

Problems in Students' Academic Writings

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Abstract

The students in colleges, universities and schools are given various types of academic writings like assignments, laboratory reports, project reports, essays, and many more as a part of teaching and learning. But the concern observed by many tutors are the kinds of problems that are seen in their academic writings. The main aim of the research is to evaluate and check the various common types of problems in students' academic writings in the College of Science and Technology (CST), Royal University of Bhutan. Different journal papers were collected, read and evaluated to get the current state of the art. In CST, a survey questionnaire was formulated, added in Google form and the responses were collected from the faculties of CST. The research showed that most common types of problems seen in students' work are plagiarism, paraphrasing, grammatical errors, spellings and punctuations. There are various reasons for having problems in students' academic writings. The lack of not having intensive writing, time constraints, laziness and unaware of academic writing were the most common reasons stated. The result from the survey conducted in CST also showed the similar kind of problems that are seen in many of the literatures. The CST faculties recommend different solutions and suggestions to undertake so that the students' problems in academic writings are improved drastically with minimal problems.

Keywords: Academic writing, Plagiarism, Paraphrasing, Punctuation, Grammar

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1. Introduction

In higher education, the students' academic writing is considered as a vital and one major part of the teaching and learning. As per Valdes (2019), academic writing refers to any formal written works produced in an academic setting by students. The kinds of academic writings given to the students in many cases including in CST are: assignments, project report writing, thesis, essays, laboratory reports, research articles, case study report, and many more. The academic writings are performed by the students especially to fulfill the requirements as a part of assessment with the intention that they learn in the process too and then to convey their ideas and findings. Not only students, even the researches and academicians from every different discipline use academic writing to share their ideas, concepts, findings and to other aspiring scholars (Valdes, 2019)

The students in the college need to do various kind of academic writings in various subjects using either English or Dzongkha (National language) as the medium language, with majority of the tasks seen to be carried out with the use of English language. Various programmes' offering various subjects are being taught in English medium, hence all sorts of academic writings are written in English medium too. The works written by students are prone to have various kinds of problems as found in the survey conducted in CST where almost 94.1% of respondents have said that they could see many problems in their students' work.

All kinds of academic related writings given to the students are found to have various problems as indicated in various referred journals. The students are taught English language courses in their schools and colleges, but still it is found that they make errors and various kinds of problems are seen in their work especially to do with the linguistic problems. As pointed out in various journals and articles, there are various kinds of problems in students' academic writing, in CST too, the common types of problems seen are grammar, punctuation, plagiarism, text structure, citation, sentence making and writing irrelevant information.

The common problems seen in students' works are punctuations, spellings, sentence structure and verb tenses (Lasaten, 2014). Similarly, some problems seen by Darus and Ching (2009) in their students' essays were on the tenses and prepositions. Another kind of problems seen are grammatical, punctuation and spelling in students' works especially in thesis proposal (Prescante-Malimas, & Samson, 2017). Plagiarism is another kind of growing and well-known problems that will be obviously seen in students' work. Students are aware of the plagiarism but are seen that they intentionally or unintentionally do not acknowledge the main source from where they have referred their work with no or poor citation (Salemani, Chawinga, & Dube, 2018). When the work involves references from others' source, there should be a proper citation and acknowledgement to the original source, and if failed to do so, this becomes one of the problems which is commonly seen in many students' work known as plagiarism.

There could be reasons behind for the existence of problems in students' work. The academic work is said to be a very complicated and complex work because it involves paraphrasing, summarizing and quoting other authors' ideas and work (Bailey, 2011). The students are found to have committed plagiarism problems

because of the pressure for good grades, laziness, poor time management and lack of good academic writing skills (Selemani, Chawinga, & Dube, 2018). The plagiarism problem seen in students' work were unintentional and it was because of poor knowledge of plagiarism (Zafarghandi, 2012). This research will consist of the literature review carried out in order to understand some of the problems seen in students' academic writing by reading some journal articles and other sources. Also, this research will involve in knowing some of the problems seen in the students of CST especially in their academic writings.

The literature review carried out in the following section will help us to understand the existence of problems in students' academic work. And also, it will surface out some of the common problems seen in students' writings in and around various universities and colleges. This study will further help in determining some of the profound reasons that make the students to have those problems in their work. With the surface of those reason, it will help the teachers to better understand the situation faced by students and may be some will be in a better position to help students to improve in their academic writing by taking various measures.

2. Literature Review

The academic writings assigned to the students in schools, colleges and universities comes in various forms like writing essays, laboratory reports, reflective journal articles, project reports, assignments and many more. The prominent language used to do most of the academic writings are done using English. Alfaki (2015) conducted a study by selecting twenty random students from four different colleges and universities and were made to write a composition. The review made by ten English teachers found that the students' have various problems in their writings like language problems at the level of morphology and syntax, language usage errors, spelling, punctuation and capitalization mistakes, cognitive problems and graphomotor problems. As findings made by Alfaki (2015), the problems especially like syntax, punctuation, capitalization is commonly found in most of the universities, colleges and schools. Based on their findings, certain recommendations have been made to help solve the students' problem like making students to revise their written work read aloud so that this helps in correcting their punctuation, use of the dictionaries and spell checkers to improve their spelling mistakes and finally recommending students to read a lot so that their usage mistakes and grammar mistakes are reduced.

Another kind of problems seen in students' various academic writings is the paraphrasing. A sentence has to be restated in such a way that it is lexically and syntactically different, while remaining semantically equal (Pecorari, 2003). Badiozaman (2014) also found the same problem faced by the Malaysian students in his research conducted. He interviewed two students and could come up with challenges faced especially in paraphrasing the academic works like text comprehension and poor proficiency to referencing problems in their work. Moreover, there could be seen a very vast differences between the paraphrasing strategies used by a competent student compared to those with low proficiency level. The author recommends the student be given more of extensive writings so that they become familiar with the academic writings. Also, the teachers to design their teaching materials that will tailor the academic vocabulary. This can be done is almost all modules especially in English subjects.

Not only in the context of higher and tertiary education, lots of problems can be seen even with the postgraduate students' academic writings. Kotamjani, Sadam and Fahimirad (2018) conducted research and concluded in their research that the international postgraduate students have difficulties in writing coherent paragraph, paraphrasing, summarizing, appropriate application of lexical phrases, using proper vocabulary, and academic languages. They conducted a survey and the result showed that students face difficulty in academic writing especially in those contexts, so it is seen obvious that the tutors can see those types of problems in their writings.

A study was carried out by Mousavi and Naeni (2011) on Iranian postgraduate students studying in University Kebangsann Malaysia regarding the problems seen in their academic writing. The problems seen in students' work was in grammars, organization difficulties, giving ideas appropriately, vocabulary, punctuation and spelling. The majority of students amounting to 81% of them had faced these difficulties because of inadequate practice in writing. Pescante-Malimas and Samson (2017) also shows in their research that common problem made in students' thesis proposal is the linguistic error. The study collected the drafts of the thesis proposal of 32 students consisting from three different programs. The analysis was done and the result showed that grammatical, syntactical and mechanics/substance were the most common linguistic errors seen in students' work with the grammar being the main concern.

The serious and the most common problem that can be clearly observed in students' work is the contents of academic writing copied from the internet source without citing the source. (Conradson, & Hernandez-Ramos, 2004). A study conducted by Schulte (2002) shows that 62 percent of the 4500 students selected from 25 high schools have admitted in having cheated on their work and more than half had copied from the internet source directly without citing the source. A research conducted by Thomas (2001) found out that high school going students are found to be using net more to cheat in their work compared to those of college going students. His findings claim that around 15 to 20 percent of high-school students download and submit as their own work

which falls under a serious plagiarism. Conradson and Hernandez-Ramos (2004), in their work investigated and have seen that the students use internet to plagiarize their academic works. The authors recommend for the adoption of some software tools to combat the plagiarism.

The most popular problem seen in majority of students' work in various universities around the globe is the plagiarism that include paraphrasing without citing the sources, patch-writing, writing direct quotes without quotation marks (Zafarghandi, Khoshroo, & Barkat, 2012). Ellis, Zucker and Randall (2018) defined plagiarism as the practice of "presenting someone else's words or ideas as your own without appropriate attribution. A study by Selemani, Chawinga and Dube (2018) investigated postgraduate's students of Mzuzu University of Malawi regarding the plagiarism that they do in their work. The result showed that the plagiarism in their work include lack of proper acknowledgement, summarizing and use of quotation marks. As seen in many cases, students plagiarize the work because of laziness, poor time management, pressure for good grades, and most importantly due to lack of good academic writing skills (Kwong, Ng, Mark, & Wong, 2010).

Another study done by Silvana, Rullyana and Hadiapurwa (2018) revealed that the problem seen in students' work especially in higher education is the plagiarism in writing their final assignments. The research was conducted in 2017 and it showed that the students' plagiarized the work because of lack of knowledge about writing styles, limited time and availability of Information Technology facilities. On other hand, the lecturers seem to not have explained about it to their students nor they used any anti-plagiarism applications. A simple task of copy-paste, also known as plagiarism is practiced by students in most of their academic work. Nashruddin (2013), in his work happened to study the work done by students on their English assignments. He observed that the students' work was not good whereby majority of the task was a plagiarized one. As noticed by Resurreccion (2012), his study showed that the student plagiarized the work because of poor writing skills, not sure about citation and quotation rules (Nashruddin, 2013).

3. Methodology

The study conducted was intended to understand the various types of problems seen in students' academic related writings. This particular study involves the online survey using the purposive sampling method. The questionnaires were designed that includes a mixture of both open and closed ended questionnaires with the majority 80% encompassing of open-ended questionnaires. In order to get the best result from the study, the framed questionnaires underwent multiple revisions which could finally garner a short 7 questions that was then added in Google form. The questionnaire includes:

1. The types of academic writings that are provided to the students by the tutors.
2. Whether the tutors find any problems in their writings or not.
3. What are the common types of problems seen in their academic writings?
4. Do the tutors support or guide students to improve their academic writings after seeing the problems?
5. Do the tutors see any improvement in students' academic writings after correcting them or guiding them?
6. The suggestions/methods that can be used to help students to improve without any problems in academic writings/minimize the problems in their academic writings.

The questionnaire was shared to the responded through the group email by sending the links for them to respond. The time frame kept for the survey was approximately 4 weeks which ultimately could get a total of 34 tutors who participated in filling up the survey form.

Since the boundary of study is intended solely for the College of Science and Technology, the respondents were those faculties teaching various subjects in the college. The respondents for this study comprised of tutors with different academic background namely, civil engineering, electrical engineering, electronics and communication engineering, Information technology engineering, mathematics, science and arts. The college consists of five departments: Civil and Architecture Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Electronics and Communication Engineering, Information Technology and Science and Humanities and as per the Figure 1, almost all members of different departments have participated in the survey but with different proportions since all the members are not equally distributed in all the departments.

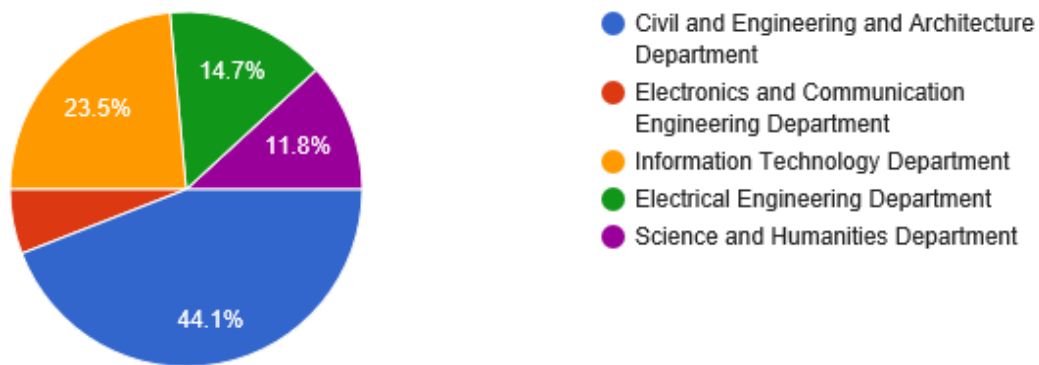


Figure 1. Departments in CST

4. Results and Discussions

As seen in the above literature, the state of art in CST also mentioned that they provide different kind of academic writings wherein 94.1% of them give assignments, 73.5% give to write project reports, 67.6% of them give to write laboratory reports, 38.2% give to write academic journal, 32.4% gives to write conference papers and a minimal percent of them give other writings like case study report, note sheets, and seminar reports as depicted in Figure 2. The faculties are providing students with the good mixture of various academic writings.

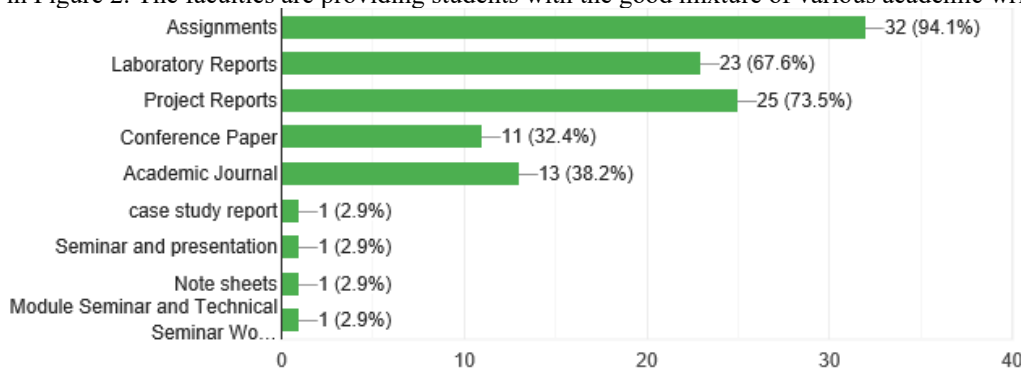


Figure 2. Types of Academic Writings

When surveyed about the problems in students' academic writing in the work that they provide, majority of the faculties that amounts to 94.1% of them have seen problems in students' academic writings as shown in the Figure 3. Only a very small percentage says that they either don't see any problems in their writings or they are not sure about it. This may indicate that the faculties are not taking the students' work seriously especially in terms of finding the problems and correcting them when they responded that they are not sure about it.

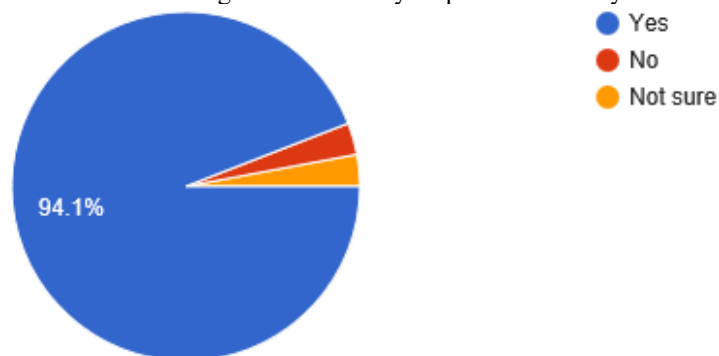


Figure 3. Existence of Problems in Students' Work in CST

As reflected in Figure 4, the common types of problems seen in students' academic writings are: 85.3% of them see plagiarized work, 64.7% observed students writing irrelevant and extra information, and 58.8% of them see grammar and punctuation mistakes in their work. 55.9% of them have observed problem in text structure, 26.5% of them have observed lexical difficulties, and 2.9% could see citation problems and 2.9% have seen problem in sentence making. From Figure 3, it is clear that the students in CST do have problems in their academic writings and the common types of problems seen are clearly depicted in Figure 4.

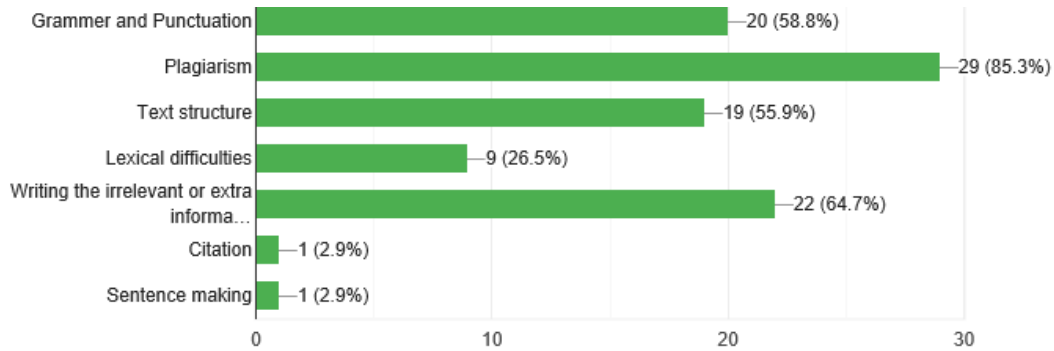


Figure 4. Types of Problems Seen in Students' Academic Writings in CST

When the problems are seen in students' work, it is the moral responsibility of a faculty to correct the problem and further, guide the students for the improvement. Around 82.4% of faculties responded 'yes' as shown in Figure 5, indicating that they try to help students in their own capable possible ways. A total of 17.6% of them have mentioned that they do help students occasionally and not all the time. This may be due to many other reasons like having heavy duties and extra work load that they need to render apart from teaching. From this analysis, it can be concluded that majority of the faculties are concerned about their students' writings and moreover, it is known that they are providing guidance and help to the students for their improvement.

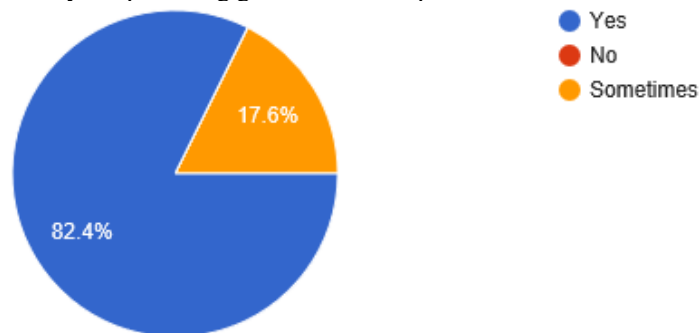


Figure 5. Guidance to the Students by Faculties

As depicted in Figure 6, it was observed by the faculties that majority of the students take the academic writing seriously and they try to improve in their writings by taking in the comments, guidance and help provided by the faculties in a positive way. As shown, 52.9% of them have mentioned that they could see improvement in students' writing after their help and guidance. 29.4% of them could see the improvement sometimes only whereas 11.8% of them are not sure about it. Only a minimal percent of 5.9% of them have not seen any improvements in their works. There is a need to put in more effort from students' side when they are provided with the help and guidance by the faculties if they want their academic related writings to be better.

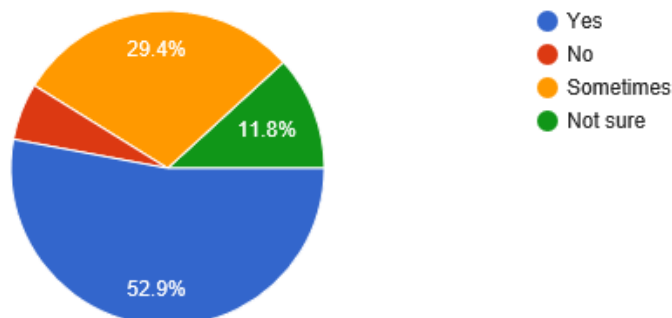


Figure 6. Improvement Seen in Students' Work

Like in other literature, the faculties of CST have also recommended some ways to help students in writing better academic writings. Some of them feel that the students should be given with the platform to write more of drafts before the final submission. The concerned faculty can then take a role to provide constructive feedback on their drafts and then make the students to write the final copy for the submission. Some felt that the students should be given a constant advance trainings or workshop in academic writings. Some even suggested that the students should be give more of writing activities frequently so they the can improve in their writings.

5. Conclusion

The study conducted with the survey in the College of Science and Technology has shown that many faculties offer different types of academic writing like assignments, project reports, research articles, essays, and many more. It is shown that, almost all the faculties give assignments to the students. According to the study, the types of problems include: grammatical error, paraphrasing, citation, plagiarism, punctuation, text structure, and many more in the students' academic writings. As per the literature study, it shows that the students face difficulties when writing because of lack of good understanding of academic writing, minimal writing habits, and few trainings on academic writing. Whereas in some cases, the reasons seen was due to students' laziness, poor time management and the fear to obtain good grade marks.

In the case of CST, the students are given guidance, support and help by the majority of faculties in different capacity they could. The result seen is that some students do not take the guidance positively and hence don't improve in their academic writings. Based on the literature review, we can recommend the faculties and administrations to look into such kind of issues and come up with ultimate better solutions so that we can minimize the problems and improve students' writings. Some of the solutions include: providing constant trainings on academic writing, reminding students about it in the classes, making students to write more, etc. Some of the faculties in CST recommend to allow students to submit drafts and give feedbacks before the submission of final work, providing more of writing assignments followed by constant feedbacks by the faculties and providing refresher courses on academic writings.

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