

CHALLENGES FACED BY EFL STUDENTS IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

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Abstract. This study explores the challenges faced by EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in academic discourse. Utilizing a qualitative approach, data were collected through surveys and interviews with university students. Findings indicate that limited vocabulary, insufficient exposure to academic materials, and a lack of critical thinking skills are the primary obstacles. The study concludes by recommending targeted instructional strategies to enhance academic literacy and empower students to participate more fully in academic communities and scholarly discussions.

Key words: primary obstacles, academic materials, limited vocabulary

Introduction

Academic discourse refers to the formal and structured communication used in academic settings, including essays, presentations, and research writing. It encompasses not only the use of advanced vocabulary and complex grammatical structures but also the ability to present logical arguments, evaluate evidence, and follow academic conventions. For EFL students, mastering academic discourse is essential for academic success and participation in global scholarly communities. However, many students struggle with these conventions due to linguistic, cognitive, and instructional challenges. This paper aims to identify and analyze the major barriers EFL students face in acquiring academic discourse competence, offering insights into effective educational practices and support systems. This research adopted a qualitative approach, which is appropriate for exploring the subjective experiences and perceptions of learners. Participants included 30 undergraduate students majoring in English Philology at Navai Innovation University. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and written surveys that focused on students' experiences with academic reading, writing, and speaking tasks. The interview questions encouraged participants to reflect on their challenges, preferred learning strategies, and the types of support they found most useful. The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and insights. The analysis of student responses revealed three main categories of challenges that EFL students commonly face when trying to master academic discourse. Students frequently reported difficulties with academic vocabulary, complex grammar, and unfamiliar rhetorical features. They often found it hard to understand academic articles or write papers that met academic standards. Concepts such as cohesion,

hedging, and nominalization were particularly challenging, as these features are rarely emphasized in general English instruction. Additionally, students struggled with using transition signals and discourse markers appropriately, which affected the clarity and flow of their writing. Many participants indicated that they had limited exposure to authentic academic texts and academic communication outside of the classroom. They seldom engaged with journal articles, academic presentations, or research seminars, which limited their familiarity with formal academic language styles. This lack of immersion made it difficult for them to internalize discourse conventions and replicate them in their own work. A recurring issue among participants was difficulty in constructing logical arguments, synthesizing sources, and critically evaluating evidence. Instead of engaging analytically with material, students often relied on memorization and repetition. They expressed uncertainty about how to present a clear thesis, defend it with appropriate evidence, or address counterarguments—all of which are essential components of academic discourse. The findings suggest that EFL students require more structured and sustained support to master academic discourse. One effective strategy is the inclusion of authentic academic texts in the curriculum, such as research articles, case studies, and academic essays. These materials help familiarize students with academic language and rhetorical conventions. Explicit instruction in academic writing genres—such as literature reviews, argumentative essays, and research reports—can also enhance students' competence. Moreover, integrating activities that promote critical thinking is essential. These may include debates, peer review sessions, problem-solving tasks, and analytical writing assignments. Such activities encourage learners to engage with content more deeply and move beyond surface-level understanding. Teachers play a pivotal role in this process and should receive ongoing training to implement these practices effectively. Curriculum developers and policymakers must also ensure that academic literacy is given due emphasis across all stages of higher education. Mastering academic discourse is a complex but essential goal for EFL students who aspire to succeed in higher education and professional settings. This study highlights the significance of addressing linguistic limitations, cognitive skill gaps, and the lack of exposure to academic practices. By improving curriculum design, providing targeted teaching strategies, and fostering a critical thinking environment, educators can bridge the gap between general English proficiency and academic fluency. Future research should examine the effectiveness of specific pedagogical interventions aimed at improving academic literacy, with attention to long-term outcomes and student autonomy.

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