

INTEGRATING CONTENT AND LANGUAGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: CHALLENGES IN TEACHING WRITING TO EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract: *As higher education institutions increasingly adopt English-medium instruction (EMI), teaching academic writing to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students poses significant challenges. The integration of content and language learning, often promoted under Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), has become a common approach. However, students frequently struggle with producing coherent, critical, and disciplinary-specific writing. This paper explores the main challenges faced by EFL students in academic writing within EMI contexts, including linguistic limitations, insufficient writing strategies, and a lack of disciplinary literacy. It also discusses pedagogical implications and offers recommendations for improving writing instruction in multilingual higher education environments.*

Keywords: *English as a Foreign Language, academic writing, higher education, EMI, CLIL, writing instruction, disciplinary literacy*

Introduction

In recent years, the global shift towards internationalization in higher education has led to the growing adoption of English as the medium of instruction (EMI) in non-English speaking countries. This shift has reshaped how content is delivered and how students engage with academic discourse, particularly in written form. For students who are non-native speakers of English, writing in academic settings presents a dual challenge: they must not only master the subject matter but also express their ideas in a language they are still acquiring.

Challenges in teaching writing to EFL students

One of the core difficulties EFL students face in academic writing is limited vocabulary and grammatical competence, which directly affect clarity and coherence. Even when students grasp the subject content, expressing complex ideas in a structured and academically appropriate manner can be overwhelming. Moreover, academic writing conventions vary by discipline, and EFL students often lack the necessary exposure to the genres, styles, and rhetorical expectations of their specific fields.

Another major challenge is the lack of effective writing strategies. Many EFL learners are unfamiliar with the stages of the writing process, such as planning, drafting, revising, and editing. This is compounded by differences in educational backgrounds, where writing may not have been emphasized or taught systematically.

Disciplinary literacy also plays a critical role. Academic writing is not a generic skill but one that is deeply embedded in disciplinary practices. EFL students often struggle to write in a way that aligns with the expectations of their field, especially when instruction fails to bridge content and language effectively. Instructors, too, may face challenges in addressing both language and content simultaneously, particularly when they lack training in language-sensitive pedagogy.

Recent perspectives and pedagogical implications

Recent studies suggest that successful integration of content and language requires collaboration between language specialists and subject instructors. Approaches such as genre-based pedagogy and scaffolded writing tasks have shown promise in supporting EFL students' development. Technology-enhanced writing tools, peer review systems, and writing centers are also becoming integral in helping students refine their writing skills in EMI environments.

Universities that adopt inclusive writing policies and provide explicit instruction in both general and discipline-specific writing conventions tend to better support their multilingual student populations. Instructors are encouraged to create opportunities for meaningful writing, offer feedback beyond grammar correction,

and help students develop a sense of voice and audience awareness in academic contexts.

1. Linguistic limitations and academic language barriers

EFL students in EMI environments often find themselves facing a language barrier that goes beyond basic communication. Academic writing requires a command of formal structures, discipline-specific vocabulary, and the ability to form logical, cohesive arguments. Even students with good general English proficiency may struggle with academic genres such as essays, reports, or literature reviews. Research shows that many EFL learners rely heavily on translation from their first language, which can lead to awkward phrasing or misused terminology, ultimately affecting clarity and persuasiveness.

In addition, academic English demands an understanding of hedging, citation, and formal tone—features that are not always emphasized in general English courses. These linguistic challenges often lead to students avoiding complex ideas or relying on memorized phrases, reducing the critical engagement required in higher education writing.

2. Insufficient writing strategy instruction

A significant challenge in EFL academic writing stems from limited awareness of writing as a process. Many students are unfamiliar with iterative writing practices like drafting, feedback incorporation, and revision. Instead, they tend to view writing as a one-time task, which reduces the quality of their work. Wingate (2012) argues that many EFL students lack access to models of effective writing and are not taught how to structure arguments or engage with academic sources.

Moreover, students might not understand the purpose of different types of academic texts. For example, writing a critical analysis differs greatly from summarizing a text, yet students may not be aware of these distinctions without explicit instruction. When writing is taught without clear connections to academic tasks or disciplines, students may fail to transfer these skills to other courses or contexts.

3. Disciplinary literacy and genre awareness

Academic writing is shaped by the norms of different disciplines. A lab report in biology follows a different structure and tone than a reflective essay in education. EFL students often find it difficult to grasp these distinctions, especially when they are not taught explicitly. The concept of disciplinary literacy emphasizes the need for students to learn how knowledge is constructed, debated, and communicated in their field.

Unfortunately, in many EMI settings, content instructors assume students have already acquired academic writing skills, while language instructors may not be equipped to teach field-specific conventions. This disconnect leaves EFL students uncertain about expectations and vulnerable to low performance in written tasks. Genre-based pedagogy, which focuses on teaching the social purposes and structures of specific academic genres, has proven effective in bridging this gap (Hyland, 2016).

4. Teacher preparedness and institutional support

Effective writing instruction in EMI environments also depends on the readiness of educators. Subject-matter lecturers often feel unprepared to address language-related issues and may resist integrating writing into their teaching. Similarly, language instructors may lack the subject knowledge needed to support writing in specific disciplines. This lack of collaboration limits students' opportunities to receive meaningful and context-aware feedback (Morton, 2020).

Institutional support plays a key role here. Universities that offer writing centers, workshops, and tailored support services are better positioned to meet the needs of multilingual learners. Additionally, when faculties integrate writing instruction into content courses, students are more likely to develop confidence and competence in academic writing.

5. Technology and innovation in writing instruction

Technology offers new ways to support EFL students' writing development. Tools like Grammarly, Turnitin Feedback Studio, and Google Docs facilitate real-time feedback, revision tracking, and collaborative writing. In blended and online

learning contexts, students can access writing resources, attend virtual workshops, and receive asynchronous feedback from instructors. However, the effectiveness of these tools depends on students' digital literacy and the pedagogical strategies used to integrate them.

Moreover, writing software cannot replace the role of human feedback, especially when it comes to content development and critical thinking. Teachers need to balance technological tools with traditional instruction that helps students build cognitive and metacognitive strategies for writing.

Conclusion

Teaching academic writing to EFL students in higher education presents multifaceted challenges, particularly within English-medium instruction contexts. As students are expected to develop both content knowledge and academic communication skills, the demand for integrated and supportive writing instruction becomes increasingly important. Linguistic limitations, unfamiliarity with academic genres, and insufficient writing strategies often hinder students' ability to express their ideas effectively. These challenges are further complicated by a lack of alignment between language and content instruction, leaving students without clear guidance on how to meet disciplinary expectations.

To address these issues, a shift in pedagogical mindset is needed—one that values writing not merely as a language skill but as a tool for learning, thinking, and engaging with academic communities. Collaborative approaches between subject lecturers and language instructors, genre-based instruction, and institution-wide writing support initiatives can play a vital role in improving EFL students' writing outcomes. As higher education becomes increasingly multilingual and globalized, fostering students' academic writing competence must be viewed as a shared responsibility across the curriculum.

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