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PROBLEMS IN TEACHING ENGLISH ACADEMIC WRITING AMONG ESL LECTURERS AT PUBLIC AND PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN MALAYSIA

Khairunnisa Azmar
University Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
E-mail: nisazmar1410@gmail.com

Abu Bakar Razali
University of Putra Malaysia (UPM), Malaysia
E-mail: abmr_bakar@upm.edu.my

Abstract

English academic writing is fundamental at tertiary level as it is the main medium of communication in the academe. Over the years, ESL lecturers have not only struggled to search for the most suitable teaching approach(es) to teach academic writing but have encountered several other problems in their teaching, such as class size, students' English proficiency levels, heavy workload, and others. Given these circumstances, a review of the literature has indicated there are scant studies that explore the problems faced by ESL lecturers where comparisons are made between public and private universities. Grounded in multiple case studies, four ESL lecturers from two public and two private Malaysian universities were purposively selected for the study. Data were collected from semi-structured in-depth interviews, lesson observations, and document analysis. A total of 12 interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim by the researchers, and data were analysed thematically using thematic analysis and cross-case analysis, where emerging themes were used to present the findings. Findings reveal that ESL lecturers at higher education institutions encountered problems, such as constraints in time, marking issues, students' lack of interests and motivations, lecturers' lack of interest in writing, lecturers' lack of content and pedagogical content knowledge, and lack of institutional support. Hence, professional support should be given to ESL lecturers to overcome their teaching problems, and future research should explore the strategies employed by ESL lecturers to alleviate their teaching problems.

Keywords: *ESL/EFL lecturers*, *English academic writing, qualitative case study*

Introduction

English academic writing is a type of formal writing that is written based on its academic conventions for the purpose of sharing academic information and knowledge in the educational context. In tertiary education in Malaysia, proficiency in academic writing skills is considered pivotal for students. It serves as the primary means of written communication for the writers (Yuvayapan & Rathert, 2018) in showcasing their points of view to the readers. Ratnawati et al. (2018) have asserted that skills in academic writing are essential for Malaysian students not only for their studies but also for their future endeavours as these skills help the students to polish and enhance their critical and analytical thinking skills while producing their piece of academic writing. Albeit its importance for education at tertiary level, majority of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students view academic writing as demanding skills compared to other language skills (Haerazi et al., 2018). This is due to the

technical aspects of academic writing which demand academic writers to have good knowledge of English language (i.e., grammar), the ability to construct meaningful sentences in English language, use of academic vocabulary, mechanics of writing (i.e., spelling, punctuations, etc.), and use of referencing for published works. With these aspects, English academic writing has been portrayed as not only challenging to learn among the students but also a daunting skill to teach among the ESL lecturers. ESL lecturers have lamented that writing instruction is a daunting task and requires a lot of effort (Maarof et al., 2011) as there are many elements and parts of writing that need to be mastered and taught to students. Additionally, dealing with students' lack of interest in writing skills is also one of the problems circling teaching academic writing. Akhtar et al. (2020) have reiterated that most ESL students regarded academic writing as uninteresting and challenging skills due to many facets of writing skills to be mastered and consequently portrayed negative perceptions and dislike towards the skills.

Therefore, ESL lecturers not only need to equip themselves with ample content knowledge of English academic writing, but they also need to have the required pedagogical skills to teach such technical skills. This is because teaching writing at tertiary level is much more demanding than teaching writing at school level. ESL lecturers are not only need to educate their students on the conventions of English academic writing (i.e., use of formal writing style, formal tone, correct use of grammar, academic vocabulary, mechanics of writing, and referencing) but they also need to instil the importance of learning and acquiring academic writing skills among their students. As a result, teaching English academic writing has never been an easy task for most ESL/EFL lecturers, especially in Malaysia, where English is considered a second language to many and a foreign language to few. These circumstances have motivated the researchers to conduct a study by exploring the problems faced by ESL lecturers in teaching English academic writing at higher education institutions, particularly in the Malaysian tertiary education context.

Research Problem

In a study by Hajan et al. (2019), ESL teachers viewed academic writing as a complex process that required many skills. Some of the constraints that these teachers encountered in teaching English academic writing were related to insufficient class time to complete their lectures as teaching writing is a tedious task. Additionally, several other problems, such as attitude and motivation of students to learn English academic writing, a high number of students in a class, and insufficient and poor school facilities, especially lack of adequate technology have hampered the teaching delivery of English academic writing lessons in the classroom.

On top of that, lecturers' lack of creativity and sharing of cultures in academic writing was also one of the important issues highlighted in the previous study. According to Joshi (2017), lack of exposure and involvement in academic writing, such as writing term papers, book reviews, and research articles among ESL lecturers, led them to lack experience in publication and presenting papers at conferences. As a result, ESL lecturers are unable to instil the importance and culture of English academic writing among the students. Another compelling issue is the lack of content knowledge in academic writing among ESL lecturers. In a study by Roxas (2020), ESL lecturers were found to conduct their English academic writing classes using unclear lesson instructions and lacked knowledge on unfamiliar vocabulary due to their lack of content and pedagogical knowledge. Consequently, this has impeded students' understanding in learning English academic writing.

Abdullah, and Majid (2013) reiterated that inadequate knowledge on ESL teaching was one of the factors that contributed to the challenges in teaching academic writing. They further accentuated that dealing with low level of English proficiency among the students was another never-ending issue for majority of ESL lecturers when teaching the demanding skills of academic writing. This finding is in tandem with a study by Kamaruddin and Abdullah (2015)

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where they mentioned that insufficient content knowledge and pedagogical skills among new or young ESL lecturers were one of the problems in teaching English academic writing. This is further mentioned by Kwan and Yunus (2014) and Yunus and Chan (2016) that the lack of content knowledge among ESL lecturers in English academic writing was one of the prevailing issues in teaching academic writing. It was noted that ESL lecturers who have incompetency in English language and lack knowledge of academic writing conventions tend to pass down the errors to their students, and consequently, students learn to adopt these errors in their own writing.

In Malaysian tertiary education context, ESL lecturers also face problems in teaching English academic writing. One of the most prevalent problems is dealing with students' low proficiency in English language. Although Malaysian students have been exposed and introduced to the English language since young, as English is regarded as a second language in Malaysia, not many of them are able to acquire proficiency at an acceptable level. Majority of Malaysian students do not use English language in their daily communication, at school, at university, and at home (Singh, 2019). Due to this, students are unable to maintain good use of English language in their studies.

This finding is consistent with those of Zamin et al. (2018), who explored the experiences of novice ESL lecturers in teaching English academic writing. Two main challenges were found, which were lack of teaching experience at tertiary level and lack of content knowledge in research writing. These novice ESL lecturers admitted to having limited knowledge in referencing styles and writing literature reviews. They also expressed fear about teaching English academic writing, considering it as a challenging and technical course to teach. In another study by Ibrahim et al. (2017), they mentioned four main problems that ESL lecturers encountered when teaching English academic writing. These problems were related to the attitude of ESL lecturers, lack of content knowledge and pedagogical skills, inappropriate use of teaching strategies, and inappropriate writing assessments. These findings are also mentioned in a study by Alabere and Shapii (2019) at a public university in Malaysia where underqualified, unprepared and lack of experience among ESL lecturers are some of the problems affecting the teaching of English academic writing.

Based on the reviews of literature, there is a dearth of studies conducted in Malaysian tertiary education context that closely focus on the problems encountered by ESL lecturers in teaching English academic writing at public and private universities using qualitative multiple case study approach. Findings from this study would bring significant impact to the field of teaching and learning, especially English academic writing where potential ways and strategies are proposed to alleviate the teaching problems and thus help ESL lecturers to bridge the practice gap in enhancing students' academic writing.

Research Aim and Research Question

The study aimed to explore the problems faced by ESL lecturers in teaching English academic writing in Malaysian tertiary context at public and private universities. Conducting a comparison study at these research settings (public and private universities) would help the researchers to provide in-depth findings on the phenomenon of teaching English academic writing to the body of literature. The study was guided by the following research question; What are the problems faced by ESL lecturers in teaching English academic writing at higher education institutions in Malaysia?

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Research Methodology

General Background

The study is grounded in a qualitative multiple case study approach. The case study approach is deemed as suitable research approach as it allows the researchers to explore the phenomenon in its natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). In relation to the study, the researchers explored the problems surrounding the teaching of English academic writing faced by ESL lecturers in Malaysian tertiary education context, specifically at public and private universities. In line with this methodological stance, Yin's replication of logic (1994) was employed by the researchers in which similar research procedures were replicated for each case to maintain consistency and standardization in conducting multiple case studies. The study involved ESL lecturers who are teaching English academic writing course at public and private universities in Malaysia. Data collection process started in the first academic semester of 2022/2023, precisely from November 2022 until May 2023, at two public and two private universities.

Sample

The study involves four ESL lecturers who are teaching English academic writing course in higher education institutions at public and private universities in Malaysia. These numbers (i.e., four ESL lecturers) are considered appropriate for case study approach as case study does not require huge numbers of participants compared to quantitative study. Moreover, findings from case study approach focus on particularizing the phenomenon under exploration, and the findings are not used to generalize the population (Yin, 1994). These ESL lecturers were selected purposively by the researchers based on the selection criteria, such as: (1) possessing at least Master's degree in the field of ESL or any related field, (2) teaching English academic writing to undergraduate students, (3) having a minimum of two years teaching experience at tertiary level, and (4) a permanent academic staff. These ESL lecturers were then provided with informed consent forms to indicate their voluntary participation in the study. Pseudonyms were used to ensure the anonymity of the participants and the institutions' details. The participants' demographic information is presented in the table below.

Table 1
Participants' Demographic Details

ESL Lecturers (pseudonyms)	Gender	Age	Academic Qualifications	Institutions	Years of teaching experience
Ms. Siti	Female	36	Master (Teaching English as a Second Language)	Public University A	9
Mr. Yash	Male	33	Master (Linguistics)	Public University B	7
Mr. Ray	Male	33	Master (English and Communication)	Private University A	6
Ms. Ana	Female	29	Master (English as Second Language)	Private University B	2

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Research Instruments

Case study approach relies heavily on the use of multiple instruments to corroborate and strengthen the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research instruments, such as semi-structured in-depth interviews, lesson observations, and document analysis were used to collect data for the study. Semi-structured in-depth interviews and a set of probing questions were developed by the researchers and were validated by two experts in the field of TESL. Semi-structured interviews were used by the researchers to help yield rich data to understand the experience of the participants, their explanations on the experiences, and how they construct meanings out of those experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The interview sessions with each ESL lecturer were conducted face-toface for three times at the beginning, middle, and end of the study. Along with that, four times of lesson observations were also conducted with each ESL lecturer at their respective institutions, where the researchers opted for the role of non-participant observer while observing the teaching of English academic writing in the classrooms. The researchers noted down descriptive and reflective notes while conducting the lesson observations. Lesson observations were conducted to help provide further information on specific incidents that can be used by the researchers as a reference for subsequent interviews with the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Lastly, documents, such as course syllabus/ scheme of work, teaching schedules, and samples of assessments were also collected from each case and analysed to help strengthen the findings. Merriam (1988) asserted that the use of document analysis helps the researcher to understand and interpret the meaning of each type of document which are relevant to the study.

Procedures

Data were collected at the specific research settings (i.e., two public and two private Malaysian universities) during the first academic semester of 2022/2023 which lasted for about seven months. In conducting the study, letters of permission were sent to the gatekeepers to obtain approval and permission to conduct the study. Once approval was obtained, each participant was given an informed consent form to indicate their agreement and willingness to participate in the study. Each participant was interviewed in English language for three times at the beginning, middle, and end of the study individually at their respective institutions. Each interview sessions lasted for about 60 to 80 minutes and was voiced-recorded using a voice recorder. All 12 interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim by the researchers for data analysis.

Lesson observations were also carried out four times by the researchers at each institution. During the lesson observations, the researchers opted the role as non-participant observer, who were not involved directly or indirectly during the lesson. While conducting observations, the researchers documented descriptive information on what was observed, heard, and seen at the research sites through the researchers' senses. This includes details about teaching and learning activities, reactions, interactions between ESL lecturers and their students, and the learning environment in the classroom. At the same time, the researchers also jotted personal reflections or reflective notes based on the observations, such as researchers' experiences, thoughts, hunches, and personal questions that arose during the observation as part of the researcher's reflexivity role.

Data Analysis

To analyse the data, the researchers employed six steps of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). These collected data, which are in-depth interview transcripts and lesson

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observations field notes, were then triangulated with the analysis of collected documents, such as the course syllabus, outlines/scheme of work, teaching schedules, and samples of assessments. According to Yin (2014), the procedure of triangulation helps to corroborate and strengthen the collected data for multiple case study approach. By using six steps in thematic analysis, the researchers first familiarized themselves with the data by reading and listening to each interview transcript for at least three to four times. This was done to help researchers immerse themselves into the data in trying to understand the participants' experiences. Then, initial codes were generated and later grouped according to similar categories. Based on the categories, the researchers then developed a few possible themes, reviewed their suitability in answering the research question, and finally wrote up the findings. Based on the data analysis, six major themes emerged from the in-depth interviews to represent the problems faced by ESL lecturers in teaching English academic writing in Malaysian higher education institutions. These themes are presented in Table 2.

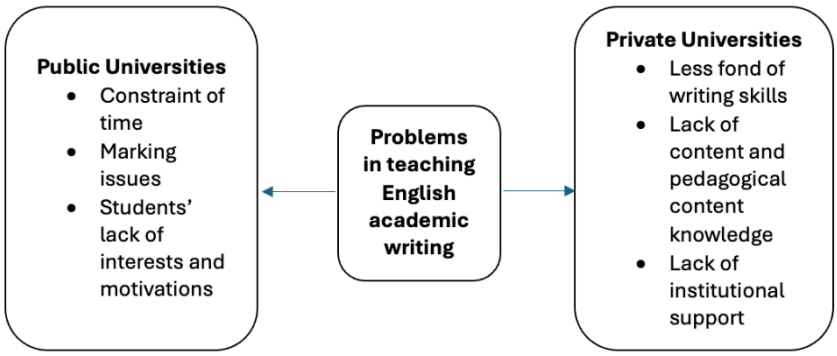
Table 2
Emerging Themes from In-Depth Interview Transcripts

No.	Emerging Themes
1	Constraint of time
2	Marking issues
3	Students' lack of interest and motivation
4	Lack of interest in writing skills
5	Lack of content and pedagogical content knowledge
6	Lack of institutional support

Research Results

Based on the findings, six themes emerged to signify the problems that Malaysian ESL lecturers faced in teaching English academic writing. On top of that, based on the cross-case analysis, ESL lecturers at public and private universities encountered different kinds of problems in their teaching. Figure 1 illustrates these differences.

Figure 1
Problems in Teaching English Academic Writing among ESL Lecturers in Malaysia



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Problems faced by ESL Lecturers at Public Universities

Based on the cross-case analysis, the researchers found that both ESL lecturers, Ms. Siti and Mr. Yash from public universities A and B encountered similar problems in their teaching of English academic writing. The problems that they had were *constraints of time, marking issues* and *students' lack of interest and motivation*.

Constraint of Time

Both ESL lecturers, Ms. Siti and Mr. Yash are teaching at public universities in Malaysia. Both have been teaching at their institutions for nine and seven years respectively. One of the most prevailing problems that they faced in teaching English academic writing was the constraint of time. Both lamented that they did not have enough time to fully maximize their teaching every week. Ms. Siti mentioned that,

> *"…among the problems that I encountered when it comes to teaching writing is time constraint. I don't think it is enough to see them for only 2 hours per week…" (Ms. Siti, 2nd Interview, lines 554-555, p. 36).*

Ms. Siti disclosed clearly in her second interview that there was not enough time for her to teach the students for only 2 hours per week. From the analysis of the course syllabus at public university A, there are about 14 main topics to be covered in the span of 14 weeks in a semester. She claimed that it was a real struggle for her to complete the syllabus and sometimes she had to rush in her teaching. On top of that, Ms. Siti mentioned that some of the topics in the course are quite challenging and more time is needed to teach and explain, like topic on APA style of referencing, which can be considered as one of the technical topics in academic writing. Ms. Siti alluded about this by saying,

> *"…like I told you, the time constraint is actually one of the factors that limiting…limiting the lesson itself because you have to follow the timeline and at the same time you have to get all the works done. So, that is when you know you don't actually have time to get things done at one time. Some of the contents are actually too big for them…just like the language part, they need longer time to explore it because they won't be able to actually understand it straightaway when we are explaining it…" (Ms. Siti, 3rd Interview, lines 220 – 223, p. 15).*

Based on the aforementioned information, Ms. Siti claimed that 2 hours of teaching every week is not enough to teach English academic writing. This is due to the nature of the course, and there are many technical aspects that students need to learn and understand, which requires longer hours of lecture time. Furthermore, with a compact syllabus to be covered every week, she had to rush in her teaching, and this somehow or rather jeopardized her quality of teaching delivery. The same issue on time constraint was voiced out by Mr. Yash from public university B in his second interview session. He stated that,

> *"…because in 14 weeks, it's like I am rushing because there are so many topics in academic writing. For example, in week 11, it starts with grammar topics in writing, and the topics are quite a lot, and it's like I have to rush to teach all the topics…" (Mr. Yash, 2nd Interview, lines 127 – 130, p. 9).*

Mr. Yash mentioned there were too many topics to be covered in the syllabus. Based on the analysis of the course syllabus of English academic writing at public university B, there are nine main topics with more than 30 subtopics to be covered in 14 weeks. This is quite

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overwhelming for him as he is not only focusing on the aspects of writing skills but also on grammar sections, such as subject-verb agreement, tenses, reporting verbs, active passive voice and others. Below is a description of one of the lesson observations:

> The topic of the lesson was Clauses and Types of Sentences (grammar lesson). However, in that lesson, the lecturer covered four sub-topics, which are Dependent, Independent Clauses, Compound and Complex Sentences in the duration of 2 hours of lecture. The lesson was conducted in a rush. The lecturer seemed to be tense while explaining to students each of the sub-topics. His explanation went very fast from one topic to the other, and he was reading directly from the slides with fewer attempts to explain and provide examples on the topics. Once he finished reading the slides, the lecturer then quickly asked the students to complete the exercises and gave them only a few minutes to complete the exercises. Once the students had completed the exercises, whole-class discussion was conducted to discuss the answers. This was done repeatedly in hurry for all four topics. A few Chinese students who were seated in the front row were caught shaking their heads, implying they did not manage to catch up with the lesson. Why was the lecturer rushing in delivering his lecture? There would be some students who did not manage to understand the lesson as it was very quick and fast (3rd Classroom Observation, 10th January 2023).

Based on the lesson observation field notes, Mr. Yash was rushing to finish up the syllabus and he had to combine all four topics in one lesson. Students were learning in a tensed atmosphere where the lesson went by quickly. Moreover, Mr. Yash also told the students that they will be having online replacement classes during the study week to cover the unfinished topic, which is *Reviewing and Revising Academic Writing*. Thus, from this situation it clearly shows that Mr. Yas had constraint of time to complete the syllabus, and hence he was rushing during the lesson.

Marking Issues

The second theme that emerged from the cross-case analyses for both public universities is the marking issues. Both Ms. Siti and Mr. Yash claimed that they had problem in marking the students' written assignments. One of the contributing factors was the huge number of students. At the time the study was conducted, Ms. Siti had about 60-70 students, and her class was conducted as a mass lecture. As a result, marking individual written assignments became one of the prevalent issues. Moreover, Ms. Siti mentioned that English academic writing course at her institution was fully graded based on coursework assessments. Hence, it added the number of written assignments that she had to read, mark, and grade for her class. She kept on lamenting how tiresome and exhausted she was when it came to grading her students' written assignments.

> *"I really love teaching writing but…the tiring part would be the marking part, I would say. You dislike writing because it requires a lot of attention in your time especially in marking it. The marking would be exhausting…" (Ms. Siti, 2nd Interview, lines 147 – 149, p. 10).*

Though Ms. Siti admitted to loving teaching writing skills, marking and grading an abundance of written works was not something that she was keen on. She also lamented that it consumed a lot of her time. According to her, attention had to be given to the contents of writing and, at the same time, trying to separate and maintain her mood while grading the papers.

> *"…by the time you are marking, you have to ensure there is no emotion involved so that you are free from bias, especially if it is a free essay. So, I think it's a bit hard to actually cater to your feelings, your emotions must be neutral, you are not affected by it, you are always in good mood so that you enjoy the marking…" (Ms. Siti, 2nd Interview, lines 612 – 615, p. 40).*

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Ms. Siti admitted that it was quite challenging when grading and evaluating her students' written assignments. This was because it required a lot of time, attention, and, at the same time, trying to avoid bias. In parallel, Mr. Yash from public university B also encountered a similar problem. Compared to English academic writing course at public university A, where the course is fully graded based on coursework assessments, at public university B the course is graded based on coursework (i.e., 70 per cent) and final examination (i.e., 30 per cent). As a result, Mr. Yash claimed to have an abundance of markings to be done in the course and was having issues on the number of written works to be graded, as he had 16 contact hours per week with five different groups of students. He mentioned that,

> *"Marking, yes…because you need to assess each of the students' writing and it's a lot. It is very tiring because you have to read one by one, check it…so, marking is very tiring…because there are lots of assignments plus the final exam…" (Mr. Yash, 3rd Interview, lines 355 – 356, p. 24).*

Based on his statement, he admitted that marking students' written assignments was very exhausting for him, considering that all the assignments were individual assignments. Moreover, he also had to evaluate and mark students' final examination answer scripts. With that, he further confessed that marking was a tedious task as he had to pay attention to each student's writing in terms of their contents and arguments while grading their piece of writing.

Students' Lack of Interest and Motivation

The third theme developed from the cross-case analyses at public universities is the theme of students' lack of interest and motivation. Both public university ESL lecturers, Ms. Siti and Mr. Yash claimed that most of their undergraduate students lacked the interest and motivation to learn English academic writing. These ESL lecturers claimed that most of their students did not view English academic writing as an important course in their studies, even though it is one of the university's compulsory courses. In Ms. Siti's case, she was teaching non-language students (i.e., Administration and Science Policy students) and according to her, most of the students did not perceive skills in academic writing as important skills. She kept on telling the researchers during her interview session that it was quite challenging for her to convince the students that those skills in academic writing are fundamental and pivotal for their undergraduate studies, especially when they had to prepare their final year project paper (FYP) in their final year of undergraduate study. She expressed her concerns by saying,

> *"…and the fact that for some students, they see English as their elective course because they are not basically, taking TESL or English programs. So, they, probably they did not see this subject as important as their core subject, this is their elective subject. I think that would be one of the problems that I faced when it comes to my teaching…" (Ms. Siti, 2nd Interview, lines 557 – 560, p. 36).*

Based on Ms. Siti's observations on her students, she claimed that some of them did not see the importance of learning English academic writing. They see academic writing course as another English course that they need to register as part of the requirements for their undergraduate study. Therefore, she said that it was quite challenging to make her students 'see' the relevance and importance of learning and acquiring skills in academic writing.

A similar problem was faced by Mr. Yash in his teaching at public university B. He was also teaching non-language students from different faculties, namely from Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Medicine, Faculty of Arts and Design, Faculty of Agriculture and Faculty of Educational Studies. According to him, the differences in students' educational backgrounds (majors) play an important part in terms of how he deals with their interests,

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and motivations in learning English academic writing. He added that these students do not see academic writing as an important skill and significant as they perceived English course as an elective and not as their main core course. He further reiterated this is the same problem that he encountered every semester.

> *"Yes, they have to take it. Medic program, they don't have FYP, but they need to take academic writing course… another one is School of Economics, they also don't have FYP, but the students need to take academic writing course. So, students have the perception like "why [do] I need to learn English academic writing when I don't have to write FYP?" Like this semester I'm teaching the architecture and design students. The class is on Monday evening from 5.00 p.m. to 7.00 p.m. and they have the perception like "why I need to learn this…" (Mr. Yash, 3rd Interview, lines 328 – 334, p. 22).*

Based on this excerpt, it was challenging for Mr. Yash to change his students' negative perceptions towards English academic writing. He confessed that he had to work hard to get their attention and tackle their interests by bringing them closer to the lesson on the importance of academic writing for their study and as a lifelong skill. He mentioned that,

> *"…that is the challenge for me to twist the perception that students have towards academic writing course. I really need to learn to tackle them. I always say to them, "if you understood what I am teaching you, at least you could teach your siblings and later your own kids". They need to have positive thinking towards academic writing. Yes, it is a challenge for me especially to motivate them and I think I have talked about this in terms of the challenges that I faced when teaching this course…" (Mr. Yash, 3rd Interview, lines 331 – 347, p. 23).*

He further stated that it was not easy for him to cope with the student's lack of interest and motivation since they had the idea they did not need to produce their FYP. Moreover, some of these classes were held late in the evening, from 5.00 p.m. until 7.00 p.m., which was not quite suitable for undergraduate students as they could no longer sustain their attention and motivation during this hour. In all, both ESL lecturers from public universities encountered problems, such as constraints in time, marking issues, and dealing with students' lack of interest and motivation in teaching English academic writing to their undergraduate students.

Problems faced by ESL Lecturers at Private Universities

Findings from the cross-case analyses between the two private universities A and B revealed that ESL lecturers, Mr. Ray, and Ms. Ana faced different kinds of problems in their teaching. The emerged themes are *lack of interest in writing skills, lack of content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge*, and *lack of institutional support.*

Lack of Interest in Writing Skills

One of the intriguing findings that the researchers found from the analysis was the lack of interest in writing skills in Mr. Ray. He made it clear in all the interview sessions (i.e., three times) that he was not keen on writing skills, and it became one of the challenges for him when he had to teach an academic writing course. He confessed this by saying,

> *"I am not really a fan of writing skills. Though I am teaching academic writing, I don't like teaching writing skills. So, that becomes a challenge for me because you don't like it but you…you know…in the classroom you have to fake it to make it…" (Mr. Ray, 3rd Interview, lines 62 – 64, p. 5).*

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Based on his admission, it was clear that writing skills are not his forte. The researchers realized that this was due to his prolonged issues and negative perceptions towards writing as a technical and demanding skill since he was still a student. Mr. Ray recalled his learning experience where he learned writing mostly through traditional approach where learning was very passive with fewer interactions between the lecturer and students. He further shared the difficulties he had encountered in writing, such as difficulties in planning his writing and other language problems, such as lack of reading habits, vocabulary, and mechanics of writing. Those negative perceptions have not changed since then. Moreover, he also admitted preferring teaching other language skills, such as listening and speaking. To him, these two language skills are less technical compared to writing skills.

> *"I kind of like to have listening and speaking because you can do a lot more activities with that and you can really get them to move and walk around…listening you can have songs and then for the speaking activity, follow-up you can like "tell me what do you feel about that songs"…you know …just them giving the responses…you know…it's just listening and speaking and if to go through a rank, I would say that, it's going to be listening, speaking, reading and writing. Writing is the least preferred subject to teach…" (Mr. Ray, 2nd Interview, lines 116-121, p. 8).*

Based on the above excerpt, Mr. Ray affirmed in his second interview that he was not keen on teaching writing skills, and it is the least preferred skill to teach. To him, listening and speaking skills lessons are much more enjoyable as they involve a lot of movements, and many interesting activities can be done with the students in the classroom that do not require lots of technical aspects, unlike academic writing. In short, Mr. Ray from private university A lacks interest in teaching writing skills, and that has become one of the prevalent issues when he must teach academic writing.

Lack of Content Knowledge and Pedagogical Content Knowledge

Meanwhile, the researchers found that Ms. Ana from private university B had different problems. She was found to lack content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge in teaching English academic writing. As a result, she encountered a few difficulties in her teaching, such as preparing teaching materials, determining the suitability of the materials, and delivering the lesson itself. She admitted,

> *"…when I first prepared the materials, it was difficult for me because I wasn't so sure how it should be done in terms of essay. Okay, Classification essay but what are the things that I must focus on? If it's the introduction, how do I teach the introduction to the students? I was not able to pick up the skills at the time when I looked at the Course Outline. So, that was difficult for me during my first semester. I struggled because I felt is this too much or this is too little. Do I need to add more? Do I need to remain as it is? So, it was difficult for me in terms of the pedagogy especially APA citation as well because I was exposed to APA citation but not the latest version, so in which I have to re-study again and I have to ensure that everything is in place…" (Ms. Ana, 2nd Interview, lines 285 – 292, p. 19-20).*

Based on this revelation, Ms. Ana admitted that it was challenging for her not only in terms of teaching the course but also in terms of preparing the lesson materials. She lacked content knowledge in preparing the lesson materials, especially in determining the levels of difficulty of the lesson materials to suit the levels of her students' English language proficiency. Therefore, she was quite unsure when preparing the lesson materials. She said that,

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> *"…it was my first time teaching the subject in which I did not expect to get [to teach] writing. I was expecting a course that is more towards speaking, that is what I was expected. Yaa...that is one of the root causes and another thing is because maybe I have lack of preparation. I wasn't so sure, like I have mentioned earlier, I wasn't so sure if this is the right thing to do. I also did not approach…people who I should approach in this matter which are...the subject matter expert. So, those are my main problems that I faced when I first started teaching writing for academic purposes…" (Ms. Ana, 2nd Interview, lines 305 – 311, p. 20-21).*

Ms. Ana admitted that it was her first time teaching an academic writing course, and she was not prepared to be given such a demanding and technical course to teach when she first started her teaching career at private university B. With her lack of teaching experience at the tertiary level (i.e., 2 years), the researchers concluded that one of the problems that she faced as a young ESL lecturer was her lack of content knowledge in English academic writing and pedagogical content knowledge to teach the course. When asked about areas of improvement in her teaching, Ms. Ana admitted that she needs to better equip herself with more content knowledge as she said,

> *"It would be content knowledge. I think I can improve better if there are a lot of readings, a lot of tutorials…different kinds of tutorials I can provide to the student. In terms of content definitely, because I think it is very important for us to keep on renewing the knowledge in ourselves so that we have an idea what to improve on…" (Ms. Ana, 3rd Interview, lines 86 – 89, p. 6).*

With such revelation, this shows that Ms. Ana admitted she lacked content knowledge and would like to improve more in that area. Despite that, she still tried her best to deliver quality lessons to her students.

Lack of Institutional Support

The second theme to define the problem faced by ESL lecturers from private universities is the lack of institutional support. Ms. Ana from private university B encountered this problem as she confessed there was lack of professional support given by her institution in terms of a shortage of training/seminars/workshops for academicians. She acknowledged this by saying,

> *"Specifically for Writing for Academic Purposes that I am currently teaching, we don't have that, but we do have trainings where it is on general trainings like… how to use technology for example VLE system (i.e., university system)…but pedagogy, I have yet to attend one…" (Ms. Ana, 3rd Interview, lines 125 – 127, p. 9).*

As someone who is a novice to tertiary education, institutional supports are needed by Ms. Ana. She further mentioned that it would be good if she could attend those seminars/trainings/workshops on pedagogy so that she can learn and improve her teaching for the benefit of her students and also her teaching career.

> *"Yes, it's definitely important because it can add up values and knowledge for us to vary with our teaching methods. Because when we go for trainings, we will be equipped with new knowledge that we may have not heard before or tried before, so I guess it's very useful especially for a fresh graduate like me because I'm still new in teaching at tertiary level, 2 years. So, I think in terms of pedagogy knowledge, there are a lot of things to be improved and there are many things that I need to work on because whenever I ask for feedback, I feel like my colleagues have been doing a good job and I feel like I have a lot to catch up. I'm not saying it's not good but there are a lot of improvements to be done…" (Ms. Ana, 3rd Interview, lines 142 – 147, p. 10).*

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Ms. Ana acknowledged the need for seminars/trainings for fresh graduates like her to develop their teaching careers. With such an opportunity, she could improve her pedagogy as well as her content knowledge in English academic writing. In short, the kinds of problems that Ms. Ana had in teaching English academic writing were lack of content and pedagogical content knowledge as well as lack of institutional support. Meanwhile, Mr. Ray from private university A had an issue with his lack of preference towards writing skills.

Discussion

Findings of this multiple case study reveal that teaching English academic writing is a daunting task for most ESL lecturers both in public and private universities, and they suffer from different kinds of problems. This is because ESL lecturers are not only dealing with the nature and technical aspects of academic writing itself, but also must deal with other problems in their teaching within their own institutional contexts. One of the most prevalent problems indicated by the study's findings is the lack of content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge of ESL lecturers, especially those with less than 5 years of teaching experience. With such inadequacy, this is worrying as skills in academic writing are important and essential for students at tertiary level as it is the medium of communication in academe.

Apart from the lack of content knowledge, the issue on lack of pedagogical skills also needs to be highlighted. Some ESL lecturers, especially those in private universities are not well equipped with pedagogical knowledge and skills to teach academic writing. As a result, they are not aware of matters pertaining to the selection of teaching materials, preparing lesson materials that meet the students' needs and course learning outcomes, and varying their lesson materials according to levels of difficulty based on students' proficiency levels. It is imperative for ESL lecturers to have both knowledge of content and pedagogy to teach English academic writing. This problem is more prominent among ESL lecturers in private universities as they do not have a clear guide/textbook in teaching academic writing. As a result, these ESL lecturers have to search for and prepare their own teaching materials to be used in the classroom, and as described earlier, some of them lack teaching experience in tertiary context and preparing lesson materials is one of the challenges. With unclear guidance of lesson materials, these ESL lecturers struggle to teach academic writing as they are unaware of how 'to approach' the course in providing meaningful lessons to their students. Unlike ESL lecturers who are teaching at public universities, they are provided with standardized lesson materials, such as academic writing textbooks and lecture notes, which are used by both ESL lecturers and students. Teaching becomes much easier for these lecturers as they have a guide to teach the students, and moreover, they do not face the struggle in preparing their own lesson materials. Therefore, the researchers believe that the same guidelines to teach academic writing should be provided to ESL lecturers at private universities.

The discussion of pedagogical skills among lecturers in teaching academic writing is also one of the issues highlighted by Mahmood (2020). In his mixed methods study in Pakistan, he acknowledged that the selection of lecturers to teach English academic writing does not receive greater emphasis. He found that there were no specific pedagogical skills, teaching certifications, writing skills, or assessments used to measure the lecturers' competency to teach English academic writing. This is worrying as the shortage of knowledge, skills and training among ESL lecturers are some of the factors that impact their teaching, as mentioned by Hadi et al. (2021). The same issue is highlighted in a much more recent study by Abdulkhalek and Al-Khulaidi (2022) that among the issues in teaching academic writing is unqualified writing lecturers who do not possess the needed content knowledge and teaching experience at tertiary level. In relation to this issue, the researchers urged higher institutions to pay more attention to the selection of their academicians and provide necessary professional support to help improve their academicians' pedagogical skills.

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Another significant finding of the study is marking issues, especially for lecturers who are teaching in public universities, where they usually teach many classes, and each class would consist of up to 70 students. To the researcher's knowledge, not many previous studies have indicated similar issues in regard to problems faced by ESL lecturers, especially in Malaysian tertiary context. Marking and grading are never-ending issues and, in fact, are synonyms for writing skills. Based on the interview sessions with the ESL lecturers (i.e., from both public and private universities), they admitted to disliking marking activities. Some of them confided that it took them a lot of time to read, evaluate, and understand the students' written works, and some of these ESL lecturers confessed to not prefer reading and marking, especially when they have many students, and they need to spend longer time in marking. Moreover, it becomes a burden to ESL lecturers when they are given a huge number of students in a class, and this could be too overwhelming considering the technical aspects that need to be paid attention to when marking written assessments. This is the case when Li and Ma (2020) pointed out in their study that one of the problems faced by ESL lecturers is the issue of class size. To help overcome marking issues due to large class sizes, the researchers propose ESL lecturers consider adopting a collaborative writing approach where students can learn to write in pairs or in groups. In this way, it can help to reduce the burden in marking written assessments.

On top of that, the findings also reveal that personal preference towards writing skills is also one of the issues that needs to be highlighted. All the ESL lecturers who participated in the study acknowledged that they preferred to teach other language skills than writing. This somehow signifies the daunting and demanding aspects of writing skills compared to other language skills that make ESL lecturers feel reluctant to teach the skill. This is prevalent among ESL lecturers especially those who graduated in other fields than Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). With no background in ESL education, these lecturers may lack pedagogical content knowledge to teach as they are not equipped with knowledge on pedagogical courses while pursuing their undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Master's degree). With such inadequacy, these lecturers had issues in their teaching which is much prevalent among those who are teaching at private universities. These ESL lecturers may not be ready in terms of their knowledge and pedagogical skills to teach academic writing, considering their educational background and less teaching experience at tertiary level. Proper measures should be taken to mitigate these problems or else students' learning will be at stake, and this should not be compromised.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings of the study indicate that ESL lecturers in Malaysian tertiary context, both in the public and private universities, do encounter several problems in their teaching of English academic writing which are constraints of time, marking issues, students' lack of interest and motivations, lecturers' lack of interest in writing skills, lack of content and pedagogical content knowledge, and lack of institutional supports. This is no doubt, as academic writing is a technical skill and encompasses many facets in which teaching this skill has been demanding among ESL lecturers. To alleviate some of the problems and concerns in teaching English academic writing, professional support from higher education institutions is much needed for these lecturers depending on the context of the teaching. On one hand, while there is a clear guide to the teaching of English academic writing course in Malaysian public universities through the use of conventional academic writing module, the lack of time allocated for teaching academic writing (only 2 hours every week) and the huge number of students in the class are really putting a lot of strain on the ESL lecturers to complete and finish the module and especially in marking their students' written works.

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On the other hand, while there is more freedom from ESL lecturers from private universities in teaching their students academic writing due to the lack of clear academic writing module and they can rely on more varies sources of teaching materials, these ESL lecturers do lament on the lack of guide and support that are not given to them by their universities. Furthermore, lecturers from both universities do also lament on the lack of continuous professional development and support from their respective institutions for them. The researchers believe that this is an important aspect that should be focused on by both public and private universities in addressing this issue. This can be done by continuously providing the needed seminars/trainings/workshops conducted by experts from the field of English for academic purposes (EAP) to share the current issues and techniques to teach academic writing. Moreover, mentorship in terms of preparing lesson materials and knowledge on content and pedagogical skills can be shared between senior and junior ESL lecturers and should be implemented in the institutions to help alleviate some of the teaching problems faced by young junior ESL lecturers.

Additionally, policymakers, curriculum developers and subject matter experts need to revisit and relook at the syllabus of English academic writing course for both public and private universities. Changes and modifications to the syllabus, especially on the contents and assessments, are needed so that it does not only meet and achieve the course learning outcome but also helps to improve students' learning and helps to bridge the practice gaps. For one, the large size of classes in public universities should be made smaller so that more meaningful academic writing lessons can take place. On another note, more support on the teaching materials and teaching aids, especially in private universities, should be focused as well by the administration in private universities so that ESL lecturers can feel more supported in their teaching. Furthermore, ESL lecturers in both public and private university settings should not be burdened with overloaded content and overwhelmed with the assessments in the syllabus. The authors suggested ESL lecturers employ process and collaborative teaching approaches where students can learn to write according to the process of writing collaboratively with one another. This will not only help to reduce the burdens faced when marking assignments in academic writing course as students co-authored in the writing process and at the same time exposed to the correct methods of producing writing.

Henceforth, the findings from this study are highly beneficial to ESL/EFL lecturers, students at the tertiary level (i.e., undergraduate and postgraduate), higher education institutions, and policy and curriculum makers both at local and international contexts in exploring the kinds of problems in teaching English academic writing. A review of past literature has shown there is a scant of studies conducted where qualitative study design is used to explore in-depth the issues of teaching English academic writing. Through this research, the authors managed to explore the breadth and depth of teaching problems faced by ESL lecturers in the real-life context of the phenomenon by making a comparison between public and private universities. Therefore, it is imperative to further explore this area as the skills in academic writing are significant and important in both local and global contexts, as writing is a lifelong skill and the main source of communication in tertiary education. Findings from this study are hoped to help shed some light on ESL lecturers and related stakeholders to take necessary measures, especially in providing content and pedagogical knowledge and professional support to overcome the problems in teaching English academic writing. Through these supports, ESL lecturers can enhance their knowledge and skills in teaching academic writing and help their students improve their academic writing skills.

Limitations

There are a few limitations of the study especially in terms of the methodology used. The conducted study was done using a qualitative multiple case study approach where findings from

the small sample size of the study are unable to be generalized to the whole population of all ESL lecturers who are teaching at higher education institutions, be it in Malaysia or elsewhere. Moreover, the study only focuses on ESL lecturers who are teaching English academic writing to undergraduate students at public and private universities in Malaysia. Findings from these institutions may not be inclusive to other ESL lecturers who are teaching English academic writing at other types of higher education institutions, such as colleges, college universities, and polytechnics in Malaysia or outside of Malaysia. Findings from these institutions may produce different kinds of findings due to different factors, such as syllabi of English academic course, teaching workload, teaching materials, ESL lecturers' experience, and their content and pedagogical knowledge.

Recommendations

The researchers call for more studies that focus on the problems faced by ESL lecturers in teaching English academic writing to postgraduate students. Other than that, future studies should also be conducted at other types of institutions, such as colleges, college universities, and polytechnics. This will provide more interesting findings on the issues circling the teaching of English academic writing. Lastly, future research could also be done to explore the strategies employed by ESL lecturers to overcome the problems they faced in teaching English academic writing.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no competing interest.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Semi-structured In-depth Interview Questions
First Interview (beginning of the study)
A) General questions on personal and professional background

1. Please tell me about yourself, your educational background, and your professional background as an ESL lecturer.
2. How and why did you become an ESL lecturer?
   - How many years of teaching experience do you have, specifically at the tertiary level?
   - When did you start teaching at the tertiary level?
   - What are some of the English language courses you have taught so far?
   - What criteria do you think qualify a person to become a university lecturer?

Second Interview (middle of study)
B) ESL Lecturers' experience in teaching writing at the tertiary level

1. Please tell me about your teaching load, the course(s) you are currently teaching and for which program (e.g., engineering, business, accounting etc.)
2. What would be your usual teaching routine as an ESL lecturer the moment you enter the classroom?
3. When did you start teaching writing course?
   - Is it at the beginning of your career or just recently?
   - What is the name of the writing course(s) you have taught and how was your teaching experience?
   - Among the four language skills, which one do you prefer or like to teach and why?
   - What about writing? You don't like to teach writing skills?
   - How do you think writing should be taught in the classroom?

Third Interview (end of study)
C) Problems faced by ESL lecturers in teaching academic writing

1. What are the problems that you encounter when teaching writing?
   - What do you think is the root cause of the problems you mentioned?
   - How did you resolve the problems or situations that you mentioned?
   - In which way do you think teaching writing at the tertiary level is different from that at the school level?
   - In your own view, do you think teaching writing is challenging as compared to other language skills? Why is that?
   - Have you ever felt tired of teaching writing?

Appendix B – Sample of Lesson Observation Field Notes

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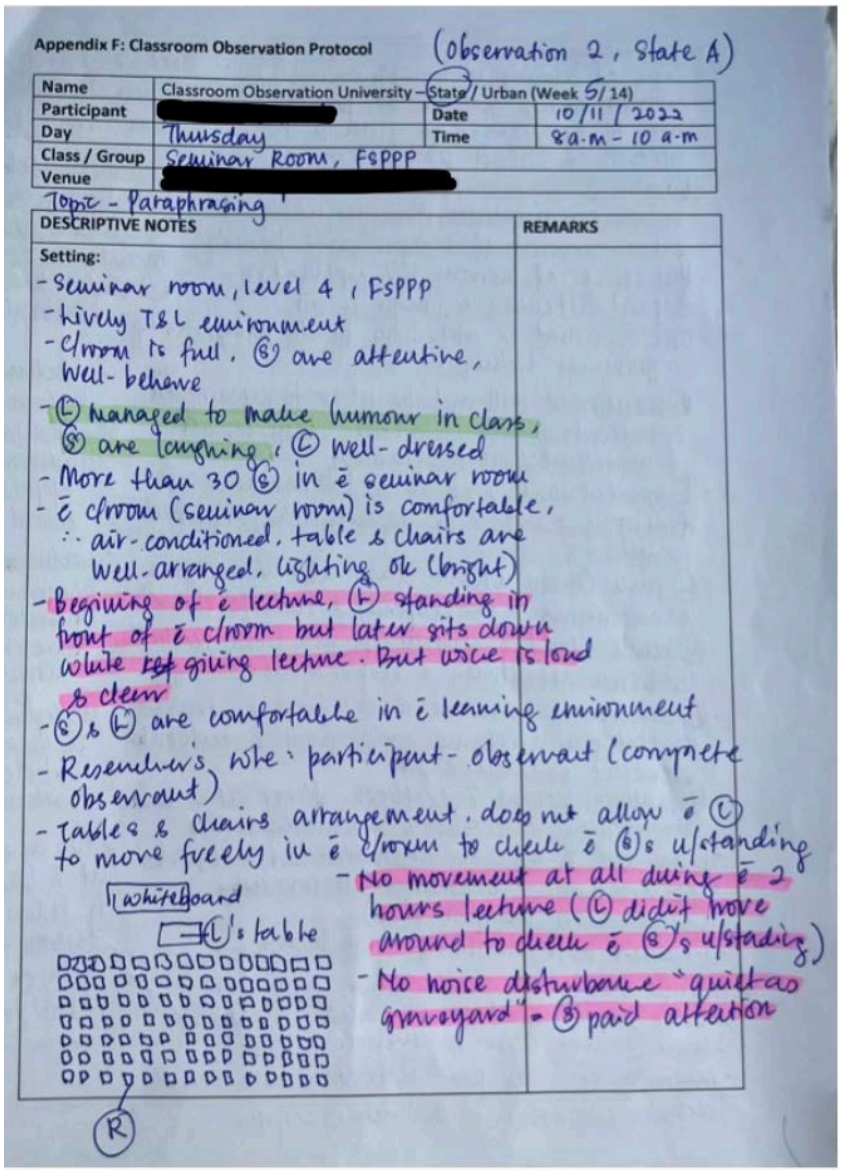

Appendix F: Classroom Observation Protocol (observation 2, State A)

Name	Classroom Observation University – State / Urban (Week 5/14)		
Participant	[redacted]	Date	10/11/2022
Day	Thursday	Time	8a.m – 10 a.m
Class / Group	Seminar Room, FSPPP		
Venue	[redacted]		

Topic - Paraphrasing

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES	REMARKS
Setting: - Seminar room, level 4, FSPPP - lively T&L environment - c/room is full. (S) are attentive, well-behave - (L) managed to make humour in class, (S) are laughing, (L) well-dressed - More than 30 (S) in ē seminar room - ē c/room (seminar room) is comfortable, ∴ air-conditioned, table & chairs are well-arranged, lighting ok (bright) - Beginning of ē lecture, (L) standing in front of ē c/room but later sits down while ~~ref~~ giving lecture. But voice is loud & clear - (S)s (L) are comfortable in ē learning environment - Researcher's role: participant-observant (complete observant) - Tables & chairs arrangement. does not allow ē (L) to move freely in ē c/room to check ē (S)'s u/standing - No movement at all during ē 2 hours lecture ((L) didn't move around to check ē (S)'s u/standing) - No noise disturbance "quiet as graveyard" - (S) paid attention	

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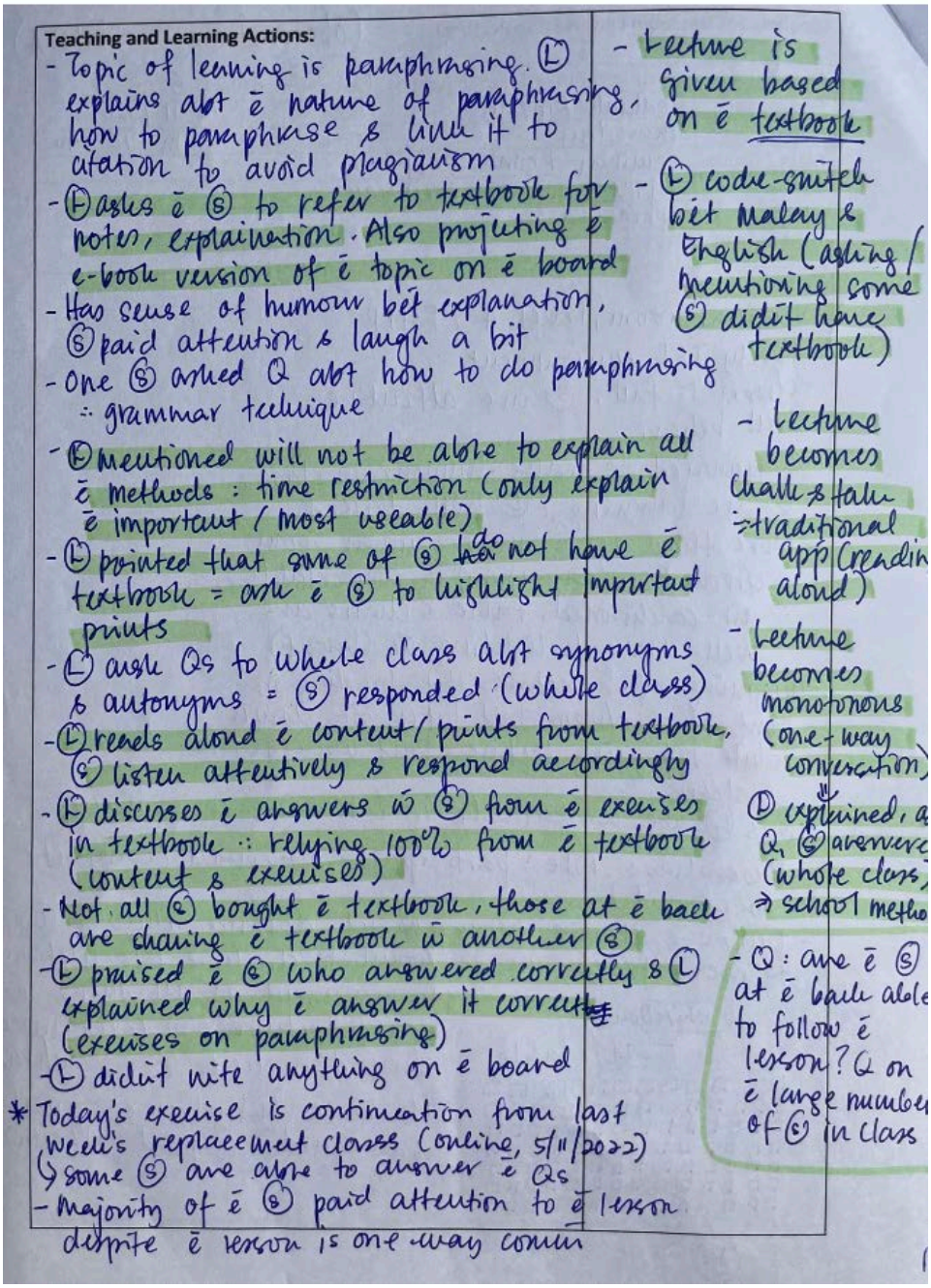

Teaching and Learning Actions:

- Topic of learning is paraphrasing. (L) explains abt ē nature of paraphrasing, how to paraphrase & link it to citation to avoid plagiarism
- (L) asks ē (S) to refer to textbook for notes, explanation. Also projecting ē e-book version of ē topic on ē board
- Has sense of humour bt explanation, (S) paid attention & laugh a bit
- One (S) asked Q abt how to do paraphrasing ∴ grammar technique
- (L) mentioned will not be able to explain all ē methods : time restriction (only explain ē important / most useable)
- (L) pointed that some of (S) ~~has~~ do not have ē textbook = ask ē (S) to highlight important points
- (L) ask Qs to whole class abt synonyms & antonyms = (S) responded (whole class)
- (L) reads aloud ē content / points from textbook, (S) listen attentively & respond accordingly
- (L) discusses ē answers w (S) from ē exercises in textbook ∴ relying 100% from ē textbook (content & exercises)
- Not all (S) bought ē textbook, those at ē back are sharing ē textbook w another (S)
- (L) praised ē (S) who answered correctly & (L) explained why ē answer it correct (exercises on paraphrasing)
- (L) didn't write anything on ē board

* Today's exercise is continuation from last week's replacement classes (online, 5/11/2022)
⇒ some (S) are able to answer ē Qs

- Majority of ē (S) paid attention to ē lesson despite ē lesson is one-way comm

- lecture is given based on ē textbook
- (L) code-switch bt Malay & English (asking / mentioning some (S) didn't have textbook)
- lecture becomes chalk & talk ∴ traditional app (reading aloud)
- lecture becomes monotonous (one-way conversation)
  ⇓
  (L) explained, a Q, (S) answered (whole class)
  ⇒ school metho
- Q: are ē (S) at ē back able to follow ē lesson? Q on ē large number of (S) in class

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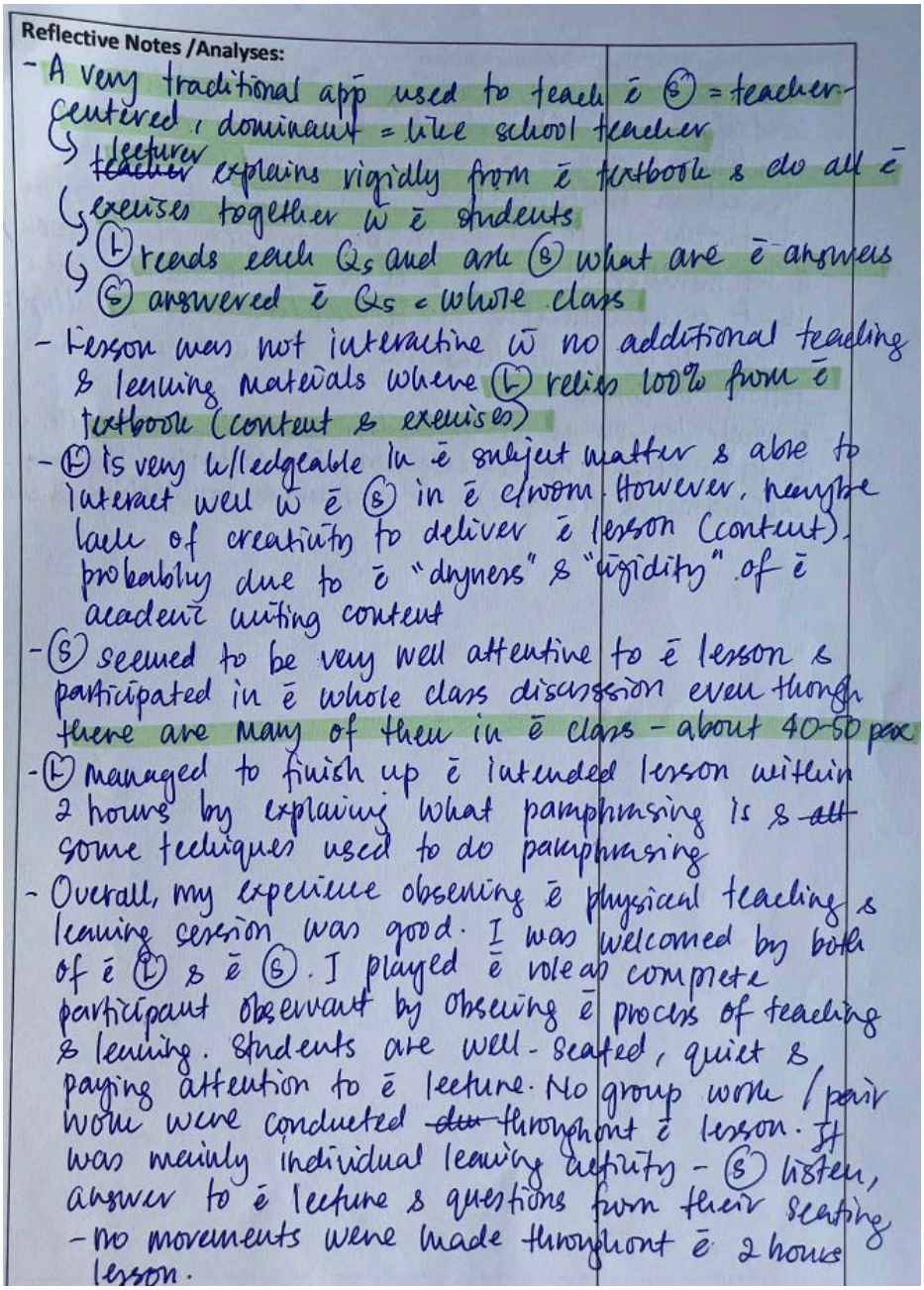

Reflective Notes /Analyses:

- A very traditional app used to teach ē (S) = teacher-centered, dominant = like school teacher
  - ~~teacher~~ lecturer explains rigidly from ē textbook & do all ē exercises together w ē students
  - (L) reads each Qs and ask (S) what are ē answers
  - (S) answered ē Qs e whole class
- lesson was not interactive w no additional teaching & learning materials where (L) relies 100% from ē textbook (content & exercises)
- (L) is very knowledgeable in ē subject matter & able to interact well w ē (S) in ē c'room. However, maybe lack of creativity to deliver ē lesson (content), probably due to ē "dryness" & "rigidity" of ē academic writing content
- (S) seemed to be very well attentive to ē lesson & participated in ē whole class discussion even though there are many of them in ē class - about 40-50 pax
- (L) managed to finish up ē intended lesson within 2 hours by explaining what paraphrasing is & ~~all~~ some techniques used to do paraphrasing
- Overall, my experience observing ē physical teaching & learning session was good. I was welcomed by both of ē (L) & ē (S). I played ē role as complete participant observant by observing ē process of teaching & learning. Students are well-seated, quiet & paying attention to ē lecture. No group work / pair work were conducted ~~dur~~ throughout ē lesson. It was mainly individual learning activity - (S) listen, answer to ē lecture's questions from their seating - no movements were made throughout ē 2 hours lesson.

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Khairunnisa Azmar *(Corresponding author)*	PhD Candidate, Business School, University of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia E-mail: nisazmar1410@gmail.com ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3774-0844
Abu Bakar Razali	PhD, Associate Professor/ Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Educational Studies, University Putra Malaysia (UPM), Malaysia E-mail: abmr_bakar@upm.edu.my ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3181-1004