

## WRITING CHALLENGES FACED BY ESL LEARNERS IN PAKISTAN: REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

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### **Abstract**

*This paper aims at investigating the writing challenges faced by ESL learners in Pakistan, surveying previous research studies as the basis. In Pakistan English is taught as a second language. ESL learners often confront numerous difficulties in their writing proficiency. The existing research literature reveals that ESL learners in Pakistan encounter several common obstacles, namely, grammar, vocabulary, coherence, cohesion spelling mistakes, interlingual and intralingual errors, cultural disparities. The findings demonstrate that grammar continues to be a significant hurdle, as learners struggle with intricate grammatical structures, verb tenses, and subject-verb agreement. Their limited vocabulary and struggle to locate suitable words impede their ability to express ideas effectively. Additionally, organizing their writing coherently and structuring their sentences present challenges for ESL learners. Thus, the dissimilarities in culture and rhetoric between English and the learners' native language impact their writing style and organization. The study underscores the significance of targeted instructional strategies in addressing these challenges. It proposes the incorporation of explicit grammar instruction, lexical growth exercises, writing strategies focusing on organization, and the provision of authentic writing tasks. By addressing these challenges, ESL learners in Pakistan can enhance their writing skills and attain higher proficiency in English.*

**Key words:** ESL learners, writing challenges, Pakistan, grammar, interlingual and intralingual errors, instructional strategies, grammar instruction, critical thinking development, lexical enhancement, coherence, authentic writing tasks, writing apps.

### **Introduction:**

ESL writing refers to the process of teaching and learning writing skills in English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. It specifically focuses on developing the writing abilities of individuals who are non-native speakers of English. ESL writing instruction typically covers various aspects of writing, including grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, paragraph development, essay organization, and overall coherence and cohesion. The goal is to help ESL learners become proficient and effective writers in English, enabling them to communicate their ideas clearly and accurately. ESL writing instruction often follows a gradual approach, starting with simple writing tasks and progressing to more complex assignments as learners' skills improve. It emphasizes the development of both accuracy and fluency, allowing learners to master the mechanics of writing while also expressing them creatively. Teachers of ESL writing often employ a range of instructional strategies and

techniques, such as modeling, brainstorming, outlining, drafting, revising, and editing. They may provide explicit instruction on grammar rules, sentence structure, and vocabulary usage, as well as guide learners through the process of generating ideas, organizing their thoughts, and producing coherent and well-structured written pieces. ESL writing instruction can take place in various settings, including language schools, colleges, universities, or even online platforms. It may involve individualized instruction, small-group activities, or whole-class lessons, depending on the specific needs and resources available. Overall, ESL writing aims to empower non-native English speakers with the skills and confidence to express themselves effectively in written English, supporting their academic, professional, and personal endeavors.

### **Statement of the problem**

There is the limited availability of comprehensive literature reviews that specifically focus on identifying the key ESL writing challenges in Pakistan. While some reviews of research in this area have been conducted in the past, there is a lack of recent and in-depth analyses of comprehensive review of studies in the present scenario, identifying and categorizing the specific writing challenges faced by ESL learners in Pakistan. This gap hinders a comprehensive understanding of the unique difficulties faced by ESL learners in their writing skills. Moreover, there is a dearth of research that proposes practical implications and strategies for addressing the identified ESL writing challenges in Pakistan. The existing literature lacks comprehensive recommendations for teachers, ESL learners, curriculum designers, and policymakers on how to effectively address these challenges and improve ESL learners' writing proficiency. Filling this research gap is beneficial in providing valuable insights and recommendations to gear up ESL writing proficiency in Pakistan.

### **Significance of the study**

The significance of the study lies in its worth to contribute to the understanding and improvement of ESL writing instruction in Pakistan. By identifying the key writing challenges faced by ESL learners as described in the vast array of the studies conducted in this domain, the study can inform the development of targeted interventions and strategies to enhance their writing proficiency. The implications derived from the study can be used by educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers to improve teaching practices, instructional materials, and support systems for ESL learners in Pakistan. Thus, the study has the potential to positively impact the academic success and language development of ESL learners in the country.

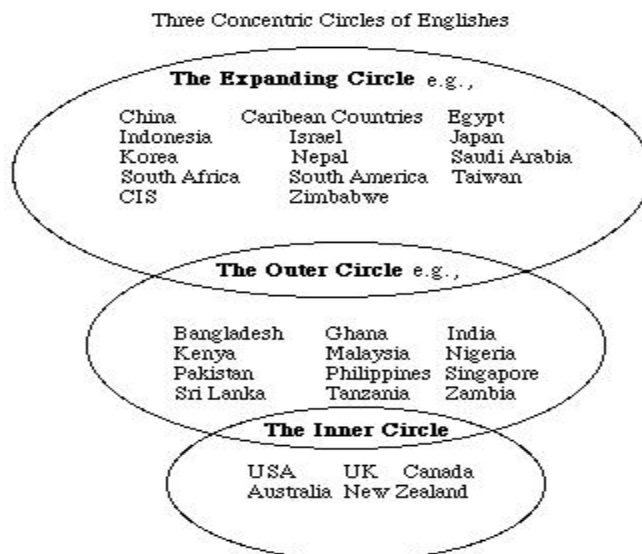
### **Research Objectives**

What follows are major objectives of the study:

1. To identify key ESL writing challenges in Pakistan through a comprehensive literature review.
2. To propose practical implications and strategies for addressing identified ESL writing challenges in Pakistan.

### **Research questions**

1. What are the key ESL writing challenges identified by researchers in their studies focusing on ESL learners in Pakistan?
2. What are the potential implications for addressing these challenges?



### The Kachru model of concentric circles of English

The model offered by Kachru (1996) has three concentric circles of English. It has got international applause and acclaim. The socio-linguistic framework demonstrates the use as well as the spread of English across the globe. The model consists of three circles – inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle. It explicitly divides English-speaking countries in three major circles. As far the inner circle is concerned, it represents the countries where English is the native language and enjoys official status. These countries include United Kingdom, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zeland. English is a primary means of communication in these countries. Here English is used as a native language (ENL).

As for the outer circle, it represents the countries where English is used as second language (ESL). These countries were ruled over by the English during the colonial period. The circle includes countries such as Bangladesh, Ghana, India, Kenya, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Zambia.

As for the expanding circle, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). Here English is used for specific purposes e.g. business and tourism. Though English has limited official status in these countries, it plays a significant role regarding global communication. This circle includes countries such as China, Caribbean countries, Egypt, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Korea, Nepal, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South America, Taiwan, commonwealth Independence States (CIS) and Zimbabwe.

It is worth noticing that all the circles have their distinctive linguistic features and varieties within circles and out of their respective circles. Undoubtedly, the model helps understand the phenomenon of surprising spread of English.

### Review of the research

Ajmal et al. (2020) have remarked that ESL Pakistani learners encounter multi-faceted issues while writing in English. The researchers have enumerated psychological, linguistic, cognitive

and social challenges faced by these learners. The major objective of the study was to find out the impact of the process – genre approach on writing anxiety among ESL learners in Pakistan. Findings of the study have revealed that process – genre approach was an eclectic approach. It was based on language knowledge, context knowledge and process knowledge. The process – genre approach was found beneficial in a reducing writing anxiety because of its salient features. The approach help the learners describe purpose of writing, equipping the learners with a clear awareness of the purpose.

Although the study by Akhtar et al. (2019) was conducted in Malaysian context, it delt with ESL learners challenges in writing in English, similar case regarding ESL Pakistani learners. The study provided a systematic literature review of the studies which were conducted in order to find out the challenges faced by ESL learners in writing in English. The solutions were also offered to these challenges. The researches reviewed in this area were published from 2010 until 2019. Twenty-seven studies were reviewed and analyzed in this regard. Three major challenges were observed regarding academic writing. They include teaching methods, students' attitude towards English, and language ability. As for solution to these issues, they involve employing active learning English language teaching methods – tasked based learning, blended learning, collaborative learning and cognitive approach.

Aqeel (2014) explores in research that writing skills play a crucial role in foreign language learning. They contribute to the overall language proficiency of learners and enable them to express their thoughts, ideas, and opinions in written form. However, there can be various emerging problems related to writing skills in foreign language learning like limited vocabulary and grammar, fear of making mistakes, lack of authentic writing tasks & insufficient feedback and assessment. Further they suggested to addressing these emerging problems and implementing effective solutions, instructors can support learners in developing their writing skills in a foreign language. A balanced approach can be integrates writing practice, constructive feedback, authentic tasks, and learner autonomy can significantly contribute to learners' proficiency and confidence in written expression.

Aqeel and Sajid (2014) have suggested that writing skills indeed play a crucial role in learning a foreign language. The skills contribute to overall language proficiency and provide learners with the ability to express their thoughts, ideas, and opinions in written form. However, there can be various emerging problems related to writing skills in second language learning in Pakistan. Various approaches and methods are employed for teaching ESL learners. The traditional approaches emphasize the teaching of grammar rules and translation exercises, assigned for writing tasks. Writing and reading skills are prioritized, ignoring speaking and listening skills. The researchers underscores that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is conducive to teaching writing skills.

Fareed et al (2016) mentioned that Pakistan has a complex language policy framework that recognizes multiple regional languages alongside Urdu and English. However, the implementation of language policies can be challenging, leading to gaps in language education, limited resources for minority languages, and conflicts related to language preferences and identity. Authors further suggested that the efforts are being made in Pakistan to address these language problems, including reforms in language education, promotion of bilingual education, and initiatives to enhance English language proficiency. However, these challenges require

ongoing attention and comprehensive strategies to ensure effective language integration, inclusive communication, and equal opportunities for all linguistic communities in Pakistan.

The study conducted by Hassan et al. (2020) examined the cognitive attitudinal impact of process approach in order to address college English writing instruction problems faced by ESL learners in Pakistan. The study used a quasi – experimental design which included the pre test and post test method. The study used covariance review in order to assess the results quantitatively. Findings have revealed that process approach to writing had a statistically significant effect regarding writing performance of ESL learners in the country. It was recommended that the writing method should be used for documenting EFL events.

Irfan's study (2018) aimed to investigate the impact of creative writing tests on classroom practice in Pakistan. The study was designed to know perceptions of English teachers about creativity, teaching and assessment of creative writing across the country. It was observed that English teachers don't develop creative skills of students of English at matriculation level. Findings also maintain that teachers' concept of creativity both artistic and traditional. The major emphasis is on the topics given in the textbook and the model test papers. It is done so that the students may get good scores in the examination. The teachers are unaware of the latest techniques, approaches and methods, practiced successfully in the west. The need is to include testing of creative writing which will bring fruitful results.

Although the study of Jenebagha et al. (2021) was conducted in Iranian contexts, it pointed out the writing issues faced by learners writing in English. The major objectives of the study were : (i) to find out the roots of the Iranian EFL learners' writing problems, (ii) to discover how these roots are interconnected with each other, and (iii) to introduce a corresponding model. Findings of the study revealed that there are some basic factors which had different sources – mainly linguistic, personal, epistemological and ecological. Awareness of epistemological and ecological sources enables teachers to revisit their views of these issues.

Jokhio et al. (2020) study focus on two major objectives (i) to examine the challenges of teaching writing skills to large classes in Pakistan private and public universities, and (ii) to find out the useful strategies and approaches to teaching activities skills in these universities. As for the challenges were found uncomfortable in giving feedback in all students because of shortage of time, lack of individual attention, disruptive noise, assessment issues were considered other major issues. The use of appropriate strategies in the specific context would be more beneficial. An effective planning will be also useful for teaching writing to large classes. Separate techniques should be used for weak and average students. Use of peer assessment technique brings fruitful results regarding MCQs. Involving students in pair work and group work tasks can increase students' engagement in written tasks. Setting rules after consultation will overcome the disruptive noise.

In their study, Khan et al. (2015) have investigated the challenges faced by ESL Pakistani learners in writing in English. They include lack of training, inadequate proficiency in lexis and syntax, lack of special writing courses, inability to produce ideas because of lack of critical thinking, inability to express themselves effectively in English.

Mahmood's study (2020) amid to explore the writing challenges faced by EFL learners and teachers' proficiency at higher education of Pakistan. As for the learners, the challenges include references and citations, cohesion and coherence, choosing a worthwhile topic and language usage. As for the teachers, the issues included selection criteria of teachers, lack of



pedagogical and analytical skills and incompatibility of curriculum. The study suggests that using eclectic approach and data collection techniques to assess the experiences of academic writing will work wonders in this regard.

The study abducted by Nusrat et al. (2019) amid to examine the effect of teacher feedback on the written English of ESL learners. In the quasi-experimental study were given three types of feedback- direct feedback, indirect feedback and no feedback. Those who were given direct feedback performed better than those were given indirect feedback and no feedback. Findings of the study have maintained that direct feedback can improve English writing of ESL learners in Pakistan.

Sheikh (2020) conducted a study to explore the most frequent writing difficulties in English faced by higher secondary male and female students. The difficulties faced by ESL learners at higher secondary level include lack of knowledge in the preposition and punctuation, mistakes in the use of past and indefinite tense and present perfect tense , wrong use of double future tense, wrong construction of sentences, lack of cohesion, lexical competence. It was also observed that before writing in English learners think about Urdu sentences. Then they translate these sentences into English. Adoption of a eclectic approach is recommended in the study. Students should be advised to handle the hindrance of first language in writing in English. Students should be encouraged to work on spelling and grammar rules. More focus is needed for writing asks than oral work.

Zubair's study (2019) examines the problems and difficulties faced by learners in English writing at secondary level classes in the public sector schools. It is found that these learners encounter grammatical errors along with inappropriate vocabulary, spelling mistakes while writing in English. It was noticed that their writing was unorganized. The research found that the scripts of the learners had repetition of information, absence of thesis statement, lack of creative writing, grammatical mistakes and irrelevant information. Interlingual errors were observed in their scripts. The learners were unable to produce creative writing. These issues may be addressed if the learners are given proper guidance and feedback from their teachers.

### **Major ESL writing challenges as identified in the research studies**

Research studies have identified several major writing challenges faced by ESL (English as a Second Language) learners. One of the primary challenges is organizing ideas coherently and structuring their writing effectively. ESL learners may struggle with developing a clear introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion, leading to disorganized and disjointed essays. Another common challenge is grammar and syntax. ESL learners often encounter difficulties in sentence construction, including subject-verb agreement, proper verb tense usage, and word order. These grammatical errors can impede the clarity and coherence of their writing. Additionally, vocabulary limitations pose a significant obstacle to ESL learners' writing proficiency. They may struggle to find appropriate words and phrases to express their ideas precisely, resulting in repetitive or simplistic language use. Moreover, ESL learners often face challenges with integrating source material and citing references correctly, particularly in academic writing. They may struggle with paraphrasing, summarizing, and properly attributing information, which can lead to unintentional plagiarism. Finally, writing with a natural flow and tone is another hurdle for ESL learners. They may find it challenging to adopt an authentic voice in English, resulting in writing that sounds stilted or overly formal. Addressing these challenges requires targeted instruction, explicit teaching of writing strategies, and ample practice

opportunities to develop writing proficiency. ESL educators can provide scaffolding, explicit feedback, and models to help learners improve their writing skills and overcome these hurdles.

### **Recommendations for addressing writing challenges**

1. Encourage ESL learners to immerse themselves in English language environment. Learner should read text in English, English newspapers and alone articles. In this regards, watching English language movies and T V shows will provide experience to various accents of English.
2. Design relevant writing tasks in the Pakistan – content including social issues at central traditions. Already finalized topics will enable learners to express their thoughts in effective ways.
3. Emphasize critical thinking skills in ESL writing instructions. Learners should be well-advised to analyze and assess information along with logical and critical thinking. It will help them, develop the skills to express ideas in a persuasive way.
4. Promote a culture of reading among ESL learners. The more they read, the more they develop writing skills. Engage them to classic works e.g. Chaucer, Donne, Milton's poetry, Marlowe and Shakespeare's plays, Victorian and Modern novels and short stories from history of English literature and also some from postcolonial literature. Reading will help them increasing lexical competence. Reading texts in English will improve their syntactic ability along with the formation of sentences. Learners should be exposed to different writing style and genres.
5. Prevail chances for ESL learners to engage themselves in arithmetic writing experiences. They may include writing letters to newspaper editorials and contributing to newsletters and journals published in their educational institutes. Such tasks will connect ESL learners writing skills to real life situations, fostering a source of motivation and purpose.
6. Incorporate their writing exercises to curriculum in order to increase fluency in writing. Setting specific limits will motivate ESL learners to focus on provoking ideas coherently with the assigned timeframe. For instance asking the learners to play the roles of mothers who write letters to their sons in Canada to come back to Pakistan, and then playing the roles of sons who still need to lengthen their stay in Canada. Twenty minutes should be given for both these letters.
7. Leverage the use of technology tools in education to enhance writing instructions given to ESL learners. Grammar-checking tasks and online sources will give prompt feedback, engaging ESL learners in the fruitful priorities of writing.
8. Teach learners to move for easy phase to difficult one. Paragraph writing on same current topic will work wonders. Then easy writing should be focused. Techniques of paragraph writing and essay writing should be shared and discussed. Encouragement instead of criticism will give incentives to write more effectively.
9. In order to overcome/reduce anxiety in writing in English. The learner should be praised at the end of the writing tasks.
10. Errors are also building blocks for ESL learners. If these errors are controlled, at early stage, it will bring fruitful results. Otherwise learners' errors will convert into mistakes.
11. Give ESL learners core words lists with meanings in order to increase vocabulary in short time. Ask learners to learn new words with the help of contextual clues in order to augment their lexical growth.

12. Teach ESL learners how to use writing apps in order to find out coherence and speed in their writing scripts, assignments and projects. These apps will not only help them check their mistakes but also open horizon of new writing tasks.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Pakistan faces various language issues due to its linguistic diversity and socio-cultural factors. These language issues impact different aspects of society, including education, communication, and identity. Pakistan is home to a wide range of languages, with over 70 languages. The diversity poses challenges in written and spoken communication. English enjoys a prestigious status in Pakistan, providing academic and professional opportunities. However, limited English proficiency among the general population can hinder socioeconomic mobility and access to global platforms. Meanwhile different provinces and regions in Pakistan have their own dominant languages, leading to linguistic divisions. This can create barriers in interregional communication and understanding. However, the education system in Pakistan faces language-related challenges, such as the choice of language for instruction and the availability of quality English language education. These challenges affect learning outcomes and contribute to disparities in educational opportunities. The formulation and implementation of effective language policies that address linguistic diversity, promote multilingualism, and ensure equitable language education are crucial for addressing language issues in Pakistan. Language proficiency in writing offers socioeconomic implications. Language is deeply intertwined with cultural identity.

To cut the long story short, the study gives a comprehensive view of the previous research conducted to investigate the writing challenges faced by ESL learners in Pakistan. The review of the previous studies on these challenges has provided fruitful insights into the current landscape and hindrances which learners face in the domain of writing. The comprehensive review of existing literature has pointed out various factors contributing the challenges. These challenges include grammatical mistakes, inadequate proficiency in English, lack of coherence and cohesion. Various obstacles, hindering the development of creative writing skills, - are described in detail. These issues include limited exposure to English inadequate knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, lack of coherence and cohesion, spelling mistakes, and cultural differences. It is mandatory for teachers, learners, policymakers, educationalists and stakeholders at regional, provincial and federal level to recognize the impact of these challenges, providing appropriate opportunities to ESL learners to come out of chaos. In order to mitigate these challenges, recommendations are give above should be implemented. All will but only overcome writing barriers encountered by ESL learners, but also improve their proficiency in writing in English. All this will benefit their academic success.

Future research regarding writing challenges encountered by ESL learners in Pakistan could explore the usefulness of specific pedagogical approaches and instructions in order to address these challenges. Additionally, further research can examine the effectiveness of grammar-checking software, and long-term benefits of technology integration.

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