



ISSN Online: 2709-9180
ISSN Print: 2709-9172

**INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN
OF LITERATURE AND LINGUISTICS**

Vol. 9 No. 01 (March) 2026

Pages: 11-23

Published by: Research Syndicate

Email: researchsyndicate.vv@gmail.com Website: <http://ibll.com.pk/index.php/ibll/index>

INVESTIGATING L2 WRITING CHALLENGES AT THE HIGHER SECONDARY LEVEL: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF STUDENT AND TEACHER PERCEPTIONS IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR COLLEGES OF LAHORE

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Abstract

Second language (L2) writing proficiency remains a persistent challenge for learners in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, particularly in the societies where English functions as an official language yet is acquired primarily through formal instruction. This study investigates the writing difficulties encountered by higher secondary level students in Lahore, Pakistan, and examines the convergence and divergence between student self-reports and teacher perceptions regarding these challenges. Employing a descriptive quantitative research design, data were collected from 240 students (equally distributed across gender and public-private sector divisions) and 60 English language teachers through structured questionnaires utilizing a five-point Likert scale. Statistical analyses, including independent samples t-tests, were conducted using SPSS to examine gender-based, sector-based, and experience-based variations in perceived writing difficulties. The findings reveal that grammatical competence, particularly tense usage and sentence construction, constitutes the most significant area of difficulty, followed by punctuation conventions and vocabulary limitations. Significant gender differences emerged, with female students reporting greater difficulties in tense usage and sentence structure, while male students demonstrated relative weakness in vocabulary application. Sector-based analysis indicated that public sector students outperformed their private sector counterparts in tense accuracy and punctuation usage, whereas private sector students exhibited



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superior vocabulary skills. Teacher perceptions largely converged with student self-reports, though experienced teachers placed greater emphasis on structural accuracy while less experienced teachers prioritized lexical and mechanical aspects. The study concludes that L1 interference, particularly syntactic transfer from Urdu, combined with examination-oriented pedagogical approaches, significantly impedes the development of autonomous writing competence. Pedagogical implications include the need for process-oriented writing instruction, explicit grammar instruction integrated with meaningful contexts, and strategies to mitigate first language interference in academic writing.

Keywords: *L2 writing difficulties, higher secondary education, EFL context, teacher perceptions, student self-assessment, public-private sector comparison, Lahore*

Introduction

The acquisition of writing proficiency in a second language represents one of the most cognitively demanding tasks in language learning, requiring the integration of linguistic knowledge, discourse competence, and sociocultural awareness. In the context of English language education in Pakistan, where English functions as an official language and the medium of instruction at higher educational levels, the development of adequate writing skills assumes particular significance for academic advancement and professional mobility. Despite twelve years of formal English language instruction, a substantial proportion of Pakistani students at the higher secondary level demonstrate inadequate writing competence, struggling with fundamental aspects of grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and discourse organization (Warsi, 2004; Bhatti, Parveen, & Ali, 2017; Bhatti et al., 2020). This persistent gap between instructional investment and learning outcomes necessitates systematic investigation into the specific nature of writing difficulties and the degree of alignment between student self-perceptions and teacher evaluations.

The status of English in Pakistan reflects the complex linguistic legacy of colonialism and the contemporary demands of globalization. Crystal (1997) identifies English as the preeminent global lingua franca, a designation that accords the language significant symbolic and material capital in Pakistani society. The National Education Policy (2009) mandates English as the medium of instruction in schools and colleges, thereby institutionalizing its role as a gatekeeper to educational and economic opportunities. However, the implementation of this policy confronts substantial challenges, including inadequate teacher preparation, resource constraints, and the cognitive burden of acquiring academic proficiency in a language that remains largely absent from students' immediate sociolinguistic environment (Azim et al., 2018; Azim & Garcia, 2020). The majority of students, particularly those from rural backgrounds and lower socioeconomic strata, lack meaningful exposure to English outside the classroom, resulting in fossilized errors and limited communicative competence.



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Writing, as a productive language skill, demands the orchestration of multiple cognitive processes simultaneously. Unlike speaking, which permits immediate feedback and repair, writing requires the writer to anticipate reader interpretation and encode meaning through conventionalized graphic representations independent of temporal and spatial constraints (Hughes, 1996; Daniels & Bright, 1996). McArthur (2006) characterizes writing as both a cognitive and social process, emphasizing that effective written communication necessitates not merely linguistic accuracy but also awareness of genre conventions, audience expectations, and rhetorical purposes. For L2 learners, these demands are compounded by the need to navigate between first language (L1) rhetorical patterns and target language expectations, a process that frequently results in transfer errors at the lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels.

The higher secondary level (grades 11-12) represents a critical juncture in Pakistani students' English language development, as performance in this phase determines eligibility for university admission and shapes subsequent academic trajectories. At this stage, students are expected to produce extended written texts demonstrating control over complex grammatical structures, appropriate vocabulary selection, coherent paragraph development, and adherence to academic conventions. Yet empirical evidence suggests that many students fail to meet these expectations, exhibiting persistent difficulties with tense consistency, sentence boundary identification, punctuation usage, and lexical precision (Farooq et al., 2012; Haider, 2014). These deficiencies not only compromise examination performance but also limit students' capacity for critical thinking and knowledge construction in higher education contexts.

Teachers occupy a pivotal position in diagnosing and addressing student writing difficulties. Their perceptions of student challenges inform instructional priorities, feedback practices, and curricular decisions. However, research indicates that teachers may not always accurately identify the specific difficulties their students face, particularly when large class sizes and examination pressures constrain opportunities for individualized assessment (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010). Understanding the degree of convergence between student self-reports and teacher perceptions can illuminate areas where instructional attention may be misaligned with student needs, thereby informing more targeted pedagogical interventions.

This study addresses the following research objectives: first, to identify the most frequent writing difficulties in English faced by higher secondary male and female students in Lahore; second, to examine English language teachers' perceptions regarding the difficulties of teaching writing skills at the higher secondary level; and third, to compare the perceptions of English teachers and learners regarding difficulties related to writing skills. By examining these issues through a comparative lens that attends to gender and sectoral (public-private) dimensions, the study aims to contribute to the development of



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contextually appropriate pedagogical strategies for enhancing L2 writing instruction in Pakistani higher secondary education.

Literature Review

Theoretical Perspectives on L2 Writing Development

Theoretical conceptualizations of L2 writing have evolved substantially over recent decades, moving from product-oriented approaches that emphasize linguistic correctness toward process-oriented and genre-based perspectives that attend to the rhetorical and social dimensions of written communication. Flower and Hayes (1981) seminal cognitive process model posits that writing involves recursive planning, translating, and reviewing processes that place significant demands on working memory. For L2 writers, these cognitive demands are intensified by the additional burden of accessing vocabulary and grammatical knowledge in a less automatized language system, often resulting in trade-offs between linguistic accuracy and conceptual complexity (Schoonen et al., 2003).

The contrastive rhetoric hypothesis, articulated by Kaplan (1966) and subsequently refined by scholars such as Connor (1996), suggests that L1 rhetorical patterns transfer to L2 writing, potentially creating discourse-level interference. In the Pakistani context, where Urdu follows a Subject-Object-Verb syntactic structure and employs distinct rhetorical conventions for argumentation and narration, this transfer manifests in characteristic error patterns including post-positioning of adverbial phrases, excessive nominalization, and digressive paragraph development (Cai, 2004). Recent scholarship has moved beyond deterministic transfer accounts to examine how L2 writers strategically deploy their multilingual repertoire, though the cognitive burden of managing cross-linguistic influence remains significant for novice writers (Canagarajah, 2002).

Sociocultural theory, as applied to L2 writing by scholars such as Prior (2006) and Hyland (2016), emphasizes that writing development occurs through participation in specific discourse communities with their own genre conventions, evaluative criteria, and power relations. In Pakistani educational contexts, the dominant examination culture shapes writing instruction toward formulaic, product-oriented approaches that prioritize grammatical correctness over communicative effectiveness or critical engagement (Haider, 2014). This institutional context constrains teachers' capacity to implement process-oriented pedagogies and limits students' exposure to authentic writing tasks that would develop transferable discursive competence.



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Empirical Research on L2 Writing Difficulties

A substantial body of empirical research has documented the writing difficulties encountered by L2 learners across diverse educational contexts. Grami (2010) characterizes academic writing as a complex mental production requiring careful thought, discipline, and concentration, noting that students frequently misconstrue writing as a product rather than a process, thereby neglecting essential revision and editing activities. Pineteh (2012) identifies mechanical weaknesses—including paragraphing deficiencies, punctuation errors, and sentence construction problems—as pervasive among L2 student writers, attributing these difficulties to insufficient grammatical knowledge and limited exposure to target language models.

In the Pakistani context specifically, research has highlighted the multifaceted nature of writing challenges. Ahmad et al. (2011) found that students in provincial government schools faced greater difficulties in grammar acquisition compared to their counterparts in federal institutions, suggesting that institutional resources and teacher quality significantly mediate writing outcomes. Farooq et al. (2012) identified spelling, vocabulary, and grammar as the primary areas of difficulty for secondary level students, while Haider (2014) documented organizational problems, writing anxiety, and lack of confidence as additional barriers to effective writing performance. Tariq et al. (2013) emphasized the role of family educational background and parental support in shaping English language learning outcomes, particularly in rural areas where exposure to English remains limited.

The phenomenon of L1 interference has received particular attention in Pakistani L2 writing research. Davies (2003) notes that Pakistani students frequently think in Urdu and then translate into English, a process that generates syntactic, idiomatic, and imagistic mismatches due to the substantial structural differences between the two languages. This translation-based approach to writing not only produces non-idiomatic expressions but also constrains conceptual development, as students remain bound to L1 semantic categories and rhetorical patterns. The persistence of this strategy despite years of formal instruction suggests that pedagogical approaches have failed to foster the development of direct L2 conceptualization and formulation processes.

Teacher Perceptions and Pedagogical Implications

Teachers' perceptions of student writing difficulties significantly influence instructional priorities and feedback practices. Research by Shafie et al. (2010) indicates that writing instruction in higher education contexts frequently suffers from a lack of interaction and sustained engagement, with teachers struggling to provide individualized guidance on academic writing conventions. Arkoudis and Tran (2010) found that lecturers often felt ill-equipped to advise international students on academic writing, suggesting a gap between teachers' subject expertise and their knowledge of L2 writing pedagogy. Can (2009)



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documented the negative impact of conflicting feedback from different faculty members, highlighting the need for coherent and consistent writing instruction across the curriculum.

In the Pakistani context, teacher perceptions are shaped by institutional constraints including large class sizes, examination-oriented curricula, and limited professional development opportunities. Warsi (2004) observes that many English language teachers in Pakistani institutions lack adequate proficiency in the language themselves, compromising their capacity to model effective writing or provide accurate feedback on student compositions. The reliance on prescribed textbooks and standardized examination formats further constrains teachers' pedagogical autonomy, limiting opportunities to implement innovative, learner-centered approaches to writing instruction.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive quantitative research design utilizing survey methodology to investigate writing difficulties at the higher secondary level in Lahore, Pakistan. The descriptive approach is appropriate for the research objectives, as it enables systematic documentation of existing conditions and the identification of patterns and relationships within the data (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993). The cross-sectional design allows for the collection of data from a large and diverse sample, facilitating comparative analysis across gender, institutional sector, and professional experience variables.

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised higher secondary level students (grade 12) and English language teachers in public and private sector colleges in Lahore. A total of 240 students (120 male and 120 female) were selected through stratified random sampling from eight colleges (four public and four private), with 30 students drawn from each institution. The student sample was balanced for gender, with 60 male and 60 female students from each sector. Additionally, 60 English language teachers (30 male and 30 female) were selected from the same institutions, with equal representation of teachers having more than five years and five or fewer years of teaching experience.

Instrumentation

Data were collected through structured questionnaires developed specifically for this study. The student questionnaire addressed five dimensions of writing difficulty: tense usage, sentence structure, punctuation, vocabulary, and spelling. Each dimension was operationalized through multiple items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The teacher



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questionnaire paralleled the student instrument while adding items addressing perceived difficulties in teaching writing and observed student error patterns. Both instruments were piloted with a small group of participants to ensure clarity and reliability.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were computed to characterize the sample and summarize responses. Independent samples t-tests were employed to examine significant differences between groups (male/female students, public/private sector students, male/female teachers, experienced/less experienced teachers). The significance level was set at $p < .05$ for all analyses.

Results and Discussion

Student Perceptions of Writing Difficulties

Analysis of student responses revealed that grammatical difficulties, particularly tense usage and sentence structure, constituted the most frequently reported writing challenges. The mean scores for tense-related difficulties were notably high across both genders and sectors, indicating that verb morphology and temporal reference pose persistent problems for higher secondary students. This finding aligns with previous research documenting the complexity of English tense-aspect system for L1 Urdu speakers, whose language employs a fundamentally different temporal marking system (Warsi, 2004).

Gender-based analysis revealed significant differences in perceived writing difficulties. Female students reported significantly greater difficulties with tense usage (mean = 17.49) and sentence structure (mean = 14.33) compared to male students (means = 14.92 and 12.90, respectively), with t-test results indicating statistical significance at $p < .001$. Conversely, male students reported greater difficulty with punctuation (mean = 10.53) compared to female students (mean = 9.00), though this difference may reflect greater self-awareness of mechanical errors rather than actual performance variation. Female students demonstrated higher mean scores for vocabulary (mean = 14.41) compared to male students (mean = 12.25), suggesting relatively stronger lexical knowledge among female participants. No significant gender difference emerged for spelling difficulties, indicating that orthographic challenges are distributed relatively evenly across genders.

Sector-based analysis compared writing difficulties between public and private sector college students. Public sector students demonstrated significantly higher mean scores for tense usage (mean = 15.54) and punctuation (mean = 10.02) compared to private sector students (means = 14.76 and 9.00, respectively),



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suggesting that public sector students experience greater difficulty in these domains. However, private sector students reported significantly greater vocabulary difficulties (mean = 15.41) compared to public sector students (mean = 11.25), indicating that lexical knowledge represents a particular challenge in private institutions. No significant sectoral differences emerged for sentence structure and spelling, suggesting that these difficulties are relatively uniform across institutional types.

Teacher Perceptions of Student Writing Difficulties

Analysis of teacher responses revealed significant gender-based differences in perceived student writing difficulties. Male teachers placed significantly greater emphasis on tense-related difficulties (mean = 16.67) compared to female teachers (mean = 15.89), with a t-test significance value of .049. Conversely, female teachers rated vocabulary (mean = 16.99) and spelling (mean = 16.75) as more significant difficulties than male teachers (means = 16.05 and 15.93, respectively), with both differences achieving statistical significance. No significant gender differences emerged for punctuation and sentence structure, indicating consensus between male and female teachers regarding the relative severity of these difficulties.

Experience-based analysis compared the perceptions of teachers with more than five years of experience against those with five or fewer years. No statistically significant differences emerged across any of the five difficulty categories, suggesting that teaching experience does not substantially alter perceptions of student writing challenges. However, mean score comparisons revealed interesting patterns: more experienced teachers placed greater emphasis on tense usage (mean = 15.92), sentence structure (mean = 18.87), and spelling (mean = 17.39), while less experienced teachers prioritized punctuation (mean = 7.93) and vocabulary (mean = 15.93). Though these differences did not achieve statistical significance, they suggest that experience may shape the granularity with which teachers attend to different error types.

Comparison of Student and Teacher Perceptions

The comparison between student self-reports and teacher perceptions revealed substantial convergence regarding the hierarchy of writing difficulties. Both groups identified grammatical competence—particularly tense usage and sentence structure—as the most significant challenge facing higher secondary students. This alignment suggests that the writing difficulties documented in this study reflect genuine learning obstacles rather than artifacts of student self-perception or teacher bias.

However, some divergence emerged in the relative emphasis placed on specific difficulty types. Teachers, particularly those with more experience, tended to prioritize structural accuracy (tenses, sentence structure) over mechanical and lexical aspects, while students reported relatively uniform



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difficulty across all five categories. This pattern may reflect teachers' professional focus on systematic grammatical patterns amenable to explicit instruction, contrasted with students' holistic experience of writing as a demanding activity where multiple challenges converge simultaneously.

The finding that female students report greater difficulty with core grammatical structures while demonstrating stronger vocabulary knowledge has important pedagogical implications. It suggests that gender-differentiated instructional approaches may be warranted, with female students potentially benefiting from additional support in grammatical analysis and sentence construction, while male students may require targeted vocabulary enrichment activities. However, such differentiation must be implemented cautiously to avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes or constraining individual student development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that L2 writing difficulties at the higher secondary level in Lahore are both pervasive and multifaceted, encompassing grammatical, mechanical, and lexical dimensions. The convergence between student self-reports and teacher perceptions regarding the primacy of grammatical difficulties—particularly tense usage and sentence structure—provides a robust evidentiary basis for prioritizing these areas in instructional design. The significant gender and sectoral differences identified suggest that one-size-fits-all approaches to writing instruction are unlikely to address the diverse needs of the student population effectively.

The persistent influence of L1 interference, particularly the translation-based approach to writing that transfers Urdu syntactic patterns into English compositions, underscores the need for pedagogical strategies that foster direct L2 conceptualization. Process-oriented writing instruction, incorporating pre-writing activities, multiple drafting, peer review, and teacher conferencing, may help students develop greater metacognitive awareness of their writing processes and reduce reliance on L1 transfer strategies. Explicit grammar instruction, integrated with meaningful communicative contexts rather than decontextualized rule memorization, can address the tense and sentence structure difficulties documented in this study.

The finding that private sector students demonstrate superior vocabulary knowledge but greater difficulty with grammatical accuracy, while public sector students show the reverse pattern, suggests that institutional resources and instructional emphases shape the profile of student writing difficulties. Private sector institutions, with their greater access to English language materials and extracurricular exposure, may successfully develop students' lexical repertoire while insufficiently addressing grammatical foundations. Public sector institutions, constrained by limited resources, may prioritize



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examination-oriented grammatical instruction at the expense of vocabulary enrichment. Both sectors would benefit from balanced instructional approaches that integrate lexical and grammatical development within meaningful writing tasks.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed. First, teacher education programs should enhance pre-service and in-service teachers' knowledge of L2 writing pedagogy, particularly strategies for addressing L1 interference and fostering process-oriented instruction. Second, curriculum developers should design writing tasks that require sustained composition rather than sentence-level exercises, providing opportunities for students to develop discourse-level competence. Third, assessment practices should incorporate process-oriented evaluation criteria that reward revision and improvement rather than penalizing all errors indiscriminately. Fourth, institutions should invest in writing centers or peer tutoring programs that provide individualized feedback on student compositions. Fifth, future research should employ longitudinal designs to track writing development over time and experimental designs to evaluate the efficacy of specific instructional interventions.

The limitations of this study, including its restriction to a single urban context and its reliance on self-report instruments, suggest directions for future investigation. Mixed-methods approaches incorporating text analysis, classroom observation, and interview data would provide richer understanding of the writing difficulties documented here. Comparative studies across different regions of Pakistan would illuminate the role of sociolinguistic context in shaping L2 writing challenges. Ultimately, addressing the writing difficulties identified in this study requires sustained commitment to pedagogical reform, teacher professional development, and institutional support for effective L2 writing instruction.

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