

Effective and ineffective academic writing support for ESL students: A higher education perspective

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ABSTRACT

Academic writing presents significant challenges for students who use English as a second language, often affecting students' academic performance and progress. Given its critical role in academic success, various institutions have introduced various support approaches to enhance students' writing skills. However, ongoing challenges suggest that these approaches vary in effectiveness. This study explored the effective and ineffective academic writing support approaches. Employing a literature review analysis, questionnaire, and interview, the study collected data within the framework of transactional distance theory. Findings indicate that scaffolded writing support is a highly effective pedagogical approach, as it systematically deconstructs the writing process into manageable steps. Other effective approaches include explicit and timely feedback, tailored writing instruction, simplified academic language, structured peer-review sessions, and enhanced accessibility to writing resources. In contrast, ineffective approaches involved the use of complex academic language, text-heavy materials, information overload, limited engagement time, and a lack of practical exercises, all of which hinder students' ability to internalize key writing concepts. Additional challenges include language barriers, vague feedback, and unstructured peer-review sessions. The study contributes to the refinement of curriculum design, academic writing support approaches, and English as a Second Language support structures by promoting feedback-driven and student-centered interventions that align with students' needs, ultimately improving writing outcomes, enhancing retention rates, and reducing failure rates. Overcoming academic writing challenges and reducing transactional distance is at the core of effective student support approaches.

Keywords: academic writing; effective approaches; ESL; ineffective approaches; student support

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INTRODUCTION

In Comprehensive Open, Distance, and e-Learning (CODEL) institution like the University-OD (pseudonym), academic writing is not just a requirement but a fundamental skill that shapes students' academic journey. According to Alisoy (2023; 2024), Mohale (2025), Poe (2022), and Teng et al. (2022),

academic writing is a specialized form of written communication used in universities. Academic writing encompasses the presentation of logical arguments, the application of theories, and the critical analysis and discussion of findings. What sets academic writing apart from other writing genres is its adherence to formal language, logical structure, and a strong emphasis on supporting statements with evidence and analytical reasoning (Lin, 2024; Nurkamto et al., 2024). Academic writing follows established conventions such as citation, referencing, and scholarly integrity to ensure precision and credibility. Without mastering these skills, students may struggle to express their ideas clearly, construct persuasive arguments, and engage meaningfully in academic discourse (Qasem & Zayid, 2019; Cilliers et al., 2022; Luvuno & Ajani, 2022). Academic writing challenges are further amplified by the fact that many students use English as a Second Language (ESL), where writing is not only a means of communication but also a vital tool for language mastery. One of the key factors that heightens academic writing challenges is that many students registered for the Academic Writing Skills Module (AWSM1 – pseudonym) use English as a second or even third language. Academic writing requires the ability to express complex ideas clearly and concisely. According to several recent scholars, the ability to communicate ideas cohesively in written form is crucial for academic success across disciplines. However, marking and moderating AWSM1 scripts reveal common academic writing challenges, including verbosity, lack of authorial voice, grammar issues, poor paragraphing, plagiarism, and challenges with citation and referencing. These challenges corroborate findings from studies by seminal authors, which highlight that the students often struggle with grammatical errors, developing a unique academic voice, structuring paragraphs (including topic sentences, supporting details, and concluding statements), essay composition, paraphrasing, summarization, and adhering to proper citation and referencing practices. A particularly concerning issue is the high prevalence of plagiarism. Without effective student support structures, these challenges can result in prolonged registration periods, academic deferment, or even deregistration (high dropout rates). Additionally, the anxiety and lack of confidence stemming from these struggles may subject students to ridicule from their peers, who may mockingly refer to them as ‘professional students’ or ‘academic ancestors’ (a term commonly used in South Africa to describe individuals who remain in the academic system for years without completing their qualifications) (Boubekeur, 2021; Dyomfana, 2022; Fiock, 2020; Hassel & Ridout, 2018; Mare & Mutezo, 2021). Recognizing the complexity of these writing challenges, the primary lecturer (researcher) initiated student support approaches to lessen these challenges and reduce transactional distance. However, given the multifaceted nature of these issues, it became essential to explore the contextual realities behind the challenges.

Before the commencement of the current study, the primary lecturer recorded podcasts and vodcasts as supplemental tools and provided additional tutorials to address some of the challenges faced by AWSM1 students. This approach aligns with findings of recent scholars who emphasize the significant value of incorporating multimedia tools, such as podcasts and vodcasts, to enhance academic writing skills. While these resources can be helpful, they are not enough on their own without a deeper understanding of the fundamental challenges AWSM1 students face in developing academic writing skills. Despite the presence of various academic writing support systems, many students in the AWSM1 module continued to struggle. This raises an important question: What makes certain academic writing support approaches effective, while others fail to produce the desired results, particularly for ESL students in the AWSM1 module? Writing support programs such as workshops, tutoring, online resources, and peer mentoring have been widely implemented across institutions to assist students (Kakada et al., 2019; Wong & Chapman, 2023). However, the effectiveness of these programs varies, and not all students benefit equally. Therefore, this study aims to explore which approaches to academic writing support are effective and which are ineffective, specifically for ESL students in the AWSM1 module. This necessity led to the formulation of the following research questions (RQs) for the study:

- 1) What does the literature identify as effective and ineffective approaches for supporting ESL students’ academic writing skills in higher education?
- 2) What challenges do ESL students face when engaging with academic writing support?

- 3) How do ESL students perceive the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of approaches to academic writing support resources?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic writing support plays a critical role in CODEL institutions, in modules like AWSM1, where transactional distance presents significant challenges. The absence of face-to-face interaction, coupled with feelings of isolation and the perceived inaccessibility of lecturers, can hinder students' academic progress. Effective support approaches are crucial in overcoming these barriers and enhancing students' writing development. This literature review addresses RQ 1 by examining existing scholarship on academic writing support in CODEL contexts. This section reviews existing literature on academic writing support in CODEL contexts, highlighting the five most and least effective approaches for enhancing student success.

Effective academic writing approaches in CODEL institutions

According to Li and Zhang (2022), Mahan (2022), and Nguyen (2024), scaffolded writing support is a highly effective pedagogical approach to teaching academic writing, as it systematically breaks down the writing process into manageable steps. This approach provides structured guidance through key stages, including brainstorming, modelling, outlining, diagnosing writing challenges, drafting, and revising. Integrating pre-planning, actual writing, post-writing reflection, and internalization, scaffolded support ensures a comprehensive and iterative learning experience. Additionally, it facilitates meaning negotiation through peer feedback and lecturer approaches, creating a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where students progressively transition from assisted to independent writing (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978; Zakharova et al., 2023). In CODEL contexts, this approach also helps reduce transactional distance, making academic writing more accessible and engaging for students. Subsequently, interactive online multimodal writing support workshops are highly beneficial for ESL students, providing an engaging way to develop academic writing skills (Lim & Querol-Julián, 2024; Lim & Tan-Chia, 2023). These workshops incorporate various learning modes, such as podcasts, vodcasts, virtual classes, discussion forums, writing center, vlogs, blogs, and recorded webinars (Sholikhah et al., 2024), affording students with opportunities to engage with key academic writing components, including argument development, citation and referencing, voice, grammar, paragraphing, discourse markers, and coherence. According to Mohale (2025) and Rajendram (2020), multimodal technologies cater to diverse learning preferences, not only enhancing student engagement but also enhancing deeper understanding and skill development. Peer review and collaborative writing is an effective approach that encourages students to engage in structured peer feedback through online platforms (Bearman et al., 2024; Chugh et al., 2021). de Caux and Pretorius (2024) and Wei and Liu, (2024) assert that this process allows students to refine their writing by reviewing and providing feedback on each other's work. It encourages a collaborative learning environment where students are on a more equal footing, reducing the anxiety that may arise from speaking to an authoritative figure, such as a lecturer. Additionally, this method includes explicit feedback from peers, which enhances both the learning experience and the development of writing skills.

Following this method, personalized feedback plays a crucial role in academic writing development. This approach provides detailed and constructive feedback through written comments, audio recordings, or video responses, with a focus on areas for improvement (Hyland, 2019; Maphoto & Sevnarayan, 2021). Explicit feedback is essential for identifying specific areas that need further attention, helping students recognize their weaknesses and addressing challenges in academic writing. Personalized feedback highlights areas of improvement, guiding students toward more effective writing approaches and enhance their growth (Ellis et al., 2006). Lastly, formative assessments, when coupled with writing guides, provide essential support for students' academic writing development. This approach equips students with comprehensive writing manuals, style guides, academic articles, and sample essays, all of which encourage independent learning and deepen understanding of writing conventions (Hillison & Reeves, 2024; Tang et al., 2024). Moreover, it integrates short writing

exercises, reflective journals, and quizzes, which not only reinforce learning but also encourage critical thinking and self-reflection. These activities are designed to gradually build students' confidence, allowing them to refine their writing skills over time and gain greater proficiency in academic writing (Barasa, 2024; Hopkins & Reid, 2024).

Ineffective academic writing approaches in CODEL institutions

On the contrary, ineffective academic writing approaches in CODEL institutions entail a detrimental approach, which is the lack of scaffolding, no step-by-step guidance to support students in structuring their writing process. This approach fails to produce positive results as it takes too long to show improvement. Research by Sun et al. (2024) and Munshi et al. (2023) highlights that without scaffolding approaches to break down writing tasks into manageable stages, students often struggle with poor planning, disorganized writing, and an overwhelming cognitive load. The absence of structured support results in scattered ideas, weak arguments, and reduced motivation to improve. Moreover, Dlamini et al. (2024) emphasize that failing to diagnose the specific challenges students face in academic writing leads to unclear, abstract, and imprecise work, weakening the quality of academic discourse.

Another ineffective approach in academic writing, particularly within a CODEL context, is the use of unclear instructions. Vague or ambiguous directives often lead to confusion among students, making it challenging for them to grasp the task requirements and expectations (Ismailov et al., 2021; Subandowo & Sárdi, 2023). The lack of clarity in instructional language diminishes students' ability to engage meaningfully with assignments, ultimately hindering their capacity to complete tasks effectively (Matiso, 2023). Minimal or delayed feedback is an ineffective approach as it reduces the opportunity for students to learn. Implicit feedback is cumbersome as it does not serve as a tool for highlighting areas that need improvement (Carless, 2019; Lipnevich & Smith, 2009). In contrast, explicit and immediate feedback creates engagement and provides constructive guidance crucial for maintaining motivation and progress. Limited or delayed feedback fails to meet students' learning needs, leaving them without the necessary support to enhance their performance. Fourthly, failing to address genre-specific academic writing needs is an ineffective approach (Deng et al., 2024; Tardy, 2023). Kessler and Polio (2023) argue that treating academic writing as a one-size-fits-all skill, without revision and recognizing the distinct requirements of different genres, limits students' ability to develop their writing skills. To succeed, students need tailored guidance that aligns with the conventions of each academic genre. Lastly, providing students with text-heavy resources while neglecting practical exercises is ineffective. Over-reliance on dense reading materials results in an overwhelming number of instructional tutorials (Nie et al., 2023; Shaheen et al., 2023). This approach disregards the benefits of active learning, which creates engagement, critical thinking, and deeper comprehension.

With that said, it is important to highlight that ineffective academic writing approaches frustrate ESL students, who face numerous challenges. Recent studies by Alisoy (2024), Bolton et al. (2024), Luvuno and Ajani (2022), Mohale (2023), and Welply (2022) indicate that ESL students struggle with various aspects of academic writing support, including the formulation of a clear thesis statement, structured introductions, signposting, argumentation and counter-argumentation, application of subject content, linguistic proficiency, citation and referencing, paragraphing, and adherence to grammatical conventions. Additionally, students often encounter difficulties in crafting logical conclusions and recommendations. Common issues include grammatical errors, superficial development of an academic voice, and a high tendency toward plagiarism. Historically, academic writing challenges among first-year university students in South Africa have been a significant concern, posing substantial barriers to their academic progress (Mohale, 2025). Given this context, it is crucial to identify the challenges ESL students face in academic writing support and to understand how they perceive the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the approaches used in the AWSM1 module.

Theoretical framework

This study is guided by Moore's (1997) transactional distance (TD) theory, which is relevant to CODEL institutions such as University-OD. The theory highlights that distance in education goes beyond physical separation. It emphasizes the importance of reducing the psychological and communication gaps between students and lecturers to improve the quality of online learning experiences (Devkota, 2021; Iqbal et al., 2021). At the core of this theory is the relationship between structure, dialogue, and learner autonomy. To reduce feelings of isolation and strengthen engagement, the AWSM1 academic team makes use of the Moodle Learning Management System (LMS), podcasts, vodcasts, discussion forums, and e-tutors. These platforms and tools facilitate interaction between students and lecturers, maintaining a sense of connection and academic support in CODEL context. The integration of TDT with action research is relevant and allows this study to explore both effective and ineffective approaches to academic writing support for ESL students.

METHOD

Research context

The study is set in South Africa, specifically at University OD. South Africa, a country that emerged from decades of political and racial injustices under apartheid, has made significant progress in expanding access to higher education since the advent of democracy in 1994. During apartheid, many Black South African students were systematically excluded from tertiary education. However, the post-1994 democratic dispensation has enabled more Black South African students to access institutions of higher learning. Despite these gains, challenges remain, particularly regarding language. English, as the medium of instruction (MoI), poses a significant barrier for many students who speak it as a second or additional language. As such, academic writing becomes a critical skill for ESL students, particularly those enrolled in the AWSM1 module at University OD. These first-year students face unique difficulties as they transition to the academic demands of university life, making targeted support essential. This study aims to explore the academic writing challenges faced by ESL students and assess their perceptions of the effectiveness of support mechanisms within the AWSM1 module. Since English is not the first language for many of these students, mastering academic writing in English can be particularly demanding. The findings of this research will not only benefit University OD but also provide valuable insights for other CODEL and face-to-face institutions. Through sharing best practices and recommendations, this study can contribute to the enhancement of academic writing support across various learning environments. Ultimately, the insights gained could influence broader educational strategies and promote continuous improvement in student support services.

Research approach and design

This study employed action research as a practical approach to address the academic writing challenges faced by first-year students enrolled in the AWSM1 module within a distance education context. The researcher began by identifying persistent difficulties in students' academic writing, particularly related to structure, coherence, and argument development. In response, the researcher developed and integrated targeted support materials, including podcasts and vodcasts, to supplement online teaching and provide additional guidance outside of formal tutorial spaces. These multimedia resources were refined based on student engagement and feedback during the semester. Data were collected using a combination of literature review analysis, questionnaires, and interviews, all framed within the transactional distance theory to understand the communication gaps and levels of learner autonomy. This iterative process allowed the researcher to evaluate and adapt teaching strategies in real time, enhancing both student support and academic performance. Action research, in this context, served as a dynamic tool for continuous reflection and improvement, with lecturers actively participating in the development of innovative, student-centered teaching practices.

Sample

This study employed purposive sampling, selecting 20 AWSM1 students from the first semester of 2024 to explore effective and ineffective approaches to academic writing support in a University-OD CODEL context. Of these, seven students responded to the questionnaire via the LMS Moodle platform, and seven participated in an interview conducted through Microsoft Teams. All students were based in different provinces across South Africa, representing diverse linguistic backgrounds, and were between 19 and 29 years of age. Four were first-year students taking the module for the first time, while ten were repeating the AWSM1 module for the second time. Although the response rate was limited, qualitative research prioritizes the depth and richness of data over numerical representation (Rana et al., 2023). To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, ensuring anonymity throughout the study. Focusing on a smaller sample, this research aimed to capture detailed, experiential insights rather than broad generalizations.

Research instruments

This study employed three qualitative data collection instruments: literature review analysis, questionnaire, and interview, each selected to complement the others and strengthen data validity (triangulation). Analysis provided a structured approach to reviewing and interpreting existing literature on effective and ineffective approaches in student support to improve academic writing skills, making it a practical and reliable method due to the accessibility and variety of available data. The interview guide was developed based on observations made during virtual classes, where students frequently expressed difficulties with academic writing and articulating their ideas clearly. These real-time insights informed the formulation of interview questions, ensuring that they were grounded in the actual experiences and challenges faced by the students. The aim was to explore, in greater depth, the specific areas where students struggled and to better understand their perceptions of the academic writing support provided. To ensure reliability and validity, the questions were piloted with a small group of students and reviewed by content lecturers to confirm their clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's objectives. The questionnaire, administered through the LMS Moodle platform, consisted of a structured set of pre-set questions designed to gather targeted responses efficiently. An interview conducted via Microsoft Teams offered real-time interaction, addressing the limitations of face-to-face interviews, and providing flexibility for participants. The integration of literature review analysis, questionnaire, and interview created a comprehensive data collection process in which each method complemented and reinforced the others. This approach enhanced the study's credibility by ensuring cross-validation of students' in-depth experiences and providing a thorough understanding of the research topic.

Data analysis

The researcher employed a structured framework for thematic analysis, drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase approach to systematically examine data from the literature review analysis, questionnaire, and interview. This method facilitated the identification, organization, and interpretation of meaningful themes within the dataset, ensuring methodological rigor and alignment with systematic research principles. Themes identified through the analysis process were carefully constructed to provide coherent and insightful interpretations that align with the study's objectives. The six-phase framework by Braun and Clarke (2021, p. 2), summarized in Table 1 below:

Table 1

Six-step thematic analysis procedure

Phase	Examples of procedures for each step
1. Familiarising oneself with the data	Transcribing data, reading and re-reading, and noting down initial codes.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data systematically across the dataset, collating data relevant to each code.

Phase	Examples of procedures for each step
3. Searching for the themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Involved in reviewing the themes	Checking if the themes work about the coded extracts and the entire dataset, generate a thematic 'map'.
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and generation of clear names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	Final opportunity for analysis, selecting appropriate extracts, discussion of the analysis, relating to the research question or literature, and producing the report.

Source: [Braun & Clarke \(2021, p.2\)](#)

To deepen the analysis, the study incorporated [Moore's \(1997\)](#) TD theory to explore the psychological and communication gaps between students and lecturers in online learning environments. This theoretical lens provided valuable insights into the complexities of student-lecturer interactions, highlighting challenges and opportunities for improving engagement in distance education. The trustworthiness of the study was ensured through triangulation, achieved by integrating multiple data sources, including a literature review, questionnaire, and interviews. This methodological triangulation allowed for cross-verification of findings, enhancing the reliability and depth of the analysis. Examining themes from various perspectives, the study improved its credibility. The interpretation of diverse data sources supports the dependability and transferability of the findings, particularly in relation to online learning experiences, but also advances theoretical discussions on distance education.

Ethical considerations

The University-OD's research ethics committee granted permission for data collection, ensuring that the study adhered to established ethical standards. To protect the identities of participants and the institution, pseudonyms were assigned to the university, module, and students. The researcher prioritized ethical integrity by obtaining informed consent, maintaining transparency throughout the process, and safeguarding data. All collected information was securely stored in a password-protected file, reinforcing confidentiality and data protection measures.

FINDINGS

The findings presented in this section address RQ 1, RQ 2, and RQ 3 of the study. Through an analysis of the questionnaire and interview, three key themes emerged:

- 1) Effective and ineffective academic writing approaches in CODEL institutions.
- 2) Multifaceted academic writing challenges.
- 3) Students' perceptions of effective and ineffective approaches.

Effective and ineffective academic writing approaches in CODEL institutions

The literature examined various approaches to supporting ESL students' academic writing skills in higher education, identifying both effective and ineffective approaches. Based on the reviewed studies, five effective approaches include:

- 1) Scaffolded writing support. This approach breaks down writing into manageable steps (brainstorming, outlining, drafting, and revising) providing structured guidance.
- 2) Interactive multimodal writing workshops. These workshops utilize podcasts, vodcasts, virtual classes, discussion forums, vlogs, blogs, and recorded webinars to accommodate diverse learning preferences, enhancing engagement and comprehension.
- 3) Peer review and collaborative writing. Facilitates structured feedback through online platforms, reducing student anxiety, promoting active participation, and minimizing passive learning.

- 4) Explicit and personalized feedback. This approach entails written comments, audio recordings, and video responses to highlight areas for improvement and offer constructive guidance.
- 5) Formative assessments with writing guides. Incorporates writing manuals, sample essays, exercises, reflective journals, and quizzes to reinforce learning and critical thinking.

The literature review also identified and highlighted five ineffective approaches to academic writing support, which include:

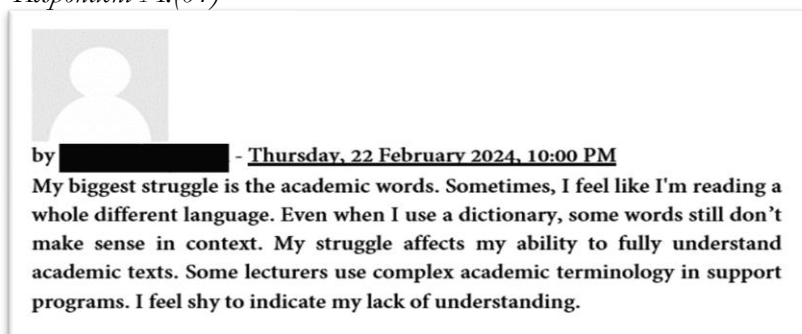
- 1) Lack of scaffolded support. This results in poor planning, disorganized writing, and cognitive overload.
- 2) Failure to diagnose writing challenges. This approach leads to weak arguments, scattered ideas, and imprecise academic discourse.
- 3) Unclear instructions and ignoring genre-specific writing needs. This causes confusion, making it difficult for students to understand assignment requirements and develop proficiency in different academic writing genres.
- 4) Minimal or delayed feedback. This limit learning opportunities, as implicit feedback fails to highlight specific areas for improvement.
- 5) Over reliance on text heavy resources. This reduces engagement by neglecting practical exercises essential for active learning.

Multifaceted academic writing challenges

The following snapshots illustrate the students' responses to the online questionnaire, specifically addressing the second research question.

Figure 1

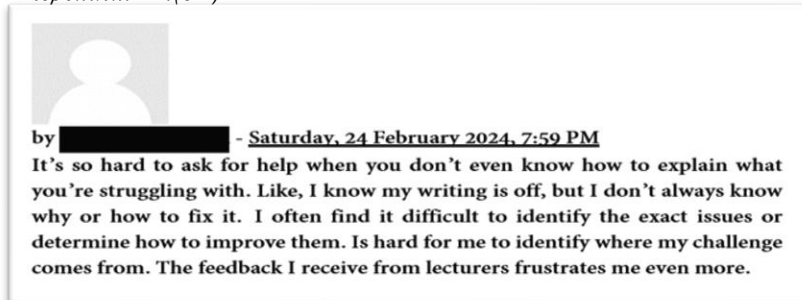
Respondent A:(01)



Respondent A:(01) indicated challenges with academic vocabulary, as some lecturers use complex academic terminology.

Figure 2

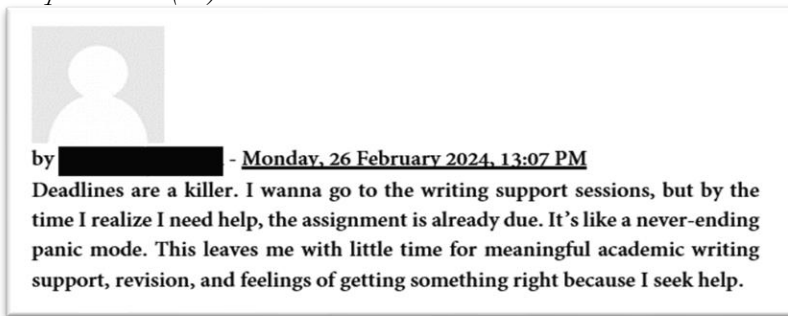
Respondent A:(02)



Respondent A:(02) revealed a struggle to express their concerns, citing difficulties in communication and a limited understanding of the challenges they were facing.

Figure 3

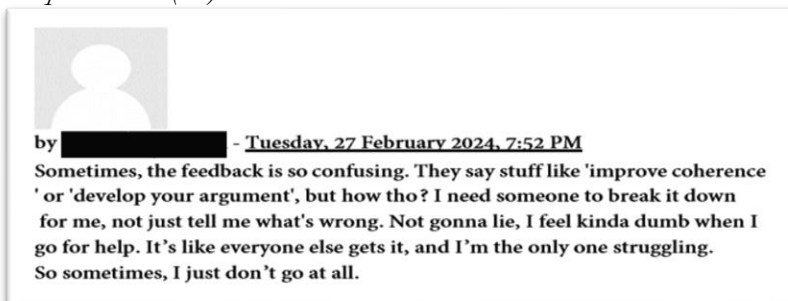
Respondent A:(03)



Respondent A:(03) highlighted time management as a major challenge, which limits student's ability to fully benefit from academic writing support sessions.

Figure 4

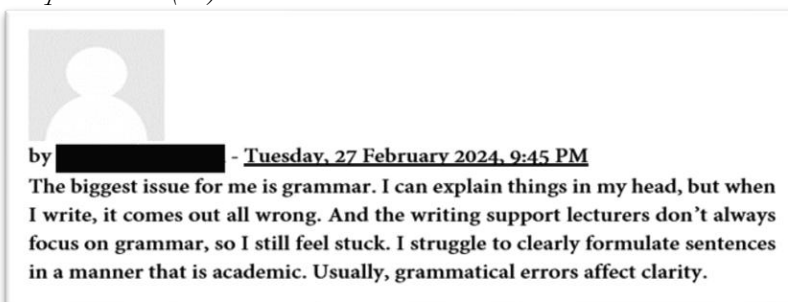
Respondent A:(04)



Respondent A:(04) stated that unclear feedback, poor guidance on unpacking and breaking down complex concepts and lack of explicit explanations in support programs hinder understanding and contribute to low attendance.

Figure 5

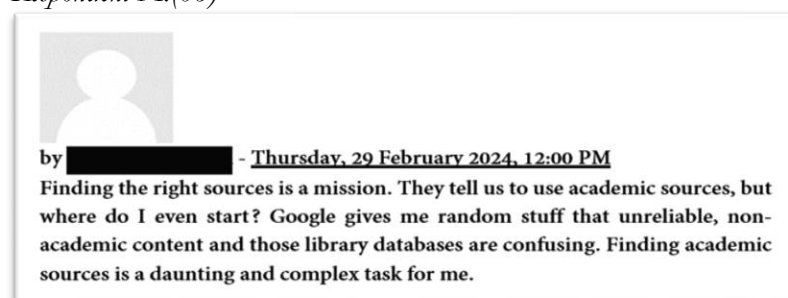
Respondent A:(05)



Respondent A:(05) revealed that challenges with grammar, sentence construction, and academic writing conventions persist due to insufficient focus on grammar in academic writing support.

Figure 6

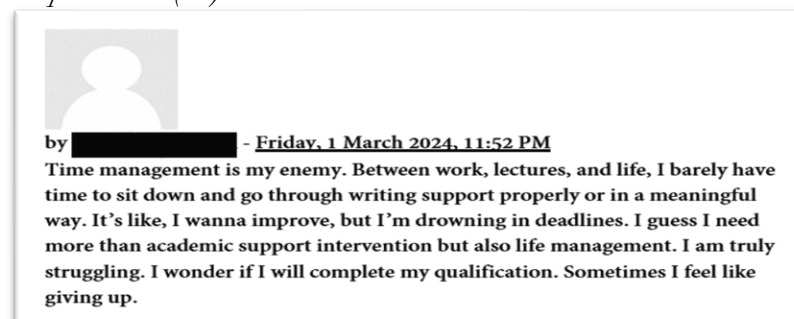
Respondent A:(06)



Respondent A:(06) expressed that those difficulties in accessing reliable academic sources, whether through Google or the complex library databases, make the research process daunting and complex.

Figure 7

Respondent A:(07)



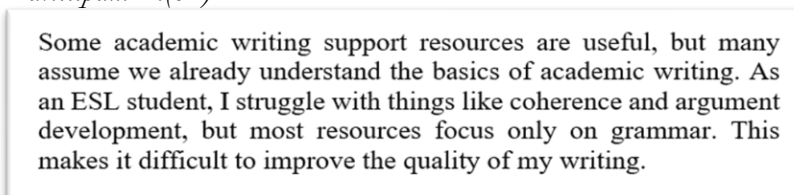
Respondent A:(07) indicated that time management is a major challenge, limiting meaningful engagement in academic support and leading to feelings of being overwhelmed and discouraged, which may increase the risk of dropping out.

Students' perceptions of effective and ineffective approaches

The following snapshots illustrate the students' responses to the interview, specifically addressing the third research question.

Figure 8

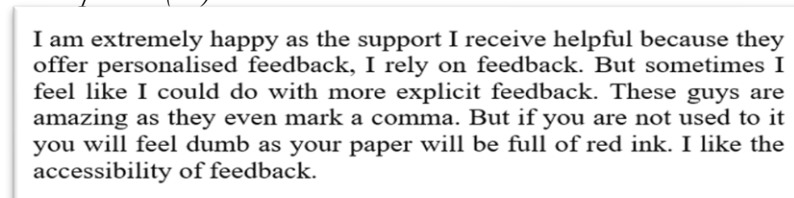
Participant B:(01)



Participant B:(01) noted that although academic writing resources are helpful, they often fail to introduce fundamental concepts from the beginning, leaving gaps in foundational understanding.

Figure 9

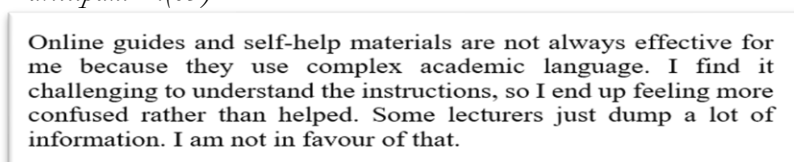
Participant B:(02)



Participant B:(02) stated that while feedback is personalized and accessible, it can be overwhelming when heavily marked, highlighting the need for more explicit guidance and clarity.

Figure 10

Participant B:(03)



Participant B:(03) revealed that online guides and self-help materials are often difficult to understand due to complex academic language and unclear instructions, the overwhelming information make it hard to grasp key concepts.

Figure 11

Participant B:(04)

One major challenge is that workshops and tutorials often move too fast. They cover important academic writing principles, but as an ESL student, I need more time and practical exercises to internalize the concepts. Without that, I struggle to apply what I learn.

Participant B:(04) disclosed that while the support approaches are beneficial and effective, they often lack practical exercises and are delivered too quickly.

Figure 12

Participant B:(05)

I realised that yes, we are being supported academically, but they don't teach us how to properly paraphrase or use citations correctly. I received many warnings for unintentional plagiarism because the resources focus on avoiding plagiarism rather than teaching proper citation skills.

Participant B:(05) indicated that academic support lacks proper guidance on paraphrasing and citation leading to unintentional plagiarism.

Figure 13

Participant B:(06)

I am happy because academic writing support is tailored for my needs. As an ESL student is normal face language barriers. I get jealous when I see native English speakers being able to grasp complex concepts fast and as they benefit a whole lot. Lastly, I need resources that address specific second-language challenges, like sentence structure and transitions.

Participant B:(06) indicated that tailored academic writing support is effective for ESL students, as language barriers are a common challenge. Native English speakers tend to grasp complex concepts more quickly (benefits them significantly). It is crucial to emphasize the importance for resources that specifically address the challenges faced by ESL.

Figure 14

Participant B:(07)

Peer review sessions help, but they are not always well-structured. Some students give vague feedback, and as an ESL student, I need detailed explanations on how to improve my writing. More guided peer review processes would be helpful.

Participant B:(07) indicated that while peer review sessions are effective, they lack proper structure and guidance. Some students provide vague feedback, which is not always helpful. ESL students in peer review sessions require detailed explanations on how to improve their writing.

DISCUSSION

Academic writing support plays a pivotal role in CODEL institutions, especially in modules like AWSM1, where transactional distance (Devkota, 2021; Iqbal et al., 2021; Moore, 1997) presents significant challenges. The lack of face-to-face interaction, combined with feelings of isolation and perceived inaccessibility of lecturers, can hinder students' academic progress. According to the literature consulted, effective academic writing support is essential to overcoming these barriers and enhancing students' writing development. Among the most effective strategies is scaffolded writing support, which breaks down the writing process into manageable stages. This approach not only reduces transactional distance but also creates an iterative learning experience through pre-planning, writing, reflection, and peer feedback.

Interactive multimodal writing workshops further enhance student engagement by catering to diverse learning preferences through podcasts, vodcasts, virtual classes, discussion forums, and recorded webinars. These workshops help students develop key academic writing skills, including argumentation, citation, and coherence. Peer review and collaborative writing also contribute to writing development by creating a collaborative environment where students provide structured feedback to one another, reducing anxiety and promoting active learning. Personalised feedback plays a critical role, presenting detailed and constructive suggestions for improvement, which guides students toward more effective writing. Additionally, formative assessments, when coupled with writing guides, help reinforce writing conventions, encourage critical thinking, and build students' confidence over time.

These effective approaches to academic writing support echo the sentiments expressed by Alisoy (2023; 2024), Mohale (2025), Poe (2022), and Teng (2022), who emphasise that such approaches are essential for academic success and crucial for students' achievements across various disciplines. In contrast, ineffective approaches, such as a lack of scaffolding, fail to provide the necessary guidance to structure the writing process, leading to disorganised writing and cognitive overload. Without clear steps, students may struggle with weak arguments and scattered ideas. Furthermore, failing to diagnose writing challenges results in vague, imprecise academic discourse, while unclear instructions often leave students confused and unable to grasp assignment expectations. Minimal or delayed feedback also proven ineffective, as it fails to offer timely, actionable guidance, hindering students' ability to make improvements. Treating academic writing as a one-size-fits-all skill without addressing genre-specific needs limits students' ability to adapt to different academic writing conventions.

Finally, an over-reliance on text-heavy resources without practical exercises reduces engagement and prevents active learning. For ESL students, ineffective academic writing support compounds existing challenges such as formulating clear theses, developing arguments, adhering to grammatical conventions, and mastering citation practices (Kakada et al., 2019; Lin, 2024; Nurkamto et al., 2024; Wong & Chapman, 2023). Understanding how students perceive the effectiveness of various writing support approaches and addressing the barriers they face is crucial to improving academic writing outcomes in CODEL settings.

The second research question revealed that ESL students encounter various challenges in academic writing support approaches. These challenges include language barriers, difficulties in self-expression, and struggles with articulating concerns. Additionally, many students lack effective techniques to enhance their academic writing or identify the root causes of their difficulties. Other obstacles include the use of complex academic terminology, limited comprehension of discipline-specific concepts, and feelings of shyness when working in group settings rather than one-on-one.

Furthermore, issues related to grammar, sentence construction, and adherence to academic conventions present significant challenges. Many students also rely on Google and other non-

academic sources, struggle with navigating extensive and sometimes overwhelming library databases, and face time management difficulties. The lack of clarity and explicit demonstration in feedback further complicates their learning process. Moreover, some students experience difficulties in unpacking and breaking down complex concepts, leading to low attendance and an increased risk of dropping out.

These challenges align with findings from studies such as [Dlamini et al. \(2024\)](#), [Sun et al. \(2024\)](#), [Munshi et al. \(2023\)](#), [Matiso \(2023\)](#), and [Mohale \(2023; 2025\)](#), which highlight the multifaceted difficulties students encounter in academic writing support approaches. Diagnosing these specific challenges is essential, as failure to do so results in unclear, abstract, and imprecise work, ultimately weakening the quality of academic discourse. This issue further exacerbates transactional distance ([Moore, 1997](#)), potentially increasing dropout rates and contributing to the marginalisation of students in academic spaces ([Dyomfana, 2022; Mare & Mutezo, 2021](#)). A lack of clarity in instructional language significantly diminishes students' ability to engage meaningfully with academic tasks. Moreover, the absence of explicit feedback frustrates students, as feedback should serve as a tool to highlight areas for improvement and bridge academic gaps ([Hyland, 2019; Maphoto & Sevnarayan, 2021](#)). Explicit feedback is crucial in helping students identify their weaknesses and address academic writing challenges. Personalised feedback further enhances student development by highlighting specific areas for improvement, guiding students toward more effective writing approaches, and enhancing their academic growth ([Ellis et al., 2006](#)).

Challenges experienced in the AWSM1 module corroborate findings by [Li and Zhang \(2022\)](#), [Mahan \(2022\)](#), and [Nguyen \(2024\)](#), which advocate for scaffolded writing support as a highly effective pedagogical approach. Systematically breaking down the writing process into manageable steps, scaffolded support facilitates a more structured learning experience. Given this understanding, it is imperative to address ineffective academic writing approaches to improve student retention, enhance the pass rate of the AWSM1 module, reduce dropout rates, and lessen transactional distance. Ineffective writing support exacerbates the frustrations of ESL students, who already face numerous challenges in academic writing.

The findings on the third research question indicate that ESL students have mixed perceptions of academic writing support resources. Some perceive them as effective, while others find them ineffective. Perceived effective approaches include personalised feedback, accessibility, structured coverage of academic writing principles for ESL students, tailored support approaches, and well-facilitated peer review sessions. These elements help students engage meaningfully with writing tasks and develop their academic skills. However, several challenges contribute to the perception that academic writing support is ineffective. These include an overwhelming abundance of online guides and self-help materials, which can lead to information overload. Additionally, the use of complex academic language, insufficient time for engagement, and a lack of practical exercises hinder students' ability to internalise key concepts.

Furthermore, inadequate guidance on paraphrasing and citation increases the risk of unintentional plagiarism. Other concerns include language barriers, vague feedback that lacks detailed explanations, and peer review sessions that require clearer instructions to be truly beneficial. Notably, one student expressed feeling that jealousy sometimes arises among non-native English speakers, as native speakers appear to grasp complex concepts more quickly, leading to a sense of discouragement. The mixed perceptions of students align with findings from studies by [Ismailov et al. \(2021\)](#), [Subandowo and Sárdi \(2023\)](#), [Deng et al. \(2024\)](#), and [Tardy \(2023\)](#), which highlight how vague or ambiguous feedback often led to confusion, making it difficult for students to grasp task requirements and expectations.

Additionally, implicit feedback is ineffective as it fails to highlight areas that need improvement, leaving students uncertain about how to refine their work. Providing students with text-heavy resources while neglecting practical exercises further diminishes the effectiveness of academic writing support. Over-reliance on dense reading materials results in an overwhelming number of instructional tutorials, which can hinder students' engagement and comprehension ([Nie et al., 2023; Shaheen et al.,](#)

2023). These challenges contribute to increased transactional distance, as described by Moore (1997), making students feel isolated and disconnected from their learning experience. Furthermore, they expand the zone of proximal development, as explained by Vygotsky and Cole (1978) and later supported by Zakharova et al. (2023), making it more difficult for students to bridge the gap between their current abilities and desired competencies.

However, some effective approaches include explicit and immediate feedback, which enhances student engagement and provides constructive guidance that is crucial for maintaining motivation and academic progress. Tailored academic writing approaches also improve student comprehension and support their development (Barasa, 2024; Hopkins & Reid, 2024). For academic writing support structures to be truly effective, lecturers must adopt approaches that are relevant, clear, concise, and practical. Reducing verbosity and focusing on realistic, practical exercises, student-centred approaches can significantly improve students' learning experiences and academic writing proficiency.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored effective and ineffective approaches to academic writing support for English as a second language students. Through an analysis of past and recent literature, as well as data from questionnaires and interviews, key factors influencing students' experiences with academic writing support were identified. The findings revealed that scaffolded writing support is a highly effective pedagogical approach, as it systematically breaks down the writing process into manageable steps. Effective academic writing support approaches emphasise the importance of explicit feedback, tailored writing approaches, simplified English, structured peer-review sessions, accessibility, and awareness. In contrast, ineffective approaches include the use of complex academic language, text-heavy online materials, information overload, insufficient time for engagement, and a lack of practical exercises, all of which hinder students' ability to internalise key concepts. Additional challenges include language barriers, vague feedback without detailed explanations, and peer review sessions that require clearer guidance. Notably, one student expressed feeling of jealousy sometimes arise among non-native English speakers, as native speakers seem to grasp complex concepts more quickly, leading to discouragement.

The study highlights the importance of addressing these barriers and ensuring that academic writing support approaches are responsive to the diverse needs of students. Improving the design and accessibility of writing support programs helps students overcome academic writing challenges and enhances their academic success. Therefore, writing support should be carefully tailored to address the diverse and specific needs of students, considering the varied challenges they face. For instance, specialised workshops could be offered for ESL first-year students, focusing on foundational writing skills such as grammar, sentence structure, and academic vocabulary. These workshops could also incorporate practical strategies for developing coherent arguments, improving citation practices, and understanding academic conventions. This study offers valuable insights for improving academic writing support approaches and ESL students in higher education. It highlights the importance of feedback-driven, student-centered approaches that respond to students' diverse needs, with the goal of improving writing outcomes, enhancing retention, and reducing failure rates. While the findings provide practical implications for curriculum designers, ESL support staff, and academic developers, the study is limited by its focus on a single distance education institution, which may face unique challenges not generalizable to other contexts. Moreover, the current research suggests that ineffective academic writing support can increase feelings of isolation, especially when instruction lacks personal engagement. In addition, future research should explore how language attitudes affect ESL students' confidence in academic writing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT:

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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