help you learn to write?
3. Do you think that the materials used in a writing classroom are important?
4. How do think these materials will help you improve your writing in the writing classroom?

Teaching and learning in the writing classroom

1. How was academic writing taught in Chinese writing classes?
2. How did you learn to write academically in China?
3. What are the academic English writing teaching and learning styles in China and Malaysia?
4. What, in your opinion, caused disparities in academic writing teaching and learning in the two contexts?

Ways to overcome academic writing difficulties

1. How do you get past the challenges of writing an academic essay?
2. Do you get help from anyone to improve your writing skills?
3. Do you consider the assistance you received to be beneficial? If so, why? If not, why not?
4. What other methods do you use to overcome your writing difficulties?