

## Challenges of Report Writing Skills Among University Students

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30880/dils.2021.01.01.002>

Received 15 August 2021; Accepted 30 September 2021; Available online 30 October 2021

**Abstract:** Writing skill is one of the four basic skills in English which is used widely in various assessments including report writing in universities. Although students are expected to have learnt the skill and ability to prepare reports in the earlier education level, many students still struggle to write effectively. Thus, this study was conducted to explore the challenges faced by the university students in report writing tasks. A total of 100 respondents from a technical university in Malaysia participated in this pilot study. A questionnaire was distributed to the respondents via Google Form. The data was analyzed and tabulated to explore the challenges faced by the respondents. Based on the analysis, it was found that even though the majority of the students admitted that they were familiar with the report writing tasks, they still faced problems in writing the reports efficiently. Among the important factors identified included confusion with the types, language issues and lack of practice. The respondents also suggested that reading or finding more information, practising report writing more frequently and seven other factors as effective ways to improve report writing abilities. This study also hopes that students and educators will look into this matter seriously as this ability is important not only in universities but also at the workplace.

**Keywords:** Report Writing, Skills, Language Issues, University Students

### 1. Introduction

Writing is one of the four language skills besides listening, speaking and reading. Writing skills embrace all the information and aptitudes that are utilized in communicating ideas via the written expressions. Apart from the content, it is vital for writers to know the circumstances that call for different styles of writing and the appropriate jargon to be used in preparing a written document such

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as report writing. Writing skills required of students at university level are different from the skills required at school levels which most students fail to understand which makes it difficult for them to master the required skills effectively. Report writing is also one of the academic writing skills that university students need to grasp well (Gómez & Cuellar, 2019). These skills are important for employees at workplace as well as students at all levels including undergraduates at universities. For university students, there is a variety of written tasks that they have to accomplish and report writing is a common task where they usually write reports of their work such as laboratory reports, research reports and program reports. However, even though they have been trained to write multiple times, they still struggle to give their best to write due to various reasons. Thus, report writing skills are crucial for university students. This study was conducted to identify the challenges faced by the students at a technical university in Malaysia with the aim of improving writing skills particularly in report writing using English so they could apply the skills in future.

### 1.1 Writing and Report Writing

Writing involves cognitive activity which comprises various aspects such as language skills and content from schemata which clearly reflects the arrangement of content and linguistic knowledge. Similar to many other skills, writing requires enormous training and practice to be skilful at it. A good command of accurate spelling, punctuation, grammar, diction, thesis statements, subject sentences, and coherent relationships within a paragraph or text may help a writer to produce writing but it still may not be sufficient enough for the task at hand such as a report writing. University students will need to produce this type of technical writing which requires both the linguistics knowledge in English and the technical knowledge of the course. Good report writing skills can be further enhanced by integrating content and language integrated learning (CLIL) among students (Kusmayadi & Suryana, 2017). Thus, practising to write according to the assignment and task is vital for students. Some students may have the knowledge but do not know how to write in English and vice versa. This is because many students are not trained on how to utilize their knowledge according to the tasks and their knowledge becomes fossilized (Ronald et al, 2007).

Constant writing with reviews or feedbacks and editing the drafts sufficiently can help students develop writing skills. Students must be given information about the outcomes of their work in order to engage in deliberate practise. Analytic grading which includes mechanics, coherence, and substance, should be practised with the students (Kellogg et al, 2006). This will give more confidence to the students to write in future. Once the students have mastered sufficient skill, the amount actual changes that took place can be measures to provide more support to them (Mastoras, 2011). Thus, providing enough opportunities for students to practise writing in the related genre is very important so that they can utilize their prior knowledge and embed the new knowledge gained from the current level to produce up-to-date written document which could also activate their long-term memory (Watt-Taffe & Truscott, 2000). Thus, university students must be provided with ample of opportunities to write especially for report writing tasks.

Nowadays, the technology-based integration in teaching writing in second language classrooms has created various kinds of debate where some are for it and some are against it. Meanwhile, this situations indicates a shift in the educational models from a behavioural to a constructivist learning approach (Kasapaglu-akyol, 2010). These development have taken a toll on the part of the educators who need to constantly keep up with the latest developments in helping their learners to acquire the skills sufficiently (Feiler & Logan, 2007). Thus, educators also need to update their knowledge to help students to learn writing such as report writing according to the phase of time which would help to keep the students motivated to learn (Lee, 2012). Thus, this study explores the report writing challenges among the university students. Based on the findings, this study hopes to provide some useful suggestions in order to help the students improve their abilities in report writing tasks.

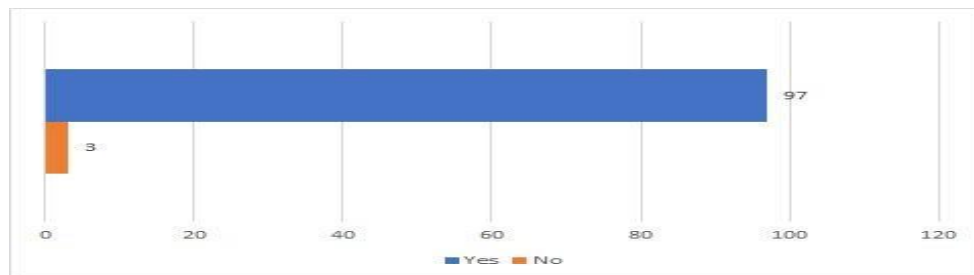
## 2. Materials and Methods

This pilot study involved a hundred university students from a technical university in Malaysia. The respondents were randomly selected from the Faculty of Technology Management & Business (FPTP) and Faculty of Civil Engineering and Built Environment (FKAAB) who were in the third and fourth

year of their studies to answer a self-developed questionnaire. The respondents were attending academic courses in the university where they needed to apply the knowledge of report writing. The questionnaire was validated by three experts from the related field. In the second part of the questionnaire, an open ended question was included to elicit suggestions from the respondents to improve their report writing abilities. Their responses were analyzed thematically and categorized accordingly for more detailed data regarding the writing challenges faced by the students. The data obtained were analyzed and tabulated based on their responses. The open-ended responses were thematically analyzed to elicit suggestions to overcome the challenges in report writing.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The collected data were analyzed accordingly and tabulated for a better understanding of the writing challenges pertaining to report writing tasks among the university students. The analysis of the questionnaire was conducted based on constructs. The following figures provide the details of the analysis and findings.



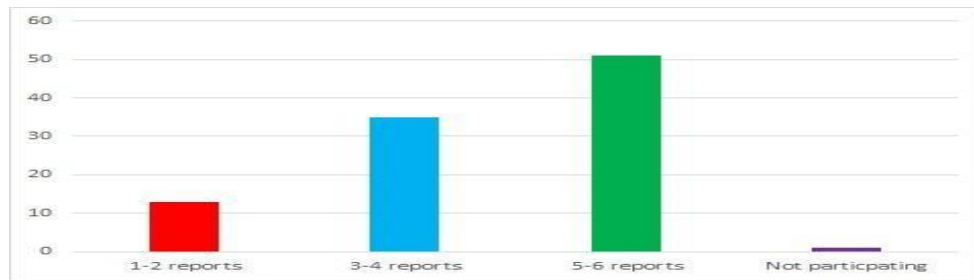
**Figure 1: Familiarity with report writing.**

Figure 1 indicates the percentage of familiarity with report writing among the respondents of the study. A very high percentage (97%) of the respondents showed that they were familiar with report writing and only a small percentage (3%) highlighted that they were unfamiliar with it. Generally, most of the respondents were familiar with report writing.



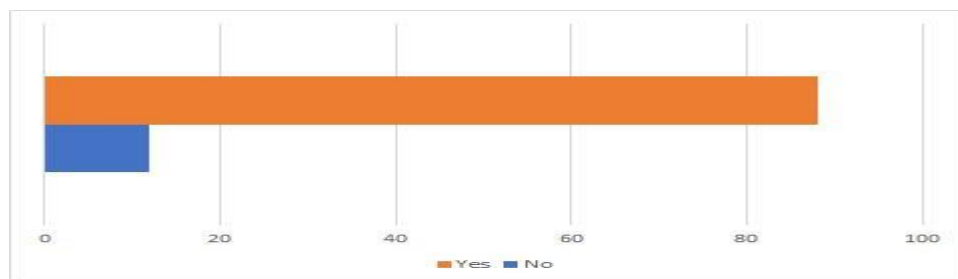
**Figure 2: Types of report done.**

Figure 2 reflects the percentage of types of report done. The highest percentage (86%) of report types done was for the laboratory reports. While the second highest percentage (85%) was for the field trip report. The second lowest type of report was the incident/accident report with the percentage of 28% and the lowest (6%) was for other types of reports. Generally, most of the respondents chose laboratory reports as the type of report that they had done and therefore, highly familiar with it.



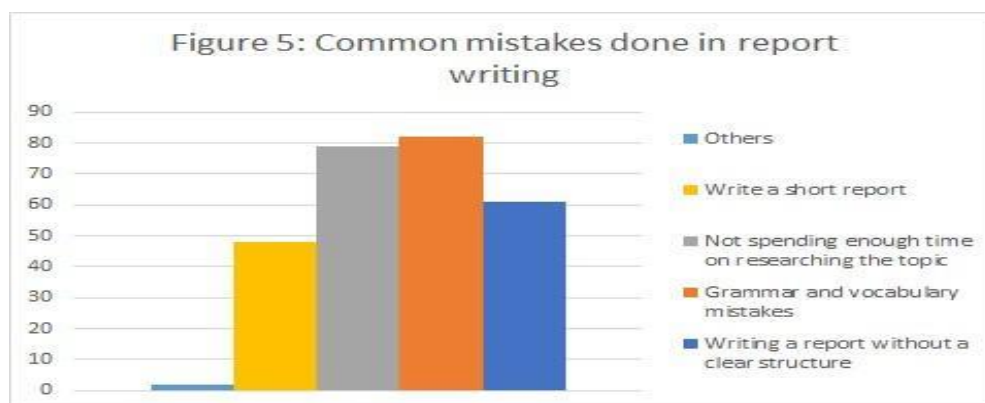
**Figure 3: Frequency of participating in writing reports in a semester.**

Based on Figure 3, the highest percentage (51%) on the frequency of participating in writing reports in a semester was between five to six reports. The second highest was frequency (35%) was between three to four reports. The second lowest frequency (13%) was between one to two reports and the lowest frequency (1%) indicated no participation at all. Hence, most of the respondents in the target group participated in writing about five to six reports per semester.



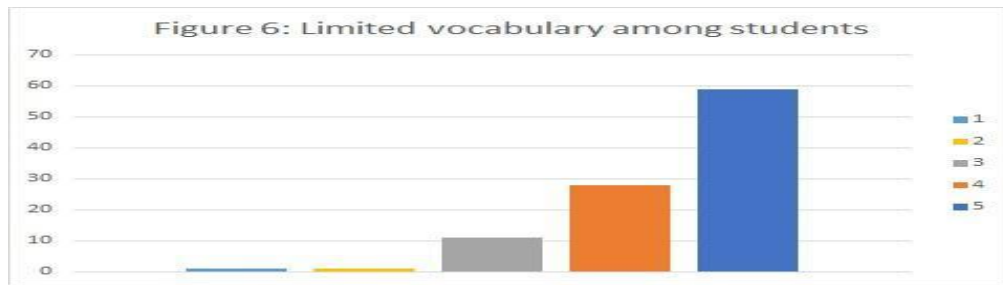
**Figure 4: Respondents face problems when writing a report.**

According to Figure 4, a very high percentage (88%) of the respondents agreed that they faced problems when writing a report. However, there were some respondents (12%) who mentioned that they did not face problem when writing a report. Generally, most of the respondents were found to face problems when writing a report.



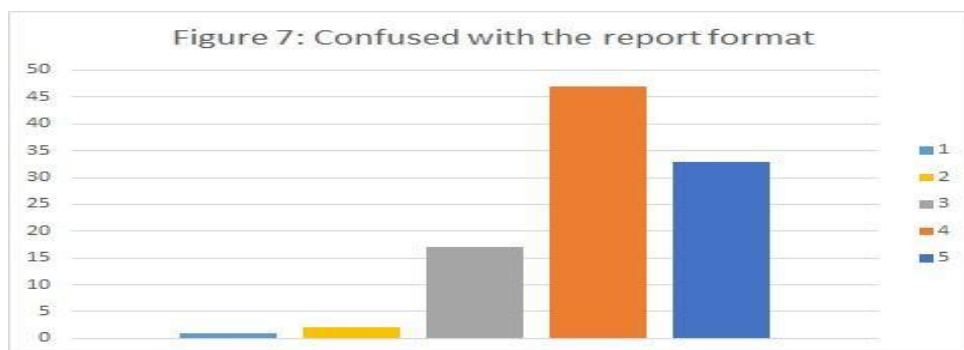
**Figure 5: The common mistakes done in report writing.**

By referring to Figure 5, the majority (83%) of the respondents chose ‘grammar and vocabulary mistakes’ as the common mistakes done in report writing. Next, the many (79%) respondents chose ‘not spending enough time on researching the topic’ as the common mistakes in report writing. More than half of the respondents (61%) chose ‘writing a report without a clear structure’ as the mistake they did. Next almost half of the total respondents (48%) admitted that ‘writing a short report’ without a enough substance as their mistakes. Meanwhile, a small number of respondents (2%) chose ‘others’ as their mistakes in writing a report.



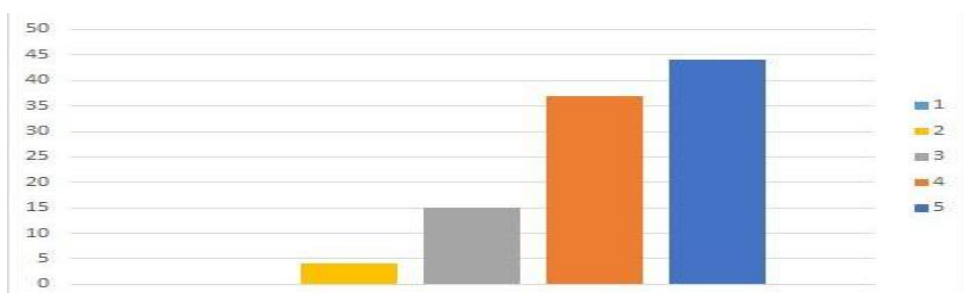
**Figure 6: Limited vocabulary among students.**

Majority of the respondents admitted that the vocabulary plays a big role in report writing. Figure 6 shows that 59% respondents strongly agree, and 28 % respondents agree that limited vocabulary had affected the quality of their report writing skills. Meanwhile 11% of the respondents chose to be neutral on this matter. Only a small percentage of the participants disagreed on this issue where only one respondent disagreed, and one respondent strongly disagreed. Basically, most of the respondents found that the issue of limited vocabulary affected their report writing skills.



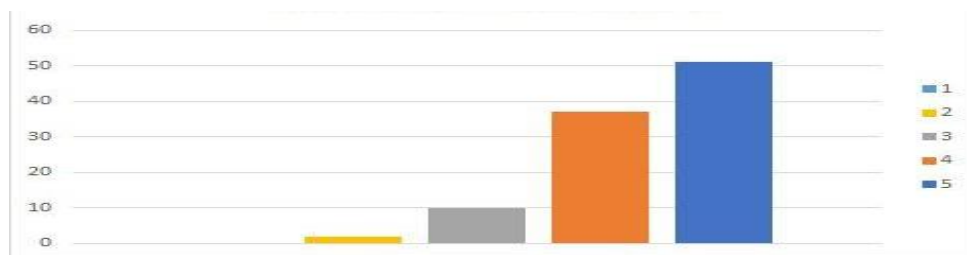
**Figure 7: Confused with the report format.**

Figure 7 shows the percentage of respondents' opinions on confusion with the format for the report. The highest percentage (47%) of respondents agreed, 33% of them strongly agreed, and 17% were neutral with the statement. Meanwhile, the percentage of disagree and strongly disagree were 2% and 1% respectively. In summary, the majority of students agreed that the confusion of the format of the report was also another reason for not being able to write well.



**Figure 8: Fear of making mistakes.**

According to Figure 8, the percentage of the respondents who strongly agree that fear of making mistakes is the highest at 44%. Next, 37 percent of the respondents agreed, 15% of them were neutral and 4% chose to disagree with this reasoning. Generally, most of the respondents admitted that ‘fear of making mistakes’ had affected their report writing skills.



**Figure 9: Lack of exercise, practice and experience in report writing.**

Based on Figure 9, the highest percentage (51%) of the respondents strongly agree, 37% of them agree and 10% choose neutral for the issue of lack of exercise, practise and experience in report writing. Meanwhile, the lowest percentage of 2% of the respondents disagreed with this issue. Conclusively, most of the respondents agreed with the issue of lack of exercise, practice and experience had affected their report writing skills.

Table 1 below shows the response from an open-ended question in the questionnaire. The responses were divided into nine categories of suggestions such as learning by attending seminar, reading/ finding more information, practice, referring example, seeking professional’s help, lessons on social media, doing proper preparations, lecturers providing clear instruction, and campaign.

**Table 1: Suggestions on improving report writing skills**

Category	Number of respondents
Learning by attending seminar	10
Reading/ finding more information	26
Practice	24
Referring example	7
Seeking professional’s help	8
Lessons on social media	2
Doing proper preparations	8
Lecturers providing clear instruction	14
Campaign	1

According to Table 1, 26 respondents suggested reading/ finding more information, 24 respondents said to practice on writing the report and 14 of them suggested the lecturers in charge provide clearer instructions. Apart from that, 10 respondents suggested organizing a seminar on report writing, 8 of them said that students need to seek for professional’s help and another 8 said that students should do proper preparations. 7 respondents suggested referring to examples and 2 respondents gave an idea for the educators to give lessons on social media. Lastly, 1 respondent suggested conducting a campaign.

#### 4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study highlighted some crucial issues pertaining to report writing skills among the university students. The findings showed that many students were struggling to write the report in English despite the fact that they were familiar with the task. It is rather shocking to find from the survey that the majority of the respondents did not provide a positive sign with regard to the details of report writing skills. A massive evidence had been shown from the investigation that students had a variety of issues that majority of them face with regard to the common mistakes done in report writing. The issues include grammar and vocabulary mistakes, limited vocabulary, confusion with the report format, fear of making mistakes, lack of exercise, practice and experience in report writing.

These findings are really important as it shows the current situation that happens among the university students especially pertaining to report writing abilities in English. The study also recommends that the management of the university and the students themselves should be aware of the results of this survey. An extension from that, they need to solve the problem drastically and as soon as possible. However, solving the writing problem during this pandemic situation can be a little more challenging for the management to engage students to participate in the program because of the online distance learning where some students have severe internet connection problems and other challenges.

Finding a solution to improve report writing abilities among students could help them succeed in academic pursuits and employment upon graduation. Based on the findings of this study, most of the respondents felt that providing a sample report as a reference for each course can be a good solution. This is because the students could analyse the structure of the report writing for their assignment. Other than that, the responses from the open-ended question in the questionnaire provides some thoughts about other possibilities to solve the problem such as reading or finding some information about the report and many more. In conclusion, this study could be an eye opener to many students, educators, university administrations, and policy makers in showing the importance of improving the report writing abilities among the university students.

Last but not least, it is recommended that university students improve their grammar and vocabulary mastery in order to obtain a good command of the language. Students should cultivate more reading habits where reading helps to improve their vocabulary. By acquiring sufficient vocabulary, students can write reports with more ease. In addition, students also have to spend more time doing researching on the topic given. This is because by doing more research, they can obtain more information and ideas to write a good report. Reading inspires new ideas, by making reading a part of regular routine, students can continuously be exposed to new ideas and techniques to write their report. A disciplined reading habit gives students an opportunity to write a report by themselves without any problems.

### **Acknowledgment**

Throughout our research writing, we would like to acknowledge the Centre for Language Studies of the University of Tun Hussein Onn, Malaysia.

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