



Improving University Students' Writing Skills in Pakistan

María Isabel Maldonado García

University of Management and Technology, Pakistan

Abstract: The education system of Pakistan is not unified. Students mainly attend three types of schools with different languages as medium of instruction; private schools, public schools and religious schools (called locally madrassas). Even though mother tongue education is emphasized in education and literacy circles, Pakistan has not been able to implement policies that would allow all students to be taught in their mother tongue. Since mother tongue education (MLE) is not a reality, students have been facing many issues, especially in those regions of the country where Urdu is not spoken at home, rather a different regional language, dialect or language variety. A conference was held in Karachi, where data about the language situation of the country was collected at level one of the data collection and at level two, eighteen experts were interviewed, who provided a list of recommendations to address the matters found at level one, for the improvement of the writing skills of the students all over the country. The most important of these recommendations were to ensure that the students engage on enough writing practice and proper programs of instruction are set into place with properly trained instructors.

Keywords: Additive bilingualism; Language learners; Writing skills; Writing centers; Urdu/English bilinguals; Improving writing skills.

Introduction

The purpose of this article was to collect a set of recommendations with the purpose of improving the English language proficiency levels of the university students of Pakistan with focus on their writing skills, since this is how their knowledge in different subjects, not only language, is measured.

It is clear that academic success in any part of the world is directly related to the ability to read and write well. All over the world exams are conducted in written form, as well as assignments, projects, etc. In other parts of the world, for example in the USA, universities have what are called "writing centers." North (1984) states that writing centers have been the object of misunderstandings such as thinking that their purpose is to kind of "fix" students' writings. In fact, according to him, they are understood as a composition remedial resource for students "a pedagogy of direct intervention." However, the goal was "to produce better writers, not better writing."

Writing centers can be directed to different audiences. For example; there are centers for all school levels, middle, high, those in college, as well as university level students. Their source of funding varies as well. For example; some have received funds from foundations, other from schools or universities, other from private sources, grants, local communities' fundraisings, etc.

Students come to the writing center with a set of expectations. Some of them include achieving better

grades in a specific subject, through the improvement of their assignments or class papers. However, writing centers are usually very strict in their policies.

The process of reviewing a paper with a student has more to do with negotiation than with actually fixing the paper itself. According to Rafoth (2010) "conversation is the key idea behind writing centers." Furthermore, the writing process, according to him, is about confidence and being brave enough to show the writing to an audience, which takes courage.

He further points out the reasons why a student may visit the writing center. In this regard he states:

- a. "Writing is not easy and tutors can help. (It is pretty basic).
- b. Tutors are able to discuss writing in a way that moves you forward. They create idea-rich conversations.
- c. Writing center instill confidence that you are on the right track, or help you get there if you are not.
- d. Writers need readers" (Rafoth, 2010).

In general, students are really concerned about their course assignments and achieving good grades. For this reason, the students, all over the world, in their majority arrive to the writing center with an assignment that needs improvement. Tutors (also called consultants) are not supposed to write anything or make changes in the student's papers. This is why the tutors work with the students so that they are able to actually produce pieces of writing independently.

Linville (2009) mentions various goals for the student as well as for the tutor when revising a writing assignment. These are:

Table 1.

Goals for the Student and for the Tutor

Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▸ Acknowledge the need to become a proficient self-editor. ▸ Learn what your most frequent patterns of errors are. ▸ Learn to recognize these errors. ▸ Learn how to correct these errors
Tutor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▸ Teach the student how to become a proficient self-editor ▸ Learn how to diagnose frequent patterns of error. ▸ Learn how to correct (and teach students to correct) six major error types. ▸ Learn when to refer students elsewhere for more instruction.

Source: Editing Line by Line (2009)

Students who come to the job market are assessed by potential employers in large measure on their writing skills. This is done initially through an application for employment and a CV. Nevertheless, writing centers are important because:

1. The main purpose of the writing center is to provide students with the opportunity to improve their writing skills through the assistance of qualified personnel.
2. The large majority of office employees have some kind of writing responsibility.
3. The large majority of companies with great employment growth potential asses writing at the time of hiring.
4. At the time of promotion, a large number of companies consider the writing abilities of their employees.
5. In the era of globalization, writing is a valuable skill since communication is done through email and presentations are used in the large majority of company meetings.
6. Even before employees reach to a company, when they are students in a university, they will have a number of assignments for each of their subjects. In the large majority these assignments are usually written and in many occasions presented in front of the class.
7. The university exams are in their large majority taken in written form.

In relation to the above, Geiser and Studley (2001) state that someone's ability to compose a text is the best prediction tool for academic achievement, or success, during the first year of university.

A writing center is necessary in each university of Pakistan, since the writing center prepares the

students not only for academic success, but also for a future brilliant career. There is only one writing center in the country. That is the Ardashir Cowasjee Writing Center, in a reputed and famous independent university called Institute of Business Administration, Karachi. In Pakistan, the concept is quite innovative, since usually the task of improving student's writing is done through the English language departments of the universities in the country and universities do not wish to invest in a specific center for improving writing skills. For this purpose, the Ardashir Cowasjee Writing Center, Karachi held a conference in April, 2017 to address the writing issues of the students of Pakistan. To speak at the conference, eighteen experts (professors of English language, literature and linguistics) including the researcher, were called to express their points of view in regards to providing a set of guidelines towards the improvement of Pakistani student's writing skills.

Literature Review

When compared with other fundamental skills such as listening, speaking and reading, writing is the most difficult skill because it requires writers to have a great deal of lexical and syntactic knowledge, as well as principles of organization in L2 to be able produce a good writing (Tangpermpoon, 2008). It is indeed a fact that the level of language difficulty increases when writing.

Present day classroom practice has been influenced by L1 and L2 English language writing theories such as Crusius (1989), Grabe and Kaplan (1996), and others. Cognitive skills are influenced by writing so that when students write, they use analytic processes, as well as synthesis and inference, which are fundamental to the learning process of the students.

Various schools of thought have theories in regards to the writing approaches:

- “(1) the expressive school of thought (e.g. Moffet, 1968);
 (2) the cognitive school of thought (e.g. Britton *et al.*, 1975; Kinneavy, 1980);
 (3) the interactionists (e.g. Swales, 1990); and
 (4) the social constructivists (e.g. Halliday & Martin, 1993).”

According to Bacha (2002), these theories can be considered through the communication triangle proposed by Kinneavy (1971, 1980) comprised of the essentials of the writing process which are in his view the writer (encoder), the audience (reader or decoder) and the context (reality or truth):

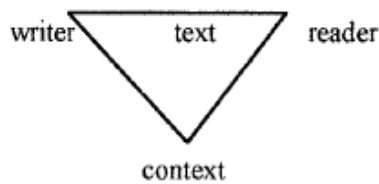


Figure 1. Communication triangle (Kinneavy, 1971, 1980)

Other theories have influenced the state of the art in regards to the improvement of English language writing in terms of L1, L2 and academic writing as well as content based writing. Although there is certain controversy in this regard (Horowitz, 1986; Braine, 1988; Sparck, 1988a, 1988b; Johns, 1998, etc.). Nevertheless, it is important to have in consideration the thinking process geared towards academic success since the students work towards this goal. There is a considerable amount of research in relation to this topic. (Vygotsky, 1962; Horowitz, 1986; Reid, 1993; Robinson, 1988; Swales, 1990; Johns 1988; Jordan, 1997, etc).

Recent studies conducted about the situation in Pakistan state that “In Pakistan there is a dire need of changing a conventional, unprofessional model of teaching of writing. Our students lag behind not due to ability, but owing to inadequate pedagogical approach.” (Haider, 2012). In addition, a study conducted in girls’ schools of Baluchistan (Rasheed, 2017) found that secondary teachers face various challenges in their classrooms, which are as stated before, multilingual. These challenges are the following:

a. multilingualism,

- b. weak linguistic background of the learners (this includes not understanding English, no exposure to English language, etc.),
 c. anxiety of the students due to their shyness and lack of confidence.
 d. syllabi issues (length and difficulty mainly)
 e. lack of English language teacher trainings, workshops and refresher courses.

In a multilingual area of Pakistan such as Baluchistan is an enormous challenge that makes it difficult for the teacher to cope with the continuous code-switching from English to Urdu, vice versa and sometimes the usage of local languages. Another study conducted in public colleges of Pakistan found that the “students at intermediate level in the state run colleges find it difficult to identify major parts of speech i.e. noun and verb.” (Imran *et al.*, 2016). A research conducted by Panhwar *et al.* (2017) concluded that the traditional methods of teaching English utilized in Pakistan and the lack of training of the teachers makes CLT difficult to use in the classrooms. Accordingly, these teachers should be trained to adapt CLT techniques for the improvement of their teaching skills. A research conducted at Lasbela University, concluded that the students feel anxiety when learning English language. (Gopang *et al.*, 2017).

In terms of the errors that Pakistani students make when writing English language Javed, Xiao Juan & Nazli (2013) conducted a study of students of tenth grade in Pakistan with the purpose of analyzing students writing skills and comparing the proficiency levels and types of errors in urban and rural students. The students of the urban areas showed better writing performance as compared to those of the rural areas.

Henry (2000) mentioned a list of micro-skills involved in the improvement of writing skills. Proficiency in mastering the micro-skills assists the writer in having a good command on correct writing without errors. The micro-skills mentioned by Henry are:

1. use the script, spellings and punctuations correctly.
2. apply the accurate words to state the right tense, case and gender.
3. make use of major components such as subject, verb and object etc.
4. appropriately which can convey the thought of writer clearly to the reader.
5. make the text coherent to make the reader understand easily.
6. place all parts of speech properly.

7. apply the vocabulary and terminologies appropriately.
8. use the style of writing suitably to the requirements of the audience.
9. clarify the central ideas from the sustaining information.
10. avoid from jargon, slang, taboos and keep in mind the standard of language
11. according to the mental level of the reader.
12. judge about the prior knowledge of the audience about the subject.”

A study conducted by Khan (2011) studied a focus group of teachers of English and the difficulties they faced while engaging their students in creative writing. They revealed that most of the teachers think the Lahore Board of Examinations most important flaw is that it does not measure the creativity of the students, the topics are given to the students and taken from textbooks, the same topics are given in the examinations. For this reason, the students are unable to write on topics that have not been studied on textbooks. In terms of feedback, the teachers pointed out that they correct errors but do not respond to what the students have written, neither offer encouragement to develop their writing skills.

Another study by Farooq, Hassan & Wahid (2012) revealed that the students of English language as an L2 think that their main problem is that their thought processes occur first in Urdu or their mother tongue, and then translate their thoughts to English language. However, the most serious problems Pakistani students face is the lack of vocabulary, L1 interference, and problems learning and applying grammar rules. The reason for this is the application of the traditional methods of language teaching (grammar-translation method). For them, the most complex of the four skills of language is, in fact, writing (This was confirmed by a study conducted by Dixon & Nessel (1983) where the researchers stated that writing is the most difficult of the four skills). In the study of Farooq et al., the researcher also gave recommendations for the improvement of English language writing after considering the situation that the students presented. The limitation of their 2012 study was that of the need for a study in terms of geographical area, since it only addressed two towns out of the nine towns of Lahore. In this regard, this study, even though it cannot address the issues of every single geographical area of the country, is more complete than the one conducted previously by them, since it includes a population of eighteen experts from different geographical areas of Pakistan, by which the five provinces of the country are represented. Until now, no study has addressed the global English

language needs of the students of Pakistan. These are based on the fact that for Pakistani students, English is a second language and while the schools of thought mentioned before talk about writing approaches, they do so from the point of view of students who write in their mother tongue. From the point of view of second language acquisition, the most up to date method of second language instruction is the Task Based Method (Harmer, 2001).

The problems the students of Pakistan face when writing in English language have been documented extensively in the studies mentioned above and many other dealing with error analysis of the students, motivation, anxiety, problems, etc. However, even though these studies provided some recommendations, they did so partially. Utilizing the experience of the experts of Pakistan, this research aims to find solutions to the problems the students are currently facing. This approach is grounded on the fact that it is the experts, who interact with the students and their problems every day and for this reason, they are the ones qualified to provide the best recommendations.

Methodology

The present study is aimed at determining an appropriate model for the improvement of the writing skills of students, mainly in English and Urdu languages, with the purpose of achieving a higher level of academic success in the country. In this regard, this study applied a sequential mixed methods approach to research to achieve the objectives; mainly descriptive and analytical quantitative and qualitative methods. For implementing the methodology, an analysis of the socio-linguistic factors that affect Pakistani students was taken into consideration and suggestions were given after the analysis of the available data. Classroom policy, as well as writing centers procedural policies, is very much influenced by the above mentioned theories. In this regard, Pakistani linguists, English language instructors, ESL certified professionals, writing center consultants as well as other language experts were requested to provide solutions to the writing problems of students in Pakistani Universities. The researcher had to provide solutions, as well as collect the recommendations proposed by other experts, which is part of the framework of this study.

Data Collection and Participants

The only writing center in Pakistan is the Ardeshir Cowasjee Writing Centre, located at Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Karachi, a public university of Pakistan. The center held a conference early last year (2017), where language experts of the country shared their expertise about the writing needs of Pakistani students.

The statistical data was collected from the available literature and official organizations of the country in the subject of the writing skills of Pakistan, challenges, issues, etc. This data was presented at the conference, which provided a clear spectrum of the problems Pakistan faces as a multilingual country. In the first stage of the methodology this data was presented to the experts.

In previous studies recommendations had been given for the improvement of writing of a certain group of students in a specific university or a specific geographic location. As in the studies mentioned earlier, a focus group of 18 experts was provided with the data collected at level 1 and through a group interview; they proposed a set of recommendations for the improvement of academic writing in Pakistan at level 2. This is based on the available literature, language data and discussion among the language experts from around the country that participated in the conference.

Research Questions:

The researcher was given the following guiding prompts, which are, in fact, our research questions for the collection of the recommendations:

1. What are the needs of second language learners in Pakistan for both English and Urdu as second languages?
2. What does SLA literature recommend for effective second language acquisition at the secondary level?
3. What are recommendations for developing an effective language model for L2 learning?
4. What are basic standards in language literacy that teachers must possess?
5. How should these be reflected in teaching standards?

On the basis of the above research questions the data was collected.

Ethical Considerations

The participants of the conference (experts, consultants and students) had been informed that the data collected would be used for the purpose of making recommendations for the improvement of the writing skills of the students of Pakistan. This statement was made public in prints of the program of the conference. The experts of the conference belong to various higher education institutions of Pakistan. Furthermore, the consultants and students also gave their views about what should and should not be done and were aware that recommendations would be given at the end. The experts, consultants and students provided these recommendations publically and for this reason the collection of data does not break any confidentiality law. The names of those participants have not been mentioned here, although it is public knowledge. In addition, a large portion of the recommendations came from the researcher since this person had been put in charge of collecting recommendations from the experts and providing additional ones.

Results

As stated before, the data collection was conducted at two different levels:

Level 1: Literacy percentages were collected as a whole, as well as reading proficiency percentages per class from grades 1 to 10. Writing percentages were not available since literacy in Pakistan is measured in terms of reading skills. Overall information about the language situation in the country was gathered to have a better global understanding of the national realities.

Level 2: Once the above mentioned information was collected, it was made available to the experts, who in turn provided a set of recommendations to address the current issues and the research questions.

Level 1

In Pakistan the issue of second language is of prime importance. With a variety of backgrounds students who come from a public school or madrasa background have more writing problems than others from private institutions. Blau & Hall (2002) establish that non-native English speakers (NNES) are indeed different from those students whose native language is English. They are different from the point of view of the tutor as well, as the tutoring that these

students need is very different from that of native English speakers (NES).

In Pakistan, a large number of students commit a series of errors due to mother tongue interference. Some of these errors are lack of articles when speaking or writing in English language, since in Urdu and other languages of Pakistan the definite article does not exist. A research that analyzed the types of errors committed by students resulted in the fact that the majority of the errors committed happened due to language interference. It also concluded on the fact that the lack of practice and adequate feedback on the part of the instructors slowed their L2 language proficiency development. Another important factor observed in the study was that the students actually felt a psychological distance between them and the L2 (Sarfraz, 2011).

In addition, when talking about second languages and tutoring, there is evidence the consultant (tutor, instructor) and the writer feel hesitant about the tutorial and how it should be conducted (Thonus, 2004). When speaking about Pakistan, for both the

consultant and the student, English may be a second language in a large majority of cases. Thonus (2004) has pinpointed similar patterns of tutorial exchanges for non-native speakers' needs and similar patterns of tutorial exchanges for native speakers' needs.

Especially in countries where universities' medium of instruction is English (and it is a second language for that society) there is a high level of importance for writing centers. Students reach the university or college from schools in which English may or may not be the medium of instruction.

The literacy rate of Pakistan is still an issue under debate. Efforts have been made under the current government of Pakistan to achieve an accurate census. These efforts are still ongoing and in the future they are meant to furnish a clearer picture about the real situation concerning literacy in the country. The census of 2005 revealed the following data (Choudhry, 2006):

Table 1.
Literacy Rates in Pakistan

Year	All Areas			Urban			Rural		
	Both genders	Male	Female	Both genders	Male	Female	Both genders	Male	Female
2004	54%	66.3	41.8	72.4	79.9	64	43.8	58.4	30

Pakistan does not have a homogeneous educational system. In fact, three types of education systems can be found:

- Private schools where the medium of instruction is English.
- Public schools where the medium of instruction is Urdu.
- Madrassas where the medium of instruction is Urdu.

The writing centers should be directed towards the last two types of schools if the task to be achieved is writing fluency in the English language.

Nevertheless, many students are unable to write properly in Urdu as well. It is most important due to the order of the Supreme Court in September 2015, Urdu has (after being the national language since the inception of Pakistan) now become the de-facto official language. For this reason, Urdu has been, is and will be, definitely, the medium of instruction in the public schools of the country (Maldonado García,

2016). The teachers employed in those public schools, usually, are the byproduct of the same system of education. Consequently, the situation it has become a vicious circle, where the teachers who are not fully proficient in Urdu, neither in English, are the ones in charge of the education of the young, who in the hands of these instructors are unable to achieve the proper academic and language goals. Since a percentage of them will become teachers as well, the inefficient system of education is being perpetuated.

To add to this, not being able to study through mother tongue medium of instruction (MLE), students struggle to learn Urdu and/or English languages. The fact that students are generally not fluent in these two languages, which are extendedly used as the medium of instruction throughout the country, adds to their inability to achieve high academic success in large percentages (Maldonado García, 2015). The reason is that language fluency and proficiency are necessary to understand and perform in any school subject. Without language ability, understanding of the material is impossible. In these cases, the students are

forced to memorize material which they will reproduce during examinations since they are not fluent in these languages.

Furthermore, those students who come from an Urdu medium of instruction face many academic problems when reaching University level, as the majority of the Universities of the country have English as the medium of instruction. In any case, even though the materials of the students are written in English, it has been noted that an elevated number of instructors teach in Urdu, Punjabi, or other regional or indigenous languages of the country. On the other hand, the examinations and project writing are still

done in English. These contradictions create problems for students.

In addition, the fact that assignments are of various natures, the students usually suffer from anxiety about writing papers and also experience less satisfaction with the writing process, which results in lower grades (Fritzsche et al., 2003).

The previous table showed that literacy is better in non-rural areas. The following table shows data from different types of school systems in the rural and urban areas:

Table 2

Learning Levels of Urdu, Sindhi and Pashto in Rural Areas of Pakistan in Public and Private Schools (2015). Class Wise % Children Who Can Read.

Class	Nothing	Letters	Words	Sentences	Story	TOTAL
1	31.0	41.2	20.1	4.6	3.1	100
2	10.2	27.1	42.3	14.0	6.5	100
3	5.1	13.7	37.4	27.9	15.9	100
4	2.7	6.6	23.7	32.7	34.2	100
5	1.8	3.9	13.6	25.5	55.2	100
6	1.4	2.6	3.5	20.9	66.6	100
7	1.3	1.7	5.6	15.5	75.8	100
8	0.9	1.0	3.3	12.3	82.4	100
9	1.0	0.6	1.4	8.2	88.8	100
10	1.0	0.4	1.1	5.6	91.9	100

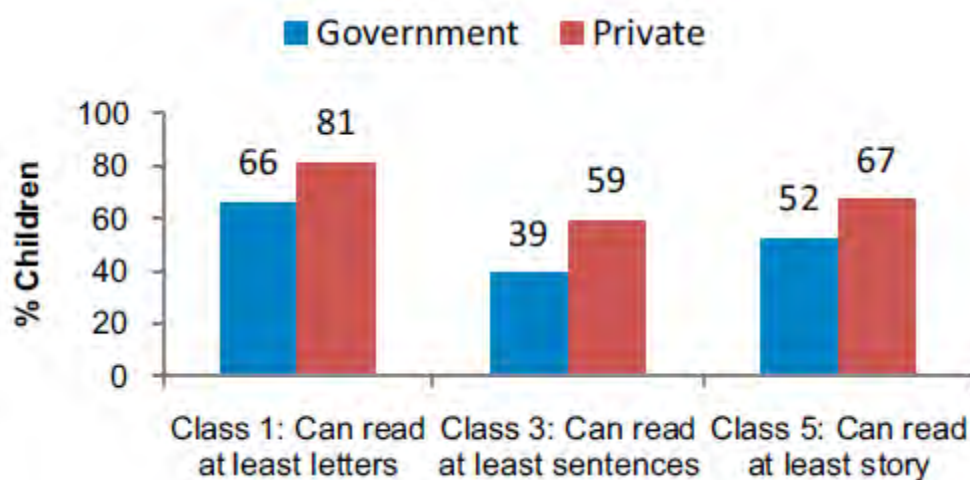


Figure 2. Learning Levels by School Type- Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto (ASER, 2015)

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2014) showed that in class 5, 55.2 % of the students were able to read a story. This level is very low as by this age (10-11 years old) all students should be able to read a complete story. Nevertheless, this is an improvement from the report of 2014 which stated

that 46.4% of children in rural areas were able to read a story in grade 5. The report of 2015 shows slow improvements in all grades which is encouraging. By grade 10 the report shows that 91.9% of children are able to read stories as compared to 88.8% in 2014.

These figures are for the national and two regional languages. Punjabi is not a medium of instruction in Punjab so it is not included in the report. There are no figures for Balochi as well.

However, the level of English language proficiency is different in the rural areas:

Table 3

Learning Levels of English in Rural Areas of Pakistan in Public and Private Schools (2015). Class Wise % Children Who Can Read.

Class	Nothing	Letters		Words	Sentences	TOTAL
		Capital	Small			
1	36.3	28.7	21.8	8.8	2.4	100
2	15	22.4	35.5	21.7	5.4	100
3	8.1	11.3	32.3	34.9	13.5	100
4	4.4	6.0	20.7	39.8	29.1	100
5	3.0	3.3	12.0	31.9	48.8	100
6	2.2	1.9	7.2	24.3	64.4	100
7	1.8	1.2	5.1	18.3	73.6	100
8	1.1	0.8	3.6	13.5	80.9	100
9	1.3	0.5	2.3	8	87.9	100
10	1.4	0.4	2	5.2	91.1	100

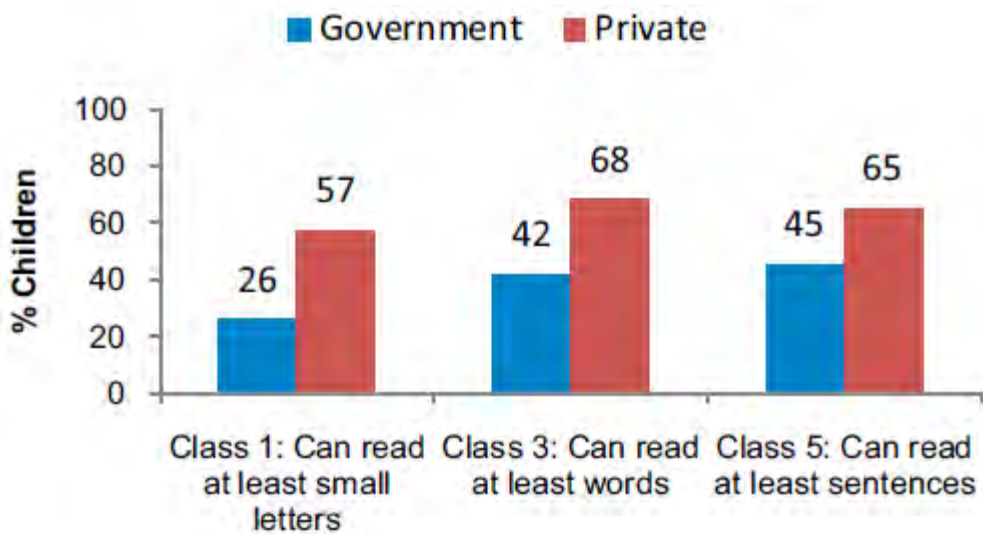


Figure 3. Learning Levels by School Type -Rural (ASER, 2015)

According to the Annual Status of Education Report, the learning of English is, in fact, disadvantaged as compared to that of Urdu, Sindhi and Pashto as the students of 10th grade are seemingly unable to read stories and 91.1 they are just able to read sentences.

An improvement in this regard has been noticed from 2014 where 88.3% of the students of English language in grade 10th were able to read sentences only.

Table 4

Learning Levels of Urdu, Sindhi and Pashto in Urban Areas of Pakistan in Public and Private Schools (2015). Class Wise % Children Who Can Read.

Class	Nothing	Letters	Words	Sentences	Story	TOTAL
1	13.5	44.1	31.2	8.3	2.9	100
2	6.0	21.6	43.2	19.4	9.7	100
3	33	7.2	34.9	30.2	24.3	100
4	25	3.0	18.1	33.5	42.9	100
5	26	1.8	10.9	26.9	57.8	100
6	0.9	1.5	5.6	15.5	76.5	100
7	1.3	1.6	6.6	13.1	77.5	100
8	0.4	0.2	2.9	8.5	87.9	100
9	0.3	0.5	1.7	5.7	91.8	100
10	0.1	2.3	1.8	5.4	90.5	100

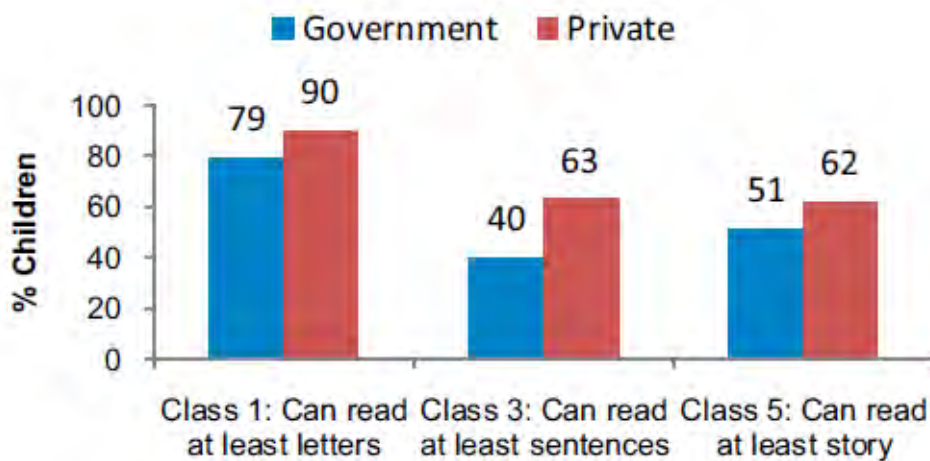


Figure 4. Learning Levels by School Type-Urdu, Sindhi, Pashto (ASER, 2015)

In this case, Annual Status of Education Report mentions that 57.8 % of the students of 5th grade are able to read stories as compared to 60.3% in 2014. There has been a decline in the percentage in the span of one year. In the students of 10th grade the figures for 2017 are 90.5% as compared to 2014 which was 92.2%. In the urban areas the learning curve has declined as compared to the rural areas which showed improvement.

As it can be seen in the above table 60.3% of children in 5th grade and 92.2% of children in 10th grade are able to read stories in Urdu, Sindhi and Pashto according to the medium of instruction in their province.

Table 5

Learning Levels of English in Urban Areas of Pakistan in Public and Private Schools (2015). Class Wise % Children Who Can Read.

Class	Nothing	Letters		Words	Sentences	TOTAL
		Capital	Small			
1	14.7	27.7	33.9	19.5	4.1	100
2	5.9	16.7	32.2	35.1	10.1	100
3	3.2	7.6	21.8	42.0	25.4	100
4	1.4	4.2	9.9	40.3	44.2	100
5	2.0	4.0	6.4	28.1	59.5	100
6	0.8	2.4	3.4	12.9	80.6	100
7	0.7	4.5	5.5	11.1	78.2	100
8	0.2	1.2	2.6	6.7	89.3	100
9	0.6	0.4	2.2	4.2	92.6	100
10	0.2	0.7	4.0	5.2	90.0	100

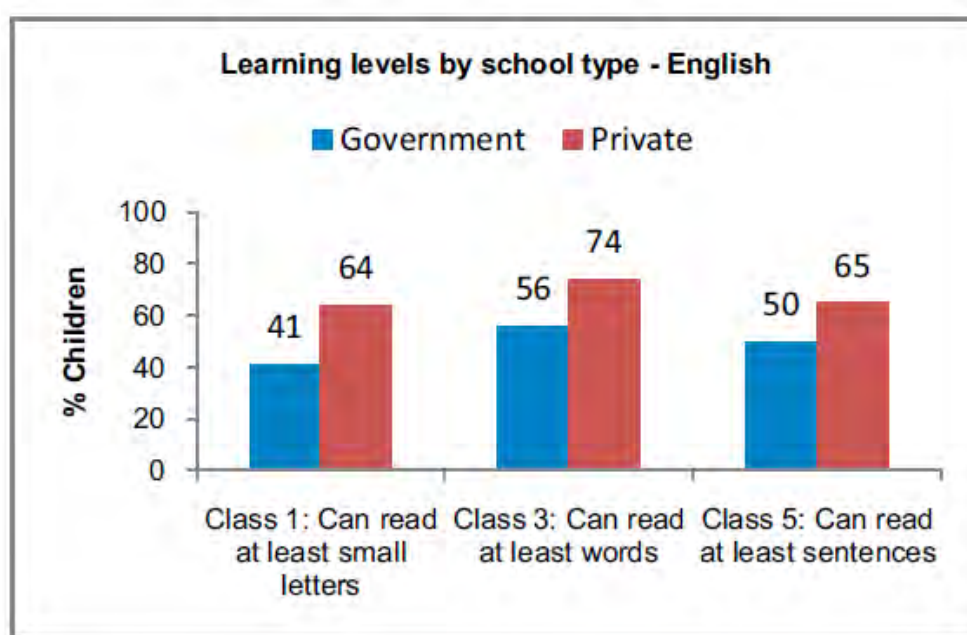


Figure 5. Learning Levels by School Type - English (ASER, 2015)

The Annual Status of Education Report states that the same is the case of the English language learning curve. In 2015, 59.5% of the students of 5th grade were able to read sentences as compared to 55.8% of the 5th graders in 2014 which shows improvement. On the other hand, the 90% of the 10th graders were able to read sentences in 2015 as compared to 92.1% in 2014. This shows a decrease in the learning curve for grade 10th.

These are the same students which will enroll in universities later on and pursue academic degrees which will be taught in English language. If they are unable to read stories, we can predict that the level of

difficulty in writing academic papers and studying in a foreign language will increase considerably.

In order to provide answers for the research questions the experts provided the following answers in the form of recommendations:

Level 2

The purpose of this paper is to provide recommendations as to improve the language skills of Pakistani students according to their own context, which is different depending on the area they live in. For example, a student who lives in Lahore will have better resources to learn English language in the city

than a student that comes from Balochistan since the availability of English language resources in that area of the country is scarce. In this regard there is not a homogeneous environment or background the students come from like in other countries. Rather, Pakistan has 74 mother tongues (and not everyone speaks the national language of Pakistan, Urdu). The recommendations provided are aimed to provide changes from the point of view of the schools, colleges and universities, having in mind the ground realities of the Pakistani education system.

Discussion

These recommendations have addressed the needs of the language learners of Pakistan according to the type of school they have attended or are attending. It has also provided an effective second language acquisition model at primary and secondary levels for addressing the four skills of language, with focus on writing and preparing the students before they reach the university. This model is geared to ensure that the students are well prepared in terms of writing skills before their admission in a higher education institution and the graduate program of their choice. Ensuring that the students are engaged in the improvement of their language skills from primary to secondary levels will naturally result in an improvement of their writing skills through intensive writing practice. Furthermore, the Task Based Method is an appropriate pedagogical model to achieve the writing objectives of the students for English and Urdu languages in the three different types of schools of the country because it addresses language knowledge through daily activities that are not related to language, like giving and asking directions, going shopping, renting an apartment and many other. Addressing these needs will create a homogeneous background of the students when they reach university level. At the moment, the private schools are creating elite students who are able to compete better for jobs and in the international market, while the students of the madrassas and public schools are unequipped for such tasks. This results on a large section of the population that is unable to compete in academics and later on in the professional arena, where the jobs are given to those who have a better proficiency in English language. This proficiency is obvious during the CV review process, as well as during the interview process.

It was also observed that the lack of effective methodologies for teaching second language and the absence of training of the instructors were largely at

fault for the failure of the students in achieving language proficiency. The study provided recommendations to address these issues and set guidelines for the improvement of the proficiency levels and training of the instructors.

In terms of teaching standards, the six levels of the European Framework for Languages should be completed before enrollment in a professional study program. In addition, a certain level of proficiency in English language will be required for university admission. With all of these processes in place, the proficiency levels of the students will increase which will naturally result in an improvement of the writing skills.

Conclusion

The data obtained indicates that academic failure in Pakistan is due, in its great majority, to a weak ability and proficiency in language. The reason has a lot to do with poorly managed programs of instruction, lack of training of the second language teachers, the application of old methods of teaching second languages, which lack pedagogy and do not target the four language skills, etc.

The recommendations given in this paper will contribute towards the alleviation of this pandemic. Understanding the nature of the reality at hand is important and accordingly, the implementation of the above listed measures is directed towards assisting in improving a situation which is difficult but can be corrected to a large extent if the recommendations are implemented for extended periods of time.

Changes in the national curriculum are very necessary for the improvement of the language literacy of Pakistani students, which will further enhance students' writing skills with extra practice, if combined with the recommendations provided in this paper. Improvement at a large scale, throughout the country is possible if planned properly and the suggested recommendations are implemented. It is of major importance for the future of Pakistani society that the language issues that faces be resolved with urgency.

Recommendations

1. What are the needs of second language learners in Pakistan for both English and Urdu as second languages?

Primary and middle schools:

As stated before the education system of Pakistan has three types of schools:

1. **Private**- Usually English medium, where Urdu is taught as a subject.
2. **Public**- Usually Urdu is the language of instruction and English is introduced at some point as a subject or medium of instruction.
3. **Religious schools or Madrassas**- where Urdu is the medium of instruction and students also learn Arabic well but the English language is ignored.

The first type of school needs assistance in Urdu language instruction as students can speak and write English well for the Cambridge examinations, but Urdu, the national and official language of Pakistan is taught as a subject. This type of school creates individuals motivated internationally but less in touch with the national reality, and fluent in English language but less in Urdu. Since this may be a language spoken at home, but not utilized as the medium of instruction, usually the writing skills of these students are less developed than English language skills.

In the public schools, the students are neither able to write or speak Urdu or English well. This type of school mass-creates (because the majority of students of Pakistan attend this type of school) students who, if not polished later in their life in any of these two languages or both, will be academically and professionally crippled. The reason is that although they may be fluent in Urdu language, their writing skills may lack and since English language may be taught as a subject, they would also not be fluent in this language as the above tables reflect. The schools need assistance in increasing the proficiency of the students in Urdu, as well as English language.

In the religious schools, the students become very proficient in Urdu language but the teaching of English language is ignored, which in turn produces students in touch with religion but not with technology, science, or a global international reality where they can compete professionally.

A model that would address the need of the students of these three types of schools is urgently needed.

2. What does SLA literature recommend for effective second language acquisition at the secondary level?

In terms of second language acquisition, SLA literature states that the most up to date method for teaching languages is the Task Based Instruction method, a branch of the communicative method, popularized by Prabhu (Harmer, 2001). This method is based on the pedagogy of the communicative method and it includes task performance according to specific situations that can occur in real life. Through learning how to solve problems in the L2, students learn the language. As the level of difficulty of the problems increases, the tasks are adapted towards the solutions of the problems and the proficiency in the second language increases as well. This is the methodology adopted by the European Framework for Languages.

3. What are recommendations for developing an effective language model for L2 learning?

According to the experts, adapting the Task Based method to the environment of the students of Pakistan includes:

1. **To develop materials for Urdu language according to the European Framework for languages** (the Chinese have copied this model very effectively and opened more than 500 Chinese language institutes all over the world in the span of ten years), thus creating levels of A1, A2 (basic levels), B1, B2 (intermediate levels) and C1, C2 (advanced and native levels). In this manner, the students of the private English medium schools will be targeted and can become in touch with the national reality of their own country. In addition, although the majority of the private school students may speak Urdu at home, they are less familiar with putting their thoughts in writing since their writing skills are less developed. The model will address this problem providing extensive writing practice, which is very much needed.
2. **This model can also be effective for the students of the public schools** as these materials are also available for English language and taught effectively all over the world. So, both languages will be taught through the same pedagogical method.
3. The Madrassas are usually unregulated bodies. However, the **Education Ministries can start recognizing and regulating these schools and including the study of English language** by

providing some type of incentives to them so they are motivated to include it in the syllabi.

The previous model will ensure a uniform level of language acquisition throughout all types of schools and provide a base for future reforms of the national curriculum in terms of language teaching. It will also assist students in those areas of the country where they are taught using their mother tongue and through a method of translation into Urdu or English such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan.

By using this model, the students will reach university level with a better level of Urdu as well as English languages.

4. What are basic standards in language literacy that teachers must possess?

1. School and university teachers of English language should have a minimum of a B2 level of English language certified by an official institution apart from the relevant degree from an HEC (Higher Education Commission of Pakistan is the body that regulates university programs) recognized degree awarding institution.
2. For the teachers of other subjects, a B1 level of English language will be required.
3. For the teachers of the Urdu language as a subject in schools or in the Universities' Urdu departments the proficiency level required in Urdu will be of C2 (native).
4. All instructors and consultants of English and Urdu should be members of the Linguistic Association of Pakistan, so that under one proper forum all issues of importance can be addressed and collective corrective action could be taken. This would also ensure a variety of suggestions from the experts all over Pakistan and abroad.
5. How should these be reflected in teaching standards?

At primary and secondary levels:

1. Better trained language instructors mean better instruction processes for the students.
2. In terms of teaching standards, the six levels of the European Framework for Languages should be completed before university admission.

At university level:

1. The writing centers or language departments will make it possible to belong for people who are actually left out through the process of writing improvement and will provide enough writing practice so that the students feel comfortable writing their own university projects of any subject.

2. In terms of pedagogical relevance some writing centers and English departments provide a one format type of assistance for all. However, students have shown different levels of proficiency and for this reason writing centers or university departments should not only perform proficiency tests, but also **offer individualized attention to each student** as each one will present different issues with their writing skills (Cawasjee Ardashir Writing Center is already providing this type of attention).

3. The role of **the writing center or English department is a place of growth for the student**. Students should be encouraged to seek assistance, rather than being taken as a remedial type of a system. The instructors should encourage this pattern of thought for the promotion of the writing centre.

4. Writing pedagogy is more challenging in an L2. Students who have a different L1 will suffer from different writing problems in their L2. **These types of students require different specialized attention and specific teaching methodologies** than students who have to write in their L1. Instructors or consultants should ensure these methodologies are implemented and if they required training they should consult the Dept. of English language of the university or LAP for assistance if the department is unable to provide this assistance.

5. An important suggestion given during the Conference was to **start department of linguistics in all universities of the country**. This was also a suggestion at the ICLAP 2016 Conference at University of the Punjab. It is the need of the day.

6. The writing centers and/ or English departments should allow the students to express themselves without worrying about the biases of the readers, **allowing freedom of expression**. This should also be extended to the university teachers who correct papers; they should also encourage and promote freedom of expression in writing as well as orally. In addition to the previous recommendations, the following were given as well:

Installations and programs for students:

The universities of Pakistan are generally using English as the medium of instruction. Although in many cases teaching is done in Urdu, Punjabi or a language the student can understand. In this regard:

1. **All universities could have writing centers** or specialized departments for improving writing skills in Urdu and English languages. At the moment, the concept of the writing center is mostly unknown in Pakistan. This sole fact is already an impediment towards the creation of writing centers in the universities of the country. Another fact is that the management of universities relies on the English language departments of their institutions. However, they do not realize that assistance in language instruction is the need of all of the students, regardless the department they study in and the program they are studying while the English departments cannot fulfill the writing needs of the students of all departments of the university. The creation of writing centers in Pakistan is usually viewed as another expense for the university, rather than a center which will alleviate and solve the writing problems of the students and that needs to be independent from the English departments.
2. **Initiating a platform** for more frequent, formal and informal, interaction between the existing writing centers and also with the institute that might consider offering such an academic support to their students. Such a platform can be a national Writing Centers' Association with chapters in every province.
3. At initial levels, for admission in Universities a **6.5 IELTS band or A2 level of English** language can be required. When the program

improves, this band can be elevated progressively to 7, 7.5 or B1.

4. The writing centers could have the function of performing **proficiency tests for Urdu and English languages** and ensure corrective action for the improvement of grammar and vocabulary. These proficiency exams can be taken by British Council or by the university at the time of admission.
5. If a student fails to achieve or prove the required proficiency at the time of admission, **he or she will be required to achieve this proficiency within the first year of his or her degree** until the school program is at a level that can provide students with the required proficiency.
6. Once proficiency has been achieved (although this make take one or two years) **students should be polished on the following tasks:**
 - a. The ability to write effective academic papers.
 - b. The ability to prepare effective presentations.
 - c. The ability to write effective letters and business documents.
 - d. The ability to write an effective curriculum vitae (although the Career Development Centre of the university can perform this task as well, given the fact they have qualified staff for this purpose).
7. All university programs and degrees **will have a compulsory course in the first year for academic writing in English**. If students after taking the course need further assistance, a second course in the second semester can be included.
8. These courses can be helpful as well for international students whose mother tongue is not English.

References

- ASER. (2015). Annual status of education report. Retrieved from [http:// http://asERPakistan.org/report](http://http://asERPakistan.org/report)
- ASER (2014) Annual status of education report. Retrieved from [http: http://asERPakistan.org/report](http://http://asERPakistan.org/report)
- Adam, J. (2009). Engaging Students in Writing Labs: An Empirical Study of Reading and Commenting on Student Papers. *International Journal of Education*, 1(1), 1-9.
- Bacha, N. N. (2002). Developing learners' academic writing skills in higher education: A study for educational reform. *Language and Education*, 16 (3), 161-177.
- Blau, S. & Hall, J. (2002). Guilt-Free Tutoring: Rethinking How We Tutor Non-Native-English-Speaking Students. *The Writing Center Journal*, 23(1), 23-44.

- Braine, G. (1988). A reader reacts... TESOL Quarterly, 22 (4), 700–709.
- Britton, J. et al. (1975). The Development of Writing Abilities. Houndmills: Schools Council Research Studies, Macmillan Education. 11–18
- Clark, I. L., Healy, D. (1996). Are writing centers ethical? WPA. 20 (1/ 2).
- Choudhry, M. A. (2006). Pakistan: where and who are the world's illiterates. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Paper commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006, Literacy for Life.5.
- Crusius, T.W. (1989). Discourse: A Critique and Synthesis of Major Theories. New York: Modern Language Association of America.
- Dixon, C. N., & Nessel, D. D. (1983). Language experience approach to reading and writing: Language experience reading for second language learners. Hayward, CA: Alemany Press.
- Farooq, M. S., Uzair-Ul-Hassan, M. & Wahid, S. (2012). Opinion of Second Language Learners about Writing Difficulties in English Language. A Research Journal of South Asian Studies, 27 (1), 183-194.
- Grabe, W. and Kaplan, R. (1996). Theory and Practice of Writing. London: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Geiser, S., & Studley, R. (2001). UC and the SAT: Predictive validity and differential impact of the SAT and SAT II at the University of California. Retrieved from http://web.stanford.edu/~rag/ed351B/sat_study.pdf
- Gopang, I. B., Ansari, S., Kulsoom, U., & Laghari, A. (2017). An Empirical Investigation of Foreign Language Anxiety in Pakistani University. International Journal of English Linguistics, 7(2), 21.
- Haider, G. (2012). Teaching of Writing in Pakistan: A Review of Major Pedagogical Trends and Issues in Teaching of Writing. Journal of Educational and Social Research, 2(3), 215-25.
- Halliday, M.A.K. and Martin, J.R. (1993). Writing Science: Literacy and Discursive Power. London: Falmer.
- Harmer, J. (2001). *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (3rd ed.). Essex: Pearson Education.
- Henry, J. (2000). Writing workplace cultures: An archeology of professional writing. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Horowitz, D.M. (1986). What Professors Actually Require: Academic Tasks for the ESL Classroom. TESOL Quarterly, 20 (3), 445–62.
- Imran, M., Asgher, T., & Ghani, M. (2016). A Study on Science Students' Understanding of Three Lemmas: State Verb, Action Verb and Noun in the State Run Colleges in Pakistan. International Journal of English Linguistics, 6(5), 121.
- Javed, M., Xiao Juan, W. & Nazli, S. (2013). A Study of Students' Assessment in Writing Skills of the English Language. International Journal of Instruction, 6 (2), 129-144.
- Johns, A.M. (1988). Another reader reacts . . . TESOL Quarterly, 22 (4), 705–7.
- Jordan, R.R. (1997). English for Academic Purposes: A Guide and Resource Book for Teachers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Khan, H. I. (2011). Testing Creative Writing in Pakistan: Tensions and Potential in Classroom Practice. International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 1 (15), 111-119.
- Kinneavy, J.L. (1980). A Theory of Discourse. New York: Norton.
- Fritzsche, B., Young, R. , Hickson, B., Kara C. (2003). Individual differences in academic procrastination tendency and writing success. Personality and Individual Differences, 35, 1549-1557.

- Linville, C. (2009). Editing line by line. In S. Bruce & B. Rafoth (Eds.), *ESL writers: A guide for writing center tutors* (2nd ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers. 116–131
- Maldonado García, M. I. (2015). Reforming the National Curriculum: Teaching the National and Provincial Languages of Pakistan. *Journal of Elementary Education*, 25 (2), 73-87.
- Maldonado García, M. I. (2016). Debate on Urdu as the Official Language of Pakistan: English versus Urdu. *Almas* 18, 700-712.
- Moffet, J. (1968). *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- North, S. M. (1984). The Idea of a Writing Center. *College English*, 46 (5), 433-446.
- Panhwar, A. H., Baloch, S., & Khan, S. (2017). Making Communicative Language Teaching Work in Pakistan. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 7(3), 226.
- Rafoth, B. (2010). Why Visit Your Campus Writing Center? *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, 1, 146-155.
- Rasheed, S., Zeeshan, M., & Zaidi, N. A. (2017). Challenges of Teaching English Language in a Multilingual Setting: An Investigation at Government Girls Secondary Schools of Quetta, Baluchistan, Pakistan. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 7(4), 149.
- Sarfraz, S. (2011). Error Analysis of the Written English Essays of Pakistani Undergraduate Students: A Case Study. *Asian Transactions on Basic & Applied Sciences*, 1 (3), 38.
- Sparck, R. (1988a). Initiating ESL students into the academic discourse community; How far should we go? *TESOL Quarterly*, 22 (1), 29–51.
- Sparck, R. (1988b). The author responds to Johns . . . *TESOL Quarterly*, 22 (4), 707–8.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tangpermpoon, T. (2008). Integrated Approaches to Improve Students Writing Skills for English Major Students. *ABAC Journal*, 28 (2), 1-9.
- Thonus, T. (2004). What are the differences? Tutor interactions with first- and second- language writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 13, 227-242.
- Ziegler, N. (2009). Launching a Writing Center: A Practical Possibility. *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*, 25 (1), 8.

Author Contact Information:

María Isabel Maldonado García
 Department of English Language and Literature
 University of Management and Technology, Pakistan
Spanishprofessor1@gmail.com

Please Cite: Maldonado García, M. I. (2018). Improving university students writing skills in Pakistan. *The European Educational Researcher*, 1(1), 1-16. doi: 10.31757/euer.111

Received: March 26, 2018 ▪ Accepted: May 24, 2018