

Exploring the factors shaping the academic writing proficiency among Tanzanian university students: A basic interpretive study

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Abstract

Academic writing is among one of the most critical challenges students encounter in university. The current status of academic writing in Tanzanian higher education institutions is not satisfactory. This study aims to assess the factors influencing students' poor academic writing in Tanzanian universities and to find ways to improve their writing skills. The study utilized an exploratory qualitative design and collected data through interviews with 25 university students from five universities in Tanzania. The results revealed that several factors, including lack of preparation, inadequate training and mentorship, use of inappropriate writing styles, and limited access to resources influenced students' poor academic writing. Additionally, limited proficiency in the English language and time management challenges also contributed to poor academic writing. Based on the findings, the study recommends the implementation of effective writing training programs, provision of adequate resources, and improvement of English language proficiency to enhance academic writing skills among Tanzanian university students. Further research is necessary to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing academic writing among university students in Tanzania.

Keywords: academic writing, challenges of academic writing, writing in higher education, scholar, Tanzania

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1. Introduction

In today's interconnected world, academic writing is recognized as a key element for student's success in higher education. However, it has been acknowledged globally that university students encounter numerous challenges in their studies (AlMarwani, 2020). Deane et al. (2008) noted that writing is one of the most complex tasks for an individual to learn, highlighting that it requires the highest level of understanding because every writing has its unique characteristics and format. Komba (2015) espoused that more than 50% of Tanzanian students faced numerous challenges in writing their thesis and dissertations.

In *Writing to Change the World: An Inspiring Guide for Transforming the World with Word*, Pipher (2006) states that: "Good writing facilitates the making of connections, ideas and training in a way that inspires thinking, talking, openheartedness and actions" (p. 7). This statement carries a clear message for anyone who needs to write well or produce good written academic work, a very high level of preparation and astuteness is needed. Keeping this in mind, the analogy therefore implies that writing an academic work is like constructing a house; the most significant part being the construction of its foundation (Kozak, 2022). To construct a solid foundation for the house, a builder needs to be skilled and be prepared to have materials such as rocks, bricks, sand, energy, and enough time. If the strong foundation is built well, completing the beautiful and strong house will be an easy task and the house will last for a long time. It is therefore not surprising that students also need to engage in a preparatory study of academic writing even before working on their writing. In addition to this preparation, understanding, purposefulness, flexibility, professionalism, materials, discipline, mutual respect, and collaboration among the people involved in the task, are crucial. Furthermore, the preparatory study should include a critical review of the specific topic, effective reading, a critical analysis, writing, and presentation of the study findings. On the other hand, students in higher education are required to adopt and understand a variety of writing styles, rules, structures, procedures, and practices even before they reach their final research (Saragih & Simanjuntak, 2023).

Linus Pauling as quoted in Pipher, (2006) noted that 'the secret of having good ideas is to have a lot of ideas, then throw away the bad ones'. This quote is a powerful catalyst for personal growth and success because it reminds us to embrace changes. In this study, this quote sheds light that success in academic writing needs a strong academic writing foundation that encourage students to understand rules, procedures, ethical standards, styles, and structure.

According to a study by Alhassan and Bora (2020), academic writing poses a significant challenge for undergraduate students in Tanzania, particularly those who are not native English speakers. The authors identified several common writing challenges, including a lack of understanding of academic writing conventions, poor time management skills, and difficulty with citation and referencing. A study by Muneju et al. (2023) found that students in Tanzanian universities also face challenges related to accessing resources for academic writing, such as libraries and online databases. Muneju et al. (2023) noted that students often rely on informal sources, such as peers or social media, for information and guidance on academic writing. Another study by Ebadi and Pourahmadi (2019) explored the challenges faced by Iranian university postgraduate students in writing masters' theses. The authors found that students lacked research knowledge inability to write academically using academic vocabularies, lack of research design and choosing a researchable topic. In a study by Magali (2019), undergraduate students in Tanzania reported feeling frustrated and discouraged by their struggles with academic writing. The authors suggested that universities should provide more opportunities for students to practice writing and receive feedback from instructors and peers.

Magali (2019) assessed the perception of undergraduate students in Tanzania. In Tanzanian higher education institutions such as the University of Dar es Salaam, St. Augustine University of Tanzania, the University of Dodoma, students are required to do a scholarly research/dissertation, write a report, their findings, present the findings, and publish a scholarly paper in a reputable journal as a requirement for the award of a university degree. This is a mandatory requirement by the Tanzanian Commission for Universities (TCU). While report writing has been a vital component for assessment for the award of all levels of degrees in higher learning institutions in Tanzania, students have always encountered difficulties with academic writing (Saragih & Simanjuntak, 2023). The students who tend to work tirelessly with their supervisors produce good scholarly work, while other students pay research experts to write reports on their behalf. Some others again, download, copy, and plagiarise the work of others. Academic writing is an integral part of university education, and it plays a vital role in shaping students' academic and professional careers. However, academic writing can be challenging, particularly for students in Tanzania universities, who often face various linguistic, cultural, and academic challenges. These challenges can significantly affect their academic performance and limit their future career opportunities. Despite the importance of academic writing and the challenges faced by students in Tanzania universities, limited research has been conducted to explore these challenges comprehensively. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the academic writing challenges faced by students in Tanzania universities, as this knowledge can inform the development of appropriate interventions and support programs to address these challenges.

This study aims to explore the academic writing challenges faced by students in Tanzanian universities. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the factors influencing students' poor academic writing and how to overcome those challenges. By providing a comprehensive understanding of the academic writing challenges faced by students in Tanzanian universities, this study can inform the development of evidence-based interventions and support programs to improve students' academic writing proficiency. This research can also contribute to the existing literature on academic writing challenges, particularly in the African context, and provide a basis for further research in this area. The complex state of academic writing among university students in Tanzania has motivated this study. It is hoped that highlighting the different dimensions of the problem will generate further research to pinpoint the causes, effects, and remedies of poor academic writing of university students more accurately to provide effective mentoring for more effective academic writing by Tanzanian higher education students. This paper, therefore, seeks to:

- explore factors influencing students' poor academic writing in Tanzanian Universities.
- recommend ways to improve academic writing among Tanzanian University students.

Significance of the Study - Academic writing does not happen in an overnight process but it is tireless process that involves professionals with their students engage in constructive learning manner to acquire knowledge, skills and exposure which can help them in developing their academic writing effectively. From this standing point, this paper provides a significant challenges to lecturers, teachers and scholars to carefully rethink on how to guide their students in a manner that students can write and communicate their ideas in an effectively, and required manner. Similarly, this paper point out potential knowledge and skills which students should attempt to develop as a means to maintain active and effective participation in the academic writing process in higher education. Moreover, this work contains a piece of important information which can inspire education policymakers to think on how to practically incorporate academic writing from lower to higher education so that students will not face challenges as they navigate with their studies in higher education. Finally, we hope that the points of view which we have provided in this framework act as a means to instill values and skills to students, teachers and lecturers that can contribute to academic writing productivity.

Theoretical Framework of the Study - The theoretical framework of the study is Socio-Cultural Theory propounded by Lev Vygotsky. The theory theorizes that social interactions, cultural context and collaborative learning are essential in cognitive development of an individual. This theory posits that students acquire

knowledge and grow within their social and cultural environments (Cherry, 2022). Cherry (2022) believes that the use of socio-cultural theory creates new teaching and learning pedagogies which can be beneficial to language teachers in improving students writing skills.

2. Methods

Research Design - The exploratory qualitative design was utilized for the study. The paper purposively sampled only five (5) universities in the Tanzanian capital, Dar es Salam. The study centred on universities because universities serve as central institutions for higher education and academic development and key environments where students are expected to develop advanced academic skills, including writing proficiency.

Participants - A total of 25 undergraduate students from five universities in Tanzania were purposively sampled to participate in the study. This paper focused on undergraduate students in Tanzanian Universities because of their level of experience in academic writing. One of the authors of this study has been a student and is currently teaching in a Tanzania university for some years and has first-hand experience of the challenges undergraduate students in Tanzania face in academic writing, hence the need to focus on these group of students. Undergraduate students are at a critical point in their academic careers where they are transitioning from high school to university. They are still building foundational academic writing skills that they need throughout their studies and beyond. Studying undergraduate students' academic writing challenges can provide insights into the effectiveness of the current writing programs in universities and suggest areas for improvement. Moreover, undergraduate students are generally easier to access and more likely to participate in research studies than postgraduate students. This makes it more feasible to conduct a study on academic writing challenges among undergraduate students in Tanzanian universities.

Data Collection - The purposive sampling technique was used to sample 5 level 400 students from each of the 5 sampled universities to be part of the study. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that involves selecting participants based on specific criteria (Creswell, 2009; Creswell, 2012). A pilot study was initially conducted among 10 Tanzanian University students to enable the researchers to identify any potential issues, flaws, or challenges that may arise during the main study. The respondents for the pilot study were identified by the lead author and other faculty members who have had first-hand experience with some students and the challenges they face with academic writing. The outcome of the pilot study guided the researchers to purposively select 5 students each, from the 5 universities to be interviewed (that is 25 students).

Trustworthiness - In order to gather meaningful and trustworthy data, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to identify relevant concepts, themes, and existing validated interview guides that align with the research objectives. The researchers conducted content validity and test-retest reliability verify that the questions adequately capture the breadth and depth of the subject matter being studied. The data collection period lasted for 5 days from Monday to Friday. The lead researcher spent a day in each of the 5 universities. The first point of the call was to seek authorization from the registrar of the university and subsequently, some faculty members who assisted the researcher in identifying the five (5) students. Next was to obtain informed consent from each of the participants. Informed consent is an ethical principle that ensures participants fully understand the study's nature, procedures, potential risks, and benefits before agreeing to participate (Creswell, 2009; Creswell, 2012). The researchers explained the study's purpose, procedures, and any potential risks or benefits to the participants, and provided a consent form for them to sign if they agreed to participate. In addition to obtaining informed consent from the participants, outlining the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits were considered during data gathering. The interview session was then conducted with the students who agreed to be part of the study.

Data Analysis - Data analysis was done using a thematic analysis approach. According to Creswell (2012) thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found in a data set. The interviews with the 25 students were recorded and transcribed. The researchers then carefully read

and reread the transcripts and made notes to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' narratives. Codes were then generated by coding line-by-line or segmenting the data into smaller, meaningful units. The researchers then identified potential themes by grouping similar codes. The researchers carefully reviewed and refined the identified themes, ensuring that they accurately represented the data and were internally coherent. They looked for patterns, connections, and divergences among the themes. The themes were then defined and named providing clarity and coherence to the thematic analysis process. The data was then interpreted with the context of causes that influence students' academic writing and possible ways to improve the problem. The sample size of 25 university students was not sufficient to achieve saturation. However, the study can offer valuable preliminary insights, paving the way for future research with larger samples.

3. Findings from Thematic Analysis

3.1 Factors Influencing Tanzanian Universities Students' Poor Academic Writing

Based on the finding obtained on this objective, the following were the factors influencing Tanzanian Universities Students' Poor Academic Writing.

Inadequate Training/Mentorship and Preparation - The interviews with the 25 respondents outlined the factors that influence Tanzanian Universities students' poor academic writing, particularly attributing these factors to inadequate training, lack of mentorship and insufficient preparation. The following excerpts from the interviews exemplify these sentiments:

Student 1 echoed the dearth of preparation and training in academic writing, citing a lack of awareness regarding writing styles, referencing and citation rules. This deficiency, according to the student, has a direct impact on the ability to construct coherent sentences and structure ideas logically. This statement reveals not only a personal struggle but also points to a systematic issue in the educational approach to writing skills.

Student 5 emphasized the sentiment regarding the absence of effective mentorship in academic writing. The student expressed a perception that supervisors expect a level of knowledge without providing adequate guidance, leading to avoidable mistakes. This perspective implied a need for more supportive and instructive mentorship, suggesting a potential gap in the educational support system. A recurring theme emerged during the interviews, with many students expressing a sense of unpreparedness upon entering university. One student highlighted the absence of specific academic paper writing instruction in high school, indicating a foundational gap. Another student emphasized the reliance on self-learning through examples from previous students, underscoring a lack of formalized training programs.

The identified quotes collectively underscore the broader issue of inadequate preparation and mentorship in academic writing among Tanzanian university students. The challenges articulated by the students not only point to individual struggles but also highlight systematic shortcomings in educational practices, including the transition from high school to university and the perceived lack of structured guidance from mentors.

Limited Access to Resources - The respondents highlighted the constraints they face due to limited access to essential academic resources such as books, journals and reliable internet connectivity. The following excerpts from the interviews illustrate these difficulties:

Student 1 articulated the struggle of accessing relevant academic journals and books, attributing the challenge to outdated materials available in the library. The frustration expressed highlights the significance of current and pertinent resources for effective academic writing. This sentiment reflects a systemic issue in resource provision within the university setting.

Student 9 underscored the critical role of the internet in academic writing, emphasizing its contribution to accessing a wealth of information necessary for research and staying abreast of developments in the field. The student recounted a specific instance when the unavailability of internet access for two days impeded progress on a research project, hindering the retrieval of online journals and articles. This narrative underscores the vulnerability of academic endeavors to external factors beyond the students' control. A recurrent theme across the interviews was the indispensable role of resources in academic writing. Students voiced concerns about the inadequacy of library materials, especially when they did not align with the specific topics of their research. Moreover, the dependency on internet access for research and staying updated emerged as a critical factor influencing academic writing proficiency.

The students' accounts collectively highlight the considerable impact of limited access to resources on academic writing challenges. Beyond individual frustrations, these narratives point to systemic issues related to resource availability, both within the physical library and in terms of internet connectivity. The struggles described underscore the need for comprehensive access to up-to-date materials necessary for robust research and writing. This finding suggests potential interventions in resource provision and infrastructure to alleviate the identified challenges.

Poor Language Proficiency - Language proficiency emerged as a significant challenge for students, with many expressing difficulties in writing in English, the language of instruction in Tanzanian Universities. The following in writing in English, the language of instruction in Tanzanian universities. The following quote encapsulates this issue:

Student 1 candidly acknowledged the challenges stemming from English not being their first language. The student articulated the difficulty in expressing ideas clearly in writing, highlighting the additional effort required in expressing ideas clearly in writing, highlighting the additional effort required for extensive editing. The expressed lack of confidence in the adequacy of their writing further emphasizes the impact of language proficiency on academic writing.

A prevalent theme across the interviews was the struggle with English language proficiency. Multiple students conveyed challenges in articulating ideas, structuring sentences, and achieving the desired level of clarity in written expression. This common thread suggests a pervasive issue that extends beyond individual experiences and may be reflective of broader language-related challenges in the academic environment. The recurrent mention of language proficiency as a barrier to effective academic writing underscores a critical aspect of the challenges faced by Tanzanian university students. The explicit acknowledgement by students of the impact of non-native language use on their writing process suggests a need of targeted support in language acquisition and writing skills. This finding implies that interventions addressing language proficiency can significantly contribute to improving academic writing outcomes. It also emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive environment that recognizes and addresses the linguistic diversity among students, fostering inclusivity and enhancing overall academic success.

Poor Time Management - Among the challenges identified by students, poor time management emerged as a significant factor impacting academic writing. The following quote illustrates this concern:

Student 21 candidly admitted to struggling with effective time management, acknowledging instances of procrastination that result in last-minute rushes to complete assignments. The student noted the adverse effects on the quality of writing due to insufficient time for thorough revision and editing. The recurring theme of poor time management was evident across multiple interviews. Students highlighted the tendency to procrastinate and the subsequent impact on the overall writing process. This common thread suggests a widespread issue affecting students' ability to allocate sufficient time for thoughtful planning, drafting, and refinement of their academic writing.

The acknowledgement of poor time management as a significant challenge adds a layer of complexity to the multifaceted issue of academic writing difficulties. The experiences shared by students underscore the need for interventions that address not only writing skills but also time management strategies. The rushed completion of assignments resulting from procrastination implies a potential compromise in the depth and quality of academic work. This finding suggests that support programs focused on enhancing time management skills could contribute significantly to improving overall academic writing outcomes. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of incorporating strategies for effective time utilization within academic writing support initiatives.

3.2 Solutions to Improve Tanzanian Universities Students' Writing Skills

In response to the challenge of inadequate training and preparation, students can strategically engage in various support avenues. Attending writing workshops and utilizing tutoring services have proven instrumental, as expressed by Student 25. Through these initiatives, students gain insights into proper organization and citation techniques, receiving valuable feedback from knowledgeable tutors that enhances the clarity and effectiveness of their writing. The significance of peer review groups is highlighted, where students collaboratively navigate similar writing assignments, providing each other with constructive feedback. Working closely with professors further emerges as a vital component, with students benefiting from detailed explanations of assignment expectations and requirements, coupled with personalized feedback to refine their work.

In addressing limited access to resources, students underscore the importance of resource utilization. Student 18 shares a personal struggle with finding research materials, emphasizing the effectiveness of tapping into available resources such as the university library and online databases. Collaborative efforts with professors involve seeking guidance on research materials, showcasing the significance of faculty involvement in resource accessibility. Additionally, forming study groups becomes a strategic approach, enabling resource-sharing and collaborative research, thereby enhancing efficiency in completing assignments.

To tackle poor language proficiency, students deploy a multifaceted approach. Student 13, reflecting on language challenges, emphasizes the benefits of actively engaging with university-provided language courses and resources. Seeking additional language instruction through online resources and tutors complements formal coursework, reflecting students' proactive efforts to bridge language gaps. Regular practice in writing and reading in English is identified as a pivotal self-directed strategy, leading to enhanced comfort with the language and noticeable improvement in academic writing skills over time.

Addressing poor time management involves students adopting proactive strategies. The acknowledgment of time management challenges by a student is followed by a testimony of successful intervention. Creating schedules and plans emerges as a key strategy, aiding in task prioritization and goal setting for assignments. The discipline to eliminate distractions, such as social media and phone notifications, during dedicated writing time becomes a critical component, contributing to enhanced focus and timely completion of assignments. This attests to the students' resilience and commitment in overcoming challenges associated with time management.

Discussion of the Findings - These findings are consistent with previous research on academic writing challenges in higher education settings. For example, research by Seong et al. (2018) found that inadequate training and preparation, as well as limited access to resources, were key challenges for undergraduate students in Malaysia. Similarly, research by Martirosyan et al. (2015) identified poor language proficiency and poor time management as major challenges for international students in the United States. As researchers, we can observe that these findings are significant as they highlight the common challenges faced by undergraduate students in different countries, particularly in higher education settings. Our previous research, along with other studies such as Seong et al. (2018) and Martirosyan et al. (2015), emphasize the need for adequate training, preparation, and access to resources for students to effectively navigate these challenges. Additionally, these findings suggest that language proficiency and time management skills are critical for success in academic writing. As researchers, we hope that these findings will inform the development of effective interventions and support programs to address

these challenges and promote academic success for students in higher education settings. The study also identified solutions that could help students address these challenges. These solutions include seeking out writing workshops, tutoring services, and peer review groups to improve writing skills, utilizing available resources like the university library and online databases, taking advantage of language courses and resources, and creating a schedule or plan to manage time effectively.

According to our study findings, there are several solutions that can help students overcome academic writing challenges. As researchers, we recommend that students seek out writing workshops, tutoring services, and peer review groups to improve their writing skills. Additionally, utilizing available resources such as the university library and online databases can be highly beneficial. Students who struggle with language proficiency should consider taking advantage of language courses and resources to improve their skills. Lastly, we recommend that students create a schedule or plan to manage their time effectively, which can help alleviate the pressure of meeting deadlines and balancing multiple assignments. Overall, we believe that these solutions can significantly improve academic writing outcomes for students.

These solutions are consistent with recommendations from previous research on academic writing support for undergraduate students. For example, research by Ginting and Barella (2022) suggests that providing writing support services and resources, such as writing centers and online writing resources, can help students improve their writing skills. Similarly, research by Zhang and Cheng (2022) found that language support services, such as language courses and language tutors, can help international students improve their language proficiency and academic writing skills.

The findings of this study, exploring the challenges faced by Tanzanian university students in academic writing, reveal a complex interplay of factors rooted in the students' socio-cultural context. The identified challenges, including inadequate training, limited access to resources, poor language proficiency, and time management issues, are not isolated phenomena but are deeply influenced by the sociocultural environment in which the students navigate their academic journeys. The Socio-Cultural Theory, as developed by Vygotsky, offers a lens through which to understand these challenges. The inadequacies in training and mentorship point to the importance of collaborative learning and guidance within the educational context, aligning with Vygotsky's emphasis on the Zone of Proximal Development. Limited access to resources reflects cultural tools' significance, highlighting the need for an enriched academic environment. Furthermore, language proficiency challenges underscore the impact of cultural and linguistic diversity, aligning with Vygotsky's view on language as a crucial cognitive tool.

4. Conclusion

Based on the insightful responses gathered from undergraduate students in Tanzanian universities, it is evident that challenges such as inadequate training, limited access to resources, poor language proficiency, and deficient time management significantly hinder academic writing. However, the findings also illuminate practical solutions that can be implemented to alleviate these challenges. In light of this, it is imperative for institutional leaders to take proactive steps in response to these findings. Universities should consider incorporating mandatory writing seminar courses to equip students with essential writing skills. Additionally, institutional leaders can require faculty members to embed institutional resources within their courses and specific assignments, ensuring that students have ready access to the support they need. By taking a more active role in shaping the academic environment, universities can foster a culture that prioritizes writing proficiency. This includes providing workshops, tutoring services, language courses, and establishing clear expectations for writing assignments. Moreover, it calls for collaboration among universities, faculty, and students to collectively address and overcome the challenges associated with academic writing, ultimately contributing to a more supportive and conducive learning environment for all.

Theoretical Implications - The study contributes to Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory by highlighting the

influence of socio-cultural factors on academic writing challenges. The theoretical framework highlights the importance of collaborative learning, access to cultural tools and the role of language as a cognitive tool in overcoming these challenges.

Practical Implications - The study findings suggest a number of practical interventions to improve academic writing proficiency, including mandatory writing seminar courses, embedding institutional resources in courses, providing workshops and tutoring services, offering language courses and establishing clear expectations for writing assignments. These interventions can create a supportive learning environment that prioritizes writing proficiency.

Limitations and Further Research - The study sample size was small and focused specifically on universities in Tanzania thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research could explore the influence and efficacy of university-implemented writing support initiatives on enhancing academic writing proficiency among students. Additionally, comparative studies across different countries or regions could provide a broader understanding of the factors influencing writing proficiency.

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