

## STUDENTS' AND INSTRUCTORS' PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN WRITING ACADEMIC ASSIGNMENTS

การรับรู้ความยากในการเขียนเชิงวิชาการของนักศึกษาและอาจารย์ผู้สอน

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the students' and instructors' perceptions of graduate students' difficulties in writing academic assignments. The subjects involved in this study consisted of two groups. The first group was twenty-seven MA participants who were studying for their Master Degrees in Applied Linguistics for English Language Teaching at the School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT). They were still working on their coursework and had not started writing their thesis. This group comprised both first year and second year students of weekday and weekend programmes. The second group consisted of five instructors teaching these students in the MA programme.

The research instruments used for data collection were a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire was used to identify the difficulties of MA participants in writing their assignments. It was used with the first group of subjects. The semi-structured interview was conducted with five instructors of the MA programme in order to find out their criteria when evaluating students' assignments and their opinions about students' difficulties in writing academic assignments. Then, the data collected was analyzed. The results of the questionnaire were classified and calculated in percentage and mean ( $\bar{X}$ ) and the instructors' answers were categorized under the same theme by numbering of respondents.

Both groups of subjects revealed that MA participants had difficulties with the content of the task, writing skills, language usage and thinking skills. Nevertheless, each group of subjects focuses on the different areas of difficulties in writing academic assignments. The results of the study imply that the students need both methodological and psychological preparation to enable them to cope with academic writing at a satisfactory level.

**Keywords:** Writing Skill, Writing Process, Thinking Skill, Preparation for Academic Writing

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## บทคัดย่อ

งานศึกษานี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อสำรวจความคิดเห็นของนักศึกษาและอาจารย์ เกี่ยวกับปัญหาในการเขียน เชิงวิชาการของนักศึกษา กลุ่มตัวอย่างแรกในการศึกษานี้ คือ นักศึกษาระดับปริญญาโทจำนวน 27 คน ในสาขา ภาษาศาสตร์ประยุกต์ด้านการสอนภาษาอังกฤษของคณะศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยเทคโนโลยีพระจอมเกล้าธนบุรี ซึ่งกำลังศึกษารายวิชาต่างๆ ในระดับบัณฑิตศึกษา และยังไม่เริ่มดำเนินการทำวิทยานิพนธ์ ทั้งชั้นปีที่ 1 และปีที่ 2 ในกลุ่มที่เรียนภาคปกติและภาคพิเศษ กลุ่มตัวอย่างที่สอง คือ อาจารย์ 5 คน ที่สอนในระดับบัณฑิตศึกษาของ คณะศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยเทคโนโลยีธนบุรี ซึ่งเป็นผู้ประเมินงานเขียนและให้คำแนะนำของนักศึกษา

เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการเก็บข้อมูลในการวิจัยนี้ คือ แบบสอบถามและการสัมภาษณ์แบบสอบถามใช้กับนักศึกษา ส่วนการสัมภาษณ์ใช้กับอาจารย์ผู้สอนนักศึกษา ข้อมูลที่ได้แสดงว่านักศึกษามีปัญหาสี่ข้อหลัก คือ ปัญหาด้านเนื้อหา สาระของงาน ปัญหาด้านทักษะการเขียน ปัญหาด้านการใช้ภาษา และปัญหาด้านทักษะในการคิด จากนั้นข้อมูลที่ได้ จากแบบสอบถามและการสัมภาษณ์จะนำมาวิเคราะห์เป็นอัตราอัตรายลและค่าเฉลี่ยในรูปแบบที่มีสาระสำคัญเดียวกัน อย่างไรก็ตาม กลุ่มตัวอย่างแต่ละกลุ่มให้ความสำคัญกับประเด็นย่อยในบางปัญหาแตกต่างกัน ผลการศึกษานี้ปัจจุบัน ความมีการเตรียมผู้เรียนให้พร้อมสำหรับการเขียน เช่น วิชาการทั้งด้านวิธีการและด้านจิตใจ เพื่อให้ผู้เรียนสามารถเขียน งานวิชาการได้ในระดับที่น่าพอใจ

**คำสำคัญ:** ทักษะการเขียน กระบวนการเขียน ทักษะการคิด การเตรียมผู้เรียนในการเขียนรายงานวิชาการ

## Introduction

This study investigates Master's Degree Students in Applied Linguistics in English Language Teaching (ELT) at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) about their problems of writing academic assignments. To accomplish the Master's Degree in English Language Teaching, all MA participants are required to complete assignments in various courses throughout the programme. They were prepared for academic writing skill by the Language and Study Skill Course (LSS) in the first semester of the programme.

## Statement of Problems

Although all MA participants were prepared for written language skills in the course of Language Study Skill (LSS course), some participants still had difficulties when they wrote

assignments for the MA courses. In writing such an assignment, the participants are not only required to have language skills but also thinking skill and knowledge of the subjects. Moreover, they need to apply their knowledge from the theoretical part into the new context required in each assignment.

With reference to the assessment of their written assignments, their grades varied from A to C. Hence, it is interesting to investigate what their difficulties in writing assignments are and what their weak points are despite the fact that they are prepared for the written assignments in the LSS course. It is also interesting to find the factors that cause their difficulties from their point of view and from the viewpoint of the instructors of the MA courses.

## Rationale of the Study

Assignments are one kind of academic writing which reveals not just only how well the writers can understand related theories and concept, but also how critically they can analyze the situation or the context as well as how proficiently they can express their ideas to the readers. It is expected that the study can reveal students' difficulties in academic writing which they need to learn in the course of Language Study Skill. The results of the study can hopefully be used as guidelines for preparing Language Study Skill (LSS) course for graduate students. Hence, this study aims to answer the research question, "What do students and instructors perceive as students' difficulties in writing academic assignments?"

## Writing Assignment

Among all kinds of formal writing, written assignment such as a term paper or an article, is the one that every student at a college or university is required to do. Writing an assignment requires high level of language competency concerning vocabulary, grammar and structure since it is an evidence that verifies the writers' knowledge. Furthermore, writing an assignment needs complete sentences and the use of full word forms (Tribble, 1996). Moreover, the paper must be well composed i.e. the writer has to pay attention to language accuracy and organizing of ideas and have arrangements of discourse forms in the context of each paragraph. By organizing idea, the written assignment needs the writers' care of topic sentences, thesis statement or main idea and it must be supported by details (Leki, 1998). In addition,

the writers should focus on the content which is relevant to the assigned topic of the academic assignments. Therefore, writing assignment is not an easy task.

## Problems of Writing

With reference to English language teaching practitioners' common problems in producing a good piece of academic writing are listed below.

### Language Use

The language used in academic writing is known as formal form of language as it requires the use of correct sentences and meaning which requires a large number of elements such as correct spelling, word choice and grammar rules. Leki (1998) supports that a writer should be careful with grammatical mistakes, spelling, punctuation in his/her written work. This means that the writers who have limitation of language proficiency might have difficulties in writing academic paper concerning vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure than the more proficient ones. As a result, less proficient writers might fail in their written assignment because of their limitation of language proficiency. Thus, language use is a crucial problem in all kinds of written text.

### Content

Hyland (2003) says that knowledge of assigned topic is needed by the writers to create effective text. This means that the writers should apply their knowledge to explain content of the assignments. In addition, writers need to select important information from theories which

are relevant to the topic to write. Moreover, the overall content needs the writers answer and explain the assignments required. This means that the writer must have sufficient knowledge about the topic. Canagarajah (2002: 125-126) mentions that “Knowledge is channeled into the writing task, it is then processed appropriately to meet the final product.” Hyland (2003) clarifies that the important problem of academic writing is that the writers do not have input knowledge about the topic to write and they do not have sufficient content of the topic. Furthermore, when an academic writing is composed, it is often not be answered by concentrating on questions provided or the points that the academic paper focuses on. In other words, another problem of some writers is the lack of knowledge of the content to be described or discussed in a written text.

### Organizing Idea

Organizing idea is concerned with thinking process which is a difficulty that some writers face when they write assignments. By writing academic assignment, writers need to organize their thoughts into a sequence which makes sense and they should express ideas coherently. Leki (1998) views that when the writers compose an academic paper, they should consider the main point or central idea of that piece of writing. He continues that the written papers are written into paragraphs in which the writers must think of the main ideas and how to compose them in a well organized way. Hence, composing academic assignment requires both cohesion and coherence.

Nuttall (1996) says that cohesion is surface link on the texts that helps connections between sentences and ideas. He continues that cohesion directly affects the signification of sentences. If the sentences do not have connective words such as reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction, there may be gaps between sentences. Moreover, Enkvist (1990: 14) explains that “Cohesion refers to explicit linguistic device that shows the relationship between sentences in each paragraph and between paragraphs that form a text which devices into reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction.” Therefore, cohesion is necessary in writing as it makes a text meaningful to the readers.

With reference to coherence, Richards, Platt and Platt (1992: 61) define it as “the relationship which links the meanings of utterances in a text.” Another definition is given by Enkvist (1990: 14) saying, “Coherence is the quality that makes a text conform to a consistent world picture and is therefore summarizable and interpretable.” Hence, coherence in a written passage is concerned with the text itself and the reader’s background knowledge, knowledge of the world and the knowledge of the text structure. Nuttal (1996: 26) adds “coherence depends on many things including obviously sequence in which sentences are arranged.” Thus, coherence in writing passage is especially important and it is required in academic writing as well as academic paper (Enkvist, 1990). To sum up, a good piece of writing needs to have both cohesion and coherence.

## Writing Experience

Writing experience is an important problem which is a factor affecting writing assignments. This is because they do not have much chance for writing practice in a language class. Harris (1993) clarifies that the writers should learn and practice to write and they have to spend some periods of time to practice composing a text. In so doing, the writers will learn how to find information for an input in their written text. Moreover, they should practice every step in a writing process. Consequently, those who lack writing experience and have very few opportunities to learn about writing process will have difficulty in producing a good piece of work.

## Writing Process

To write a text, the writers need to pass through several stages in a writing process. Hedge (2000) says that effective writing is the result of composing process which involves planning. Palmer, Hafner and Sharp (1994) defined that planning helps writers get ready to write and it is a preparation for the next stage of writing. Moreover, planning lets the writers know what they will say and see the ideas clearly. These ideas are strengthened by Murcia and Olshtain (2000) saying that planning is important as it helps the writers realize what to say about the topic and helps the writers develop their awareness of content. To drafting, Pappas, Kiefer and Levstik (1995: 216), say “Drafting involves attempts to create or construct a whole text which the writers do when they complete the paper.” To re-writing, Reid (2000) mentions that the writers will shape their written

texts and they always have new ideas to add to what they already composed. This means the writers will improve their papers which is called revising, Hedge (2000: 306) says, “The writers may re-read, look back at original plan and think about how to express the next set of ideas. Thus, after writing part of the draft, writers also review what they wrote.” Palmer, Hafner and Sharp (1994) mentions that in the writing process, the writers will revise their writing task by expanding ideas, clarifying meanings and reorganizing information and editing. Pappas, Kiefer and Levstik (1995: 216) state that “Editing is to clean up the draft of a text so that the message is stated in the most comprehensible way using the most appropriate language possible.” Tribble (1996) clarifies that the writers read through what they have written and make correction for grammatical accuracy. In addition, editing can involve replacing one word with another to make it fit better.

## Research Methodology

### Subjects

The subjects in this study were divided into two groups. The first group consisted of MA participants who were still working on their coursework and had not started writing their thesis. They were classified into students of weekday and weekend programmes both in the first year and second year. There were totally twenty seven participants. The second group consisted of five instructors in the MA programme at the School of Liberal Arts, KMUTT. In this case, they were the instructors who evaluated the assignments and thus, knew

the difficulties of the MA participants in writing academic assignments.

### Research Instruments

In order to answer the research question, “What do students and instructors perceived students’ difficulties in writing academic assignments?” the research instruments used in this study were a questionnaire (See Appendix A) and a semi-structured interview (See Appendix B).

### Questionnaire

The questions in the questionnaire were based on MA students’ difficulties in writing academic assignment and were concerned with the theories of literature review (See Problem of Writing). The questions identified the difficulties of MA participants in writing their assignments. Moreover, the questions were categorized into topics about language usage, content of the task, thinking skill and writing skill. Then, the questionnaires were distributed and collected to both weekday and weekend MA students.

### Semi-Structured Interview

The questions in the semi-structured interview were made according to the students’ difficulties and were based on theories (See Problems of Writing). Moreover, the questions in the semi-structured interview were parallel to the questionnaire including their criteria for evaluating students’ written assignments in order to find out their responses and opinions about students’ difficulties in writing academic assignments. Then, the semi-structured interview was conducted with five instructors of the MA programme.

### Research Procedures

After the questionnaire and the questions of the semi-structured interview were designed, the questionnaire was piloted with a group of six MA students; three students were in the weekday programme and the other three were in the weekend programme. They were different groups of the subjects in real procedure. Then, the questionnaire was distributed to twenty seven MA participants and collected for data analysis. For the semi-structured interviews, it was piloted with one instructors of MA programme and then, conducted one at a time with five instructors of the MA programme.

### Data Analysis

Eventually, the data collected were analyzed. Finally, the results of the questionnaire were classified and calculated in percentage and mean ( $\bar{X}$ ). Moreover, the instructors’ answers were categorized under the same theme by numbering the respondents and calculated in percentage and mean ( $\bar{X}$ ).

### Findings

This part presents the results of the questionnaires responded by MA participants and the semi-structured interview responded by the instructors respectively.

### Students’ Difficulties in Academic Writing

The following table indicates overall picture of the students’ perception on their difficulties when writing their assignments. It should be noted that they could identify more than one difficulty under each category.

**Table 1** Difficulties in Academic Writing

Students		MA Students		Total of 2 Groups = 27	Total 100%	Average Number of Students $\bar{X}$
		Total of Weekday Group = 11	Total of Weekend Group = 16			
Language Use	Grammar	5	13	18	66.67	17.50
	Sentence Structure	4	10	14	51.85	
	Vocabulary	9	10	19	70.37	
	Paraphrasing	8	11	19	70.37	
Content of the Task	Misunderstanding Related Theories	10	13	23	85.19	21.40
	Applying Related Theory	9	12	21	77.78	
	Interpretation of Content of the Task	8	13	21	77.78	
	Interpretation of Instruction	8	13	21	77.78	
	Lack of knowledge about the Topic	8	13	21	77.78	
Thinking Skills	Expressing Idea	8	7	15	55.56	14.28
	Analyzing	8	11	19	70.37	
	Synthesizing	5	10	15	55.56	
	Logical Thinking	4	8	12	44.44	
	Critical Thinking	8	8	16	59.26	
	Practicality of Ideas	6	6	12	44.44	
	Lack of Concentration on Topic	5	6	11	40.74	
Writing Skills	Cohesion of Expressing Unity	7	9	16	59.26	16.75
	Lack of Coherence	9	8	17	62.96	
	Lack of Writing Experience	3	11	14	51.85	
	Lack of Writing Process	6	14	20	74.07	

Table 1 presents the students' difficulties and factors affecting their writing academic assignment. When asked about their difficulties in academic writing, the students' responses can be divided into four categories, namely content of the task, language use, writing skills and thinking skills. The problems were prioritized based on the average number of students

identifying each category.

In general, the majority of the students met difficulty with the content of the task, language use, writing skills and thinking skills respectively. Concerning the content, twenty-three students (85.19%) out of twenty-seven students answered that they mostly had difficulty of understanding related theories.

In addition, most students (77.78%) had difficulty in applying related theories and interpreting the content of the task. The following is the illustration of their responses in the questionnaire concerning with the content of the task.

*“I don’t understand the related theories. Consequently, I could not tackle the task well enough.”* (Student 1)

The second difficulty is language use. With reference to the use of language, nineteen students (70.37%) answered that they mostly had difficulty with vocabulary and paraphrasing skills. Moreover, eighteen students (66.67%) had difficulty with grammar, and fourteen students (51.85%) had difficulty with sentence structure.

*“I don’t know how to paraphrase information from textbook into my own words and I had problems with word choice.”* (Student 2)

The third difficulty in students’ writing assignments was writing skill, most students (74.07%) had this difficulty because of the lack of writing process. Moreover, seventeen students (62.96%) lacked coherence and sixteen students (59.26%) lacked cohesion of expressing unity. In addition, fourteen students lacked writing experience (51.85%). The quotes below are some examples of their responses in the questionnaire.

*“I don’t have much writing experience. As a result, it is very difficult to write an assignment*

*with good organization of ideas and accurate structure of language.”* (Student 5)

The last difficulty concerned with thinking skills, nineteen students (70%37) out of twenty-seven students had difficulty of analyzing the task. As for the difficulty of critical thinking, sixteen students (59.26%) often met this difficulty. In addition, fifteen students (55.56%) said that they had difficulty of synthesizing and expressing idea. And, twelve students (44.44%) said that the difficulty of logical thinking and practicality of idea were often met in writing assignment. Additionally, eleven students (40.74%) had difficulty of concentration on topic.

*“I can’t analyze the main point of the theories so, I can’t express appropriate ideas to write the paper.”* (Student 3)

In conclusion, students could identify their difficulties with academic writing. Their main difficulties of writing assignment are caused by their misunderstanding of the task content, the lack of knowledge of language, writing and thinking skills, respectively.

### Students’ Writing Process

The students were asked what writing process each of them had explored when they wrote their assignments. Their responses are summarized in the table below.

**Table 2** Students' Writing Process

Subjects Students' Writing Process	MA Students		Total of 2 Groups = 27	Total 100%
	Total of Weekday Group = 11	Total of Weekend Group = 16		
<b>1. Pre-Writing</b>				
1.1 Brainstroming	8	12	20	74.07
1.2 Writing Mind Map	6	9	15	55.56
1.3 Note Taking	6	9	15	55.56
1.4 Outlining	6	13	19	70.37
<b>2. Drafting</b>	11	16	27	100.00
<b>3. Peer Feedback</b>	9	13	22	81.48
<b>4. Self Correction</b>	7	15	22	81.48
<b>5. Revising</b>	7	15	22	81.48
<b>6. Editing</b>	8	14	22	81.48

Table 2 presents the writing processes students used when writing their assignments. According to the students, the writing process can be separated into six steps, namely pre-writing (brainstorming, writing mind map, taking note, outlining), drafting, peer feedback, self correction, revising and editing. The use of each step as stated by the students is then calculated into percentage.

It was interesting to find that twenty-seven students (100%) drafted their papers after they used pre-writing stage.

*“I transformed the mind map into my paper after I finished pre-writing stage.”* (Student 3)

According to the findings, it was found that not every student used every step. However, the steps that were used by most students were peer-feedback, self correction, revising and

editing (81.48%), which indicate their concern about the accuracy of language and ideas of their written tasks.

*“I used peer feedback a lot because I think my friends have more experience in writing and knowledge of language. Moreover, they are able to check my grammatical mistakes.”* (Student 2)

To sum up, what the students mostly needed was peer feedback in order to check both the language and content of their papers. Furthermore, they also had self correction which includes revising and editing their works for the followings reasons.

*“I need to check my grammar mistakes, spelling and sentence structure.”* (Student 2)

In pre-writing, most students used brainstorming (74.07%) and outlining (70.37%). More

than half of them used writing mind map and note-taking (55.56%).

*“I discussed about writing topic and wrote mind map before I transformed into my first draft.”* (Student 1)

The data above reveal the students' perception about their own difficulties and how they wrote or checked their own work.

It is interesting to find out what the instructors of the course thought about their students'

difficulties in writing academic papers. The following part was derived from the semi-structured interview with five instructors.

### Semi-Structured Interview

According to the results of the semi-structured interview, the instructors' ideas about the students' difficulties in academic writing can be categorized into four main areas as presented in the table below.

**Table 3** Instructors' Opinion about Students' Difficulties in Writing Academic Assignments

Difficulties		Instructors					Number of Respondents	Total 100%	Average Number of Students
		1	2	3	4	5			
Content of the Language Use	Grammar	/	/		/	/	4	80	3.50
	Sentence Structure	/		/	/	/	4	80	
	Genre			/	/	/	3	60	
	Vocabulary			/	/	/	3	60	
Content of the task	Relevance to the Topic		/	/			2	40	4.00
	Related Theories	/	/		/	/	4	80	
	Lack of Reading	/	/	/	/	/	5	100	
	Knowledge of Subjects	/	/	/	/	/	5	100	
Thinking Skills	Application of Theories	/	/	/		/	4	80	2.75
	Practicality of Idea	/					1	20	
	Concentration on the Task (Focusing on the Topic and Question)		/	/	/	/	4	80	
	Lack of Logical Thinking	/	/		/		3	60	
	Lack of Analyzing Skills	/	/	/	/		4	80	
	Lack of Synthesizing Skills	/	/	/	/		4	80	
	Lack of Clarity of Explanation (Appropriate Voice)	/					1	20	
	Lack of Ability to Link Theory with Real Situation	/					1	20	
Writing Skills	The Use of Cohesion (Linking of the Text)	/	/	/	/	/	5	100	4.33
	The Use of Coherence (Liking of ideas)	/		/	/	/	4	80	
	Lack of Experience in Writing	/	/	/		/	4	80	

Table 3 presents the opinions of English instructors about the students' writing academic assignment. Regarding the students' difficulties in academic writing, the teachers' responses were divided into four categories, namely, writing skills, content of the task, language use, and thinking skills. The difficulties were considered from the average number of teachers' identifying each category. The crucial difficulty in writing academic papers was the lack of writing skills. In this study, the instructors' focus is on the use of cohesion (100%), coherence (80%) and lack of experience in writing (80%).

*“Students lack ability to use linking words in their papers. Since they lacked the use of cohesion, their writing assignments were not properly coherent and the papers were not well-organized.”* (Instructor 1)

With reference to the instructors' responses, the students met difficulty of the content of the task. Five instructors' (100%) responded that students lacked reading and knowledge of subjects. Hence, they could not apply the related theories to tackle the task (80%).

However, the students had difficulty with relevance between the topic and content of assignments (40%). The information below shows the instructors' opinion about students' difficulties with the content of the task.

*“Students didn't have sufficient reading. Hence, they did not have information to write.”* (Instructor 1)

In term of language use, the instructors emphasized the use of grammar and sentence structure (80%). In addition, students had

difficulties with genre and vocabulary (60%). The reason was because all these aspects affected the comprehensibility of the students' papers.

*“Knowledge of grammar and sentence structure are students' problem, therefore, they had difficulty in writing the papers. Moreover, when I checked students' assignments, I believe, I and other instructors commented language, content and idea. But, students didn't read instructors' feedback and comments. Instead, they were interested in the grades more than our comments. As a result, there is a tendency that they will make the same previous mistakes.”* (Instructor 5)

The last difficulty in writing academic assignment was the lack of thinking skills. Every instructor agreed that students had this difficulty. The instructors responded that students' difficulty of thinking skills can be divided into application of theories, concentration on the task, lack of analytically and synthetically skills (80%). Moreover, students lacked logical thinking (60%), lacked practicality of idea, lacked clarity of explanation and lacked ability to link related theories with real situation (20%).

*“I evaluate their assignment by looking for logically organizing idea, critical thinking, the originality of the ideas and the message conveyed in their essays and ability to link the theories to practice and to real situation. However, most of them lack these skills”* (Instructor 1)

Another interesting response, an instructor pointed that the students only focused on

their grades but they were not interesting in the instructors' comments.

*“When the students received their assignments with feedback, they did not pay attention to the instructors' comments or their mistakes but they only focused on the grade in the given papers. Therefore, they always made their similar mistake.”* (Instructor 5)

According to the findings, students' perception of their difficulties of academic writing were in agreement with the instructors' opinions. Both parties put emphasis on the same sequence of difficulties i.e. the content of the task, language use, writing skills and thinking skills. Nevertheless, the details of each category are not exactly the same.

In conclusion, MA students mostly had difficulty with the content of the task. This is supported by the instructors' opinion. They considered that the students' biggest difficulty in writing academic assignment is due to the lack of reading and sufficient knowledge of language. Furthermore, they did not pay attention to the instructors' comments and, thus, they learned nothing about their own mistakes.

## Discussion and Implications

In accordance with the findings, the data reveal that both the students and the instructors shared the same viewpoints concerning the students' difficulties with academic writing namely the content, language use, writing skills, and thinking skills. Nonetheless, each group of subjects also had different ideas about each

category of students' difficulties as will be discussed further.

With reference to both students' and instructors' responses, the highest difficulty in writing academic assignments was the content of the tasks, followed by language use, writing skills and thinking skills, respectively.

### Difficulties with Content of the Task

Looking more closely to what students responded about the content, they could not write their assignments successfully because they could not apply relevant theories in their task. Students mostly lack reading texts and concerning theories before they write their assignments. Canagarajah (2002) supports this point saying that knowledge of content is crucial when composing a text whereas Hyland (2003) supports that familiarity with topic enables the writers to develop their ideas. Particularly for this group of students, the situation may be worse because more than half of them had their first degree in other fields of study and had no experience in academic writing. Besides, all the students believed that background knowledge in English was a main difficulty when writing their assignments.

### Difficulty with Language Use

In this category, the students were concerned with vocabulary and paraphrasing theorists' written language much more than grammar and sentence structure. The justification of the students' responses was due to the difficulties when they attempted to use their own words

to write the ideas of some educationalists in their assignments. They also mention the lexical problem when they tried to select proper words to express their ideas. Dees (2003) said that students should be able to combine original details, language and their own words in order to make the information clearer to their papers. Chapelle and Hunston (2001) support that students must have good vocabulary proficiency so that they are able to select words and use their own words to paraphrase and compose their assignments.

Nevertheless, the instructors had different perception concerning language use. They considered that the students had more difficulty with grammar and structure rather than with vocabulary and tense. Thus, students' carelessness or ignorance of features of correctness on academic writing such as grammar and spelling is the crucial factor affecting the quality of the paper. (McWhorter, 1988).

### **Difficulty with Writing Skills**

The students pointed out that they could not organize their ideas well when writing their assignments because they lacked writing process particularly they mostly lacked pre-writing: mind map, note taking, outlining and brain-storming. In addition, they rarely used cohesive devices which affected the unity of their written work. This idea was confirmed by the teachers' responses that the students' paper was not well-organized, and their ideas were poorly connected. According to Grabe and Kaplan (1996), the model of writing needs students'

awareness with respect to the ways in which words, structures, and genre forms all contribute to purposeful communication. Moreover, they continued that the good writing must be coherent and it must have linking on the surface text so that the connection will be clear to the readers.

### **Difficulty with Thinking Skills**

More than half of the student responded that they could not write their assignment well enough because they lacked thinking skills especially when they needed to analyze or synthesize what they had read for their assignment.

It should be noted that the instructors were concerned with this area much more than other areas. They reviewed that the students could not apply the relevant theories because they lacked not only analyzing and synthesizing skill but also logical thinking. Hence, thinking skill is necessary for writing and the students have to clarify generate organize and express their clear ideas to compose their assignments (McWhorter, 1988).

### **Implications of the Study**

The aforementioned findings reveal that students, especially low proficiency ones and those who do not get their first degree in English should be prepared both methodologically and psychologically for academic writing at the beginning of their graduate study program. The preparation may be offered in a form of extra-curricular short training course or

integrated as a part of a language and study skill course.

### Methodological Preparation

To enable the students to write a well-organized paper, the students should start with reading research articles to see how the writer develops the whole paper. In other words, they should be trained to identify the coherence and cohesive devices employed by the writers. In addition, they should notice how the writers argue for or against the theories related to their papers. In so doing, the students will develop both critical reading and writing skills. According to Nuttal (1996), reading and writing are interactive as when reading, the readers can be motivated to think critically about what they read and also how they will write and develop their papers. In other words, reading articles enhances students' idea and enables them to become more critical.

To help students gain critical reading skills, the trainer can ask the students to form small group to make comments on a paper that they have read whether they agree or disagree with the writer. This can be a group or plenary discussion which leads to individual written assignment. Before giving feedback on the students' ideas and language use, the trainer should encourage the students to develop a checklist as a whole class work for individual

students to self-check their own work.

### Psychological Preparation

The trainer should encourage the students to be aware of the value of reading and writing for educational purposes. They should be able to realize the internal value of a piece of writing which communicates useful ideas and reflects how an individual develops his/her self-esteem rather than being concerned only with the grade that they can get from their written assignment. In other words, the students should focus on the process of how they can improve and develop their writing skills rather than the marks given on the final product. Every learner should realize the significance of the learning goals more than the performance goals. (McWhorter, 2006 and Williams and Burden, 1997).

### Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate MA students' and instructors' perception of the students' difficulties in writing academic assignments. There were four categories of difficulty, namely, the content of the task, language use, writing skills and thinking skills. The result of the findings indicates the needs of a preparatory course for academic writing especially for students with less background in language and writing experience.

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**Appendix A:****A Part of Example of Questionnaire Asking about Difficulties of Academic Writing Assignment****QUESTIONNAIRE**

This questionnaire is used to collect the data for studying in a Special Study in Applied Linguistics. Research Title: Students' and Instructors' Perceptions of Students' Difficulties in Writing Academic Assignments.

8. What are the difficulties you have faced in writing academic assignments? (You can select more than one answer).

**Content of the task**

- Misunderstanding related theories
- Applying related theories
- Interpretation of content of the task
- Interpretation of instruction
- Others .....

**Thinking Skills**

- Expressing ideas
- Analyzing
- Synthesizing
- Logical Thinking
- Critical Thinking
- Practicality of ideas
- Concentration on topic
- Others .....

**Writing Skills**

- Cohesion of expressing utility
- The use of coherence
- Lack of writing experience
- Lack of writing process
- Others .....

**Appendix B:****A Part of Example of Semi-Structured Interview Asking Instructors of English about Difficulties of Academic Writing Assignment****SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW**

This semi-structured interview is used to collect the data for a Special Study in Applied Linguistics.

**Research Title: Students' and Instructors' Perceptions of Students' Difficulties in Writing Academic Assignments.**

4. From item 3, what do you see as the students' difficulties when they write their assignments?  
(You can answer more than 1 answer.)

**Language Use**

- Grammar
- Sentence Structures
- Genre
- Vocabulary
- Others .....

**Content**

- Related Theories
- Relevance to the Topic
- Application of Theories
- Others .....

**Thinking Skills**

- Application of Theories
- Practicality of Ideas
- Concentration on the Task (Focusing on the Topics and Questions)
- Others .....

**Writing Skills**

- The Use of Cohesion (Linking of the Text)
- The Use of Coherence (Linking of Ideas)
- Lack of Experience in Writing
- Others .....

7. Please suggest how should MA students improve their writing assignments?.....



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