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**RESEARCH PAPER**

## Exploring Factors Linked to Difficulties with Pakistani English Language Learners' English Essay Writing Skills

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**ABSTRACT**

Writing in English is critical for academic and professional success around the world, and despite years of training, Pakistani students, like other foreign language students, experience difficulty in this area. Essay writing is one of the most difficult obstacles they face in their writing. The aim of the current study is to investigate the difficulties encountered by Pakistani undergraduates in writing English essays. It sought to ascertain the factors, internal as well as external, behind these difficulties. It also attempted to determine which factors were contributing more to the essay writing problems, internal or external. Qualitative methodology was used for the study. An open-ended questionnaire was administered to 10 students, and semi-structured individual in-depth interviews of 10 students and 10 essay-writing teachers were conducted. The data were analyzed qualitatively using exploratory content analysis. The results drawn from the current study reveal that Pakistani undergraduates are facing a lot of difficulties in essay writing such as shortage of ideas, lack of vocabulary, poor grammar, weak spellings etc. due to a number of internal and external factors like writing anxiety, L1 interference, large classes and lack of motivation. The data also show that external factors were more dominant than internal ones. Hence, the situation needs considerable attention and improvement. The study had academic and pedagogical implications.

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**KEYWORDS** English Essay Writing, Grammar, Interference, L1, Motivation, Vocabulary, Writing Skills

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**Introduction**

Globalization was the result of great discoveries and inventions witnessed in the present and last centuries. With the invention of the internet, there was a flood of information that transformed the whole world into a global village. In this process of globalization, the English language emerged as a very significant medium of communication as information started to be exchanged in it. In other words, it can be said that English became a global language.

The English language started to be considered a strong tool of communication among individuals as well as nations. It emerged as a lingua franca. It became the language of science and technology. Business professionals, government officials, army men, etc. started to communicate in this language. Above all, research throughout the world has

examined the dominance of the English language. A large number of researchers have conducted and are conducting their research in this language.

After such wide exposure to the English language at the international level, its teaching and learning also gained focus throughout the world. Professionals who wanted to excel in their fields, who wished to find out novel results and recommendations, and teachers who aspired to make their mark in the educational world started their efforts to become proficient in it. It is worth mentioning here that English language learning is synonymous with learning the integrated skills of speaking, reading, listening, and writing.

Although teaching and learning integrated skills is an uphill task, writing skills are more complicated than all the other three. It is so complex that it is taught at the end. According to Hedge (2000), young learners spend 45% of their time and energies on learning to listen, 30% on speaking, 16% on reading, and 9% on writing. The writing skill is learned and taught less because it is a highly complex and difficult skill to master. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) are of the view that "one half of the world's population does not know the art of writing adequately and effectively" (p. 87).

In Pakistan, students can be confused about learning grammar and writing skills. They think that learning grammar is the key to becoming a proficient writer. According to Leki (1997), "their only sense of security emerges from what they have learned about grammar". But this is not the case. The writing skill other than grammar includes some other specific rules of writing such as drafting, revising, editing, etc. These sub-skills of writing are neglected. Therefore, writing is an enormous challenge for learners. Nunan (2000) has also agreed to this point of view and said that writing is a big challenge and that composing a coherent, fluent piece of writing in English is a herculean task.

The acquisition and use of the English language are pre-requisites to the everyday lives of people around the world (Cook, 2001), and Pakistan is no exception to this. Learning four skills of language is a complex process, and learning writing skills is an even more complicated and difficult phenomenon. According to Anwar and Ahmed (2016), writing requires knowledge, ideas, vocabulary and grammar. It grows over time with practice. So, the students find it very tough. Mostly their difficulties are related to grammar. According to James (1988), learners usually face difficulties in learning the grammatical aspects of the target language, such as tenses, use of prepositions, articles, spellings, weak vocabulary, and wrong structures. It is not only the grammatical impediments that hinder students' writing, but they also face problems in the process of writing. The learners face problems usually while planning, drafting, editing, and final drafts (Harmer 2007).

Writing skill is a broader term that has various sub-skills like story writing, letter writing, note-taking, report writing, memo writing, application writing and paragraph writing. Essay writing is also a very significant sub-skill of writing. It has its own importance as it reflects the writer's ability to write. Its importance can be judged for the following reasons: Firstly, students start to learn essay writing skills at the primary level. They go on learning it till graduation. In the ADP (2-Year Program), essay writing carries significant marks in the final papers. Secondly, the BS (Bachelor of Studies) 4-year program is a newly launched program in public sector colleges in Punjab province, and the learners are being taught communicative skills. In their English syllabus, essay writing skill has sufficient weightage.

Thirdly, in order to fill various public sector vacant posts, such as those filled through the Central Superior Service (CSS), examinations are conducted where candidates are required to compose an essay. Most of the examinations held by the Federal Public Service Commission (FPSC) include essay writing in their written tests. It is through these tests that the eligible candidates are selected for top-level bureaucratic posts. In short, the writing proficiency of the candidates is judged through essay writing.

Fourthly, competitive examinations held at the provincial level, i.e., the Provincial Management Service (PMS), have a great charm for young graduates and postgraduates. These exams also include essay writing as a yardstick to judge the writing ability of the candidates. In both the examinations, CSS and PMS, students have to attempt a whole paper of essay writing in three hours. The marks on these papers are one hundred each. Keeping in view all these reasons, the researchers decided to undertake students' essay writing as a subject to investigate. Finally, the private sector also acknowledges the importance of English essay writing, and they, while recruiting their employees, test the essay writing ability of the candidates.

The researchers themselves teach communicative skills to the students of the BS 4 Year Program in different public-sector graduate colleges in Lahore, Punjab. The students studying in this program have been taught integrated skills in semesters I and II and are supposed to be able to write error-free compositions. However, the researchers and their colleagues often observe that the students, despite having studied English essay writing for a number of years, are far away from writing correct and coherent English essays. When, on the one hand, the investigators look at the enormous importance of essay writing in the Pakistani context and the poor performance level of their students, on the other hand, they find a huge gap in it. It prompted them to undertake this study to investigate the problems and factors that are considered to be impediments to learners' acquisition of proficiency in English essay writing skills.

## **Literature Review**

### **What is Writing?**

A large number of researchers have attempted to define writing. The definitions put forth by Chakraverty and Gautum (2000) are that writing is "a reflective activity that demands a lot of time for thinking and reflecting on a topic and to analyze and classify any background knowledge. After this difficult process, the writers need an appropriate language to express these ideas into a cohesive and coherent discourse" (p. 1). Nunan (1989) also pointed out that "writing is an extremely complex cognitive skill for everyone because in this activity the writer has to show control of some variables simultaneously" (p. 36). Accordingly, Widdowson (2001), while defining writing, also stated that writing is the use of a visual medium to show the graphological and grammatical system of the language, which means writing is the production of sentences as examples of usage.

Thus, to be able to write accurately, the students need to overcome the complexity by learning the graphic system of language, its grammatical structures, and vocabulary related to the topic underwritten. Another definition of writing is put forth by Crystal (1999), who wrote that "writing is neither a mechanical task nor a simple matter of jotting a speech down on a piece of paper. It is an exploration in the use of the graphic potential of a language – a creative process – an act of discovery" (p. 214).

Writing cannot be defined as the production of symbols; rather, it is the arrangement of these symbols in such a way that they become words and words to form

sentences and sentences to formulate passages and essays. Accordingly, Harmer (2007a) defined writing as follows: "Writing is a process – that is, the stages the writer undergoes to write something in its final form... This process has four main elements, which are planning, drafting, editing, and final draft" (p. 4).

This definition of writing is strongly advocated by Richards and Schmidt (2002), who stated that "writing is viewed as a result of complex processes of planning, drafting, reviewing, and revising" (p. 529). There is no doubt that writing is the result of various procedures. It involves some activities like setting the goals, generating information, selecting appropriate language and vocabulary, making a draft, reading and reviewing, then revising and editing. Hence, it is a complex process (Hedge, 2000, p. 302).

Recent researchers' definitions included the social aspect of writing. Shokrpour & Fallahzadeh (2007) define writing as a very complex social act that is a reflection of the writer's expertise in communicative skills. It is very difficult to develop and learn, especially when learning English as a second language. Lately, Myhill (2009) defined writing as a very complex effort that requires mastery in three aspects: a cognitive-psychological perspective, a socio-cultural perspective, and a linguistic aspect.

### **Nature of Writing**

Writing is one of the four integrated skills. Its nature has been undermined in English language teaching. It has often been considered equal to teaching grammar and sentence structures (Richard, 1990, p. 100). Different surveys proved that language composition is a difficult and complex process. Harmer (2007b) pointed out that a number of reasons exist why students find language production difficult. Nunan (1989) agreed that learning to speak English is easier than learning to write.

Other than complexity, writing is a very active process that allows writers to play with words and ideas. This idea is advocated by Zamel (1992), who held writing as a "meaning-making purposeful and exploratory process (p. 473). It can be considered a process of discovering the way to compose a piece of writing. Grabe & Kaplan (1996) think of writing as a "technology," and this technology must be learned after continuous practice.

Language transfer is another aspect through which the nature of writing can be determined. According to Friendlander (1997), writers transfer writing abilities and strategies from their first language to their second language. In this regard, Jones and Tetroe's study (1987, as cited in Friendlander, 1997) reported that "weaker writers' failure to use writing strategies in English was based on their failure to use these strategies in their first language". Contrary to this viewpoint is the opinion put forth by Blanchard & Root (2004, p. 1), who argued that writing is like the art of driving a car. If one knows the art of driving, one may know the driving rules of that country, but if one is to drive in another country, one may not know all the rules. The same is true with languages. The conventions of language may change from one to another.

### **Purposes of Writing**

According to Coffin et al. (2003), students compose writing for a number of reasons, like to be assessed, to develop their critical thinking skills, to help their understanding and memory, to broaden their learning beyond the classroom, to enhance their communicative skills, and to be prepared as future professionals in different fields of knowledge. In the Pakistani context, BS students mostly write for summative assessment purposes. Although

students have to take midterm tests, their weight is limited to 25%, which does not allow teachers to assess students' essay-writing ability comprehensively.

### **Rationale behind Writing**

In our everyday lives, we speak more than we write. In terms of frequency, McDonough & Shaw (1993, p. 25) supported the view that most people talk and listen more than they actually write. It shows that people write less in the real world; they have even fewer chances to do so in their second language. But this does not mean that the writing has a very insignificant role. People do write because of its wide range of variety. Harmer (2007), in this regard, stated that writing is used for a wide variety of purposes, so it is produced in various forms.

While commenting on the reasons for writing, Raimes (1994) draws our attention to some significant ones. Firstly, through writing, learners can use new and unseen structures or words, no matter if they are right or wrong. Secondly, writing provides a sense of involvement in the new language for the learners. They can express their ideas, use their eyes, and feel themselves associated with the new language. Thirdly, writing is done because it provides chances for cognition. The learners find new ways and techniques to write and express themselves. They also learn how to use appropriate words or structures while writing. This means that the educational purpose of writing is to make the learners experts in expressing, ordering, and communicating their ideas effectively.

However, this is not the ultimate purpose of writing. According to Hedge (2005), the aim of successful writing is not only to produce clear and correct sentences but also to write accurately and creatively. The teachers' purpose is to make the writing process creative and stimulating so that the students feel at ease with writing. Their aim is to enlighten the relationship between writing and other skills (White & Arndt, 1991).

### **Material and Methods**

#### **Research Design**

Two paradigms, namely qualitative and quantitative research methodology, determine the direction of a research project, from the beginning to the last step of writing the research report. Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in the sense that it typically operates within the setting where people create and maintain their social world (Neumann, 2006:122). Qualitative research is "idiographic" in nature, aiming to understand the meaning that individuals, students, and teachers attach to their day-to-day lives. The paradigm uses an inductive form of reasoning rather than a deductive one, thus developing concepts, insights, and understanding from patterns in the data (De Vos, 2001:242).

The basic characteristics of qualitative research are that it is undertaken within the habitat of the participants, relies on the spoken words of participants rather than on books, is a meaningful way of collecting human experiences, and the design of qualitative research keeps changing as new data and additional sources become available (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The researchers used a qualitative approach due to its suitability for their research, which can be done in the subjects' natural setting (De Vos, 2001). The present research topic needs firsthand information from the respondents related to essay writing problems and factors, so qualitative research is appropriate for it because it is a type of primary research

in which the researcher collects first-hand and natural information obtained directly from participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994: 10). "Qualitative research is undertaken within the habitat of the actors and is closely related to the term 'naturalist' as it is employed in the field of biology" (Neumann, 2006: 35).

Methodology, on the other hand, can be considered "a strategy, design, or process lying behind the choice of and use of particular methods" (Crotty, 2003:3). Its purpose is to explain and justify the use of particular methods (Wellington, 2000). Although the researcher has more than one choice, he or she can adopt any approach that suits his or her study. These various approaches can also be called research strategies available to a researcher. According to Biggan (2008), research strategy guides the researcher on how to complete his or her study. The qualitative methodology that suits this study is exploratory in nature because the researcher intends to investigate the factors that could be considered impediments in essay writing.

### **Research Site**

The research setting of the current study is public-sector colleges in Punjab, Pakistan. Although there are 825 colleges managed by the provincial government of Punjab, the focus of the research is on those colleges that are offering the BS four-year program. Although this program is offered by the majority of colleges in Punjab, the investigators collected the data from two public sector colleges in Lahore only because of a lack of time and resources.

### **Sample of the Study**

Population may be defined as the total strength of the cases having commonalities regarding age, gender, qualification, etc. According to Polit (2001), the population is the whole aggregation of cases that fulfills a specified set of criteria. The theoretical population of the open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured in-depth interviews is the students who are currently studying in the first and second semesters of the BS Four Year Program and their teachers in the public-sector male colleges of Punjab, Pakistan.

After the selection, population sampling is another significant step in a research project. For researchers who are interested in qualitative research methodology, the selection of a suitable sampling strategy is very crucial (Cohen et al., 2007; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). For the current research, the choice of purposive sampling has been made. According to Walliman (2005), purposive sampling is when the researcher selects what he or she thinks is a 'typical' sample. The researchers have employed this type of sampling because working with the whole population is not possible owing to a lack of time and resources. But the results can be generalized as the teaching practices, problems, and factors can be found in almost all the public-sector colleges in Punjab, Pakistan.

The participants of this study were 20 students and 10 teachers from two public-sector colleges in Lahore. The students as well as the teachers were from the Government Graduate College of Science, Whadat Road, Lahore, and the Government MAO Graduate College, Lahore. For the interview, participants were purposefully selected. Those teachers were purposefully selected who had expertise in the education industry (Amin, 2005). These participants are BS first and second semester male students only for two reasons. Firstly, the affiliation of two boys' colleges is with Punjab University, having the same course outlines and the same paper patterns, while the affiliation of female colleges is with another university. Secondly, for researchers, it would be difficult to visit female colleges because of limited time and resources. Data were collected only from those students who

were willing to become participants in the research and from the teachers who teach essay writing at these colleges.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

Although qualitative research can, and sometimes does, make use of structured instruments, the preference is for less structured, open-ended data collection (Fraenkel & Wallen 2003). Hence, to gather relevant information for the current study, two tools were employed. One was the open-ended questionnaire for students, and the second was the in-depth interview questions for both teachers and students. Both instruments have their own significance in collecting data.

A questionnaire is one of the most important research tools. It is a widely used instrument. It is very beneficial for collecting data in L2 research as it is easier to construct, administer, and gather large amounts of information quickly (Dornyei, 2003). There are two important types of questionnaires: closed-ended and open-ended questionnaires. While commenting on the features of a closed-ended questionnaire, Brown (2001) highlighted that close-ended questions have the same uniformity in all the questions. They are easier to administer and get data from. The respondents feel comfortable answering the questions. On the other hand, an open-ended questionnaire is devised mostly for collecting qualitative data through responses in the form of words and texts. As the current study aims at collecting qualitative information from students as well as teachers, the choice of an open-ended questionnaire may be considered appropriate. Another justification could be that, in order to get students' in-depth insight into essay writing and what possible problems there could be, an open-ended questionnaire would be a better choice.

Interviews are another effective tool used for gathering qualitative data for research purposes. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) define an interview as "a conversation that has a structure and a purpose." For the current study, the choice of semi-structured in-depth interviews has been made because this type of interview is flexible enough to elicit more and more data from the respondents. It is a flexible tool, and it allows the use of multi-sensory channels like verbal, non-verbal, heard, and spoken for getting information (Cohen et al., 2005). According to Walliman (2005), in-depth interviews have other positives, like providing a chance for both the interviewer and the interviewee to have face-to-face interaction, which is helpful for sharing more and more information relevant to the topic. It also provides the interviewer with a chance to gain more in-depth knowledge about the matter discussed. For the current study, I rely on in-depth interviews because I want to elicit students' problems with regard to essay writing and the factors behind their problems.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Techniques**

To collect the necessary data for the current research, the researchers personally visited the two public-sector colleges in Lahore (Pakistan). In the first phase, an open-ended questionnaire with ten items was administered to the students studying in the first or second semesters of the BS Four-Year Program. The questions aimed at getting a general idea of current essay teaching practices, the difficulties the students' face in writing an essay, and the factors that contribute to these difficulties. Some weaker students remained unable to express themselves in English. In order to bring clarity to the students' views, the researchers let them fill out the questionnaire in Urdu, which they translated with the help of an expert translator. Some students also made grammatical mistakes (which they themselves corrected) for data analysis.

In the second phase, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to get qualitative data from both the students and the teachers. The researchers personally visited teachers in both colleges who had been teaching essay writing to BS classes. They recorded the interview with a reliable recording device. Immediately after the interview, they jotted down the important points of the whole interview. Ten teachers were interviewed. Their interviews were recorded for transcription later on. The teachers were asked questions related to the current study. The teachers responded in the English language with full concentration and interest.

The instrument of a semi-structured in-depth interview was also used for student respondents to get more data to cross-check with the responses they got through an open-ended questionnaire. Ten students from both colleges (5 from each) were purposefully selected for interviews. Their interviews were recorded. Immediately after recording, notes were also taken down. The recorded interviews were later transcribed for data analysis.

### **Credibility of Research**

According to Fraenkel & Wallen (2003), validity and reliability are two important concepts in qualitative research too. A fundamental concern here revolves around the degree of confidence researchers can place in what they have seen or heard. To achieve confidence in research, qualitative researchers use a number of techniques to check their perceptions in order to ensure that they are being misinformed – that they are, in effect, seeing and hearing what they think they are. To enhance the validity and reliability of the current research, I made use of some techniques.

One of these procedures is triangulation, which means using a variety of instruments to collect data. When a conclusion is supported by data collected from a number of different instruments, its validity is thereby enhanced (Fraenkel & Wallen 2003). For the current research, the investigators used two instruments, namely an open-ended questionnaire and interviews, to see whether the conclusions drawn from the two instruments supported each other or not. Hence, the use of different instruments has helped to make the research credible and reliable.

Another procedure used in this study is a member check. To attain credibility and validity, the researchers, after transcribing the data from semi-structured in-depth interviews, made the interviewees check the contents. The purpose was to make them believe that whatever they said was going to be part of the research investigation and not that their altered thoughts were going to be represented.

External auditing is one more technique to enhance validity and reliability in qualitative research. In this study, an individual (one of my colleagues) outside of the study was taken to review and evaluate the report. This also helped to get authentic data from the participants.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The definition of ethics in research is put forth by Simons (1995) in Pring (2000), who says that ethics is the quest for rules of conduct that enables the researchers to work defensibly in the field of educational research. Ethical considerations have their own motives and importance. However, the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2004) gave some ethical guidelines for conducting the research work. Before collecting the data, ethical considerations were kept in mind. The researchers requested the heads (principals) of both colleges to allow them to collect the data. After seeking permission, the



researchers approach participants in the research, and interviews are recorded with the interviewees' permission and in the language of their preference (L1 or L2). In the cover letter, the participants are assured that their participation in the research is optional and not compulsory. They can quit at any stage. The data thus collected will not be used for any other purpose besides research objectives.

## Results and Discussion

The results of the current study are based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews and an open-ended questionnaire from students and teachers. The analysis of the results has been done according to the guidelines provided in McCune (2000). In the first stage of the research, a broad categorization of the responses has been done. Two broad categories have been made for the purpose of convenient analysis. In the next stage, coding of different patterns and themes has been done. In this stage, probing has been done further into sub-categories. Drawing sub-categories from the data requires reading and re-reading the responses. A sincere effort has been made to draw these sub-categories.

The combination of two data tools, namely an open-ended questionnaire and interviews, can be considered the strength of the current study because the semi-structured, in-depth interviews have helped to cross-check the data collected through an open-ended questionnaire. Through this combination, the researchers, have got the real insight of the respondents into the factors hampering students' essay writing. Qualitative research has a frequent use of observation forms, which have not been used in the current study, which may be considered a limitation of the study. It may be said that with the use of observations, I get more vivid perceptions of the respondents. According to Walliman (2005), observations of the objects can be a quick and efficient method of gaining preliminary knowledge or making a preliminary assessment of the state or condition.

## Problems in Essay-writing

The categories related to the difficulties students face while writing an essay are summarized in the following table.

**Table 1**  
**Students' Problems in Essay-writing**

<b>Stages</b>	<b>Difficulties</b>
Pre-writing stage	Shortage of ideas, lacking organizational skills, lacking confidence, misunderstanding the topic etc.
While-writing stage	Lack of vocabulary, poor grammar, weak spellings, improper word choice etc.
Review Stage	Lack of proper attention to this stage, neglected area

As far as the first sub-category of Table 1 is concerned, it is about the problems students face in the first pre-writing stage. The students as well as the teachers suggest that at this stage, the writers have to face the problem of giving a proper start to their essays. As one of the teachers said:

"Pre-writing is most difficult. It is always difficult to begin, arrange the material, and plan the format of the essay" (T6).

"It is usually difficult for the students to start, but once they start, it becomes easy for them" (T3).

The students also describe their pre-writing difficulties in these words:

"If, in some cases, I do not have thoughts or knowledge about the topic, I feel a lack of confidence." (S8).

"Sometimes topics are tricky, which creates problems for me, and I misunderstand the topic" (S1).

The teacher respondents indicate the element of rote learning in the case of starting an essay in these words:

"I have observed several students in the stage of pre-writing. They do not have self-confidence. They start writing quickly if they have learned an essay by heart. But if the topic is unseen, they cannot recall relevant information from their background knowledge" (T1).

"Writing is not a routine matter for them. Creative writing is rather difficult. They are usually hesitant" (T3).

As far as the second sub-category of writing difficulties is concerned, it showed very significant results. The students say that they face a number of problems in the writing stage. They respond that the major problem at this stage is vocabulary. Almost 9 out of 10 students state that vocabulary is their gray area. As one of the student interviewees states,

"Only the confusion that I feel is in vocabulary. Proper words do not come to mind. Although ideas are coming, I feel a lack of vocabulary to express these ideas beautifully". (S2).

The second weak area, as reported by students, is grammar. Almost 70% of students, through an open-ended questionnaire, reveal that while writing, they face problems because of poor grammar. The students suggest that:

"My problem is poor grammar, poor vocabulary, and weak sentence construction. I do not have a base of English" (S4).

"Grammar is the source of confusion" (S7).

"Obviously, poor grammar and sentence construction are the stronger factors behind problems in essay writing" (S1).

Besides grammatical difficulties, students highlight another problematic area for them, i.e., poor background knowledge. They reveal that a shortage of ideas creates writing anxiety in them. A respondent state that:

"While writing, I face confusion because of poor vocabulary and poor grammar.

I do not have great background knowledge either." (S5)

Another student respondent holds poor background knowledge as a stronger factor for poor performance in writing an essay. He states;

"Poor background knowledge is the stronger factor for our poor performance in essay writing" (S5).

Some other difficulties, as reported by the students, are spelling mistakes, organization skills, linking ideas with one another, providing a proper conclusion to an essay, and quoting eminent writers like Shakespeare in the essays.

The perception regarding problems in the essay during the writing stage is self-reported by them. The viewpoints of teachers have also been reported. They also authenticate that the students, while writing, face a lot of difficulties with vocabulary, grammar, lack of background knowledge, etc. When one of the teachers is asked what kind of problems his students encounter, he responds:

"The basic problems are grammar, syntactical issues, and a comprehensive knowledge about the topic" (T4).

The third sub-category, according to Table 1, is related to the problems students encounter in the reviewing stage. The research findings about the reviewing stage are very interesting. It was found that there had been no culture of reviewing the essay. The students normally do not care about revising or reviewing their essays immediately after writing them. Most of the teachers report that:

"At the end, the students are lacking time. They avoid reading essays again. They do not want to see their mistakes" (T9).

Some of the teachers hold the view that:

"The students are not familiar with this stage of writing." (T7).

"Classroom activity is without essay-writing analysis. Therefore, they find it difficult to review their essays" (T3).

### Factors Associated with Problems in Essay-writing

The categories related to factors behind students' poor performance in essay writing are summarized in the following table.

Types	Factors
External Factors	Inappropriate teaching methodology, improper feedback, crowded classrooms, poor reading, L1 interference etc.
Internal Factors	Lack of background knowledge, writing anxiety, lack of confidence etc.
Dominant Factors	External factors are stronger than internal ones.

Table 2 represents the types of factors associated with problems in essay-writing. It also reflects the dominant factors contributing to the difficulties in composing essays.

### External Factors

External factors, the second category behind poor performance in essay writing, are multifarious, as held by most of the respondents.

## **Lack of Reading**

The first subject under this category is related to reading. The data collected from students as well as teachers reveals that a lack of reading is one of the important causes of poor writing skills. In response to a question asked about the importance of reading, almost all the students acknowledge the importance of reading in composing a good essay. They are of the view that sufficient reading can help them a lot in writing, while poor reading can create a number of problems, such as problems making key points, writing introductions, drawing conclusions, etc.

Teacher respondents have also been consulted with reference to reading, and they are asked in interviews what kind of material they suggest to their students. They report that there is no specific book prescribed for teaching essays, but they normally suggest the compositions of B. In a class where a number of specific essays are given out of 10, only three teachers provide notes, published articles, and handouts, while others do not provide anything related to essay writing. The view regarding providing notes is given as follows:

“The students are given handouts, articles, and a ready-made essay” (T6).

Contrary to this, a teacher who recommends books says

“No specific material was used. Students are told the names of a few books and sometimes recommended one for this purpose” (T7).

## **Inappropriate Teaching Methodology**

My interaction with the essay writing teachers during semi-structured in-depth interviews has provided me with an opportunity to get an insight into the teaching methodology they use in essay writing class. The responses of most of the teachers seem to suggest they rely on the lecture method, while a few of them use interactive methodology in teaching. As for those who use the lecture method, they just announce the topic in the class and tell their students some details about it, or they write some points on the board and ask the students to write. The words of T7 can be quoted here:

“Typical essay writing class includes the narration of the topic on the first day of teaching essay writing and telling the students about the topic, and they look for it in any handbook”.

The student respondents also corroborate the methodology of the teachers in these words:

“First of all, the teacher writes the topic on the board and tells us the main points of the topic. He asks to write on the same topic in the class.” (S7).

Another factor investigated through the current research is related to the teaching approach used by the teacher in the essay writing class. Teachers' views have been sought through the interviews in this regard. The majority of the teachers favor a product approach to teaching essay writing. However, some of them say that they adopt a process or interactive approach to teaching essay writing. Those who use the product approach are aware that they should use the process approach while teaching, but they face certain limitations in using this approach. One such view is represented:

"I think teachers should teach through a process approach. But there are certain restrictions on using the process approach in our public-sector colleges, such as a shortage of time" (T2).

One other factor that is probed is the instructional strategies used by the teachers in essay writing class. The responses from the teachers suggest that the environment of the essay writing class is interactive. They announce the topic, give a little bit of a briefing, and assign a task to the students to write an essay. A teacher-respondent states:

"Classroom interaction is not participating; most of the students feel shy while speaking on every topic" (T1).

In the same context, students are asked a question in an open-ended questionnaire about the hands-on activities used in their essay writing class. Almost 9 out of 10 respondents are of the view that the only activity done in the class is that the teacher assigns the topic and asks the student to write four to five pages on it. He does not rely on any teaching activities. The words of a student respondent are:

"We have no hands-on activities in the class room. But the topic is given, and we are asked to write" (S3).

### **Insufficient Feedback**

The third theme under the external factors sub-category is that of feedback. Both students and teachers are consulted to gain an in-depth perception of the feedback practices in the two public sector institutions. Firstly, the subject is investigated through an open-ended questionnaire, where 9 out of 10 respondents say that they get feedback from the teacher, but the feedback is confined to grammatical mistakes as the teacher has limited time in the class. One such view is:

"Yes, our teacher provides us feedback. He just points out the grammatical mistakes and cannot tell the mistakes of the organization because of a lack of time."(S10).

Teachers' responses through semi-structured, in-depth interviews are not much different for the students. Although the majority of the teachers state that they provide feedback to their students, they face some problems in providing feedback to all the students. They are of the opinion that essay-writing is a lengthy activity. One essay is almost 300 to 400 words, and every class has 40 to 60 students, and the time allotted for one period is one hour, so it becomes difficult to check the essays of the whole class and provide feedback to them. Hence, they rely on finding some grammatical mistakes only; one such view representing the above-mentioned situation is given as follows:

"It is impossible to provide frequent feedback to the students. Whatever feedback is given to them is about their spelling mistakes, grammar mistakes, and punctuation problems" (T1).

### **Large Classes**

The fourth external factor that emerged from the investigation of the feedback category is the element of large classes in public-sector colleges. The students as well as the teachers mention the issue of a large number of students and a lack of time in essay writing classes. The views expressed by a student respondent in an open-ended questionnaire are as follows:

"Due to the large number of students in the class, in one hour, I did not get proper feedback from the teacher." (S8).

### **Inadequate Assessment Procedures**

The seventh external factor, as reported by the current research, is assessment. The opinions of the participants are sought about the mode of assessment, and it is also asked whether the current mode of assessment suits them or not. As regards the mode of assessment, one student states:

"They take the exam of essay writing in midterm and semester papers" (S10).

Though this mode of assessment seems formative in nature, the responses seem to suggest that in practice, their assessment is closer to a summative one. Hence, they report that they are least satisfied with their assessment. This practice promotes cramming. As one participant reports,

"I am not satisfied with the assessment system because near the exams we have to learn several essays by heart" (S2).

While commenting on the assessment, the teachers express their concerns. They suggest that in theory, essay writing in the BS program has formative assessment, but in practice it is summative, as the student has to cram essays at the end.

### **L1 Interference**

The eighth factor is L1 interference. The opinion of students is sought in this regard. They are asked a question about whether they make mistakes due to L1 interference. The responses show a minor result. The majority of the students suggest L1 helps them, and it is not a big hurdle in writing. They say it helps in generating ideas. One such opinion is:

"New ideas are generated through L1. So, I depend on it." (S4)

Contrary to it, one student respondent who claims L1 debilitates says:

"Yes, sir, I make mistakes due to the Urdu language. In vocabulary, Urdu can help us; otherwise, it creates problems for me" (S6).

### **Internal Factors**

Internal factors, the second category behind poor performance in essay writing, are analyzed below:

#### **Lack of Background Knowledge**

The first sub-category is about internal factors that hamper students' essay-writing ability. Most of the participants report that they are unable to compose a good essay because they lack background knowledge. The views of students in this regard are:

"Poor background knowledge is the stronger factor for our poor performance in essay writing." (S5)

"Another major factor is the lack of knowledge about the structure of the essay." (S6)

The teachers are also interviewed in this context. The majority of them hold the view that background knowledge has a very significant role in essay writing. They agree that it is one of the stronger factors in poor performance in essay writing. They further report that:

“If the topic is unseen, the students cannot recall relevant information from their background knowledge” (T1).

“Students have problems if they do not have the requisite knowledge and analytical skills” (T4).

### **Lack of Confidence**

As reported by respondents, another major internal factor is a lack of confidence among students to write correctly. Most of them report that self-confidence is very necessary for composing a good essay. A total of 10 students are interviewed and asked about the role of confidence. Almost 70% of students report that they lack confidence. They say;

“We don’t have much confidence while writing an essay.” (S6)

“I feel a little bit of confidence because of my vocabulary, sentence-making skills, and knowledge.” (S7)

“I am a little bit confident, but I have fears that there will be mistakes due to tenses, vocabulary problems, and conclusions” (S9).

The teacher respondent also supports this point by saying,

“Their writing is not up to the mark because they suffer from a lack of confidence.” (T8).

### **Writing Anxiety**

The third internal factor, as pointed out by the majority of the students, is writing anxiety. In interviews, most of the students admit that writing is a difficult task and that they face a lot of confusion while writing. Not a single one of them reports that he does not feel writing anxiety while writing. Although all of them are unanimous on the point that they feel writing anxiety, differences of opinion can be found on the causes of writing anxiety. Some hold vocabulary, grammar, etc. as responsible for writing, while others think that organizational skills, linking ideas, etc. create fear in them.

### **Lack of Motivation**

The fourth internal factor, as reported by the respondents, is a lack of motivation. In interviews, students are asked a question about the role of parents in motivating them towards essay writing. The data collected through their responses shows that the parents are not a source of motivation for them. Its reason, they state, is that their parents are uneducated and they do not know the importance of essay writing skills. They further state that they are self-motivated to learn essay writing because they know the significance of essay writing. Some of them point out the significance of writing skills generally and essay writing skills, particularly in the CSS examination. One such example is:

“I think that writing should be improved because it helps a lot in CSS exams” (S1).

Another important strain in the result of the 'factor of motivation' is the role of teachers. Out of 10 respondents, only 3 mention that the teachers motivate us, while others are of the view that they are self-motivated towards essay writing. The opinion of the respondent who supports the view that he is self-motivated is given as follows:

"The parents do not motivate essay writing because they are not educated" (S9).

"I am self-motivated because I want to write about various topics" (S9).

Contrary to it, the student respondents who support that teachers motivate them have their views represented in these words.

"The parents are not motivated about it because they belong to a village background and are not aware of these activities" (S5).

"It is the teachers in colleges who motivate us to write essays." (S6)

### **Dominant Factors Causing Problems in Students' Essay-writing**

The results of the third sub-category are in favor of external factors. In light of the data collected through the current research, it may be assumed that external factors play a more dominant role in hampering students writing abilities than internal ones. There is some evidence that can be drawn from the findings. These evidences are discussed below:

Firstly, students are asked a question: what are the stronger factors behind their essay writing problems? The responses suggest that the stronger factors are poor grammar, weak sentence construction, weak organization skills, lack of practice, etc. These are the issues that can be associated with teaching pedagogy, which is obviously an external factor. Secondly, through the two instruments used in this research, the participants are given the opportunity to freely comment on the problems and causes related to essay writing. The responses show that they talk more about external factors as compared to internal ones. Almost six major external factors have been pointed out, while only four internal factors have been reported.

Thirdly, through the finding, it can be assumed that the major problem of the students is cramming. They cram a list of essays near the exams to get good marks in essay writing. This activity is the result of a faulty prevalent environment and a summative mode of assessment. These two factors are again external. Fourthly, the results show three major internal factors: little previous knowledge, lack of confidence, and writing anxiety. If the causes of these factors are further probed, it can be said that a lack of background knowledge is due to a lack of reading. As one of the respondents points out,

"Well, one has to read because in essay writing, previous knowledge helps you, and previous knowledge mostly comes through reading." (S9)

Lack of confidence and writing anxiety are again caused by some external elements, such as lack of reading, poor linguistic competency, ineffective pedagogy, etc. The views of respondents, in this regard, are:

"We do not feel very confident while writing an essay because teachers help us but not properly." (S6)

"Yes, sir, I feel writing anxiety because I have weak vocabulary, poor tenses, and a lack of organizational skills" (S9).



## **Conclusion**

The significance of writing is undeniable, as it is used to record important pieces of information, facts, opinions, feelings, emotions, theories, etc. It provides us a chance to communicate not only with our contemporaries but also with our future generations. Those who are proficient in English writing have a feather in their cap, as English is understood throughout the world. It is due to the beauty and benefits of English writing that most countries, including Pakistan, acknowledge its significance. The linguistic proficiency of the students is judged through their writing skills. Good grades in examinations are given to those who have writing power. Even jobs are offered to those who have sufficient knowledge and writing ability. In other words, proficiency in writing has become a symbol of success.

Despite its significance and prominence, writing has always been a gray area for Pakistani undergraduates. The college students who join the BS Four-Year Program after twelve years of coaching for the English language do not appreciate writing as a skill. Commonly, they consider writing a means to pass the examinations instead of having hands-on practice (Kannan, 2009). When they do not learn English writing as a skill, their problems increase to a greater extent. The current study has provided an insight into the difficulties encountered by Pakistani students. Their problems start with the prewriting stage when they do not have the background knowledge, confidence, and vocabulary to write. Then, in the writing stage, they have to face lexical, grammatical, syntactical, and structural problems. In addition to that, they do not bother to revise their written productions, which leave a lot of mistakes in their writing.

As teachers of the English language, it is heartbreaking to see Pakistani undergraduates facing so many writing difficulties. The researchers could not sit back and wait for the solution to come down to us from the high-ups. Rather, through this research, we tried to find out the reasons behind these problems. A number of external and internal factors were found to hamper students' essay-writing abilities. The external factors were considered more dominant than the internal factors. Hence, more attention should be given to them to improve the situation. Learning English essay writing is an uphill task. It requires sufficient contributions from all the stakeholders, namely teachers, students, college administration, parents, and curriculum planners. The steps that all the stakeholders can take to improve the situation in Pakistan have been discussed above under the heading of recommendations.

Finally, this research will hopefully prove beneficial to students, teachers, curriculum planners, and educational researchers. The students can gain insight into their core problems, the reasons behind these problems, and suggestions. The teachers can understand the nature of essay writing problems and the factors behind them. They, too, can have self-analysis and rethink their pedagogy. The curriculum planners can find the gaps in the existing BS Four-Year Program and reform the system. Lastly, educational researchers can find a number of related topics for research through this study. The same study can be done using a quantitative approach. A number of other factors that have not been touched on in this study can be revealed through another research. This study has limited sampling due to a lack of resources and time. Female colleges have not been included in the current study. So, another study can be conducted with a large sample covering all the colleges in Punjab, including males and females.

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