

## A Study of Relationship Between Writing Difficulties and Writing Process Among ESL Learners

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### Abstract

This study aims to explore the perception of writing difficulties and the writing process among university English as a foreign language (ESL) students. The study is conducted among 171 first year ESL students from the Universiti Teknologi Mara. The survey was conducted using a self-administered questionnaire. Correlation analysis using SPSS was done to present findings to answer the research questions for this study. The findings of the current investigation provide fundamental insights that have the potential to inform more advantageous guidance for both educators and students. It would enable them to furnish their students with the essential knowledge and skills prior to their initiation into a new academic discourse community, particularly in an English-speaking nation.

**Keywords:** ESL Learners, Academic writing, Writing difficulties, Writing process

### Introduction

#### Background of Study

One of the four LSRW (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) abilities in language acquisition is writing. It is a system of written symbols that represent the syllables, words, and sounds of language using a variety of methods, including capitalization, spelling, punctuation, and word shape and function. Communication is transferred more frequently via writing than through any other sort of medium, hence writing is generally highly significant. Students must thus possess strong writing abilities to satisfy both their academic needs and job obligations.

In order for students to enhance their writing abilities, teachers must inspire them to do so by teaching them the writing processes and principles of writing, such as grammatical rules and writing exercises. Organisation, idea generation, and text translation are the challenges of writing. Even the simplest tasks can cause students to lose interest. Because writing is challenging for them, they lack the drive needed to learn a language (Tessem, 2005). According to Badger & White (2000), students are not given enough linguistic input to write in a particular text and lack a clear knowledge of the writing qualities. As stated by Archibald (2001), writing competence and general language proficiency are somewhat correlated, although writing skill is not always impacted by changes in general language proficiency. Many instructors struggle with writing, according to Wang (2005). They devote a great deal of time to editing pupils' writing. Despite instructors' greatest efforts, kids' writing is still lacking.

Students' composition remains poor, grammatically awkward, and devoid of variety and use of sentence structure, despite teachers' best efforts. The justification for this is that students have not been associated with their own learning. Self-sufficiency has not been taught to them. Monaghan (2007) guarantees that showing composing ought to incorporate techniques for conferring vital information on the shows of composed talk and the premise of punctuation and grammar. Therefore, teaching writing aims to help students achieve their highest level of verbal communication proficiency. Additionally, according to Taggart (2009), schools have not paid enough attention to writing. It has not been taught to students how to make ideas flow on paper.

Chou (2011) has outlined a variety of factors that contribute to the stress and challenges that overseas students who are studying in an English-speaking nation have when completing their assignments. In the beginning, pupils may come from various cultural backgrounds where they are totally reliant on teachers. Additionally, because they consider themselves second language learners, they may have lower expectations than those of their teachers because they have not had any critical thinking training. A lack of linguistic skills may hinder academic writing. According to Ghabool, Edwina, and Kashef (2012), this issue may be the root cause of the difficulties pupils may have when writing.

For instance, beginning an effective conversation in the target language is quite difficult for beginning authors (Shafie et al., 2010). Grammar mistakes, poor word choices, irregular verb tenses, and inaccurate punctuation and spelling are some of L2 primary issues when dealing with writing in universities. L1 interference, inadequate ideas, and imprecise task instructions are other factors that might contribute to the difficulties of academic writing (Chou, 2011). Chou (2011) draws the conclusion that the participants in his study acknowledged that they felt hesitant and unconfident to ask professors for clarification when given an unclear description of the work. Last but not least, Can (2009) asserts that students' lack of confidence in their writing abilities may be caused by teachers' inconsistent feedback from various departments within an institution.

### **Statement of Problem**

Academic writing is an essential skill for any university student. Students must be able to effectively communicate their thoughts and research in written form. Good academic writing is an invaluable asset for any student aiming to succeed in their studies or working career.

A review study (Caux et al., 2017) demonstrated academic writing to provide students with a range of valuable skills and competencies, including critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and effective communication. Moreover, academic writing has been linked to improved academic

performance, higher levels of self-efficacy, and increased publication prospects (Kornhaber., 2016).

While academic writing can be beneficial, it can also be a difficult process especially for ESL learners. Hence, this study will examine the various difficulties that university ESL learners face when engaging in academic writing. By exploring these difficulties, this study will provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges associated with academic writing and how they can be addressed.

### **Objective of the Study and Research Questions**

This study is done to explore the perception of writing difficulties and writing process among undergraduates. Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions;

- How do writing difficulties influence students perception of academic writing?
- How does the process of before writing influence students perception of academic writing?
- How does the process of when writing influence students perception of academic writing?
- How does the process of when revising influence students perception of academic writing?
- Is there a relationship between writing difficulties and writing process?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Writing Process**

Planning, drafting, rewriting, and editing are the four processes that make up the writing process. There is no sequence or sequentiality to the stages. According to Krashen (1984, p.71), 'many good writers employ a recursive, non-linear approach-writing of a draft may be interrupted by more planning, and revision may lead to reformulation, with a great deal of recycling to earlier stages'. Reid (1993) also stated that a sign of the recognition of the significance of L2 writing has been the addition of direct writing tests to standardised English proficiency tests like the TOEFL Test of Written English, as well as a sharp increase in textbook writing, conference presentations, published research, and commentary about L2 writing. Additionally, students of English as a foreign language should be taught writing for a variety of reasons, including language development, reinforcement, learning preferences, and—most importantly—writing as a skill in and of itself.

#### **Writing Difficulties**

Learning academic writing in university can also be a difficult process. Academic writing requires a level of sophistication and understanding that can be difficult to master, especially for those who have not yet developed their writing skills (Park, 2020). It is important to understand the conventions of academic writing, such as the use of proper grammar and punctuation, as well as the structure of a paper. Additionally, students must be able to think critically and analyse complex topics. This can be a challenge for those who are new to university-level writing or whose English is not their dominant language.

#### **Past Studies on Writing Difficulties**

There have been studies conducted to investigate the difficulty of academic writing for ESL students, which issues focuses on lack of knowledge and attitude.

Akhtar (2019) conducted a systematic review with the aim of understanding academic writing challenges for ESL students. The review identified three major challenges faced by ESL students in academic writing: teaching methods, students' attitude towards English, and language ability. Akhtar (2020) then conducted a follow-up quantitative study to investigate the effects of ESL learners' attitudes on academic writing, writing apprehensions and challenges of academic writing. This study was conducted among 27 first year ESL students from the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia and concluded that academic challenges were the main cause of apprehension towards writing, with students' negative attitude towards academic writing leading to a lack of interest.

### Conceptual Framework

The framework (refer to figure 1) of this study combines writing difficulties by Flower & Hayes (1981) and writing process by Petric & Czalr (2003). According to Flower & Hayes (1981), difficulties in writing can be caused by several factors. Firstly, writers find the rhetorical situation difficult when they are not familiar with the different types of writing. Next, writers may begin the essay by setting a goal. However, along the way, they may find that the goal may be hard to achieve. In addition to that, some writers find that writing becomes difficult when they could not understand the writing teacher's instruction. Sometimes, writers face difficulties in writing because they have not background knowledge of the topic. Writing individual paragraphs can also be challenging if writers did not master the skill of paragraphing. Finally, writing is difficult because some writers are not familiar with the writing process.

According to Petric & Czalr (2003), when writers write, they need to go through three main processes and they are (a) before writing, (b) while writing and (c) while revising. So the teaching of academic writing needs to take into consideration the planning stage, the writing stage and also the revision stage (Rahmat, 2022)

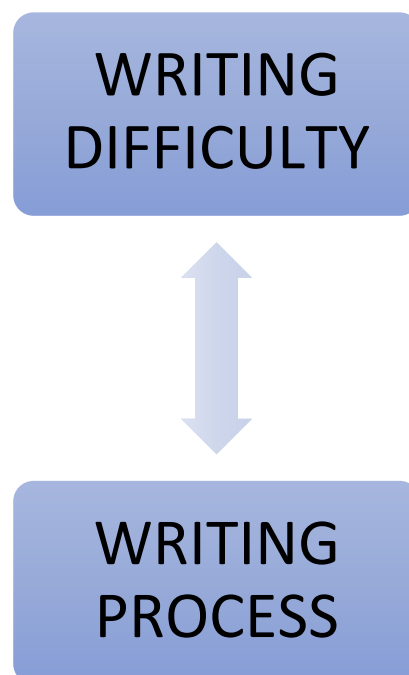


Figure 1- Conceptual Framework of the Study  
Relationship between Writing Difficulties and Writing Process

### Methodology

This quantitative study is done to explore writing difficulties and writing process among undergraduates. A purposive sample of 171 participants responded to the survey. The instrument used is a 5 Likert-scale survey and is rooted from writing difficulties (Flower & Hayes, 1981) and writing process (Petric & Czalr, 2013) to reveal the variables in table 1 below. The survey has 4 sections. Section A has items on demographic profile. Section B 7 items on writing difficulty. Section C has 8 items on before writing. Section D has 14 items on while writing and section E has 16 items on when revising.

Table 1-

*Distribution of Items in the Survey*

SECTION	WRITING STAGE	NO OF ITEMS
B	Writing Difficulty	7
C	Before Writing	8
D	When writing	14
E	When Revising	12
		41

Table 2

*Reliability of Survey*

### Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.819	41

Table 2 shows the reliability of the survey. The analysis shows a Cronbach alpha of 819, thus, revealing a good reliability of the instrument chosen/used. Further analysis using SPSS is done to present findings to answer the research questions for this study.

**Findings**

Findings for Demographic Profile

Q1 Gender

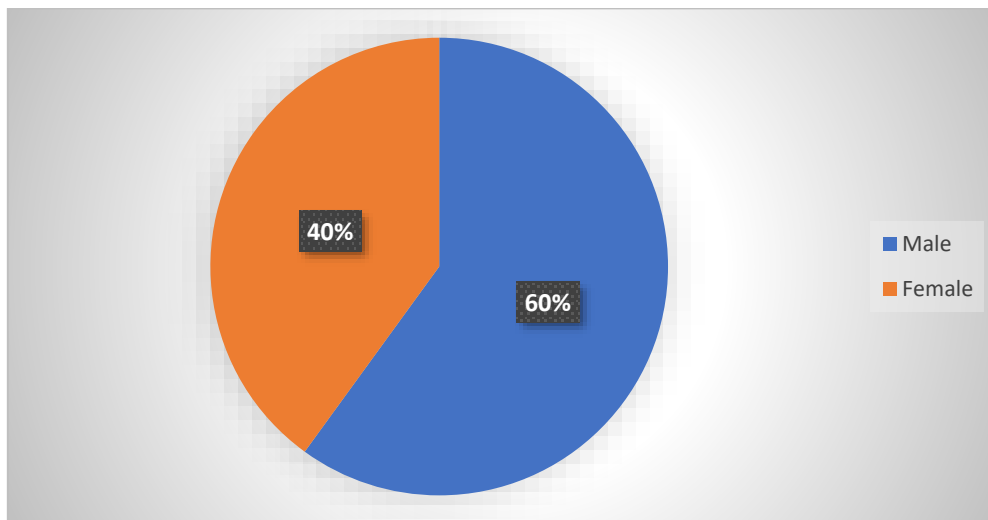


Figure 2- Percentage for Gender

Figure 2 above shows the percentage for gender. 60% of the respondents are male while 40% are female.

Q2 Discipline

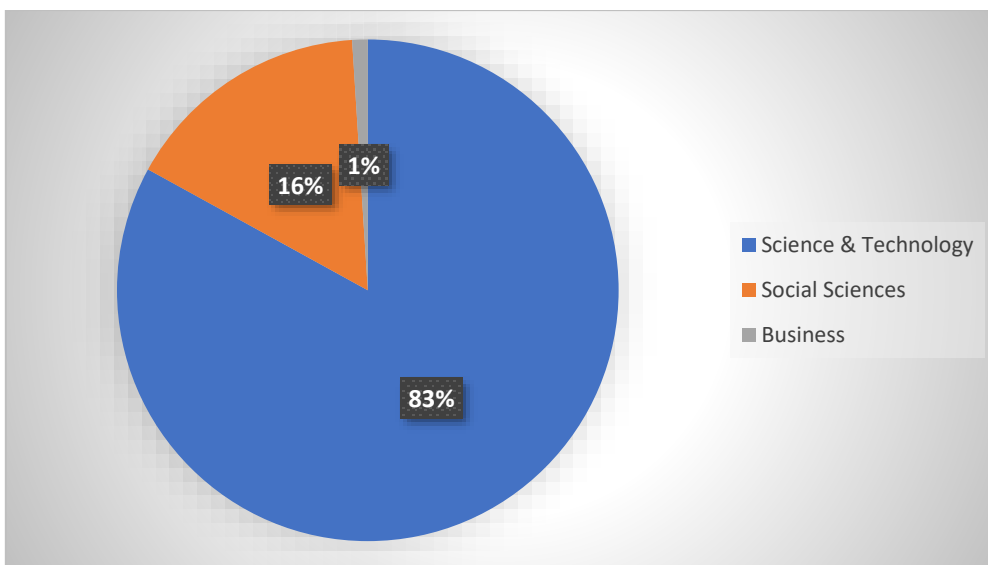


Figure 3- Percentage for Discipline

Figure 3 shows the percentage for discipline. 83% are from science & technology. 16 % are from social sciences and 1% are from business.

### Q3 Level of Study

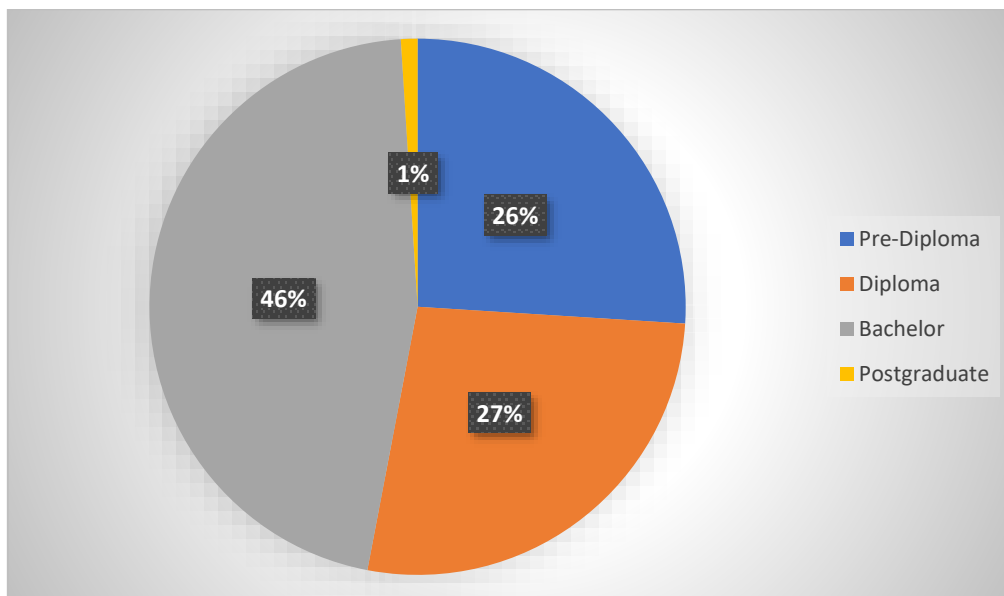


Figure 4- Percentage for Level of Study

Figure 4 presents the percentage for level of study. 26% are doing pre-diploma courses. 27% are doing diploma courses, 46% are doing bachelor courses while 1% are postgraduates students.

### Q4 English proficiency

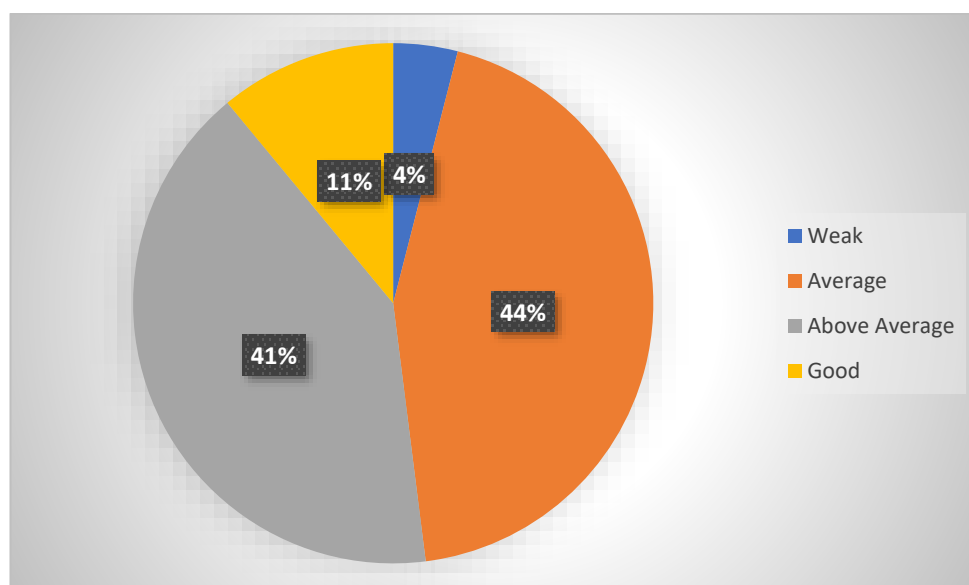


Figure 5- Percentage for English Proficiency

Figure 5 shows the percentage for English proficiency of participants. 4% said they were weak. 44% admitted they were average. 41% admitted they were above average and 11% said they were good.

### Findings for Writing Difficulties

This section presents data to answer research question 1- How do writing difficulties influence students perception of academic writing?



Figure 6- Mean for Writing Difficulty

Figure 6 presents the mean for writing difficulty. The highest mean is 2.9 for the item “find writing difficult because the goal for the essay writing is sometimes hard to achieve”. Two items shared the same mean of 2.8 and they are “find writing difficult because I am not familiar with different types of writing” and “essays are difficult because I have to know what to write in each paragraph”. The lowest mean is 2.1 for the item “the teacher’s explanation makes me feel that writing is difficult”.

### Findings for Before Writing

This section presents data to answer research question 2- How does the process of before writing influence students perception of academic writing?



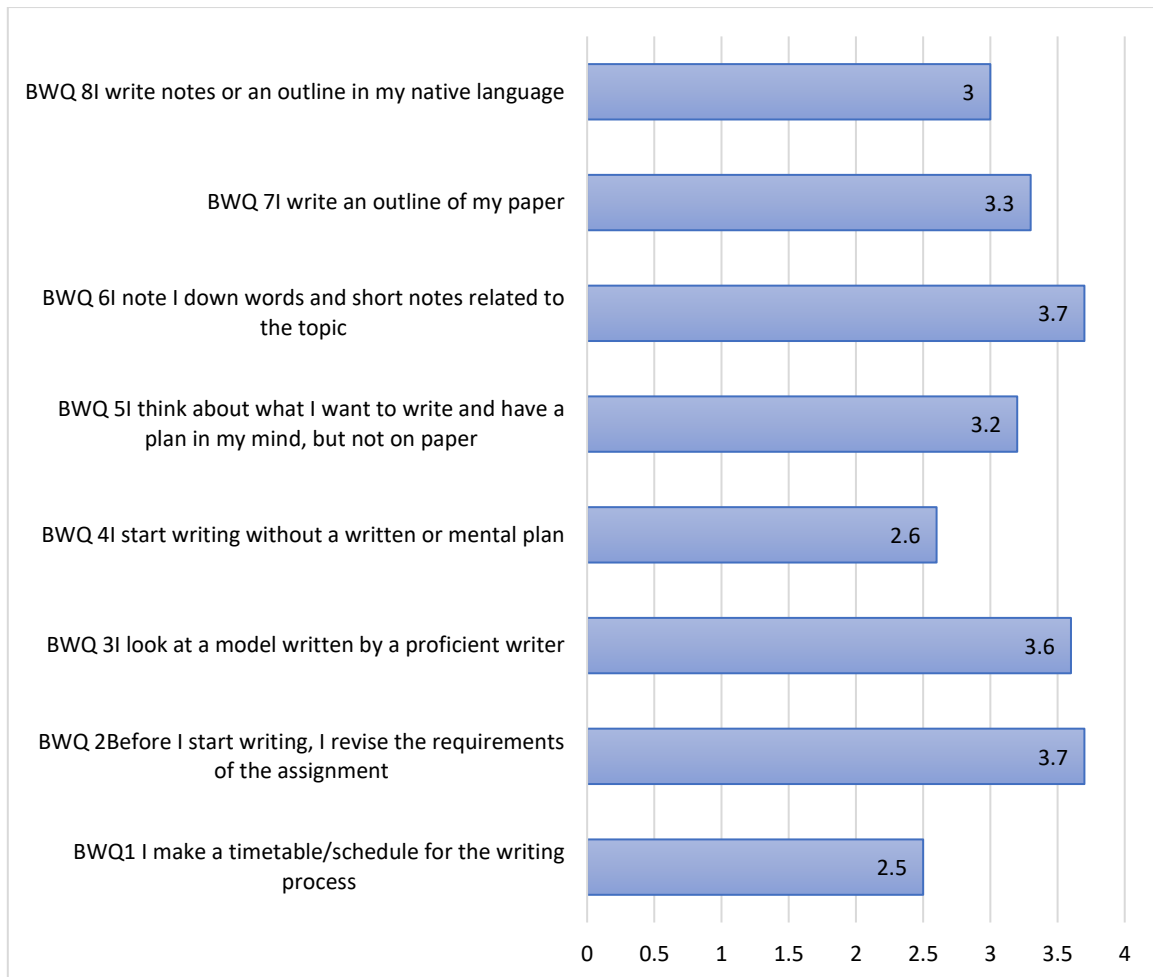


Figure 7- Mean for Before Writing

Figure 7 shows the mean for before writing. The highest mean is 3.7 for two items and they are “Before I start writing, I revise the requirements of the assignment” and “note I down words and short notes related to the topic”. This is followed by the mean of 3.6 for “look at a model written by a proficient writer”. The lowest mean is 2.5 for “make a timetable/schedule for the writing process”.

## Findings for When Writing

This section presents data to answer research question 3- How does the process of when writing influence students perception of academic writing?

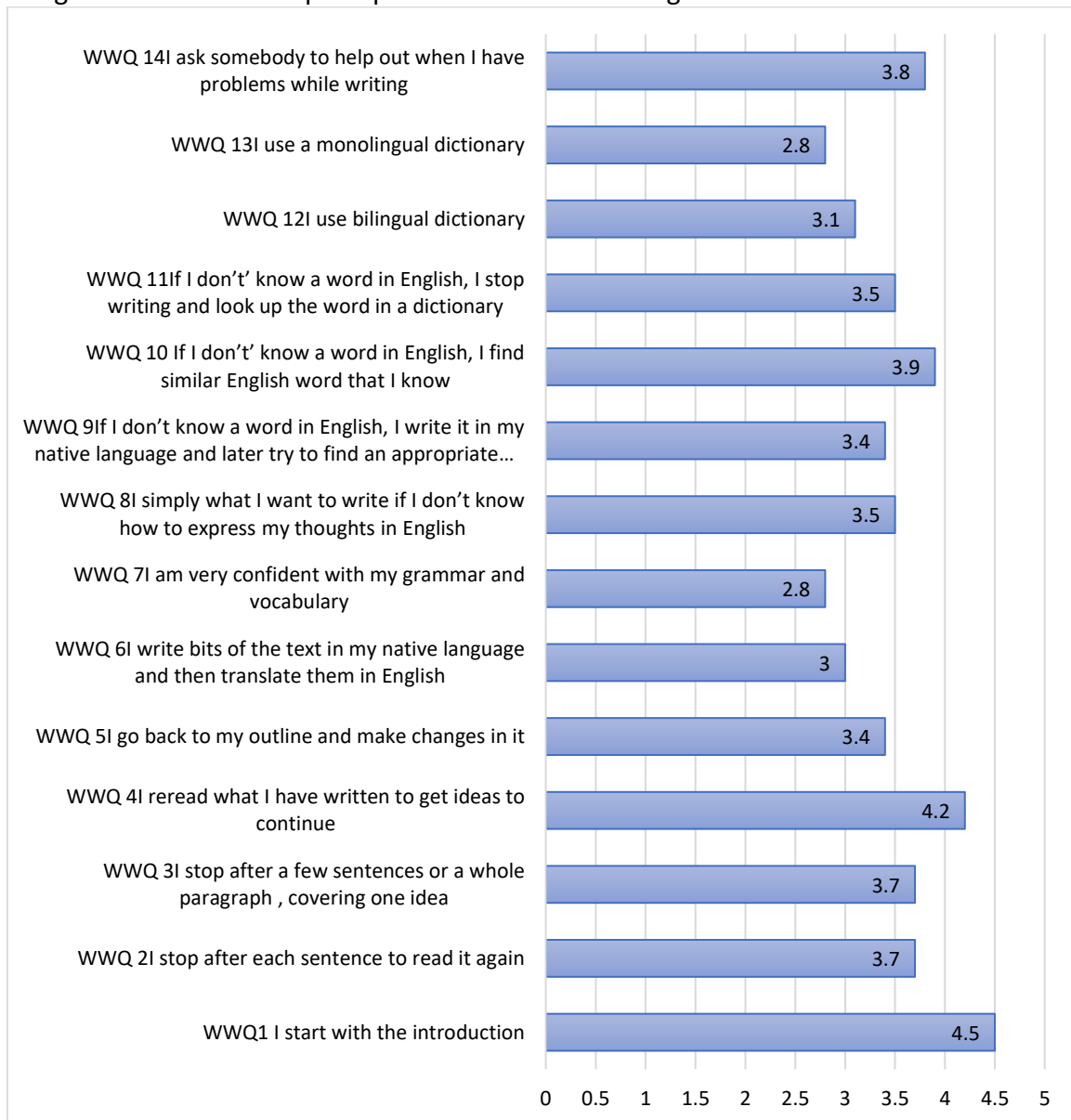


Figure 8- Mean for When Writing

Figure 8 presents the mean for when writing. The highest mean is 4.5 for the item "I start with the introduction". This is followed by the mean of 4.2 for "reread what I have written to get ideas to continue". Next the item "If I don't know a word in English, I find similar English word that I know" had a mean of 3.9. The lowest mean is 2.8 for the item "I use a monolingual dictionary".

## Findings for When Revising

This section presents data to answer research question 4- How does the process of when revising influence students perception of academic writing?

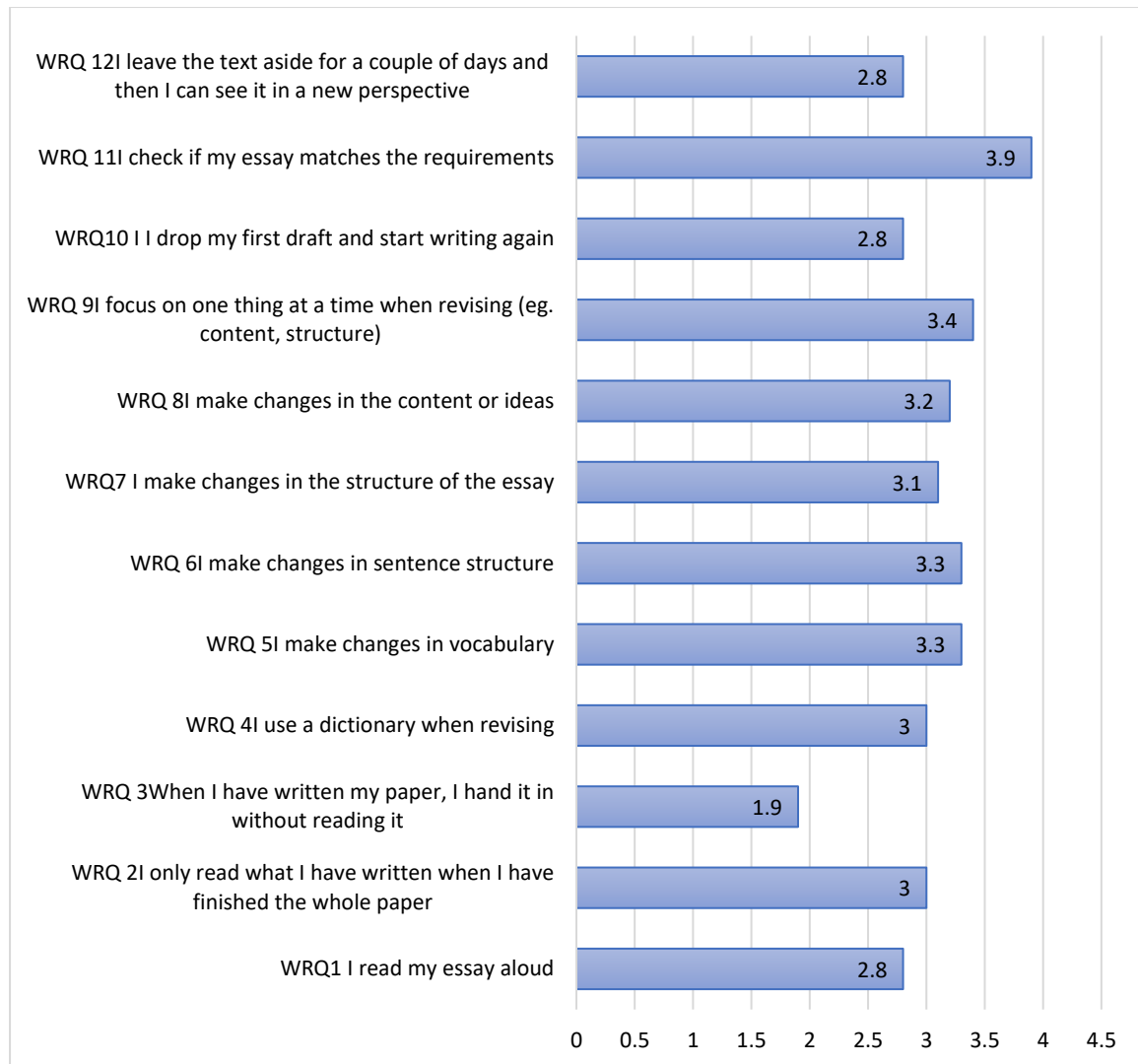


Figure 9- Mean for When Revising

Figure 9 shows the mean for when revising. The highest mean is 3.4 for “focus on one thing at a time when revising (eg. content, structure)”. This is followed by the mean of 3.3 for two items and they are “make changes in vocabulary” and “make changes in sentence structure”. The lowest mean is 1.9 for “only read what I have written when I have finished the whole paper”.

#### Findings for Relationship between Writing Difficulties and Writing Process

This section presents data to answer research question 5- Is there a relationship between writing difficulties and writing process?

Table 3-  
Correlation between Writing Difficulty and Writing Process

### Correlations

		TOTALWRDIF F	TOTALWRPR OCESS
TOTALWRDIFF	Pearson Correlation	1	.425**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	171	171
TOTALWRPROCESS	Pearson Correlation	.425**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	171	171

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

To determine if there is a significant association in the mean scores between writing difficulties and writing process, data is analysed using SPSS for correlations. Results are presented in the table above.

Table 3 shows there is an association between writing difficulties and writing process. Correlation analysis shows that there is a high significant association between writing difficulties and writing process. ( $r=.425^{**}$ ) and ( $p=.000$ ). According to Jackson (2015), coefficient is significant at the .05 level and positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. Weak positive correlation would be in the range of 0.1 to 0.3, moderate positive correlation from 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation from 0.5 to 1.0. This means that there is also a moderate positive relationship between writing difficulties and the writing process.

## Conclusion

### Summary of Findings and Discussions

When it comes to writing difficulty, the most difficult is the goal of the writing. They reported that they were not familiar with the types of writing. It is good to know that did not agree that the teacher's explanation made the task difficult. Before writing, they reported to check the requirements of the teas and they took down notes. They did not prepare a schedule for the writing task. When they were writing, they began with the introduction accordingly. They reported that they re-read what they had written. When they were revising, they focused on one thing at a time. They checked for content and structure. Similarly, Krashen (1984) and Reid (1993) reported that at the writers need to be taught the writing process at initial stages of their academic year in higher institutions of learning because academic assignments at this level involves knowledge of academic writing. In addition to that, this study also reported that there is a moderate positive relationship between writing difficulties and writing process. This means equipping students with knowledge of the writing process can help reduce their perception of academic writing being difficult. Park (2020) also discovered that when students understood the conventions of writing and the writing process, they may not see writing as difficult. This shows that the perception of writing difficulties can be influenced by the writers' knowledge of the writing process

### Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

By acknowledging the scholastic writing challenges and requirements of learners, a comprehensive understanding can be gained regarding the most efficacious and streamlined course books that can be incorporated into their educational program. Regrettably, the ultimate written output frequently falls short of the anticipated quality level. According to Al Murshidi (2014), the arduous nature of writing causes a significant number of instructors to perceive it as the most challenging skill to impart. The findings of the current investigation provide fundamental insights that have the potential to inform more advantageous guidance for both educators and students. The findings potentially have valuable implications for identifying and proposing viable solutions to the issue at hand.

The present study delves into the difficulties faced by individuals who are acquiring a second language with respect to the task of academic writing. The provision of such insights could be of considerable benefit to English as a foreign language instructors, as it would enable them to furnish their students with the essential knowledge and skills prior to their initiation into a new academic discourse community, particularly in an English-speaking nation.

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