



ESL UNDERGRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS OF CHALLENGES IN TRANSITIONING FROM GENERAL ENGLISH TO ACADEMIC ENGLISH WITHIN THE FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT, SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES AT A DEFENCE UNIVERSITY IN SRI LANKA

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Students who enter university with limited English language proficiency often continue to face difficulties when transitioning from General English to the demands of Academic English. This study investigates the challenges faced by ESL undergraduates in the Faculty of Management, Social Sciences, and Humanities at a defence university in Sri Lanka, with particular attention to writing, listening, and speaking skills. Moreover, this study discusses the coping strategies used to overcome the challenges they face. A qualitative approach was adopted, and data were collected from 50 undergraduates representing different study years, with gender distribution (54% male, 46% female). The age distribution revealed that the majority of participants (70%) were between 23 and 26 years old, while 30% were within the 19–22 range, placing most of them in the midst of their undergraduate education, and most of them (54%) have followed General English courses before entering the university. The findings reveal that 52% of students lacked confidence in academic writing, while 66% reported difficulties with academic vocabulary. More than half (65%) indicated challenges in organizing ideas into paragraphs, and nearly half (46%) admitted limited understanding of citation and referencing practices. Furthermore, a strong majority (76%) perceived Academic writing as more difficult than General English writing. These results highlight that vocabulary development, writing organization, and referencing are key problem areas in the transition from General English to Academic English. Listening results show that half of the students found lectures harder to follow than General English conversations, with many citing the speed of lecturers' speech (50%) and the heavy listening demands of Academic English (64%) as key challenges. Moreover, 60% reported struggling with technical vocabulary, confirming that academic listening is a significant barrier in their transition from General English to Academic English. Over half of the students (56.0%,) reported feeling nervous during academic presentations and experiencing difficulty speaking spontaneously in class discussions. The results suggest that more structured opportunities for practice, feedback, and guidance are necessary. Therefore, targeted support and an updated Academic English program within the faculty are essential for helping ESL learners successfully navigate the transition from General English to Academic English.

Keywords: ESL learners, academic English, challenges, coping strategies,

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INTRODUCTION

For many students who learn English as a second language, the shift from General English to Academic English can be a difficult transition (Navaz, 2012). General English focuses on developing practical language skills for everyday communication. It encompasses listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities necessary for daily life, such as speaking with friends, reading newspapers, writing emails, or understanding media. The emphasis is on fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and grammatical accuracy in informal settings rather than subject specific-language and Academic English refers to the specialized language used in educational settings, particularly at the tertiary level. It involves mastering reading and writing academic texts, understanding lectures, participating in discussions, and producing research based work. The focus is on formal language, complex sentence structures, and discipline specific vocabulary. ESL students encounter throughout this shift by referencing theoretical viewpoints such as Vygotsky's Sociocultural Constructivism (1978). However, the transition from General English to Academic English can be particularly demanding and often marks a turning point in a student's educational journey. This study examines the challenges that ESL students face at a defence university. Therefore, this study primarily focuses on the difficulties ESL students face in academic writing, listening, and speaking, and what are the coping strategies they use to help them navigate this transition.

METHODOLOGY

The quantitative aspect of this study involved the collection and analysis of data through structured questionnaires shared with 50 undergraduate students from a Defence University in Sri Lanka. A convenience sampling method was used to select participants who were engaged in academic English. Small sample sizes are common in educational research due to financial constraints, logistical difficulties, or the exploratory nature of such studies (Lakens, 2022) The questionnaire, prepared in simple English, was designed to gather demographic information and

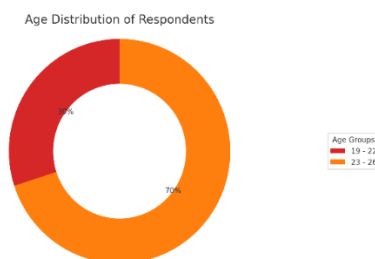


examine students' experiences and challenges related to the transition from General English to Academic English. It focused on writing, listening, and speaking skills, as well as the coping strategies they use to navigate this transition, with explanations provided in Sinhala where necessary. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics-including percentages and graphs

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

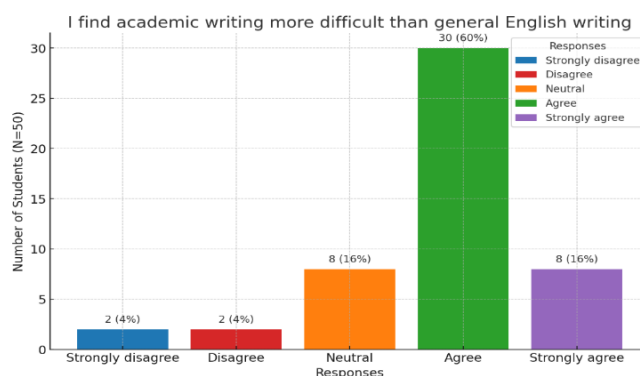
The questionnaire data indicate that students perceive Academic English as more challenging than General English, particularly in writing, listening, and speaking. A majority (54%) reported completing a General English course prior to entering university, while 46% had not. This suggests that although many students have some exposure to General English, they still encounter significant difficulties when transitioning into an academic setting.

1. Age Distribution of Respondents



The age distribution of the participants indicated that the majority of ESL learners fell within the 23–26 age group, accounting for 70% of the respondents, while the 19–22 age group comprises 30%. This suggests that most of the participants were in the later stages of their undergraduate studies, where greater engagement with academic English is typically required. In contrast, a smaller proportion of younger students were represented, reflecting that the study sample was predominantly composed of more mature learners with broader exposure to both General and Academic English.

2. Perception of Academic Writing Difficulty.





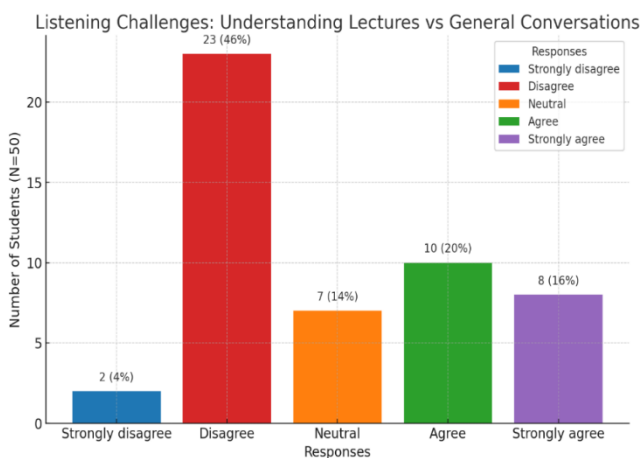
The findings indicate that a significant number of ESL students face difficulties in academic writing, with 76% of respondents (60% agreeing and 16% strongly agreeing) reporting that academic writing is more difficult than general English writing. This pattern mirrors findings from Sri Lankan contexts as well. For example, Navaz and Sama (2017) observed that TESL students at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka identified grammar knowledge, limited vocabulary, and unfamiliarity with academic writing conventions as prominent barriers to their academic writing performance.

The most commonly reported difficulty was related to coherence and cohesion, where students struggled to connect ideas logically and maintain a smooth flow across extended assignments.

The high level of agreement suggests that many students have not yet developed key academic conventions, including argument structure, referencing, and adopting a formal academic tone (use of precise vocabulary, objective stance, minimal colloquial language). Neutral responses (16%) may reflect partial confidence in basic writing skills but uncertainty about advanced tasks. The 8% who disagreed may represent students with prior training or support.

These findings highlight the need for targeted academic writing support through workshops, literacy modules, and writing centers that can scaffold ESL learners' transition to university level expectations.

3. Perception of Academic Listening Difficulty.

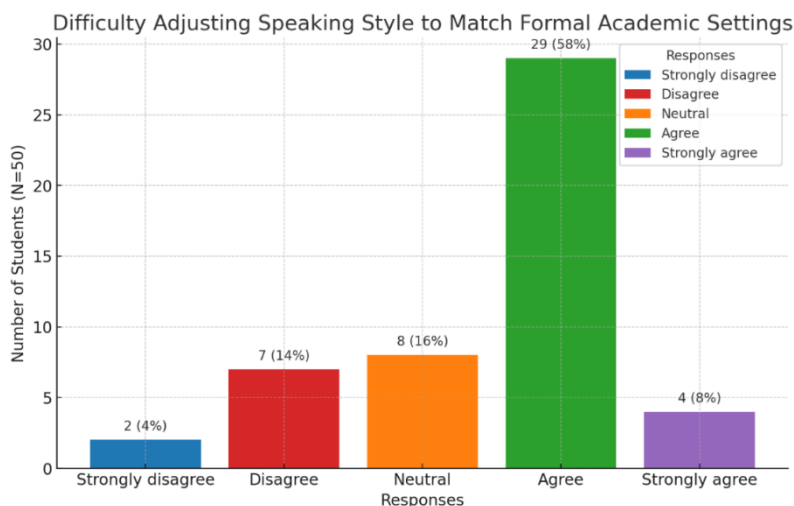


The data reveal that listening comprehension in academic contexts poses a considerable challenge for many ESL students. Half of the respondents (46% disagreed and 4% strongly disagreed) indicated that they struggle to understand English lectures compared to general conversations. In contrast, only 36% (20% agreeing and 16% strongly agreeing) felt confident in comprehending lectures, while 14% remained neutral, suggesting mixed experiences depending on factors such as lecturer style, speech rate, or topic complexity.



These results highlight that listening remains a major barrier for ESL learners. Possible explanations include the fast pace of lectures, and the frequent use of complex or subject specific vocabulary.

4. Perception of Academic Speaking Difficulty.



The study found that 66% of ESL learners face difficulties adjusting their speaking style to formal academic contexts. This suggests that many students struggle to shift from informal conversational English to the structured and formal register required in university settings. Similar patterns have been reported in Sri Lanka, where limited speaking opportunities, lack of feedback, and curriculum constraints were found to hinder speaking competency (Jayanetti, 2022)

These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions such as structured oral tasks, debates, and workshops on academic discourse to help ESL learners build confidence and develop the ability to communicate effectively in academic settings.

5. Coping Strategies.

The findings reveal that ESL learners adopt various coping strategies to manage difficulties in speaking, listening, and writing within academic contexts. A notable proportion of students (34% sometimes and 20% often) reported listening to podcasts and academic videos as a way to strengthen their listening comprehension. In terms of writing support, more than half of the respondents (56%) indicated a willingness to seek help from peers to improve their writing, while 16% remained neutral, and 14% disagreed. This highlights the importance of peer interaction and collaborative learning in academic writing development.

Additionally, most students (74%) reported using grammar books and online tools like Grammarly or QuillBot to improve their writing, showing that digital tools are a common support strategy.



Overall, the results show that ESL students use different coping strategies such as digital tools, peer help, and feedback to deal with language challenges.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings show that ESL students face challenges in speaking, listening, and writing in academic settings, but they also make use of different coping strategies. Many learners rely on digital tools, peer support, and feedback to improve their Academic English. However, not all students use these strategies consistently, which suggests the need for more structured guidance and training. Providing workshops, resources, and supportive learning environments can help students develop stronger academic communication skills and perform more confidently in their studies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To better support ESL students in their transition from General English to Academic English, several practical steps can be considered. Intensive academic courses can be introduced to students to help academic writing, critical thinking, and presentation skills. This early exposure can help ease the transition to more demanding academic tasks later on. (Hyland, 2006).

The University can offer structured support through writing workshops, peer collaboration, and feedback groups. These targeted programs can help students gradually build confidence and fluency in academic settings.

Encouraging students to actively use feedback and teaching them how to reflect on and improve their work can also go a long way in promoting academic growth. Many students benefit from learning how to assess their own writing and make revisions independently.

By implementing these strategies, ESL undergraduates will be better able to overcome the challenges they face in their academic settings.

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