LSP Teaching
Fachbezogener Fremdsprachenunterricht

Practices, Innovations, Technology
Praxis, Innovation, Technologie

Edited by / Herausgegeben von
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and Maria Vázquez Amador

Arcana Linguistica | 4

Franz Steiner Verlag

Sonder-
druck
2025

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Postgraduate Students' Writer's Block in English as an Academic Language
Reasons and Remedies

MEHMET GALIP ZORBA / ARDA ARIKAN

Abstract. Academic writing is often considered a complex process in which various factors are at work and affect the quality of the written product. Therefore, producing academic texts is a formidable task for many postgraduate students. Although English as an academic language has been gaining currency in foreign language teaching/learning, writer's block remains underresearched, particularly at the postgraduate level. This study aims to investigate the extent to which postgraduate students are hampered by writer's block while writing academic papers in English, what factors pave the way for this problem, and what strategies they use to remedy writer's block. A mixed-methods research design was employed to seek answers to the research questions, and data were collected sequentially during the spring term of the 2021–2022 academic year. In the first phase, a writer's block scale was administered to collect quantitative data, and qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews to cross-check quantitative data and gain in-depth insights. Findings revealed that postgraduate students frequently were hampered by writer's block and used various remedial strategies to cope with this problem.

Keywords: postgraduate students, writer's block, academic writing, English for academic purposes, small-scale study

1 Introduction

In higher education institutions, where the English language is used as the medium of instruction, considerable emphasis is often placed on developing academic writing skills, making it an integral aspect of all teaching and assessment processes. In such a case, writing in English serves as a means through which students demonstrate their competences, skills, and knowledge (Ahmad et al.2023, Altınmakas & Bayyurt 2019, Hazea 2023, Hyland 2013). Consequently, students often encounter challenges in generating academic texts, as the writing process involves navigating through various elements, including adherence to organizational rules and employing sophisticated language usage. Writer's block stands out as a significant obstacle among the myriad factors influencing undergraduate and postgraduate students' academic production.

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1.1 Writer's block

Writer's block is often characterised by the inability to initiate or sustain writing, stemming from factors that are not related to a deficiency in fundamental skills or dedication (Rose 1984). Although it was considered a psychological or mental problem linked to individuals' personal experiences or early-life circumstances during the 1940s and 1950s (Amado 2022, Castillo 2014, Moore 2018), studies during the 1980s showed that writer's block is a dysfunction in the production process in which cognitive and affective factors are primarily at work (Boice 1985, Rose 1984). However, recent studies also indicate that writer's block is a common and undesired problem for professional and student writers that may appear at any stage of the writing process (Moore 2018) and often manifests itself while generating, articulating, and expressing ideas and choosing which to follow (Ahmed & Güss 2022). As research shows, this problem significantly impedes the flow of ideas and the overall writing process, making it a notable obstacle in the production of academic texts for students in undergraduate and postgraduate education. It is often accompanied by heightened academic pressures, fear of evaluation, or the struggle to articulate thoughts effectively, culminating with abandoning writing, tearing and throwing away the whole text, or permanently calling off the project (Bastug et al. 2017).

1.2 Literature review

Studies on writer's block in English as an academic language revealed deeper insights into this problem. Lee (2002) identified that negative experiences in both native (L1) and second (L2) languages contribute to L2 writer's block, while free reading and writing habits mitigate it. Lee and Krashen (2003) found that blockage in Chinese higher education results from pre-mature editing and insufficient strategies for complex writing tasks, as proposed by Rose (1984). Dela Rosa and Genuino (2018) discovered that students faced writer's block due to academic writing complexity, with no significant impact on writing quality. Prihandoko (2021) revealed that graduate students' English writer's block is linked to a lack of confidence, support, anxiety, fear of criticism, and high-quality work demands. Researchers explored a variety of writing techniques that have varied impacts on writer's block (Adams-Tukiendorf 2008, Bayraktar Balkir 2016). For instance, the flipped classroom approach is found to reduce blockage through teamwork, immediate feedback, and enhanced understanding of writing complexities (Salem 2018).

Recent studies from the Turkish higher education context provide more insights into writer's block. Zorba's (2023) study indicated that insufficient guidance was provided during writing assignments, limited exposure to academic text production, stress, and procrastination were the primary factors that caused writer's block. In

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addition, students frequently experienced blockage during the drafting and planning stages of their academic writing processes. Gezmiş's (2023) study revealed that although students have positive attitudes toward writing, they may have writer's block. Therefore, writer's block emerges as a natural outcome of the academic writing process in which students keep organizing ideas using their intellectual capital, content knowledge, and proficiency in English (Zorba 2023). Seeking solutions for this challenge, Bayraktar Balkir, Celik, and Cepni (2023) explored the efficacy of synectics as a pre-writing technique to enhance idea generation and stimulate innovation in the academic writing process. Their findings showed a reduction in students' writer's block through the implementation of this technique.

1.3 The present study

Although previous research underscores the widespread occurrence of writer's block as a common challenge for undergraduate students, it remains insufficiently explored within higher education. In addition, there is a paucity of research on writer's block, primarily focusing on postgraduate students. Therefore, the existing literature fails to capture the intricacies of writer's block within postgraduate education. With this in mind, this study investigates the extent to which postgraduate students are hampered by writer's block while producing academic texts in English and seeks answers to the following research questions:

1. To what extent do Turkish postgraduate students experience writer's block while writing academic texts in English?
2. What are the factors that pave the way for writer's block?
3. What strategies do postgraduate students use to cope with writer's block?

2 Method

2.1 Research design

This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, which entails first collecting quantitative data and then qualitative data to gain insights into the results that emerged from quantitative data (Creswell 2009).

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2.2 Participants

The convenience sampling method was used to select participants, and 46 postgraduate students participated in the quantitative data collection phase of the study (see Table 1). The participant cohort consisted of postgraduate students at different stages of their academic journey, either taking courses or writing their thesis. The majority of participants were enrolled in postgraduate programs affiliated with departments associated with the English language, whereas nine participants were attending different departments where the medium of instruction was English. Approximately one-third of the participants did not engage in any coursework related to academic writing during their postgraduate education. Table 1 provides insights into the participants' demographics, including sex distribution and age groups, as well as their engagement in academic writing courses and the frequency of their academic writing activities.

Table 1: Participants' demographics

Variables	Descriptors	n	%
Sex	Female	27	58.7
	Male	19	41.3
Age	≤ 25	15	32.6
	26–29	20	43.5
	≥ 30	11	23.9
Postgraduate Students	MA students	41	89.1
	PhD students	5	10.9
Postgraduate Department	English Language and Literature	21	45.6
	English Language and Teaching	13	28.3
	American Culture and Literature	3	6.5
	Other departments (medium of instruction is English)	9	19.6
Taking a course on academic writing	No, I did not.	20	43.5
	Yes, I did (or I'm still taking)	26	56.5
Postgraduate term	Taking courses	17	36.9
	Writing thesis/dissertation	29	63.1

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2.3 Data collection and analysis

Quantitative data were collected through Rose's (1984) writer's block scale, designed with a 5-point Likert type. While administrating the scale, the descriptors of the 5 points were rearranged (1=almost never, 2=occasionally, 3=sometimes, 4=often and 5=almost always). Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews to gain deeper and diverse insights into the phenomenon in question (Dörnyei 2007). Seven open-ended questions were addressed to the interviewees, and follow-up questions were also asked if necessary to eliminate ambiguity in responses (Cohen et al. 2018, Patton 2015). The interview questions centered on three dimensions: the academic writing process, experiencing writer's block, and the participants' coping strategies. Eight students volunteered to participate in the semi-structured interview sessions for the qualitative data collection process.

In the data analysis process, quantitative data were first analysed through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was found to be 0,849, signifying a high level of reliability. Additionally, descriptive statistics was employed to test the normal distribution of the data set. This method considers skewness and kurtosis values generated from the data set to test normality (Tabachnick & Fidell 2013). The skewness and kurtosis values were found between ± 2 for each subscale and the overall scale, which shows evidence for the normal distribution (George & Mallery 2010). Braun and Clark's (2019) content analysis method was used to analyse participants' responses to interview questions in the qualitative data analysis process. In addition, member-checking and peer debriefing were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative data analysis process (Lincoln & Guba 1985).

3 Findings

3.1 Quantitative findings

Table 2 presents mean scores and standard deviation values for the sub-scales and the whole scale. These values represent the participants' average scores and the variability in their responses for each sub-scale, offering insights into different dimensions of writer's block, such as blocking tendencies and pre-mature editing. Accordingly, overall quantitative findings showed that the blocking subscale had the highest mean score (M=3.45), suggesting that the participants often experienced writer's block. In contrast, the lateness subscale had the lowest mean score (M=2.27), indicating that they rarely missed the deadlines for submitting their assignments due to writer's block.

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Table 2: Mean scores of the subscales

Subscales	M	SD
Blocking	3.45	.765
Pre-mature Editing	3.28	.706
Attitudes	3.23	.395
Complexity	3.04	.837
Lateness	2.27	.975

Table 3 provides descriptive statistics for the blocking subscale items, showcasing significant patterns regarding their responses. These findings indicate that the postgraduate students commonly encountered challenges in articulating certain sections (Item 9), found themselves unable to produce written content in a single sitting, dedicating extended hours (Item 7), and experienced the recurring pattern of writing, erasing, and rewriting due to dissatisfaction with written work (Item 16).

Table 3: Descriptives of the blocking subscale items

Blocking Subscale	M	SD
9. I'll hit places that keep me stuck for an hour or more while writing a paper.	4.15	.942
7. There are times when I sit at my desk for hours, unable to write a thing.	3.80	1.24
16. I find myself writing a sentence, erasing it, trying another sentence, and scratching it out. I might do this for some time.	3.80	1.02
17. It is awfully hard for me to get started on a paper.	3.43	1.22
22. There are times when I find it hard to write what I mean.	3.36	1.25
12. There are times when it takes me over two hours to write my first paragraph.	2.89	1.40

Additionally, findings show that initiating the writing process was also deemed challenging for some participants (Item 17), and expressing thoughts or ideas could pose difficulties (Item 22). In parallel, the composition of initial paragraphs emerged as time-consuming for some participants (Item 12), yet their responses also indicate that prolonged writer's block periods were infrequent (Item 24).

The postgraduate students' responses indicate their tendencies towards perfectionism while producing academic texts (Item 18 and Item 8), particularly syntactical and semantic perfectionism, in sentence cases (see Table 4). However, their responses show they were less inclined to display perfectionism while composing the first paragraph or beginning to write (Item 3), aligning with the insights derived

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from Item 12. All these suggest that postgraduate students overthink and self-criticize while attempting to compose academic texts with coherent and logically connected ideas and information, though not at the beginning of the writing process. Given that such a meticulous pursuit of precision in semantics and syntax takes time and effort, it inevitably paves the way for interruptions in the writing process and culminates in students' struggles to further progress in written work.

Table 4: Descriptives of the pre-mature editing items

Pre-mature Editing Subscale	M	SD
18. Each sentence I write has to be just right before I'll go on to the next sentence.	3.50	1.04
8. I'll wait until I've found just the right phrase.	3.41	1.14

Table 5 shows that the students had difficulty articulating information in an organised way and writing papers on intricate subjects with diverse interpretations (Items 11, 15, and 19), aligning with the findings related to pre-mature editing. These suggest confusion when logically structuring and synthesizing their thoughts or ideas; thus, students may feel unsure about how to move forward while writing. The last two items (Items 5 and 23) received lower scores compared to the initial three, which may stem from students' familiarity with the topics they write about and their accustomed writing approach. Whether writing an assignment or thesis, students often adopt pre-determined perspectives, implying a clear understanding of the angles to approach the topic. In other words, they know from what perspective(s) they should approach the topic. Concerning the last item (Item 5), many students are familiar with writing in such ways simply because comparing and contrasting or organised a given topic from a certain perspective is among the building blocks of undergraduate and graduate writing courses.

Table 5: Descriptives of the complexity subscale items

Complexity Subscale	M	SD
15. There are times when I'm not sure how to organise all the information I've gathered for a paper.	3.58	1.14
19. I find it difficult to write essays on books and articles that are very complex.	3.26	1.21
11. I have trouble figuring out how to write on issues that have many interpretations.	3.17	1.08
5. It is hard for me to write on topics that could be written about from a number of angles.	2.67	1.17

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Table 6 provides descriptive statistics for the attitudes subscale. Overall, the findings show the participants' positive attitudes toward academic writing. Due mainly to the appealing nature of articulating their ideas (Item 6), they found academic writing enjoyable despite the challenges they faced (Item 1). The lowest mean score for Item 21 also underscores their positive attitudes toward academic writing. Despite their positive attitudes, the participants had problems with their academic writing self-efficacy (Items 2, 10, and 13). This may arise from their exposure to academic texts (e. g., well-written journal articles, academic books, etc.) during their postgraduate education. Given that postgraduate students often tend to compare and contrast what they read with what they write, they may sometimes feel inadequate and have low self-efficacy while producing academic texts.

Table 6: Descriptives of the attitudes subscale items

Attitudes Subscale	M	SD
6. I like having the opportunity to express my ideas in writing.	4.17	.797
1. Even though it is difficult at times, I enjoy writing.	3.69	1.05
20. I think of my instructors reacting to my writing in a positive way.	3.58	.908
2. I've seen some really good writing, and my writing doesn't match up to it.	3.45	.959
10. My teachers are familiar with so much good writing that my writing must look bad by comparison.	2.93	1.25
13. I think my writing is good.	2.73	.929

Lastly, Table 7 reveals that despite encountering writer's block, postgraduate students demonstrate a capacity to complete and submit their assignments, generally adhering to deadlines successfully. These findings suggest that while writer's block may impede and slow down the writing process, students frequently struggle to overcome this obstacle and submit their assignments on time.

Table 7: Descriptives of the lateness subscale items

Lateness Subscale	M	SD
4. I have to hand in assignments late because I can't get the words on paper.	2.47	1.29

Table 8 presents a correlation matrix elucidating the relationships among the subscales measuring aspects of postgraduate students' writer's block. The correlation coefficients denote the strength and direction of the relationships between each pair of subscales. Pearson correlation coefficient values show moderate-level positive correlations between the blocking and other subscales (p=.000< 0.01). These findings suggest

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that the likelihood of experiencing pre-mature editing, lateness, unfavourable attitudes, and heightened complexity in writing rises as writer's block increases. In line with this, a weak correlation exists between pre-mature editing and complexity (r=.317), moderate correlations were found between lateness and complexity (r=.520), and attitudes and complexity (r=.448). Similarly, attitudes and lateness subscales were moderately correlated (r=.420). All these empirical findings further underscore the interrelated nature of these aspects within the context of writer's block, suggesting a multifaceted interplay of factors causing writer's block among the participants.

Table 8: Correlation matrix

Subscales	Blocking	Pre-mature Editing	Lateness	Attitudes	Complexity
Blocking	1	.412**	.538**	.588**	.591**
Pre-mature Editing	.412**	1	.257	.170	.317*
Lateness	.538**	.257	1	.420**	.520**
Attitudes	.588**	.170	.420**	1	.448**
Complexity	.591**	.317*	.520**	.448**	1

In addition, the mean scores were also compared to investigate if certain variables lead to a statistically significant difference regarding writer's block. Accordingly, the independence sample t-test was carried out to compare data in terms of variables sex, taking a course on academic writing, and postgraduate term.

Table 9: Independence sample t-test results

Scale	Variables	M	SD	df	*t*	p
Writer's Block Scale	Female	3.20	.559	44	.293	.771
	Male	3.16	.491			
	Course Taken	3.20	.569	44	.326	.746
	Course Not Taken	3.15	.478			
	Writing thesis	3.22	.489	44	.636	.528
	Taking courses	3.12	.552			

Table 9 presents the independent sample t-test results, and no statistically significant difference was found regarding these variables, indicating that sex, taking a course on academic writing, and postgraduate terms are not factors leading to writer's block.

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The One-way ANOVA test was conducted to examine the mean scores concerning age and the frequency of writing. As shown in Table 10, no statistically significant difference was found in relation to these variables, suggesting that age and the frequency of writing do not constitute influential factors leading to writer's block.

Table 10: One-way ANOVA results

Variables		Sum of Squares	df	Mean square	F	p
Age	Between Groups	.203	2	.102	.356	.703
	Withing Groups	12.289	42	.286		
	Total	12.492	45			

3.2 Qualitative findings

Qualitative findings revealed that the participants followed similar patterns while producing academic texts, yet they had different problems during this process. For each participant, academic writing begins with reading and research to familiarise themselves with the phenomenon under investigation and gain a nuanced understanding. Outlining what to write with some keywords or short sentences emerged as the second step in the majority of the participants' remarks. However, one of the participants underlined that the first step in the academic writing process (reading and research) is critical for "the digestion of the information" and "having an argumentative mindset", which "leads to the second step, formation of arguments" (Participant 2). Drafting, editing, and revising their writings were the next steps for each participant. Although they described these as separate steps, their detailed descriptions of how to write indicated that these steps were reiterated within the pattern of writing, erasing, and rewriting, and thus, they were highly intertwined.

Participants' responses to interview questions indicated they frequently encountered writer's block at different stages of the academic writing process. Participant 6 stated that he is "blocked sometimes while writing a paragraph, sometimes while linking a sentence to another one, or sometimes while writing a whole section". Similarly, Participant 1 also underlined that she "has the same problem from beginning to end of the academic writing process". Although other participants indicated sim-

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ilar responses, beginning to write is problematic for some. Participant 4's remarks vividly exemplify this problem; "when it comes to writing, it always begins with chaos because typing the first sentence is always difficult for me". Initiating writing is also a critical problem for Participant 5.

> Although I know what to write and how I should write it, composing the first sentences has always been a problem for me, whether I write an assignment or a chapter in my thesis. (Participant 5)

The participants mostly associated their writer's block experiences with a lack of motivation and confidence, high stress, failure to digest information within the reading and research process, time limitations, concentration problems, perfectionism, and failure to organize ideas. Regarding the consequences of writer's block, most participants underlined that the sections they managed to finalize during periods of elevated writer's block frequently manifested excessive brevity, weakness in involving critical information or a deficiency in coherence and cohesion.

> When I try to write with writer's block, the parts I finish usually end up scattered and disjointed, lacking coherence and a smooth flow. (Participant 1)

Lastly, qualitative findings revealed that each participant followed specific ways to overcome writer's block, such as using AI tools, mind mapping, listening to music, or taking a walk. For instance, Participant 1 stated that she utilized AI tools while writing and took a walk to overcome writer's block. Likewise, Participant 3 underlined that "getting away from the computer and calmly making plans using pen and paper was the best method." For Participant 5, "taking a break from the writing and watching YouTube videos" was an effective method. Similarly, Participant 7 emphasized that "taking a break and playing mobile games worked well" for him to overcome this problem.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

This small-scale study draws on data collected from 46 postgraduate students. Quantitative findings showed that postgraduate students frequently faced writer's block due mainly to the complexity of academic writing and inexperience in editing, although they had positive attitudes toward academic writing and usually adhered to deadlines successfully. Besides, moderate-level positive correlations between the blocking and other subscales also underscored the intertwined relationship among these variables. Despite partial alignments with the previous research (e.g., Dela Rosa & Genuino 2018, Gezmiş 2023, Lee & Krashen 2003, Zorbaz 2015), the results

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should be compared and approached cautiously due to demographic differences in participants of the previous research. In addition, statistical analyses (the independent sample t-test and one-way ANOVA) showed that sex, age, taking courses on academic writing, postgraduate term, and frequency of writing are not factors leading to writer's block. These results reiterate that whether they write individually or collectively, every student experiences writer's block (Al Maawali 2022). Considering the quantitative findings, it can be said that writer's block is an inherent outcome of the academic writing process in which postgraduate students iteratively write, edit, revise, and rewrite content, merging their own ideas and arguments with those gathered from other academic sources.

Qualitative findings underpin quantitative findings and provide deeper insights into writer's block. The participants' responses indicated that they frequently experience writer's block due mainly to a lack of motivation and confidence, difficulties in organizing ideas and sustaining concentration, failure to digest information within the reading and research process, perfectionistic tendencies while writing, high stress, and time limitations. Problems with coherence, cohesion, informativeness, and brevity appear as the outcomes of writer's block in their written productions. Lastly, qualitative findings showed that the participants used different strategies to overcome writer's block.

In conclusion, writing academic texts is a complex process that requires amalgamating different skills (e.g., gathering information, generating ideas, organizing and synthesizing them, etc.). Given that writing such complicated texts cannot be completed in one sitting, it is natural that students who are not familiar with writing in such a way experience writer's block at times. Besides, using various ways in different combinations also helps them find the best way to overcome writer's block. As Park (2020) underlines, one of the effective ways to overcome writer's block is to regularly engage students in free writing practice and facilitate peer feedback in the classroom. Therefore, it can be argued that as they gain experience in academic writing, they are less likely to experience writer's block or, at least, become less vulnerable to its negative outcomes. Given that this is a small-scale study drawing on participants' self-reports and mainly focusing on the cognitive dimension of writer's block, it is hard to make generalizations based on these findings. However, this overall picture of writer's block may guide academic staff and other practitioners working in the higher education context to reorganize the content of postgraduate-level academic writing courses to reduce the frequency and impact of writer's block. Considering all these, students' knowledge and awareness of writer's block should be increased, and this phenomenon should be included in academic writing courses. Postgraduate-level academic writing courses should familiarize students with the stages of the writing process and the complexity of academic writing. In these courses, students must be taught, through a hands-on approach, how to write and edit an academic text. However, as Amado (2022) caveats, beyond what research has so far revealed, "there are

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many ways in which writing can go wrong, and many aspects of writer's block" (p. 106). Therefore, there is a need for further studies investigating the causes and effects of writer's block at the postgraduate level and focusing on the academic writing process and students' written productions.

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