



An Analysis of Afghan Students Challenges in Academic Writing in US Universities

Mariam Alamyar^{1,2}

¹ Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47906, USA

² The American University of Afghanistan, Kabul, Afghanistan

Email: mariamalamyar@yahoo.com

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Abstract

For more than 35 years, there is no research done to find out the writing challenges of this specific Afghan students in the US. Thus, the present research undertakes a study of the qualitative analysis of the challenges that Afghan graduate students have in English academic writing across disciplines. In particular, it addresses the specific challenges that students are facing in regard to academic writing and the impact of these challenges on their class performance. It also shed lights on the factors behind those challenges and students' perceptions of what they need to overcome them. For this study, the data were collected through survey and interviews with Afghan graduate students from different disciplines in US universities. The results of the study indicated that Afghan students face challenges in all aspects of English academic writing. Nevertheless, paraphrasing, citing sources, generating ideas, and writing for different audiences are the most challenging skills. These challenges stem from a lack of focus on academic writing curricula both in English and in the native language, an overall unfavorable system of education, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Hence, this study suggests a change in the curricula from a lack of focus to a strong focus on academic writing, establishment of writing centers, provision of more writing resources in US universities, and overall changes in the current system of education in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Writing Instruction, Afghan Students' Challenge

Introduction

Globalization incorporates education in the form of the expanding market in cross-border and cross-cultural studies in tandem with, rather than as a consequence of, the rise of modernity in Western countries. Each year, students from various countries and cultures, whose first language is not English, come to English-speaking countries, especially to the United States, for education. These international students represent one of the largest groups of students who consistently and repeatedly come to the United States. They consider the US a country with the finest university education system globally, recognized and valued for its excellent range of opportunities, diversity, and flexibility in teaching and

learning, as well as its provision of modern facilities and resources to enhance the learning experience. Most importantly, the degree that they obtain from the United States gives them the broad academic experience necessary to compete in the global economy. At the same time, the United States seems to consider internationalization and diversity as the key to the future development of the economy of the country. Apart from this, the US is willing to support international students from underdeveloped and developed countries in gaining dynamic experiences in order to prepare them to return and take part in rebuilding and improving hard and soft infrastructure back in their home countries, including in areas of governance, social, political, and economic policy, education, communication, energy and transport, and environmental policy. Therefore, many private and US government-sponsored international programs provide scholarships, fellowships, assistantships and other opportunities for international students to come to the United States to experience life and education in America and to learn about each other's cultures.

One of the underdeveloped countries that is highly assisted and supported in terms of educational opportunity provided by the US is Afghanistan. The American government and non-governmental organizations help Afghan students to come to the US through different programs such as scholarships, fellowships and other exchange programs, which are generally based on the students' merit.

It is probably not surprising that while the US is providing increasing numbers of Afghan students with quality education and a lot of other academic opportunities, the challenges faced by these students are also becoming more intensive and extensive as they join American universities. One of the biggest challenges that they face in academia across disciplines is writing for their courses using American universities' norms and conventions. Academic writing can be challenging even for native English-speaking students. However, for Afghan students, academic writing is a major challenge due not only to poor academic writing backgrounds, but also to overall low quality of educational, cultural, and linguistic preparation. Afghan students have to struggle greatly when they write as they attempt to fulfill academic writing standards in these universities.

Thus, this research is a study of the qualitative analysis of the specific challenges that Afghan graduate students face in writing and the reasons behind them. It explains Afghan students' perceptions of their needs and future opportunities that are provided through English academic writing and writing in general across disciplines in the US. Furthermore, it examines the types of opportunities that Afghan students have in terms of improving their writing and how these opportunities can assist in their current academic life and with achieving future career goals.

In order to complete this study, the following research questions are investigated:

1. What are the Afghan students' challenges in English academic writing when attending colleges /universities in the US and why do they face those challenges?
2. What are the Afghan students' specific needs in terms of English academic writing,

- and how could those needs be met based on their perceptions?
3. What are Afghan students' perceptions on the importance of English writing, especially when it comes to their future goals or careers?

Review of the Literature

The past almost four decades of war and disorder in Afghanistan have had a devastating impact on the Afghan educational system and its research infrastructure. Therefore, to my knowledge and according to my research, there is no previous existing literature approximately for the past 35 years to review about Afghans students' challenges in English academic writing in US universities. However, there is a body of research that illustrate the common challenges that international students face in English academic writing as a whole that may be more or less similar to that of Afghan students studying in the US which I am going to explain in this section.

The fast-increasing number of international students has created abundant challenges for students in English academic writing which has concerned educators in the US (Felix & Lawson, 1994; Woodward-Kron, 2007). In general, international students face challenges in writing to academic audiences based on the differences between writing conventions and norms in their home countries and those in North America. One of the most important challenges for international students is the lack of knowledge and awareness about academic integrity. Researches have acknowledged the incongruous number of second language writers who are implicated in plagiarism cases in North American universities (Yamada, 2003; Bloch, 2001; Evans & Youmans, 2000). Many of these students may not be aware of how North American institutions define and regulate plagiarism. Duff, Rogers & Harris (2006) found out that historical and cultural assumptions shape perceptions of plagiarism. This is especially true for international students who did not grow up in western countries such as the United States and Canada. These differences in the cultural assumptions pertaining to plagiarism and lack of awareness about its definitions and policies lead to academic issues.

It is important to remember that plagiarism is a recent phenomenon with the advent of intellectual property rights. Duff et al (2006) state that "... the notion of 'stealing' another's work has its origins in the peculiarly western conjunction between the 'growth of the notion of human rights' (freedom of speech) and the 'stress on individual property'" (p. 675). Not all cultures adhere to this point of view. Scollon (1999) describes those students from Confucian heritage countries such as Korea, China, Singapore, Vietnam and Japan who consider their sources with supreme authority. However, they do not believe in citing them in the same way as is expected in western society (as cited in Duff et al., 2006). Added to this, in the Confucian countries' cultures, using an author's own words is a form of respect that makes it difficult for students to understand the North American standards

and change their perspectives on this matter (Hayes & Introna, 2005).

In addition to the lack of knowledge and awareness about academic honesty, experts in the field of EFL believe that the native and the target language culture, target language proficiency, cognitive process, educational experience in their home countries, language differences, and writing skills and knowledge of the grammar all have an impact on students' academic writing and writing in general (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Silva 1993; Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Blunt & Li, 1998; Gadman, 1997). Language proficiency is one important factor that contributes in writing well in any language (Simpson, 1998; Zainuddin & Moore, 2003). Students' low English proficiency and first language interference as well as translating ideas from their own language to English make it even more difficult for them to follow American English language conventions and norms.

Another challenge of international students in English Academic writing or academic audiences is the differences between the way they organize their discourses and thought patterns in their own languages based on their culture in contrast to accepted organization patterns in North American universities. Kaplan (1966) states that people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds follow different organization patterns and specific methods that reflect their own language and culture. In figure 1 below, Kaplan demonstrates various typical modes of discourse structure by speakers of several languages.

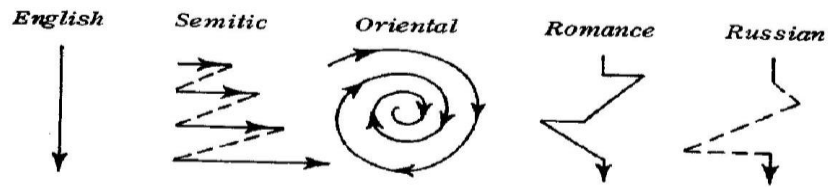


Figure 1: Cultural thought pattern/ organization

Note. Reprinted from “Cultural thought patterns in intercultural communication,” by Kaplan, R.B. 1966. *Language Learning*, 16, 1-20.

Although this organization graphic thought pattern is old, it illustrates a very insightful idea about the nature of differences in organizing thoughts in different cultures which are still true to some extent. When international students are required to write for academic audiences in Northern American universities, they are used to transferring the writing patterns that they have been familiar with in their home country. Consequently, many of them find it is difficult to adhere to academic writing in an acceptable form (Casanova & Hubbard, 1992). We can see that the international students' traditional culture not only influences their behaviors, patterns of thinking, and their views of the world, but

also their writing style.

Furthermore, students from different countries might learn some vocabulary or even memorize extensive vocabulary, but mostly it happens that they have limited practice in actually using these words in daily written work. Corona, Spangenberg, & Venet (1998) state that “at any level, written communication is more effective when a depth of vocabulary and command of language is evident” (p. 26). Ediger (1999) confirms this argument by stating that “variety in selecting words to convey an accurate meaning is necessary in speaking and writing, the outgrowth of the language arts” (p. 1). Therefore, limited vocabulary and not knowing its contextualized usage can be a factor in one’s ability to writing properly for academic audiences and thus facing huge challenges.

L2 Writing Instruction in Afghanistan

Very little attention is paid to the teaching and learning of writing skills in Afghanistan because the system of education is highly dependent on the examination. Since English in general is taught very poorly in primary, secondary, and high schools, English writing is not excluded from this. There is no supervision of how students learn to write in English before attending university or monitoring of whether they know English at all. This is because the teachers are not trained enough in English, and the numbers of students are very large in each class. It is a huge load of work for teachers in schools to check more than 100 papers each week. Sometimes, they can only check students' writing in their notebooks on the exam day. They only put check marks on each page of the notebooks to just assure the students that the teacher went through them. They only spend 20-30 minutes of their time to go through all of the notebooks.

At the university level, English is taught as a course for two years by the school of Languages and Literature, or English Department to all other schools within Kabul University. The instructors need to provide English instruction to 14 schools including the School of Languages and Literature, English department and all other departments. The English department has 30 professors in total who provide instruction to all students in the English Department and to freshmen and sophomore students in the 14 schools within Kabul University (Ministry of Higher Education in Afghanistan, 2014).

Since the number of instructors is very small in the English Department, considering the number of students in all schools, providing effective teaching is almost impossible. They may have more than 300-400 students per semester to deal with. The texts through which the English instruction takes place focus on four integrated skills: reading, writing, listening and grammar. However, the teachers merely use the grammar sections of the book and stay focused on this skill. They might focus a little on reading skills, but that is only if they have about 30-40 students in their classes. In lecture classes in other disciplines with 100 or 150 students, they cannot focus on writing skills at all

because giving feedback for the mentioned number of students is not possible for them; doing so requires a huge amount of work which is not within the capacity of the instructors. Students receive no instruction on writing and listening or perhaps they receive very little in schools with a very low number of students. In the English Department, even when writing is taught, it is more like getting information about the writing skills and there is very little actual practical experience in writing.

However, many organizations including the US Embassy and the USAID partnership programs provide the selected students who will be joining American universities with some writing practice through different English training programs either in the US or in Afghanistan. In these programs, apart from the emphasis on TOFEL preparation, they get some training on English academic writing and researching which is not sufficient and sometimes does not go beyond essay writing. Since these English training programs are very short, students do not get the chance to learn most of the accepted academic norms and conventions of American universities for writing papers and any other types of writing required at the college and university level.

Methodology

Participants' Background

The participants in this study are all enrolled in a graduate degree program and the majority of them are working towards their masters' degrees. 11 out of 60 participants are females and the rest are males. The number of female participants is quite low in this study because the number of female students coming to the US is low in general. They have issues such as family restrictions, low higher education rate, and less access to technology and English education. The participants had obtained their bachelor's degrees from various governmental and a few private universities in Afghanistan. The majority of them have never taken any English writing academic courses while obtaining their bachelor's degrees. In governmental universities, particularly Kabul University, the medium of instruction is largely in Dari. Very few departments teach in English. However, in governmental universities, one English integrated skill course is offered for all majors for 4 semesters.

In general, the participants in this study are from 34 universities in the United States. Their ages range between 22 -45. However, the majority of them fall in the category of 25-30. They have been studying in the US from 6-12 months to 13-24 and 25-36 months.

The Survey

In this study, 60 students from various disciplines and universities across the US participated in the survey. The survey was conducted completely anonymously. For data collection, the survey was sent to the students through the US Embassy in Afghanistan,

Fulbright Exchange Program with a request to voluntarily fill out the survey. Participants were sent a link to the survey and the survey took 20-30 minutes of their time in accordance with their convenience.

The students' survey entails multiple-choice statements, some of which are based on the Likert 5 option scale, in which students show their agreement and disagreement with the statements, and they are requested to provide an explanation of the option they chose for certain statements. The students' survey contains two sections. The first section includes a set of demographic information and their background in English writing. The second set of questions specifically asks students about their challenges and needs in different areas pertaining to writing skills as well as about their feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions toward academic writing and writing in general. These questions also ask for the students' opinions on how they can be better supported in learning academic writing and how writing skills will help them with their future career goals.

The Interview

The interviews were conducted both face to face and via Skype. In total, 15 students from various disciplines and universities were interviewed. However, only 10 interviewees' responses were included in the data in this study since 5 of them did not have similar backgrounds to the majority. These 5 interviewees did their bachelor degrees in different countries other than in Afghanistan. Therefore, they were considered as outliers in this study.

The participants were selected randomly from different disciplines in American universities who volunteered to be interviewed. The interview was anonymous and they were digitally-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcript of each interview was read aloud to the interviewee for validation. The interview questions focused on students' previous backgrounds in English writing, the type of challenges they face in writing for their courses at American universities, and types of support they need or ways they think they could be provided better support to help them with their writing skills. Finally, they were asked about the types of opportunities that the American universities provide them in academic writing and writing in general for their future.

Findings and Discussion

Afghan Students Challenges in English Academic Writing and the Rationale behind Them

In order to get a deeper understanding of the participants' challenges in English writing and the reasons behind them, first, it's important to learn about the participants' background in English writing. Therefore, they were asked to specify the types of writing they did in Afghanistan either in their native language and/or in English for their classes.

As can be seen in figure 2, the majority of them prepared PowerPoint slides which do not require a lot of writing skills. They could simply copy and paste the information from any sources.

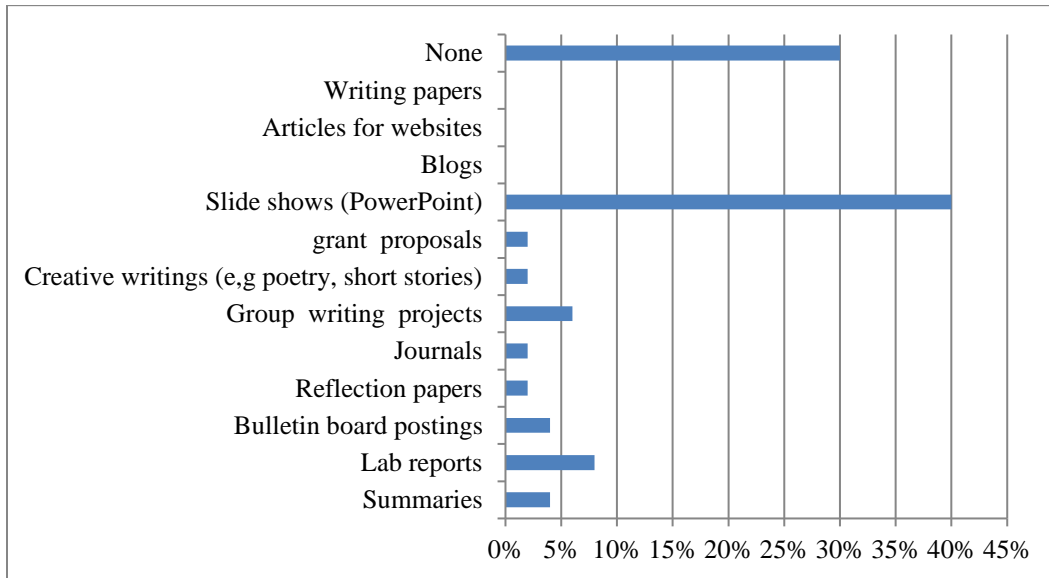


Figure 2: Types of writing participants did in Afghanistan

The second largest number (30%) states that they did not do any type of writing for their classes at the university. Relatively small percentages of them did lab reports, summaries, group writing projects, and bulletin board postings, and other extremely small percentages did reflection papers, journals, creative writing, and grant proposals. The result of this figure also reveals that students have never written papers or articles for websites and blogs while these types of writing, especially writing papers, is very important in graduate schools in the US.

Moreover, figure 3 below illustrates the respondents' agreement, disagreement and neutrality towards the question of whether they had the writing skills to meet the requirements for their courses when they joined universities in the US. As can be seen, a high number (55 %) of the participants showed their agreement on not having writing skills when they joined American universities. This means that even when the participants' level of English was good enough to get the scholarship, they had to struggle in writing for their courses when they attended universities in the US.

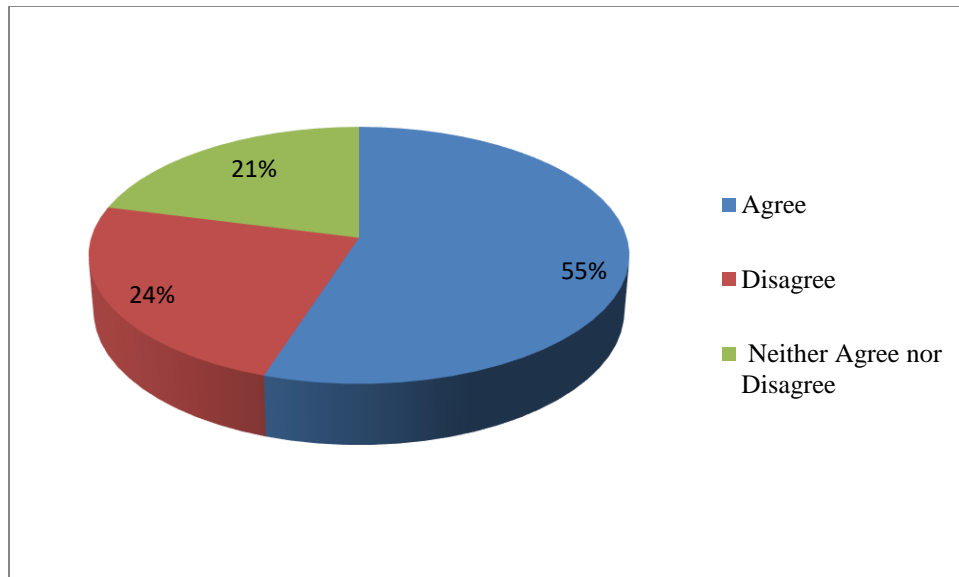


Figure 3: Participants' responses regarding their abilities to meet the academic writing requirements for their courses when they joined universities

Still, a low percent (24 %) of the respondents revealed that they had the writing skills to deal with their courses. 21% of the respondents were not sure of their responses. A lot of them stated that the reason for not having the writing skills is due to the education system which is more exam focused and in which writing is not encouraged or, even if they were asked to write, their written work was given hardly any feedback or read by their educators both at the school and university level.

Thus, in the interview, they were asked if the experiences and knowledge they brought from their home country impacted their writing in English positively and if it was helpful. A number of the interviewees stated:

"It is not that helpful, except from the experience I have from my professional work (Interview participant 1-9)."

"They were not positive. Because if I learned how to write papers and cite properly if I used accredited sources I may not needed a pre-academic program and keep struggling (Interview participant 1-7)."

From the above comments, it becomes clear that writing for academic purposes is the most challenging aspect of the student's academic life and the experiences and knowledge that they brought from back home in terms of writing were not helpful. Only the experiences from their professions helped them.

Following from this, they were asked to state the number of composition/writing

courses they have taken in the US so far to improve their writing abilities to meet the written requirements for their courses. The figure 4 below shows their responses:

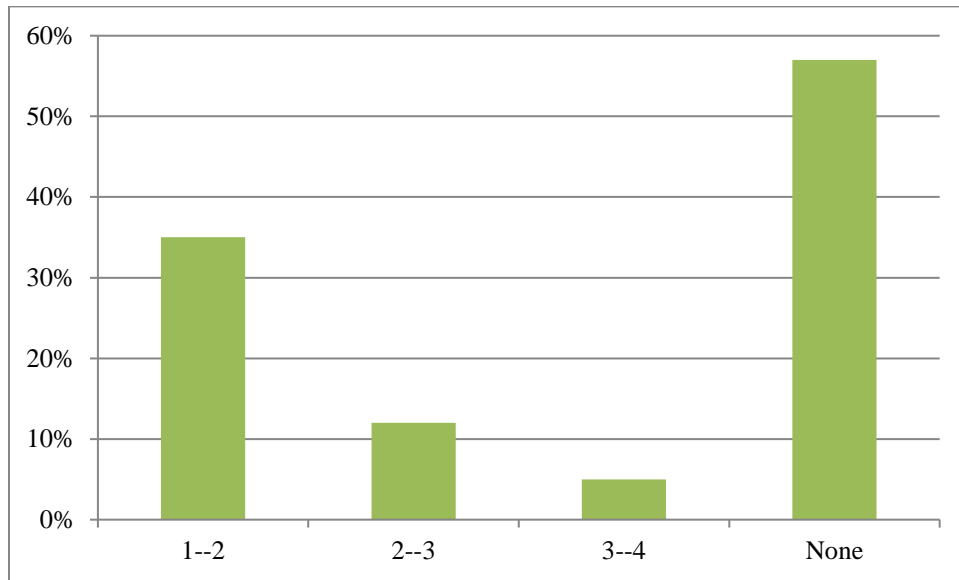


Figure 4: Number of composition/writing courses taken in the US

Figure 4 demonstrates that a fairly high percentage (57%) of the participants have taken no writing/composition courses in the US. Merely 35% of the participants have taken 1 or 2 courses after being admitted to the universities. A comparatively low percent, 12%, have taken 2-3 composition courses followed by 5% who have taken 3-4 courses. The reason that a large number of the respondents were not able to take writing courses goes back to the fact that they come from different disciplines and they might not have the time and opportunity to take writing courses as they have other priority courses to take.

Now, to find out about the overall and specific challenges of the Afghan students in academic writing, in the survey, the participants were asked to indicate the level of their difficulties in the elements of writing such as generating ideas, citing sources, researching sources, writing for different audiences and writing in genre-appropriate forms when completing university assignments in the US. The figure 5 below shows their responses.

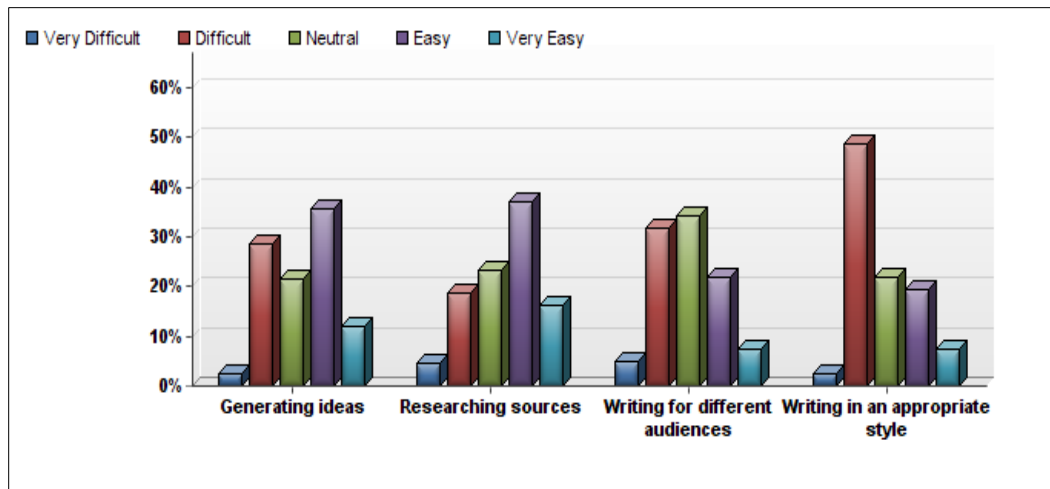


Figure 5: Respondents' levels of difficulty in important and common skills of writing an academic paper

As you can see in the figure, the respondents indicated that they have difficulty in all the skills of writing listed. However, almost 50 % of them specified that they have the most difficulty in writing in an appropriate style followed by writing for different audiences (34%). Approximately, 30 % of them indicated that they have difficulty in generating ideas followed by researching sources (19 %).

In another questionnaire in the survey, participants were asked to rank the most difficult part of writing a paper with a ranking of 1 for most difficult, 6 for least difficult. Again, figure 7.6 shows that the participants have difficulties in all the elements listed in the figure. Nonetheless, the majority (50%) of them consider writing conclusions the most challenging element of any of the listed specific elements of writing an academic paper.

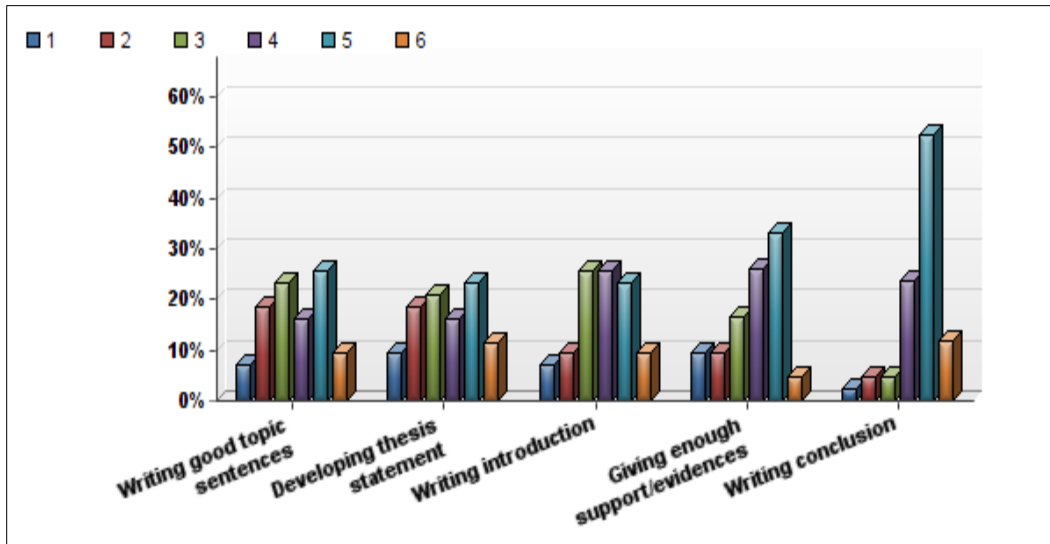


Figure 6: Level of difficulty in content-based areas of writing academic papers skills

The second most challenging element of writing a paper is giving enough support/evidence (32 %) followed by writing good topic sentences. The third most challenging elements are writing introductions and developing thesis statements.

Likewise, participants were asked to rank the most difficult and important components of writing a research paper with 1 for most difficult, 6 for least difficult. Again, figure 6.4 below indicates that the majority of the respondents (about 50 % ranked it a 1) consider paraphrasing the most challenging skill in academic writing.

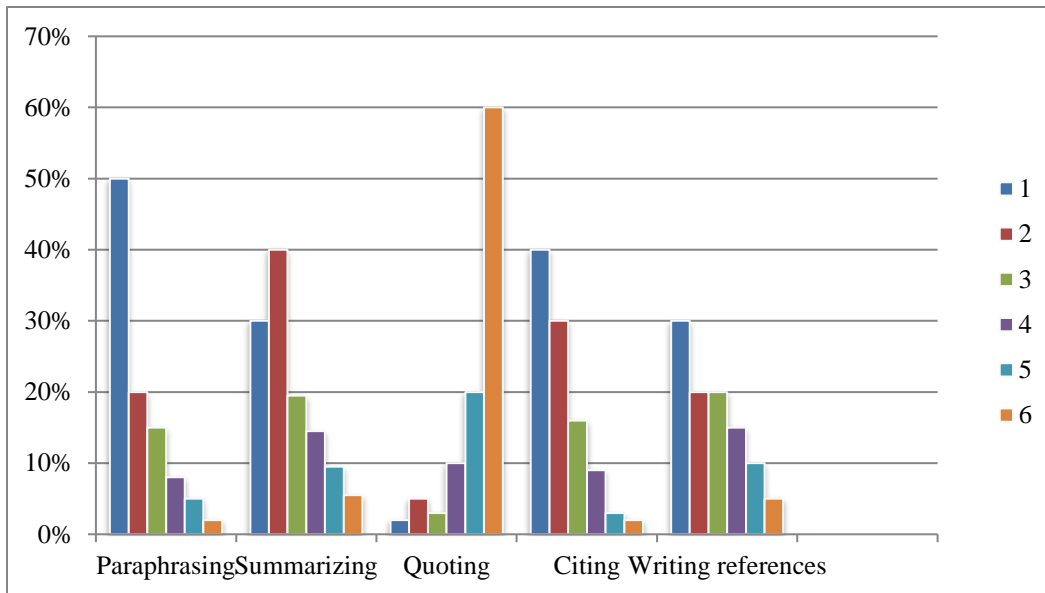


Figure 7: Respondents' degree of difficulty in important components of writing a research paper

The second major challenging skill of writing is cited by 40% who ranked their difficulty a 1 and 30% who ranked it a 2. Summarizing followed by writing references seem to be somewhat challenging (30% ranked it a 1 and 20% a 2 and 20% a 3), and quoting seems to be very easy as 60% ranked it a 6.

The figure result shows that students had very little or no training in paraphrasing and citations and these are the most difficult aspects of academic writing for them. These two aspects of writing academic papers were also considered the most challenging aspects by the interview participants as they stated:

“Paraphrasing and citations was the most difficult challenging aspect of writing a paper for me because I was never taught about it and we copied and pasted the information from any source and no one commented on it. It was totally acceptable.” (Interview participant 1-1)

“Back home we didn't have a good standard of writing and no plagiarism measurement scale but here in US it is taken very seriously. Therefore, initially I faced with lots of problems paraphrasing correctly and quoting and citing.” (Interview participant 1-7)

Both the results from the figures and the elaborations from the interviewees indicate that paraphrasing and citations were the most difficult aspects of academic writing. Participants could simply copy and paste information from other sources without paraphrasing and citing them and it was totally acceptable for their professors in

Afghanistan.

Similarly, the participants were asked to indicate their challenges in discourse and form related issues in writing based on six criteria that represent the level of difficulty they experience while doing academic writing.

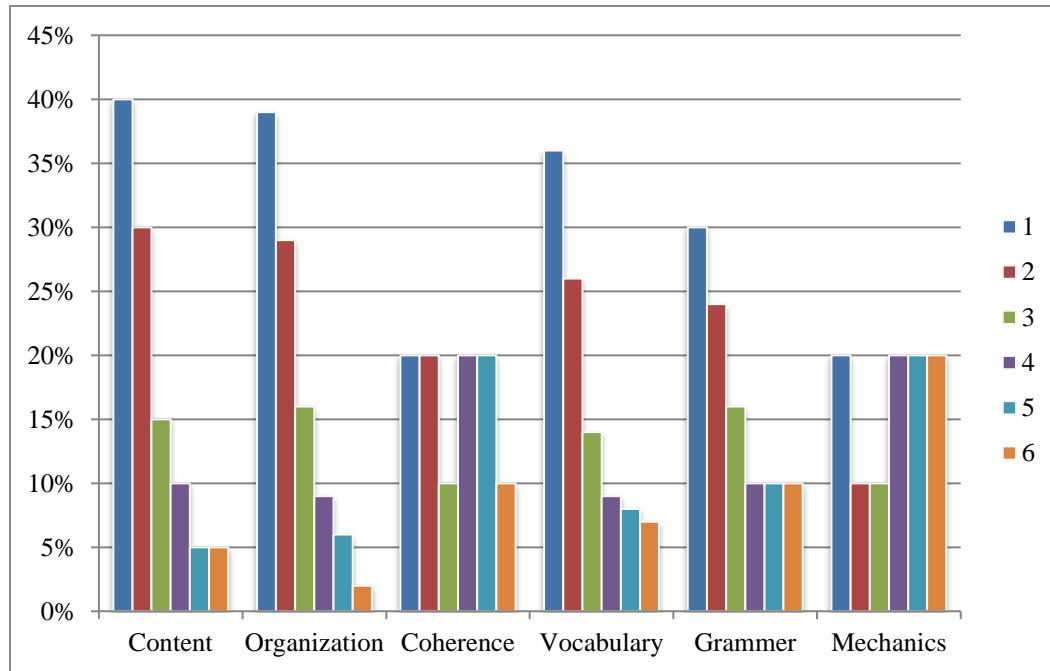


Figure 8: Discourse and form related issues difficulty rank based on the participants' responses

Figure 8 above represents the overall distribution of students' feedback as to which aspect of writing they found most difficult in order with 1 being the most difficult and 6 being the easiest. The respondents seem to have difficulty in all of the discourse and form related issues of writing but the most difficult aspect has been rated as the content (40% 1-30% 2) followed by organization (39% 1-29% 2). They ranked vocabulary as the third most difficult (36% 1 – 26% 2) element followed by grammar as being 30% 1 and 24% 2. Coherence seems to be moderately difficult and mechanics is rated as somewhat easier on this scale than all other items listed respectively.

It is surprising to see that grammar is still somewhat difficult although there is more emphasis on grammar in English education and grammar translation method has been prevalent. The reason that they still have difficulty in grammar is due to the fact that they memorize the rules of grammar.

From the above findings, it becomes obvious that English academic writing can be

a challenge for all international students. However, for Afghan students, it can be many times more challenging due to lack of training in English academic writing, lack of qualified trainers/professors to teach academic writing, low quality education, lack of updated materials, and lack of writing practice both in English and in their native languages starting in elementary and continuing to university level.

Afghan Students' Challenges in Reading Connected to Writing

In the interviews, a lot of the participants stated that the Afghan education system is set up in a way that requires students to do less reading for their courses. When they join American universities, a lot of them consider reading to be a major problem that directly affects their writing abilities in a negative way. Thus, to confirm this, the participants were asked to rank on a scale of 1 to 4, 1 being the most important reason why they have difficulty in reading and 4 being the least important reason.

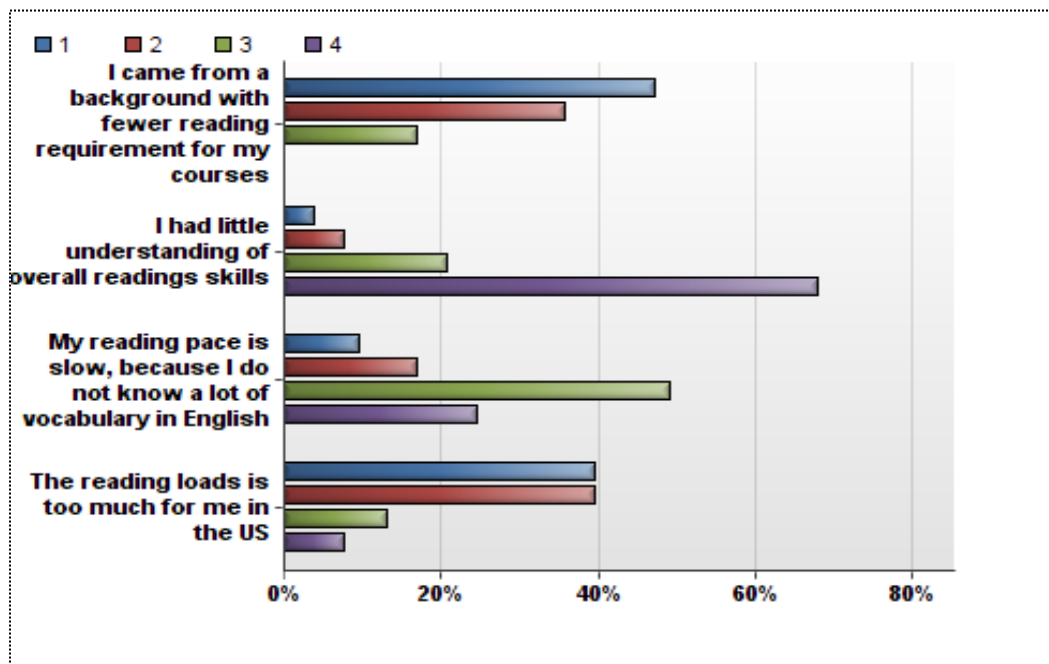


Figure 9: Level of respondents' difficulty in reading

Figure 10 shows that the majority (48%) of respondents consider their major challenge in reading to be due to their background with fewer reading requirements. Therefore, as the figure shows, the reading loads become too much for them and are hard to handle while studying in the American universities. They also think that their reading

pace is somewhat slow due to the fact that they do not know a lot of vocabulary. However, they indicated that they do not have much of a problem with overall reading skills. The respondents were asked to provide comments about their reading abilities. One of them stated that:

“I think, the main reason why I have difficulties in reading in the U.S. has to do with the lack of reading habits in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, we don't read a lot and even in our undergraduate courses we hardly finish a book/chapter for the course. But, here in the U.S. we have to read many chapters for each session.”

Later in the survey, the participants were asked if they think reading for their courses can enhance their writing; almost all of them had a very positive view about the connection between reading and improving their writing abilities. One survey participant stated:

I believe the more we read, the better we write. When I read a text, I take notes, and I play with the text. Besides, even if I do not intend to take notes to write a reading response on that text, I improve my linguistic knowledge by learning new sentence structures, vocabulary, and content knowledge.

Taken as a whole, the participants believe that reading is integral in improving their writing skills. They suppose that reading exposes them to vast varieties of vocabulary, different styles and techniques of writing, structure, grammar forms, and ideas/views and ultimately enables them to naturally and correctly reflect what they learn through reading in their academic writing.

To further confirm the participants' beliefs, it is worth mentioning that the notion of using readings to help with L2 learners' writing is not a nuanced phenomenon. There have been a lot of different presuppositions over the ideas of whether reading helps L2 learners with their writing or not. The majority of experts in the field of second language writing believe that reading does help L2 learners to develop their writing skills. For instance, Grabe and Kaplan (1996), from a pedagogical perspective, recommended that L2 reading can assist students to improve L2 writing both at the beginning level and the advanced level. They strongly suggested the use of extensive reading for beginners writing classes because they noted that “the outcome of a reading activity can serve as input for writing, and writing can lead a student to further reading resources” (p.297).

From what these pedagogic writings have suggested, it can be inferred that L2 writing skills cannot be obtained successfully by practicing writing alone. Sustained exposure of L2 learners at any language proficiency level to multiple varieties of reading texts can facilitate the development of writing skills.

Afghan Students’ Perceptions of Their Needs in English Writing and How to Meet Them

As claimed by many researchers, identifying and understanding students’ needs is an essential initial step in developing an appropriate specialized overall English program for international students (e.g., Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Hyland, 2006; Kavaliauskiene & Uzpaliene, 2003). It “can tell us a lot about the nature and content of the learners’ target language needs” (Hutchinson, 1988, p. 71). Since Afghan students come to the US with a entirely different educational and cultural background, their needs can be different and require special investigation. Thus, reflecting on their needs is critically important in obtaining information concerning students and their needs and in finding ways to solve their problems.

Figure 11 (below) illustrates Afghan students’ need to be successful at learning English academic writing in USA. These criteria have been ranked from 1 to 6 with 1 being the most important and 6 being the least important tool to achieve English competency.

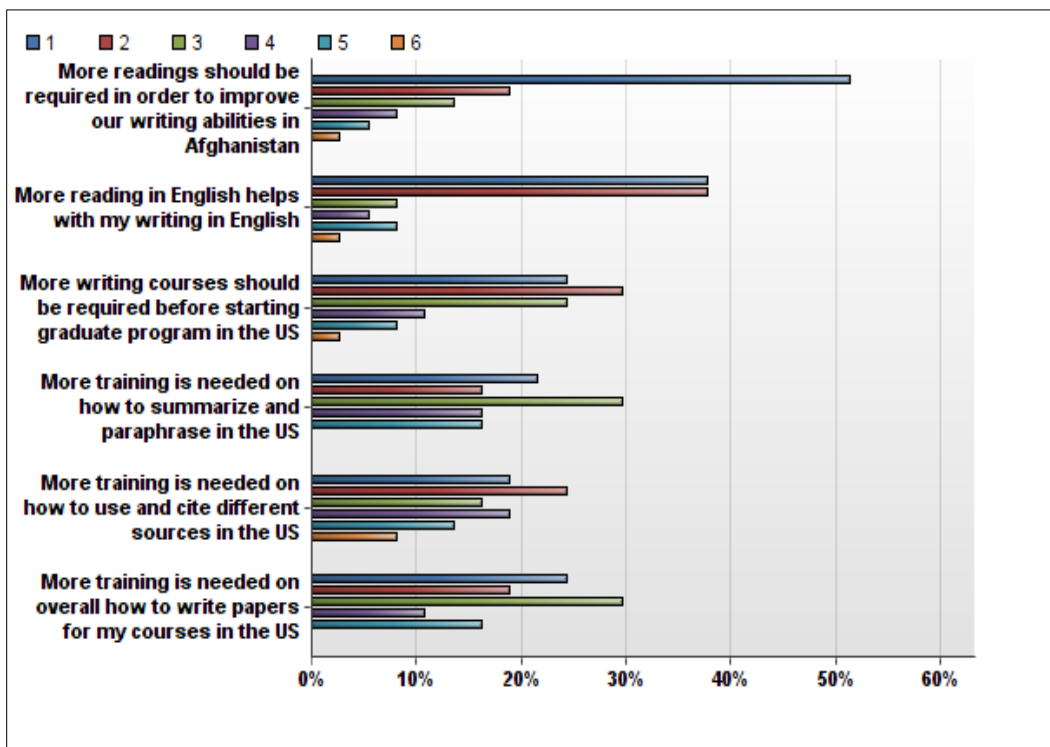


Figure 10: Participants’ response on specific needs to improve their overall academic writing skills

The majority of the participants (52%) have indicated that in order to improve their writing abilities, more reading should be included in Afghanistan schools and university curricula followed by 38% who favored reading more in English to improve their reading skills. 30% of this group indicated that more writing courses should be required before starting a graduate program in the USA. Also, 25% stated that more training is needed in how to cite sources when writing papers as well as in how to write research or essay style papers. Finally, 22% of them showed their need for training on how to summarize and paraphrase in English writing in the USA. Two survey participants provided the following comments in regards to their needs in academic writing:

“Students in Afghanistan usually only focus on very basic writing skills like how to write a paragraph or an essay; we need more advanced writing and students should get trained in their universities so that they don't remain absolutely illiterate in writing research projects and other lengthy papers.”

“As I know a few Afghan students here at my university in US, we are not comfortable in English writing. At least a graduate academic writing class should be taken prior to start of graduate program here at USA.”

Based on the perceptions of survey and interview participants, advanced-level academic writing courses in undergraduate programs should become part of the curricula for all students in different disciplines. They also think that there should be a graduate academic writing class taken prior to the start of graduate programs here in the USA.

In order to find out more about their needs in the US, interview participants were asked how much support they get from the writing program and other resources in their universities in the US and if they are sufficient or what needs to be changed to help them in improving their writing skills.

A number of interview participants provided the following explanations:

“The writing centers are good but the hours are limited and one can only use 30 minutes to discuss the how to solve and rare feedback is provided by writing centers (Participant 1-8).

“My school has a writing center, but they are mostly undergraduate students with limited or no knowledge of different disciplines other students seek help with. The program was actually meant to help undergraduates. There was very limited assistance available for graduate level students in general” (Participant 1-2).

“I don't get any particular support from my university apart from the writing lab. I did not receive any training at my university to improve my language skills although I was an international student” (Participant 1-4).

Based on the participants' explanations, it seems that some universities provide international students with writing labs and other types of tutoring which provide support for them in improving their writing. However, in some universities and for some students with poor writing backgrounds, the resources that they offer are not sufficient.

Afghan Students’ Perceptions of the Importance of Learning English Writing for Their Future Goals and Careers Purposes

Research studies have shown that students who consider writing to be less important and who are less motivated have negative perceptions toward their writing and are less eager to improve their writing than those who are willing to learn to write and believe that writing is important. Wolcott & Buhr (1987) explain in their studies that perceptions can play a significant role in influencing the motivation and performance of students. There is a close correlation between positive attitudes and good writers and negative attitudes and poor writers.

Hence, the participants were asked to present their ideas on if learning academic writing and writing in general English is important and can provide them with different opportunities. It seems that they consider writing in English integral toward their success in many areas in the future.

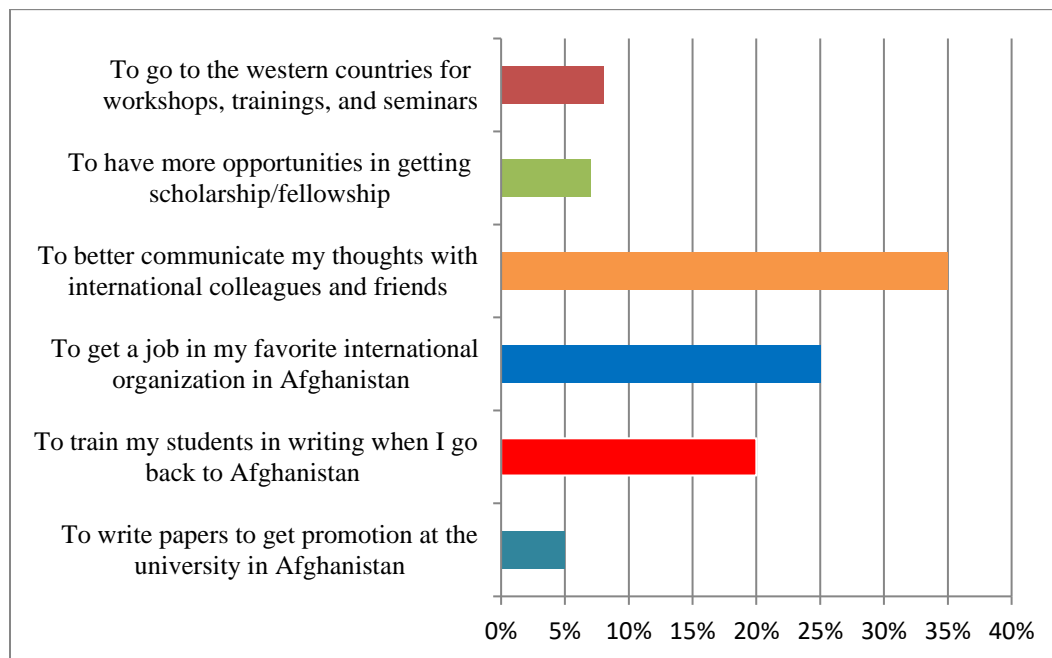


Figure 11: Participants’ responses on the importance of learning English writing

Figure 12 above exhibits participants’ responses on the types of future opportunities that English writing can provide them. It shows that a high number of the respondents (30%) believe that writing enables them to better communicate their thoughts with international colleagues and friends followed by having the opportunity to get a job

in their favorite international organization in Afghanistan (25%). A slightly high number (15%) of the participants believe that the writing skills they gain in the US can help them in training their future students. This could be the group of respondents who already have teaching positions in Afghan universities. A somewhat low percentage of the respondents (8%) think that they can have the opportunity to get more scholarships and attend workshops, seminars, and trainings abroad once they return.

In contrast, a very low percentage of the respondents (5%) seem to think the importance of writing papers is to get promotions at a university in Afghanistan. The reason for this low number could be that even if they get promotions, it hardly affects their salary or employment status. Furthermore, the participants were asked to provide other specific opportunities that can be obtained through acquiring writing skills in the US; interview participant 1-10 elaborated:

English is the international language and writing is a required skill for almost all the professional jobs in Afghanistan. When I go back to Afghanistan, I am expecting to work in a leadership position either in government or private sector and I must have good English writing to communicate with international counterparts, especially the writing grants and contracts for construction projects which has been a big problem in the past decade.

As can be seen, a high number of the interview participants believe that learning properly to write in English in the US is very essential and helps them not only in their academic lives but also provides them with opportunities for their future. Therefore, they understand the significance of learning it and they consider having quality and effective writing a high priority.

Conclusion

As the pioneer on this topic, this research has a great potential to contribute to a developing knowledge base about Afghan students' challenges in English writing, reasons behind those challenges and perceptions of their needs. This study has identified some issues and challenges by providing an opportunity for Afghan students in the US to reflect on their experiences. The data from the survey and interviews indicate that Afghan students face more challenges than any other group of international students in the US. The challenges start from the day they attend graduate schools in the US and continue until their graduations. Additionally, they are able to pass the TOFEL test and get the required score to get admitted to the universities. However, some of them have to take the test many times due to their poor writing skills and overall low English proficiency skills.

The results of this study indicate that when Afghan students joined American universities, a large number of them did not have the writing skills needed for their courses and they had to struggle for a long time until they found their way. The knowledge and

experiences they bring from back home did not positively affect their academic life in the US, except for some which was gained through their work. When they join American universities, still a large number of them do not get the opportunity to take writing or composition courses since they have to take core courses from their disciplines. The result reveals that students have difficulty in academic writing in almost every aspect, but paraphrasing, generating ideas, writing for different audiences, and citing sources are their biggest challenges.

Factors that affect their academic writing and overall academic performances negatively in the US are due to lack background in reading, an overall poor educational system, old methods of teaching, inappropriate educational structure, strict classroom culture, unwelcoming relationships between professors and students or the authoritative roles of the professors, having outdated materials, a memorization and exam focused system, lack of educators in the area, lack of receiving feedback on their written assignments, lack of academic courses or no accommodation for academic writing courses starting from elementary to university level, etc. All of this makes it hard for Afghan students to study in other countries, especially in the US. Conversely, the results indicate that students find the education system in the US very demanding and stressful, particularly with lots of papers to write and loads of reading. However, after a semester or two, they get used to it and they find it very useful, practical and welcoming.

Overall, the results indicate that irrespective of the fact that Afghan students encounter many challenges in academic writing, they still have positive attitudes and consider having good writing skills as the door to open many opportunities in their future careers. Some of the students consider the resources available to them in the US universities such as the writing labs very constructive and helpful in their academic writing. Nonetheless, some think that the writing labs have limited time to tutor them and it's not enough to meet their needs. Thus, Afghan students have specific needs that need to be addressed separately to improve the situation.

Recommendations

In order to assist Afghan graduate students who study in the US in triumphing over the culturally embedded challenges in English academic writing, it is important for the curriculum designers, policy makers, program supporters, and sponsored scholarship programs, especially the Fulbright program in Afghanistan, understand students' distinct pedagogical needs and develop intercultural sensitivity in their pedagogical practice. The result of the study indicates that the current curricula in Afghanistan pay insufficient attention to writing skills. Therefore, there is a dire need for including writing courses within the curricula and creating a culture that is conducive for a paradigm shift from no focus on writing skills to a focus on writing. From elementary school to university level

and from local school administrations to the national level, there is a need to give process writing with critical thinking a special place in their goals in every discipline. English writing skills and writing skills in their native languages should be properly taught at primary, middle and high school levels to promote the writing competence of the learners. Teachers should be provided pre-service and in service training, workshops, seminars in teaching, evaluating, and assessing writing while designing or implementing the new curricula.

Considering the situation of writing in Afghanistan, there is a need for establishing writing centers in all universities/colleges with branches for different disciplines. The writing labs are valuable and necessary components of writing programs in each department that provide support to students, staff, and professors. Furthermore, sponsored organizations need to better identify program providers are the best prepared and who has the resources to provide the proper support for this particular group. A lot of the time, it happens that Afghan students had pre-academic programs which really did not focus on actual needs in writing and reading because their instructors did not have in-depth knowledge about students' background and needs. The programs focused more on the overall English proficiency skills of students and did not really prepare them for their graduate programs. Such programs were mostly failures and wasted a lot of time and resources as well as money. Therefore, the sponsored organizations could monitor other sub-contracted programs both in the US and in Afghanistan who provide pre-academic English programs to ensure that students receive the right type of support they need for their higher education when they join American universities.

Additionally, the current system of education does not prepare students for the job market, and it has a lot of flaws which discourages critical thinking and creativity. The government needs to have a look at education systems in developing countries such as the United States, Hong Kong, Finland, and South Korea and other countries and start bringing reform to the existing system for a sound education to take place.

Finally, to overcome challenges of the Afghan students and other ESL students in academic writing, there is a need for providing them with more online and offline resources in the US. Many of the universities seem to lack some of the diverse material needed for this purpose. They have very limited or no multimedia resources such as video modules and audio-visual online tutorials to facilitate high quality academic writing. Since the majority of North American universities have one writing lab both for international and domestic students, there is a need for developing separate sections in writing labs in tandem with writing assignments that occur in composition/writing courses for international students. In writing labs which are for both domestic and international students, the tutors are not well trained on how to deal with the international students' writing differently than domestic students' writing. The tutors working in these sections of the writing labs should also receive training on how to deal with ESL students' writing and in developing their

academic writing strategies.

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