# Language Challenges Encountered by Palestinian Postgraduate Students in Academic Written Discourse

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This study aims to examine the challenges posed by academic written discourse encountered by postgraduate students at a Palestinian university. It mainly addresses the challenges that students face from their own perspective and from that of the faculty members. Data were collected from 87 postgraduate students enrolled in postgraduate programs from various disciplines. A 14-item questionnaire was used to answer the two research questions of the study. The data extracted for the questionnaire were complemented by semi-structured in-depth interviews with faculty members. Responses to the questionnaire were statistically processed using the (SPSS) software, while a thematic analysis approach was adopted to analyze the data. The questionnaire's results revealed that postgraduate students find academic style the most challenging aspect of academic writing. Moreover, the study revealed that there are no statistically significant differences in the level of the challenging aspects of academic writing based on the variables of academic degree type, year of study, and gender. The interviews' results demonstrated that the most problematic aspects of written academic discourse include insufficient proficiency in grammar, inappropriate academic style, and weak argument.

*Keywords*: Writing Challenges, Postgraduate Students, Academic Written Discourse, Academic Style

## 1. Introduction

Higher education in Palestine has witnessed vital changes during the last few years. The number of students joining postgraduate studies is on the rise. According to the Higher Education Statistical Yearbook (2019, 2020), the number of Palestinian postgraduate students that were enrolled in higher degree studies for the academic year 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 is 9,516 and 9,902 respectively. However, the number has remarkably increased to reach 16,348 and 17,571 in the academic years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 respectively (Higher Education Statistical Yearbook, 2021 and 2022). This increase has been met by a mounting tendency for Palestinian universities to grow vertically through opening new programs (master's and doctoral) in different subjects.

In an attempt to meet international standards and accreditation, higher graduate programs, particularly the doctoral ones, offer academic subjects taught in English. Thus, students are required to write in English in response to the written tasks they are requested to submit. As English is the second language in Palestine, English language skills, particularly writing skills, pose a real challenge for postgraduate students. When it comes to writing, it can be argued that this skill is considered to be a difficult one for native speakers. Krashen (Krashen, Sy-Ying 2004), for example, referred to what he calls "writer's block", where writers get stuck in the writing process. Similarly, learning to write in another language is considered to be more difficult. In the latter case, the learner needs to exert more effort in acquiring linguistic proficiency in the second language (Hinkel 2004, 7).

Academic writing challenges can be mitigated by applying different strategies, with practice being one of the most recommended solutions. In this vein, Lin and Morrison (2021, 60), for example, argue that postgraduates are required to engage in more complex writing tasks, including writing journal articles, where they develop their critical thinking and writing skills. Interestingly, the principles of academic writing can be learned. Reading high-quality texts in one's own field, for instance, can enhance writing skills by imitating the texts being read. Hyland (2016, 61), argues that "academic English is no one's first language" in the sense that this genre can be learned rather than acquired. This actually holds true if we learn the conventions and norms of such a genre through deliberate teaching.

The ability to conduct research, write academically, think logically, and evaluate critically is among these skills. Writing in English for academic purposes is considered a vital aspect that postgraduate students are required to learn. Students are usually required to write academically for their research, theses and dissertations, and journal articles. However, these students encounter language-related challenges when engaging in a written task. This will limit their success in their postgraduate studies and hinder the university's ability to achieve competitive ranks locally and internationally.

## 1.1 Significance of the study

The study aims at exploring the challenges encountered by Palestinian postgraduate students (both master's and doctoral students) when writing academically in English. This study is the first of its kind conducted on second language writing in postgraduate studies in Palestine. More importantly, the current study examines the academic writing challenges from the perspective of postgraduate students as well as from that of their instructors. With the rise in the number of postgraduate academic programs and the enrollment of students in Palestinian universities, it is crucial for researchers to understand the challenges faced by postgraduate students in their writing. Besides, the academic staff and university administration will gain valuable insights into one of the most important issues that concerns both parties, enabling them to provide the necessary writing support effectively. If properly improved, not only will postgraduate students achieve greater academic success, but the faculty members and the university will also enhance their reputation by increasing the possibility of publishing research articles from postgraduate students' theses and dissertations.

## 1.2 Research Questions and Study Organization

To achieve the intended study's goals, the following questions are addressed:

1. What are the most challenging aspects of academic writing that postgraduate students encounter, as perceived from their own perspective?
2. Are there any differences in the level of the challenging aspects of academic writing that postgraduate students encounter with respect to the variables of academic degree type, year of study, and gender?
3. What are the most challenging aspects of academic writing that postgraduate students encounter, as perceived from the perspective of heads of postgraduate departments, and what are the reasons and solutions for them?

## 2. *Literature Review*

### 2.1 Krashen's View on Second Language Writing

Writing in a second language has been widely examined by language scholars and researchers. Notably, the works of renowned linguist and theoretician Stephen Krashen have significantly contributed to the field of second language acquisition and have greatly influenced researchers and scholars in the realm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) research. Among Krashen's five hypotheses of second language acquisition, the monitor hypothesis is concerned with the two main systems through which a second language is learned: language acquisition and language learning. The Monitor Theory posits that "adults have two independent systems for developing ability in second languages, subconscious language acquisition and conscious language learning. The subconscious acquisition appears to be far more important" (Krashen 1981, 1); while language acquisition necessitates naturally occurring communication subconsciously, conscious language learning requires a deliberate learning process through which learners intentionally exert effort to acquire language knowledge and skills.

Krashen addresses second language writing extensively in his works (1993; 2004; 2021). He argues that writing in a second language is primarily associated with language acquisition rather than explicit learning; according to Krashen, the style of writing is acquired through extensive reading and exposure to authentic written texts, rather than solely relying on explicit instruction (Krashen 1993, 27). Thus, according to Krashen, reading in the second language plays a critical role in improving one's writing skills. However, he also emphasizes the importance of writing itself as it significantly contributes to cognitive development (Krashen 1993, 33). Interestingly, Krashen argues that reading in the first language also contributes to second language writing. He believes that reading has significant influence on writing. He claims that this exposes the writer to the language used in writing, including grammar as well as the various writing styles employed by other writers (Krashen 2004, 1).

In a recent work titled 'The Composing Process', Krashen (2014) discusses the components of the writing process. First and foremost, the writing process includes revising the

written content. According to Krashen, this stage is crucial for identifying and addressing any problems or issues. Writers should engage in proactive planning, creating a flexible outline that can accommodate new ideas. The third component involves rereading the written text, not only to maintain continuity but also to critically evaluate and reassess the writing. Editing is the next step in the writing process where the text is carefully reviewed and revised after the final draft. Krashen also emphasizes the importance of incubation as a significant component of the writing process. He suggests that writers benefit from taking breaks and allowing their subconscious mind to work on the ideas. Finally, Krashen argues that regularity is crucial for developing strong writing skills regardless of the amount.

## 2.2 State-of-the-Art

A considerable number of studies have examined the challenges encountered by postgraduate students when writing in English academically. A thorough survey of the existing literature shows that these studies were conducted in a different setting and used various methodologies offering an insightful view of this phenomenon. Basturkmen and Randow (2014), for example, qualitatively examined the notion of coherence in postgraduate students' academic writing in New Zealand, where writing samples were taken from doctoral students across different disciplines including Arts, Engineering, Education, and Business. Following a narrative approach, Langum and Sullivan (2017) studied the experience and needs of six first-year doctoral students in academic writing in English at a Swedish university. The participants in this study were asked to write about their journey in developing academic writing skill in English. The results of these narratives revealed two major interesting themes: deficit and commonality. Whereas the former term refers to the students' weaknesses in writing, the latter refers to the students' beliefs that writing in academic English has the same features of native academic writing. Focusing on the experience of doctoral students in writing the discussion section of their theses, Shen et al. (2019) conducted a study using a questionnaire to collect data from two hundred and ninety-five doctoral students in New Zealand, aiming to identify the main challenges encountered by students in that section. The major findings revealed that students find it challenging to avoid mixing the discussion with the results. Another important result revealed that language status, discipline, writing stage, and research type impact on students' views. A further study objective was to examine the preferred support needed for doctoral students during their studies. Participants reported that the feedback they received from the supervisors and advisors was the most valuable form of support. Besides, they emphasized the importance of discipline-specific support in order to effectively address their unique writing challenges.

With the aim to shed light on the support provided for doctoral students, Ma, L.P. (2017) evaluated the effectiveness of individual consultations for doctoral students at an Australian university. The data were collected from semi-structured interviews with those students and the results showed that individual consultations provided by the university can be operated in various formats and can be beneficial in addressing the specific needs of students. Another study with similar goals was conducted by Jeyaraj (2020) in the Malay-

sian context, where postgraduate research students were interviewed regarding their academic writing needs. The study used the semi-structured interview as the primary research tool. The results showed that students need more support in language-related aspects of writing, greater guidance from their supervisors, and greater access to ICT writing tools. Lin and Morrison (2021) examined the academic writing challenges – and the strategies to address them – encountered by Engineering graduate students and faculty members at three major universities in Hong Kong. The results showed that seeking external support ranked second as a strategy for managing writing challenges. Interestingly, this suggestion was recommended more by the faculty members than by the students.

A more recent study, closely aligned with the current research, was conducted by Gupta et al. in 2022. This study explored the academic writing challenges faced by 114 doctoral students and sought insights on the necessary support from the perspectives of their 31 supervisors. The results revealed that the majority of doctoral students (90%) believe they need to improve their academic writing skills. The results specifically demonstrated that, according to students' perspectives, the writing process presents the greatest difficulties, while sentence and paragraph organization are considered to be the least troublesome elements in the academic writing. However, the faculty members reported that grammar is the most challenging part of academic writing, while the writing process was considered among the least challenging aspects of academic writing.

## 2.3 Lack of Literature in the Palestinian Context

It could be argued that there has been a shortage of research addressing academic writing challenges faced by both undergraduate and postgraduate students within the Palestinian educational context. Previous studies have predominantly focused on assessing language proficiency across the four language skills. However, there is a notable gap in the literature when it comes to investigating language proficiency specifically within the context of postgraduate studies. With just a small number of studies addressing writing challenges at the postgraduate level, there has not been a comprehensive study to date that examines the writing challenges in such context. Abu Alyan's (2022) study, which investigated thesis writing challenges among EFL master's students, is the sole study that addressed academic writing at this study stage. Therefore, the current study will not only address this gap but also lay the foundation for future studies.

## 3. *Methodology*

### 3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-method approach combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to have a deeper understanding of the problem being addressed. Creswell (2014) argues that the mixed method approach offers a more complete understanding of the research problem. A questionnaire consisting of 14 items was adopted from a previous study by Evans and Morrison (2011) to collect the quantitative data. Qualitatively, structured

interviews were separately conducted with six heads of departments of the faculty of graduate studies. The interview questions addressed three main domains: the most challenging aspects of academic writing faced by students, the reasons behind these challenges, and the solutions to address them.

## 3.2 Data Collection Instruments

### 3.2.1 The Questionnaire

A questionnaire was adopted from a previous study conducted by Evans and Morrison (2011), which has been used by subsequent studies with similar research objectives. It was originally developed in English and used in the same language in this study. The questionnaire, which originally comprises 45 items assessing the four language skills, contained only those items related to writing skills to meet the current research objectives. The introductory section of the questionnaire includes demographic information such as specialization, study stage, year of study, and gender. The questionnaire items all relate to different aspects of academic writing skills including coherence, cohesion, academic style, writing paper sections, ideas organization, and citation. The questionnaire was administered online to the population of postgraduate studies at the university. The responses to the 14 items were generated on a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from very difficult (1) to very easy (7). Upon distribution, and to achieve the intended study objectives, the participants were instructed to fill it out in case they used English for the writing tasks they were assigned. Furthermore, the participants were informed that writing tasks included the development of theses/dissertations, research papers, and journal articles.

### 3.2.2 The Interview

The questionnaire data were complemented by qualitative data from interviews conducted with the heads of the postgraduate departments who also work as faculty members. Six heads of postgraduate departments were interviewed to obtain in-depth responses about the writing challenges encountered by the students from the perspective of their supervisors who enjoy long teaching experience. Some of the interviews were conducted online to meet the interviewee's availability. Each interview lasted around 15-20 minutes and previously structured questions were asked. However, other sub-questions were raised during the interview to get a fuller understanding of the points being reported. The main focus of the interview questions was on three aspects: the most challenging aspects encountered by postgraduate students in academic written discourse, as perceived by the heads of departments, as well as the underlying reasons for these challenges and potential solutions to address them.

## 3.3 Participants

The study population comprised all postgraduate students enrolled during the academic year 2021-2022. The faculty of graduate studies contacted them via email to participate in the study. Eighty-seven postgraduate students (31 males and 56 females) enrolled in the

university master's and doctoral programs successfully completed the questionnaire. The participants varied in terms of their study stage, study year, and gender as stated in Table (1). Additionally, they came from diverse academic backgrounds, encompassing fields such as social, educational, and health sciences. Arabic is their first language, while English is their secondary language. Researchers purposefully examined the students' perspectives since they have a more comprehensive insight into their writing challenges. Besides, it is an excellent opportunity for the decision-makers, at all levels, to hear from postgraduate students about one of the most significant issues in the higher education sector.

Table 1 - *Distribution of the study sample according to the study variables*

| Variables | Levels | N | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Academic Degree Type | Master's Student | 58 | 66.7 |
| | Doctoral Student | 29 | 33.3 |
| Year of Study | First Year | 46 | 52.9 |
| | Second Year | 29 | 33.3 |
| | Third Year | 12 | 13.8 |
| Gender | Male | 31 | 35.6 |
| | Female | 56 | 64.4 |

Structured interview participants included six heads of postgraduate departments at a Palestinian university representing different scientific fields. These department heads also serve as faculty members who instruct academic courses in English and require their students to submit written assignments in English. To have a representative sample, the researchers contacted all the department heads to conduct the interviews. Six out of seven of them responded and were interviewed. For privacy reasons, the participants involved in the interviews were identified by their initials to maintain confidentiality.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaire were generated using Google Forms, where the responses were reviewed. The data were processed using (SPSS) software to extract the participants' demographics, mean and standard deviation of questionnaire items, and t-test values for the variables (academic degree type, study year, and gender). As for the qualitative data obtained from the interviews of the heads of postgraduate departments, they were thematically analyzed. Similar ideas were grouped under a topic and direct quotations were provided from the participants where appropriate.

4. *Results*

The present study was driven by three main questions. To enhance clarity, the results are organized in this section based on the sequence of the study's three questions and the tools

that were used in the study. The first two questions were answered through a 14-item questionnaire, whereas the third question was answered by interviews.

## 4.1 Results of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in the current study comprised items related to different aspects of academic writing skills. These aspects include coherence, cohesion, academic style, writing paper sections, ideas organization, and citation. Specifically, the questionnaire included the following items: Planning written assignments, Revising written work, Using appropriate academic style, Writing a bibliography/references section, Proofreading written work, Referring to sources in written work, Summarizing/paraphrasing ideas in sources, Organizing ideas in coherent paragraphs, Expressing ideas clearly and logically, Linking ideas from different sources, Writing the introduction to an assignment, Writing the body of an assignment, Writing the conclusion to an assignment, and Linking sentences smoothly. Administered online to the study population, the responses to the fourteen items were generated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from very difficult (1) to very easy (7).

*Research Question # 1: What are the most challenging aspects of academic writing that postgraduate students encounter, as perceived from their own perspective?*

Participants were asked to reflect on the questionnaire items to gain more information about the most challenging aspects of academic writing. As seen from Table (2), the established level of challenges is medium which confirms that there is difficulty when writing for academic purposes. Writing aspects related to style, proofreading, ideas organization, and linking (items # 3, 5, 8 and 10) rank among the most prominent ones. Following an appropriate academic style in writing is perceived as the most challenging aspect of academic writing, averaging a score of (3.02). Similarly, with a lower mean of (3.01), the task of proofreading is positioned as the second most challenging. Conversely, revising the written works, referring to previous sources, and writing the introduction and conclusion of a given work are considered the least challenging aspects of academic written discourse. Interestingly, the aspect pertaining to conclusion writing ranked last with a mean of (2.69) followed by an introduction writing aspect, which achieves a score of (2.72).

Table 2 - *Means and standard deviations for the challenging aspects of academic writing*

| N | Sentence | Mean | SD | Degree | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | Using appropriate academic style | 3.02 | 1.045 | **Medium** | 60.4 |
| 5 | Proofreading written work | 3.01 | 1.017 | **Medium** | 60.2 |
| 8 | Organizing ideas in coherent paragraphs | 2.98 | 1.056 | **Medium** | 59.6 |
| 10 | Linking ideas from different sources | 2.91 | 1.117 | **Medium** | 58.2 |
| 9 | Expressing ideas clearly and logically | 2.89 | 1.072 | **Medium** | 57.8 |
| 14 | Linking sentences smoothly | 2.89 | 1.016 | **Medium** | 57.8 |
| 1 | Planning written assignments | 2.87 | 0.974 | **Medium** | 57.4 |

| N | Sentence | Mean | SD | Degree | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 12 | Writing the body of an assignment | 2.87 | 0.974 | **Medium** | 57.4 |
| 4 | Writing a bibliography/references section | 2.82 | 1.084 | **Medium** | 56.4 |
| 7 | Summarizing/paraphrasing ideas in sources | 2.78 | 1.061 | **Medium** | 55.6 |
| 2 | Revising written work | 2.72 | 1.042 | **Medium** | 54.4 |
| 6 | Referring to sources in written work | 2.72 | 0.985 | **Medium** | 54.4 |
| 11 | Writing the introduction to an assignment | 2.72 | 1.031 | **Medium** | 54.4 |
| 13 | Writing the conclusion to an assignment | 2.69 | 1.004 | **Medium** | 53.8 |
|  | Average | 2.8498 | 0.80186 | Medium | 57 |

*Research Question # 2: Are there any differences in the level of the challenging aspects of academic writing that postgraduate students encounter with respect to the variables of academic degrees' type, year of study, and gender?*

To examine the potential impact of the different variables on the outcomes derived from the first question, a t-test value was calculated. Thus, the study's subsequent question examined whether the variables of academic degree type, year of study, and gender affect the extent of challenges encountered in academic written discourse. First, the academic degree type was considered as a variable. The researchers aimed to know if the study stage (master study or doctoral study) affects the level of writing challenge. As shown in Table (3) the value of "t" is (1.075), with a corresponding significance level of (0.286). This means that there are no differences in the level of challenging aspects of academic writing that postgraduate students encounter due to the academic degree type variable.

Table 3 - *Results of the "T" test for the level of challenging aspects of academic writing according to the academic degree type variable*

| Academic degree type | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Value of "t" | Sig |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Master's Student | 58 | 2.7845 | 0.70323 | 1.075 | 0.286 |
| Doctoral Student | 29 | 2.9803 | 0.97039 |  |  |

Regarding the potential influence of the variable of study year on the level of challenging aspects of academic writing, Table (4) reports differences in the level of challenging aspects of academic research writing that postgraduate students encounter due to the year of study. To know the significance of the differences, a one-way analysis (ANOVA) was performed as shown in Table (5). Kothari (2004) defines ANOVA (which stands for 'analysis of variance') as "a procedure for testing the difference among different groups of data for homogeneity" (P.257). Notably, the value of P for the total score (0.407) and the level of significance (0.667) is greater than the level of significance ($\alpha \geq 0.05$). This outcome indicates that there are no statistically significant differences in the level of challenging aspects of academic research writing that could be attributed to this variable.

*Table 4 - Means and standard deviation for the level of challenging aspects of academic writing according to the year of study variable*

| Year of Study | N | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| First year | 46 | 2.8804 | 0.79825 |
| Second year | 29 | 2.7488 | 0.86257 |
| Third year | 12 | 2.9762 | 0.69141 |

*Table 5 - One-way ANOVA analysis for the level of challenging aspects of academic writing according to the year of study variable*

| | Mean Square | df | Sum of Squares | Value of "F" | Sig |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Between Groups | 0.531 | 2 | 0.265 | | |
| Within Groups | 54.765 | 84 | 0.652 | 0.407 | 0.667 |
| Total | 55.296 | 86 | | | |

Similarly, in the analysis conducted for the last variable of gender, there is no statistically significant difference. Table (6) shows that the value of "t" is (0.341), and the level of significance is (0.734).

*Table 6 - Results of the "T" test for the level of challenging aspects of academic writing according to the gender variable*

| Gender | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Value of "t" | Sig |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 31 | 2.8894 | 0.89914 | 0.341 | 0.734 |
| Female | 56 | 2.8278 | 0.75036 | | |

## 4.2 Results of the Interviews

*Research Question # 3: What are the most challenging aspects of academic writing that postgraduate students encounter, as perceived from the perspectives of heads of postgraduate departments, and what are the reasons and solutions for them?*

The results of this question were analyzed thematically according to the interview questions sequence. The subsequent headings reflect the sequence of the interviews' questions.

### 4.2.1 Most Challenging Aspects of Written Academic Discourse

The faculty members agreed that the following academic writing aspects can be considered as the most challenging for postgraduate students.

### 4.2.1.1 Insufficient Proficiency in Grammar and Syntax

Grammar is central in any type of writing. When it comes to academic writing, the issue of clarity in the academic text is emphasized. Such clarity would not be achieved without the use of proper grammar. Accurate English grammar is not only needed for enhancing

readability and communication, but it is also required in every piece of writing including academic writing. Grammatical competence in the English language was reported as the most challenging aspect for the students in their academic writing by the faculty members. In this regard, NQ who enjoys a long experience in postgraduate teaching mentioned that "the language of postgraduate students is generally weak, particularly the grammar". Similarly, HA who is a faculty member, besides being the head of one of the postgraduate departments, stated that "postgraduate students cannot structure the sentence well and they write too long sentences". He added "this is attributed to the fact that these students follow the language structure of their mother tongue". He further declared that there is a "cultural influence" on the writing practices among these students.

### 4.2.1.2 Inappropriate Academic Style

As regards the notion of style in academic writing, one would think of formality, objectivity, organization, precision, and hedging. The interviewees showed great concern about academic writing style. They reported that postgraduate students cannot organize their ideas and paragraphs according to academic writing conventions. They repeat ideas, sentences, and paragraphs throughout a given academic text. The interviewees also declared that postgraduate students have difficulties with both sentence and paragraphs structures. Specifically, postgraduate students write long sentences with many sentence fragments when expressing their ideas in the academic text. At the paragraph level, the interviewees confirmed that postgraduate students cannot structure the paragraphs appropriately. Besides, they use punctuation marks inappropriately. Most importantly, the interviewees agreed that postgraduate students do not use the special language and terminology of academic writing which is meant as "scientific language". In this vein, RB, one of the interviewees, said, "postgraduate students follow the Arabic style when it comes to writing in academic English". He added, "in fact, they even cannot express their ideas in Arabic and tend to use slang". For him, these students do not know how to write academically.

### 4.2.1.3 Poor Referencing Skills

This theme was also reported by the faculty members as a challenging aspect. Citing the existing literature is central in academic writing. Postgraduate students need to cite ideas, words, and data from previous related works. However, achieving such objective is quite demanding, as students are required not only to locate a relevant and current work but also to grasp its content, rephrase the borrowed ideas accurately, and provide appropriate citations. In this vein, HA mentioned that dealing with other authors' ideas is a challenge for students. Similarly, NQ argued that citation skills are one of the most problematic aspects of academic writing. She confirmed that "students do not know how to find good sources for their writing".

### 4.2.1.4 Weak Argument

In academic writing, researchers should take their stance regarding the subject matter. They need to think and interpret deeply. The notion of argument was also reported in

the interviewees' responses. MO, for example, considered students' argument in academic texts as the top problematic aspect. For him, students "lack deep thinking and suffer from ideas loss". He further argued that their "science is based on memory and students have poor rhetorical competence". Most importantly, he clearly mentioned that students have "poor rhetorical skills when it comes to writing". This opinion holds true also for HA who reported the weak argument as a challenging manifestation in the written discourse. He stated that "students' ideas are weak".

### 4.2.2 Reasons for Challenging Aspects in Academic Written Discourse

In an attempt to better examine the challenges posed by academic written discourse among the segment of postgraduate students from the perspective of the faculty members, the latter were asked to provide reasons for the most problematic aspects in academic written discourse. For readability and clarity purposes, the reasons are presented thematically in the following sections, which include ideas shared by the interviewees.

### 4.2.2.1 The Traditional Education System (Schools and University)

In Palestine, English is introduced as a second language to students starting from the first grade. Moreover, English is a compulsory course that all students must pass for the General Secondary Certificate Exam. Subsequently, at the undergraduate level, students are taught English in form of level-based courses. However, when it comes to postgraduate studies, students' academic English skills are found to be poor. This is because both stages (school and university) focus on the four skills generally without paying much attention to a specific genre. This view was shared by the interviewees of this study. The heads of departments confirmed that schools do not appropriately enhance the English language skills of the students. HA, for instance, argued that "English is partially taught at schools and it is not taught as a foreign language at all." Likewise, RB mentioned that "school teachers do not speak English well and do not know about the foreign culture". As for the role of universities in the undergraduate level, NQ referred to the traditional approach of the existing educational system regarding the research culture. She stated "the academic writing challenges are due to the traditional educational system of the BA level, where there is no opportunity to conduct research." She added: "the courses are theoretical and there are no workshops or courses in research at this level".

### 4.2.2.2 Postgraduate Students' Self-Development

The academic programs across various fields assume that postgraduate students possess the essential qualities of researchers. Nevertheless, postgraduate students do not make sufficient efforts to enhance their skills including writing. Confirming this perspective, the interviewees affirmed that postgraduate students do not work hard toward developing their academic writing skills. MO connected writing skills development with reading. For him, postgraduate students do not read other articles where they can learn writing techniques. Similarly, MO mentioned that postgraduate "students are restricted by indoctrination methods and lack deep meditation and thus there is no good representation of their ideas".

RB agrees with the former two heads of departments in their accounts of the academic writing challenges for postgraduate students. He clearly stated that "postgraduate students are lazy and do not make the needed efforts as postgraduate students". NQ mentioned that "students are not curious to develop their skills in the MA stage. They just want the certificate. They see it as a 'trend'".

### 4.2.2.3 Postgraduate University Courses

Palestinian universities offer both specialized university courses in different subject matters and some other elective courses. Unfortunately, no courses are provided on academic writing skills though there are courses about research methods. The absence of such courses prevents the building of the capacity of postgraduate students' writing skills. Such concern was emphasized by the interviewees who confirmed the need to have such courses in the programs' academic plans. RB mentioned that "the current courses do not enhance the writing skills in English". MA, on the other hand, suggested making such courses available for student enrollment. He added: "the relevant courses offered by the university need to be reconsidered and organized".

### 4.2.3 Solutions for the Challenging Aspects in Academic Written Discourse

To gain a more comprehensive insight from experienced and well-informed individuals, the departments' heads were asked to suggest solutions to tackle the problematic aspects of academic writing from their own perspectives. The following sections summarize the recommended solutions for overcoming academic writing challenges encountered by postgraduate students.

### 4.2.3.1 Offering University Courses and Training on Academic Writing

Since the absence of specialized university courses emerged as a major reason for writing challenges, the interviewees recommended including university courses on academic writing in the program's academic plans. MO suggested having what he called "parallel support courses in writing, grammar and reading" for postgraduate students.

In addition, the interviewees recommended conducting specialized training courses, workshops, and webinars on topics related to academic writing. HA emphasized the importance of having such courses and workshops held. He mentioned that "there is an urgent need to have specialized courses in writing and not general ones". He further recommends establishing "a center for language development". Similarly, RB confirmed the need for these courses and workshops saying "the solutions for overcoming writing challenges are to conduct academic writing courses for postgraduate students".

### 4.2.3.2 Exerting More Effort by Postgraduate Students

Given that the primary responsibility lies on the students themselves, the interviewees suggested that postgraduate students need to work hard to enhance their academic writing skills. MO said that "to tackle the weakness in academic writing, students need to read more in their field". He advised that students need to utilize technology-based tools de-

signed for the purpose of writing. He added "using supportive tools like Google Translate and Grammarly facilitate the writing process for postgraduate students". MA agrees with this and refers to the process of academic writing as an experiential journey. He stated, "postgraduate students need to try this experience more and more". NQ suggested that the culture of education needs to be changed. She added, "postgraduate students need to search for the information themselves".

### 4.2.3.3 Offering Exchange Visits with Foreign Universities

Learning from other universities, particularly those that adopt English as a medium of instruction, is another solution suggested by the interviewees. HA, for example, highly recommended conducting such exchange visits in an effective manner "where the whole process is monitored from A to Z." WQ went further and recommended the instructors to conduct research with their students and connect them with "educational institutions to conduct research visits".

## 5. *Discussion*

### 5.1 Discussion of the Questionnaire Results

Through the questionnaire, the researchers aimed to examine the most problematic aspects of written discourse based on postgraduate students' experiences. The results of the study revealed that the statement "using the appropriate academic style" ranked first followed by the statement "proofreading written work". Statements related to ideas organization ("organizing ideas in coherent paragraphs") and ideas connection with external sources ("linking ideas from different sources") held the fourth and fifth ranks respectively.

As for the most problematic aspect of academic writing, the use of the appropriate style was found to be the most prominent challenge for postgraduate students. Indeed, Palestinian postgraduate students are not accustomed to the style of English written discourse. Only a few students write research papers or academic texts during the undergraduate stage. They are, however, familiar with the Arabic written discourse more than the English one. This finding broadly supports the work of other studies in this area investigating writing challenges in English written discourse. Lai (2020), for example, found the rhetorical differences in the first language and second language the second most frequent challenge in the academic written discourse. The participants of her study with different mother tongues reported that the English writing style differs from their first language style.

Proofreading the written texts was also considered challenging for postgraduate students. A possible explanation for this result is that postgraduate students originally have poor academic writing and cannot write effectively. Thus, they do not have the skill and knowledge to check the syntactic and linguistic errors in a given text upon the submission of the final draft. As for revision, which is part of proofreading and a main component in the composition process, Krashen (2014) argues that poor writers regard it as a sign of weakness.

Organizing ideas in coherent paragraphs was reported as a challenge for postgraduate students. Dontcheva-Navratilova et al. (2017, 10) define coherence as "the interpretative perception of semantic unity and purposefulness derived from a text, which encompasses conceptual connectedness, evaluative and dialogical consistency, and textual relatedness". Coherence is considered the rhetorical aspect of the writing process and requires a logical sequence of ideas within a paragraph or between paragraphs. The issue of sentences or paragraphs organization was also reported by the doctoral students in the Gupta et al. (2022) study.

Linking borrowed ideas from other sources to one's own academic text was another result reported from the postgraduate students' perspective. Undoubtedly, this aspect of writing is not an easy process as it requires a precise understanding of the borrowed ideas as well as suitable citing in the text in hand. Nonetheless, citation skills are considered among the prominent features of academic writing. Citation is not only needed to support the researchers' ideas and argument but it is also important to reveal existing gaps in the current literature as well as to show the researcher's stance and voice on the subject matter. The result of this study regarding citation skills is not surprising, however. It is consistent with that of Lamptey and Atta-Obeng (2012), who found that postgraduate students encounter problems in mastering reference formats and they were found less confident when referring to other sources. Similarly, Jomaa and Bidin (2017) found that doctoral students have inadequate knowledge of using citations.

Moving to the least problematic aspects of academic writing, the results revealed that writing the introduction as well as the conclusion of a given assignment is almost not seen as a challenge for postgraduate students. Actually, this result was not surprising and suggests that both the introduction and conclusion sections are in one way or another easy to write. Both sections do not require much effort on the writers' side. The introduction is usually written after writing the whole academic work once the picture is completed. Besides, it contains some background information that the author can easily write about in clear and simple language. It is also clearly divided into subheadings including the statement of the problem, the significance of the study, and the questions of the study. The conclusion, on the other hand, is seen as a restatement of some parts of the whole work. Moreover, it might be attached to the discussion section as a concluding paragraph.

Concerning the study's second question which examines the possible relation between the academic writing challenging aspects and other factors including academic degree type, year of study, and gender, the study demonstrated that such relation does not exist. The researchers believe that the weakness in the different aspects of academic writing is not restricted to master's students' or doctoral students' academic degree. The traditional teaching system adopted in the undergraduate study stage, where less attention is based on research, does not help the students enrolling for a master's degree. Similarly, and as indicated by the heads of the departments, the academic writing skills of the master's students are still considered to be weak and need further enhancement from the university, faculty members, and the student. Thus, the student comes to the doctoral stage with problematic academic writing skills.

As for the year of study which showed no significance as a variable, the problematic aspects in the academic writing were reported to be the same regardless of the year of study. This variable actually was examined in the study as the researchers believed that the students do better in terms of academic writing in their second or third years. The writing challenges that these students encounter in their first year is somehow justified due to lack of past experience and absence of research related courses in that year. In the later years, however, the students are expected to take research courses, participate in research projects, read advanced books, and write short academic texts at least. In fact, such result was expected by the researchers and it might be due to the following reasons: first of all, postgraduate students used to think of themselves as students rather than researchers. If the opposite is true, then the student would exert greater work in developing their skills, including academic writing ones, since their enrollment. In addition, the absence of specialized courses on academic writing during the whole postgraduate program creates no difference in any of the years of study.

Concerning the gender variable, the study revealed that it has nothing to do with the most problematic aspects of academic written discourse. Surprisingly, this result did not meet the researchers' expectations. Females are generally believed to outperform males in different aspects of writing, particularly fluency, and thus face fewer writing challenges. However, the unexpected result of the study in this respect can be due to the fact that both male and female postgraduate students share almost similar backgrounds in terms of education quality at the school and university levels alike. English is considered the second language in Palestine, and both males and females receive the same quality of education. In addition, both male and female postgraduate students work in the same environment where English is used as their second language. The current result is consistent with that of the study by Qadir et. al (2021) who investigated writing apprehension among postgraduate students. Similar to our results, the gender variable in their study has nothing to do with writing.

## 5.2 Discussion of the Interview Results

The results of the second tool provide a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon being addressed. The insights of the heads of departments were informative and of high significance for understanding the writing challenges from a well-informed and experienced party.

To begin with, the results of the thematic analysis revealed that the heads of departments agreed on four major challenges that postgraduate students encounter when writing academically. Insufficient proficiency in the English grammar and syntax was a challenging aspect that was reported as an obstacle in academic written discourse. Grammar and syntax are central to any piece of writing. Correct grammar requires well-formed sentences through which a paragraph is built. Once the grammatical rules in any academic text are met, then the fundamental requirement of writing is ensured. This result was also reported by Lai (2020) where the participants mentioned that they encountered difficulties in using the right grammar when writing academically. Likewise, this finding corroborates those by Gupta et al. (2022), who surveyed the perceptions of both doctoral students and faculty

supervisors. According to this study, it was found that the faculty supervisors consider grammar as the most problematic aspect of academic written discourse.

Following an inappropriate writing style was also confirmed by the respondents as a problematic aspect in the academic written discourse. Undoubtedly, the writing style is of great concern for the majority of faculty members who have adequate teaching experience through which they can assess students' writing skills. Postgraduate students often exhibit an informal writing style by incorporating slang or spoken words and phrases into their written texts. In addition, they tend to write unclearly and imprecisely, violating the conventions of academic writing style. For example, postgraduate students tend to mix up ideas, express their thoughts redundantly, or report facts imprecisely. Interestingly, this perspective was shared by the students themselves, signifying a strong consensus on the problem. Such shared concern should lead to collaborative efforts in addressing the problem.

Another problematic aspect of academic writing that was revealed from the interviews is students' inability to refer to other sources appropriately. In fact, this is true for many postgraduate students as it not only requires good search skills but also paraphrasing and citation competencies. Such abilities are usually acquired individually with less intervention from the faculty members due to their workload and sometimes due to the large numbers of postgraduate students they teach or supervise. Again, this result is shared by the students themselves as previously discussed, where the citation and referencing skills are identified as a challenge in academic written discourse. This shared apprehension implies the need to improve this aspect of writing, thus striving towards the higher standards expected in academic discourse.

As for the postgraduate arguments being another challenge for successful academic writing as perceived by the heads of departments, it seems that postgraduate students indeed have weak arguments when it comes to ideas presentation and development. This might be due to the fact that students with poor argumentation skills do not read the model papers to carefully examine how ideas are developed and the arguments built throughout the whole text. If we accept that reading enriches our thoughts, then we need to read relevant books and articles on the subject matter. Considering them as researchers rather than students, the ideas of postgraduate students need not be intuition-based. Instead, arguments should be logical and evidence-based.

Remarkably, the results that state the reasons behind the problematic aspects of academic writing from the view of heads of departments hold the educational system, postgraduate students, and the university responsible for academic writing challenges. Indeed, the three parties contribute to such writing challenges during postgraduate studies. The interviewees were found to be honest in their diagnosis of the underlying causes of the most problematic aspects of academic writing. Likewise, the solutions that were proposed by the heads of departments on academic written discourse could be seen as practical steps towards eliminating the writing challenges in academia. Adding writing courses to the existing plans, delivering specialized training courses on academic writing, and exerting more effort by the students are all solutions that are recommended by well-informed faculty members and they could be applied if taken seriously.

## 6. *Conclusion*

This study has examined the academic writing challenges encountered by postgraduate students. It has investigated the most problematic aspects from the perspective of the students and the faculty members occupying the heads of departments. The findings highlighted that writing in an academic style has emerged as the most prominent obstacle in academic writing as perceived by both students and instructors. Additionally, the study's investigation of potential variations in the challenging aspects of academic writing based on various variables including the academic degree type, year of study, and gender showed no statistically significant differences.

### 6.1 Pedagogical Implications

Since postgraduate students are the target beneficiaries of academic writing development, we refer to them first. They are recommended to take the following steps so that they enhance their writing competency. Postgraduate students are encouraged to seek out available language support resources such as workshops, webinars, and training courses. Students are also recommended to join peer groups on writing, where they can exchange experiences and learn best practices. Finally, they can benefit from technology, particularly from AI-based tools and programs, in order to enhance their language competencies outside the traditional writing classrooms.

The other type of implication concerns postgraduate faculties in general and the faculty members in particular. As revealed from the interviews, there is a great need for a course on academic writing specifically designed for postgraduate students. The course could be an elective one being available only for those students who want to improve their academic writing skills. Once adopted in the academic programs' plans, the universities would achieve the first practical step. Moreover, postgraduate faculties are recommended to hold regular workshops and short courses for postgraduate students during the academic semester. These activities could be voluntarily run by faculty members or expert-paid trainers. Finally, postgraduate faculties are recommended to carefully assess the writing skills of postgraduate students upon their acceptance into the different postgraduate programs. Once the students' writing levels are assessed from the beginning of their postgraduate studies, proper remedial actions could be taken accordingly.

### 6.2 Limitations and Recommended Future Research

The study was limited to postgraduate students and faculty members in one Palestinian university. While this university offers a wide variety of academic postgraduate programs and attracts students from different locations in Palestine across various disciplines, it is crucial to note that the results of this study might not be applicable to students and faculty from other universities, thus limiting their generalizability. Accordingly, the researchers recommend that future studies apply the same questionnaire used for this study to other postgraduate studies. With the rise in the number of postgraduate students worldwide, it

will be of high interest to compare the results of the current study with other future ones to get a deep insight into the academic writing challenges at the international level.

Further, the current study examined the teachers' perceptions towards the potential reasons of the most problematic aspects of academic writing and their suggested solutions through the interviews, where meaningful insights were achieved. However, postgraduate students' perception towards the solutions were not examined in this study and rather limited to the potential reasons. Future studies need to qualitatively examine the students' perceptions regarding the solutions of the written academic discourse. This would complement the results of the current study, where the data are obtained from all parties.

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*Appendix (A): The Academic Writing Challenges Scale*

Part 1: Background Info

Q1)    What is your specialization?
Q2)    Are you a master's or doctoral student?
         a)  Master's Student.
         b)  Doctoral Student.
Q3)    What is your year of study?
         a)  First year.
         b)  Second year.
         c)  Third year
Q4)    What is your gender?
         a)  Male.
         b)  Female.

Part 2: Questionnaire Items

Please answer each item by selecting the appropriate item on the scale from very difficult (1) to very easy (7).

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very Difficult | Difficult | Somewhat Difficult | Neither | Somewhat Easy | Easy | Very Easy |

Academic Writing Skills

1)    Planning written assignments
2)    Revising written work
3)    Using appropriate academic style
4)    Writing a bibliography/ references section
5)    Proofreading written work
6)    Referring to sources in written work
7)    Summarizing/ paraphrasing ideas in sources
8)    Organizing ideas in coherent paragraphs
9)    Expressing ideas clearly and logically
10)  Linking ideas from different sources
11)  Writing the introduction to an assignment
12)  Writing the body of an assignment
13)  Writing the conclusion to an assignment
14)  Linking sentences smoothly