Investigating the Linguistic Difficulties that Face Freshmen in Sudanese Tertiary Level Institutions in Academic Writing

Elgamar Salah Eldein Mohammed and Dr. Mahmoud Ali Ahmed
Sudan University of Science and Technology

Abstract
This study attempts to investigate the main linguistic difficulties that face freshmen in Sudanese tertiary level institutions. The study adopts the descriptive methodology. The population of the study consists of the freshmen in English medium Sudanese universities and other tertiary level institutions as well as the students whose spatiality is English language. The sample comprises 50 students and 30 teachers. Two tools were used for data collocation: (1) MCQ Students test, and (2) a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire for teachers. The data were analyzed statistically using the SPSS package. The one-sample t-test showed that the performance of the students was far below the test value (5 marks). The weighted means of the responses of the teachers revealed a unanimous agreement that the students face difficulties in the five areas investigated. Moreover, there was a strong correlation between the views of the teachers and the students' perfomance. The study recommends that explicit instruction of the aspects of linguistic competence can enhance the performance of freshmen in academic writing.

Keywords: academic writing, linguistic difficulties, freshmen,

1. Introduction

Technically speaking, academic writing comes under the umbrella of writing as one of the macro language skills. However, it differs from other types of writing in many ways. Moreover, the requirements and challenges of academic writing are specific, and it is usually clearly defined by the particular university department The differences between academic writing and other types of writing are due to the the expectations of the academics who will assess it.

Academic writing is one of the most daunting academic activities that students come across. According to the web page ,(http://www.papersunlimited.biz/importance-academicwriting/), academic writing is no way an easy task as it consists of

  (1) lengthy procedures of conducting thorough research, and
  (2) the ability to write skillfully.

The point is that most of the students either

  (1) lack sufficient writing skills, or
  (2) fear criticism from their professors once they complete their papers.

In either way, academic writing is something that cannot be avoided as long as a student is a part of academia. In fact, academic writing is vital for enhancement of important skills which are essential for leading a successful life after the completion of studies. Some of these skills are:

Jordan (1999, p. 8) states that "academic writing" must be written in a proper formal style. Hamp-Lyons and Poole (2006, p. 16-17) agree with Jordan on the aspect of formality in academic writing. They state that academic writing is a formal piece of paper. They add that the work will contain specific grammatical patterns, organisation and argument. They elaborate on this point of formality of academic writing arguing that it comes from
  (1) its readers who must be academics,
  (2) its content that must be a serious thought,
  (3) its construction which should be use a variety of complex error-free grammatical structures, a
  (4) its vocabulary which should be varied and of a technical level appropriate to the subject matter.
Accuracy is alsi an important elemnt in academic writing. It is reflected in reflected in:
  (1) a high standards of grammar,
  (2) good quality of word choice,
  (3) usage of register-specific (academic) vocabulary,
  (4) correct spelling and punctuation.
The language used by the writer must be appropriate to the given topic within an academic context. Furthermore, the writers have to make appropriate use of source texts and of direct and indirect quotations too. They also have to provide adequate references and/or bibliography details.

1.2 Linguistic competence in academic writing

It is imperative that academic writing employs certain linguistic features that are known as academic language (Schleppegrell, 2012). In particular, academic writing should mainly use

complex, formal, objective accurate language (Gillett, 2017). These characteristics of academic writing can be explained as follows:

1. **Complexity**
   Complexity in academic writing is characterised by longer words with more grammatical complexity, noun-based phrases, subordinate clauses, and passive forms (Gillett, 2017).
2. **Objectivity**
   This feature is realized by using noun-based phrases that are known as nominalisation or grammatical metaphor under functional grammar and impersonal passive in academic writing (Knapp & Watkins, 2005).
3. **Formal language**
   Formal language is characterised by using a suitable language in an academic context that should avoid abbreviated forms such as "doesn't" (Gillett, 2017).
4. **Hedged language**
   Hedged language or hedging is a cautious language that is used to show the writer's stance and the strength of the writer's claims of a particular issue in his or her academic writing (Emilia, 2009; Gillett, 2017; Gillett, Hammond, &Martala-Lockett, 2009). This characteristic is realised through certain linguistic features such as modalities, mental processes, and circumstances (Gillett, 2017).

In the present study, these features come under the following:

- Choice of academic vocabulary (parts of speech, phrasal verbs, quantifying expressions, words with several meanings, and metaphors and idioms)
- Collocations
- Ways of talking about sources, statistics, graphs and diagrams, and cuase and effect.
- Expressing opinions and ideas.
- Functions.

The problem which the present study attempts to address is that freshmen academic linguistic competence has to be enhanced in order for the students to gain the knowledge and skill required for academic writing.

1.3 Previous studies
Concerning the problems of academic writing, Khan (2011) conducted a study to explore the problems of Saudi university students. He mentioned that they face numerous difficulties in phoneme clusters, spellings, grammar, doubling of subjects, language interference, doubling of preposition, articles, tenses, appropriate vocabulary, wrong use of prefixes, and suffixes. Khan (2011) reviewed a number of studies in this respect and concluded that the difficulties that face Arab students are caused by the shortage in the English language textbooks used by some schools and universities, dreadful teaching methodology and the problems with appropriate language environments and the lack of personal motivation on the part of the students.

Al Murshidi (2014) pointed out that the low standard of the language proficiency might also hinder academic writing. As determined by Al-Khairy (2013), the subject of his study affirmed that the main difficulties fced by Arab students encompass the inappropriate choice of vocabulary, grammatical errors, incorrect punctuation, and spelling irregular verbs.

Al Mubarak, (2017) focused on identifying the problems faced by the Arts Colleges within the University of Al Imam Al Mahdi, Sudan. The researcher used the students' project graduation to investigate the problems encountered by the students when they used their academic writing skills.

To state the obstacles recognized by the examined students in academic writing skills, the researcher employed a descriptive method. The data for the present study were collected from 15 graduation project for the year 2017. The collect data was used in identifying the issues of academic writing for English as second language at Al Imam Al Mahdi University in Sudan.

A quantitative method was used in collecting the data: 15 B.A. graduation project checked in order to identify the issues of academic writing for English as a Second language in Sudan. The number of the graduation project involved in this study was 15.

By examining the academic writing samples of the students, the study showed that a significant number of the students face academic writing problems. While writing, they show more concern for language related problems. The findings of the study revealed some issues that the students
encountered in academic writing, for instance, the use of articles, punctuation, the use of prepositions, the use of irregular verbs, weak expressions, singular and plural, unparalleled structure, consistency and verb tense. The findings of the study revealed that the students face difficulties in using punctuation which is extremely significant in academic writing.
 The study also revealed that the attitude of students towards academic writing with unique characteristics can be considered as a crucial factor in making academic writing more helpful for all students. Findings show that intervening strategies in using academic writing reveals the linguistics problems.

The significant results from this study revealed that students sampled were not familiar with the academic writing strategies.

1.4 The present study
1.4.1 Methodology
This study is descriptive. It describes the linguistic difficulties that face freshmen in academic writing. It focuses on five main areas. These are:

1. Choice of vocabulary in terms of the degree of formality appropriate to the genre of academic writing.
2. Knowledge of collocations in academic writing.
3. How to talk about sources, statistics, draphs and diagrams, and cause and effect.
4. How to express opinions and ideas.
5. How to use the appropriate language of functions such as classification, comparison and contrast, etc.

1.4.2 Population and sample
The population of the study consists of all freshmen in English medium institutions and specialties in Sudanese universities and other institutions of high education.

The sample is a random sample drawn from the population. It comprises 50 students.

1.4.3 Data collocation tools

Two tools have been used for data collocation:

1. An MCQ test for the students. The test has five sections covering the five areas mentioned above. Each section consists of 10 MCQ items.
2. A 5-point Likert scale questionnaire for the teachers which also cover the same area

1.5 Analysis and discussion of data
1.5.1 Students' test: Linguistic competence

The two assumptions of one-sample t-test are met:

(1) The sample is more than 30. So, there is no need to run the normal distribution test.
(2) The sample is a random sample.

Since the full mark for each section is 10 marks, the test value (pass mark will be 5)

Table 1: Linguistic competence: One-Sample t-test
One-Sample Test

Test Value = 5

	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Choice of vocabulary in terms of the degree of formality.	.886	29	.383	2.8000	.46667	-.6108	1.5442
Knowledge of collocations	-5.641	29	.000	3.3600	-.63333	-.8630	-.4037
Way of talking about sources, statistics, graphs and diagrams, and cause and effect.	-4.829	29	.000	3.7000	-.63333	-.9016	-.3651
Expressing opinions and ideas.	-6.113	29	.000	2.9600	-.83333	-1.1121	-.5545
ie appropriate language of functions	-6.952	29	.000	2.3800	-1.00000	-1.2942	-.7058

The table above shows the following:

(1) For all sections the Sig, value is 0.000. This value is less than 0.05. Accordingly, the mean score is not equal to 5.
(2) The t-value is negative. This means that the mean score is less than 5.
(3) All means are less than 5 (the pass mark)

From the points above, it can be concluded that the performance of the students in the linguistic competence test ravels that they are weak in all elements of this aspect:

(1) They are not competent enough in choice of vocabulary in terms of the degree of formality
(2) They lack the necessary knowledge of collocations. They do not know which which words o together in academic writing.
(3) They do not know how to talk about sources, statistics, graphs and diagrams, and cause and effect.
(4) They are weak in expressing opinions and ideas.

(5) They are not competent in using the   the appropriate language of functions such as classification,

1.5.2Teachers' questionnaire

Table 2: Linguistic competence: Weighted means of the teachers' questionnaire

Aspect		SA	A	N	DA	SDA	Mean	StD	Result
vocabulary in terms of the degree of formality.	Frequency	7	11	2	1	1	4.0333	.88992	SA
	Percent	23.3	36.7	26.7	3.3	3.3			
Knowledge of collocations	Frequency	13	15	2	0	0	4.4000	.62146	SA
	Percent	43.3	50.0	6.7	00	00			
Way of talking about sources, statistics, graphs and diagrams, and cause and effect.	Frequency	14	13	1	1	0	4.4333	.56832	SA
	Percent	46.7	46.7	3.3	3.3	00			
Expressing opinions and ideas.	Frequency	10	10	3	1	0	4.2333	.72793	SA
	Percent	33.3	33.3	10.0	3.3	00			
Using the appropriate language of functions	Frequency	9	12		9	0	3.9333	.78492	A
	Percent	30.0	40.0		30.0	00			
Total		30							

The table above shows the weighted means of the responses of the teachers about the assumption that the students face problems in academic writing.
From the table above, it is clear that there us a unanimous agreement among teachers that the students face problems in the four aspects covered by the questionnaire, These aspects are the same ones investigated in the students test.

For four of the aspects the weighted mean are as follows:

1. Choice of vocabulary in terms of the degree of formality: 4.0333
2. Knowledge of collocations: 4.4000
3. Way of talking about sources, statistics, graphs and diagrams, and cause and effect.: 4.4333
4. Expressing opinions and ideas: 4.2333

All these weighted means are equal to "Strongly Agree"
As for the fifth aspect "Using the appropriate language of functions", the weighted mean is 3.9333, which is equivalent to "Agree""

1.5.3 Correlation between the teachers' response and the students' performance

Table 3: Correlation between the teachers' response and the students' performance
Correlations

		Teachers' responses	Students' ,performance
Teachers' responses	Pearson Correlation	1	.956[*]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.011
	N	5	5
Students' performance	Pearson Correlation	.956[*]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.011	
	N	5	5

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The table above shows that the Sig, (2-ailed) = 0.011, which is less than 0.05. It is equal to r= 0.956. This means that there is a strong correlation between the teachers' response and the students' performance.

1.6 Conclusion and recommendations
It can be concluded that freshmen face linguistic difficulties in academic writing. These difficulties are apparent in the following five areas:
1. Their inability to choose vocabulary in terms of the degree of formality appropriate to the genre of academic writing.
2. Their insufficient knowledge and skill of how to use collocations that are peculiar to academic writing.
3. Their weak performance in talking about soirces, statistics, graphs and models and cause and effect.
4. Their inability to express opinions and ideas properly.
5. Their inability to use the language appropriate to functions such as classification and comparison and contrast.

The study also found a strong correlation between the teachers' views and the studnts' performance in the five area.
The study recommends that freshmen must receive sxplicit instruction in the linguistic aspects of academic writing.

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Appendixes
Appendix one: Students' test

Students' Test: Linguistic Competence
Time : 2 hours

Draw a circle round the letter of the most appropriate word/expression
Section one: Choice of academic vocabulary

(1) This problem ---------------- a threat to the academic life and professional future of the students.

        (a) is   (b) poses

        (b) represents   (d) creates

(2) Greenwood (2018, p. 45) -------------------- the significance of explicit instruction of grammar.

        (a) focused on   (b) drew attention to

        (c) underlined   (d) laid emphasis on

(3) The researcher will ----------------- his attention on the most important issues.

        (a) focus   (b) direct

        (c) put   (d) zoom

(4) The data -------------- the hypothesis that Generation Alpha in the Sudan does not differ from other countries.

        (a) proved   (b) ascertain

        (c) ensure   (d) confirm

(5) ------------ every student in the class speak Nubian as a mother tongue.

        (a) Almost   (b) Nearly

          (c) Virtually   (d) Approximately

(6) The study is ------------------ concerned with interjections used by old women in the Sudan.

          (a) primarily   (b) mainly
          (c) largely   (d) basically

(7) The researcher used a ------------- methodology which had been tested on many occasions.

          (a) strict   (b) rigorous
          (c) thorough   (d) precise

(8) The sample which the researcher drew was ----------- small.

          (a) somewhat   (b) relatively
          (c) fairly   (d) rather

(9) The experiment took ------------- amount of time.

          (a) a substantial   (b) an ample
          (c) a considerable   (d) huge

(10) The study tried to ------------- the abilities of learners with special needs.

          (a) consider   (b) take on board
          (c) deal with   (d) accommodate

Section two:Collocations

(1) In his study, Al-Mumby (2012) ---------- the phenomenon of developing the jargon of *Randoak*among street children.

          (a) examined   (b) explored
          (c) investigated   (d) dignosed

(2) There has recently been a lot of ------------- debate surrounding the issue of identity construction in school textbooks.

          (a) severe   (b) hot
          (c) heated   (d) enthusiastic

(3) His study was criticized on the ground that the sample was not ---------- of the population as a whole.

          (a) symbolic   (b) characteristic
          (c) typical   (d) representative

(4) There has recently been ---------- interest in the issue of identity conflict in LealaAbuela's works.

          (a) specific   (b) exceptional
          (c) particular   (d) special

(5) As was ---------, there was a strong correlation between mastering *Tajweed* rules and bettering English language pronunciation.

          (a) observed   (b) seen
          (c) noticed   (d) watched

(6) The main --------- of the present study are listed here again to see which have been proved and which have been rejected.

          (a) assumptions   (b) suppositions
          (c) suppositions   (d) hypotheses

(7) Before ----------- any conclusion, it is imperative to check the statistical analyses by another person.

          (a) reaching   (b) making
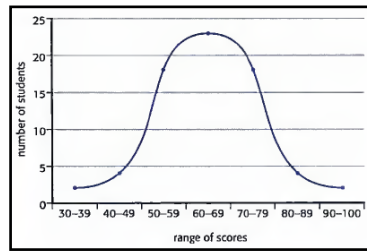   (c) deducing   (d) inferring

(8) The experiment --------- us ------ the data necessary for verifying the hypotheses.

    (a) equipped – with   (b) supplied – with

    (c) endow -- with   (d) provided - with

(9) ---- the exception ---- one study in 1988, no major research has been carried out till now.

    (a) with ----- of   (b) with ---- to

    (c) with ----- for   (d) with ----- by

(10) The rationale --------- these new trends is the need for empowering the new generations with the 21st century skills.

    (a) beneath   (b) underneath -

    (c) behind   (d) after

Section three: Talking about sources, statistics, graphs and diagrams, and cuase and effect

(1) This paper begins with a ------------- of literature on the aspect of theme in Victorian novel.

    (a) summary   (b) appraisal

    (c) review   (d) a briefing

(2) Frank Smith's --------- work laid the foundation for studying reading skills.

    (a) important   (b) original

    (c) influential   (d) seminal

(3) There ------- an extensive body of literature on intercultural communication.

    (a) is   (b) spreads

    (c) occurs   (d) exists

[For questions (4), (5) and (6) below, refer to the following scores of 6 students in a test: 5, 7, 12, 13, 14, 21, 23, 23, 23]

(4) The ---------------- is 15.7.

    (a) mode   (b) mean

    (c) median   (d) standard deviation

(5) The ------------ is 23.

    (a) mode   (b) mean

    (c) median   (d) standard deviation

(6) The ------------ is 14.

    (a) mode   (b) mean

    (c) median   (d) standard deviation

(7) The graph below shows the distribution of the scores in a test.

The bell-shaped curve indicates that the scores are ----------- distributed.

(a) evenly   (b) naturally
(c) equally   (d) normally
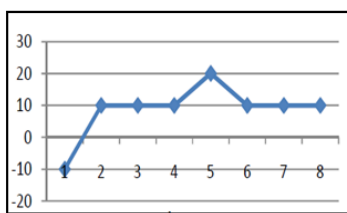
(8) Which of the following figures is a **histogram**?

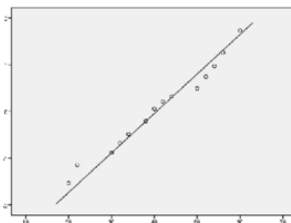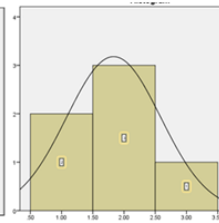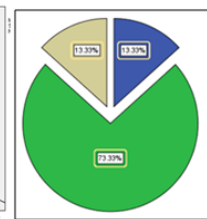Figure (1)   Figure (2)   Figure (3)   Figure (4)

(a) Figure (1)   (b) Figure (2)
(c) Figure (3)   (d) Figure (4)

(9) The process of language acquisition is ------------- by the demand to satisfy basic needs.

(a) triggered off   (b) started
(c) initiated   (d) prompted

(10) The teacher played devil's advocate to --------- the discussion.

(a) encourage   (b) enrich
(c) develop   (d) stimulate

Section Four: Expressing opinions and ideas.

(1) The --------------- of authenticity in foreign language learning is not easy to realize in textbooks.

(a) notion   (b) idea
(c) concept   (d) thought

(2) This model is an ideal ------------ of reference for the application of the research methodology.

(a) structure   (b) framework
(c) system   (d) scheme

(3) Johnson and Johnson (2016) -------- the view that e-learning is no more than a bubble that will not last long.

(a) hold   (b) take
(c) adopt   (d) maintain

(4) The last novel of El-tyeibSalih, "Al-Munsi", had a powerful impact on critiques' ------ of intertextuality.

          (a) perception (b) view

          (c)opinion   (d) stance

(5) The essay is quite ---------------. So, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to follow the thread of arguments.

          (a) unintelligible   (b) illogical

          (c) incoherent   (d) confused

(6) Provided that e-sources are checked for their scholarly authority, they can be used as references, ----- with some restrictions..

          (a) aside   (b) notwithstanding

          (c) albeit   (d) nonetheless

(7) "*There is some evidence to suggest that girls are better at learning foreign languages than boys*." The writer here is talking about

          (a) an opinion   (b) a proven fact

          (c) a misconception   (d) an attitude

(8) Suderland (2005) made her ----- on sexism in language very clear.

          (a) viewpoint (b) stance

          (c) position   (d) opinion

(9) Nation (2009) ----------- that reading speed of 250 wpm is for materials where vocabulary and grammar are known.

          (a) argues   (b) describes

          (c) proves   (d) explains

(10) The survey provides some useful ----------- concerning the problem of dyslexia among only children.

          (a) ideas   (b) views

          (c) insights   (d) thoughts

Section five:Functions

(1) Effective use of imagery is ----------- of the poet's style.

          (a) an attribute   (b) a feature

          (c) a quality   (d) a trait

(2) Broadly speaking, literary genres can be --------- into four types; fiction, non-fivtion, drama, and poetry.

          (a) categorized   (b) put

          (c) separated   (d) divided

(3) There is a very strong -------- between IQ and critical thinking.

          (a) bond   (b) connection

          (c) tie   (d) link

(4) --------------- learners are those learners who prefer working alone.

          (a) Interpersonal   (b) Intrapersonal

          (c) Private   (d) Solitary

(5) --------- traditional ways of evaluation, portfolio assessment is more developmental than judgmental.

          (a) Compared with   (b) Measured against

          (c) Balanced with   (d) Weighted against

(6) There were some unforeseen ------- that led to the failure of the experiment.

          (a) conditions   (b) contexts

          (c) situations   (d) circumstances

(7) His aim is to -------- a completely different syllabus for the ESP classes.
  (a) from   (b) design
  (c) make   (d) compose

(8) The researcher noted that she needed to -------- her analysis in order to obtain more accurate results.
  (a) refine   (b) enhance
  (c) develop   (d) improve

(9) After the intervention, there was -------- change in the performance of the experiment group.
  (a) gradual   (b) steady
  (c) marked   (d) slow

(10) To ------------- the findings of the present study: motherese is simpler than normal speech.
  (a) recapitulate   (b) repeat
  (c) restate   (d) brief

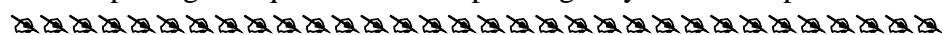☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻☻

Appendix two: Teachers' questionnaire

Teachers' Questionnaire

Dear colleague

This questionnaire is a tool for collecting data for my research about the difficulties which face the students of first year of university in writing academic papers. I thank you very much for completing this questionnaire depending on your own experience.

☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜☜

Please tick the box which expresses your opinion.
SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N= Neutral; DA = Disagree; SDA + Strongly Disagree
In academic writing, students face problems in the following aspects

No	Statement	SA	A	N	DA	SDA
1	Choice of vocabulary in terms of the degree of formality.					
2	Knowledge of collocations.					
3	Way of talking about sources, statistics, graphs and diagrams, and cause and effect.					
4	Expressing opinions and ideas.					
5	Using the appropriate language of functions (classifying, comparing and contrasting, describing change, etc.)					

Thank you very much.