



Challenges Kazakhstani Master's Students Face in Using English Language Sources

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Abstract This article considered the issues of the use of English language sources by master's degree students in Kazakhstan. The aim of this study was to identify the challenges master's students face when using sources and provide recommendations for improvement. A questionnaire was used with a total of 85 respondents. The study provided an overview of the most common barriers to using sources encountered by master's students and highlighted the importance of overcoming these challenges in order to improve the quality of their research and writing. The research found that master's students frequently struggle to identify relevant and reputable sources, as well as to select them, and have weaknesses in finding controversies while working with sources. It is also difficult for master's students to properly integrate sources into their own work. The challenges of the study's findings are presented in detail in the article. The article provides recommendations for improving master's students' source use skills.

Keywords: *Source use, Challenges, Kazakhstan, Master's students, Academic writing*

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1. Introduction

For master's students around the world, the ability to interact with source materials is one of the crucial academic skills. The use of sources is an important yet challenging feature of academic writing. It is difficult and complex but “develops strategically and progressively during academic studies” (Cumming et al., 2016, p. 47). Incorrect use of sources hinders interaction with scientific knowledge in a given field, formation of critical analysis skills, and finally, improvement as an individual writer with an individual worldview and “constructing an authorial voice” (Sun & Soden, 2021), which “indicates advanced writing proficiency” (Dartey, 2020, p. 152). It also leads to breaches of academic integrity, such as plagiarism, which is an unacceptable way to use sources.

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Very little domestic research in Kazakhstan has focused on the problems of master's students' source use skills as related to the use of sources in English. For example, Tajik et al. (2022) found that Kazakhstani University students lack the necessary linguistic proficiency and academic literacy to understand, analyze, and synthesize academic literature and write up their research. Odanova and Moldabaeva (2022) note that there is no consideration of the optimal ways of compiling academic writing, namely research into the use of sources in the Kazakh language. There are still many unresolved issues related to the English language barrier, lack of indexing status of local journals, and poor topical education on science writing, editing, and using sources by properly citing and referencing them, lack of ability to synthesize reading materials (Yergaliyeva et al., 2023; Yessirkepov et al., 2015).

Kazakhstan is a developing country that needs specialists who not only speak general English but are also proficient in academic English as the language of science (Goodman, 2022). Knowledge of academic English is a key factor for the development of science with "highly professional" experts (Cis-Legislation, 2023). The use of academic English enables scholars to access research findings, which are necessary to further propel the development of science. Moreover, having experts who are good at academic English contributes to the implementation of the main directions of development of higher education and science set by the government of Kazakhstan, promoting innovation, creating new jobs, increasing competitiveness in the global economy, etc. (Cis-Legislation, 2023).

Academic writing, within which the use of sources in English is a key component, is taught as part of the "English (professional)" course for master's students of non-linguistic specialties in Kazakhstan. The course provides instruction and practice in developing the academic writing and research skills of master's students. During the course, students receive academic writing instruction and some experience in working with sources and writing elements of an article. The course engages master's students in developing and expanding skills necessary for writing reports, articles, projects, and dissertations in English. In addition, they practice other skills such as critical thinking, analysis, note-taking, developing research questions, etc. The course takes one semester (15 weeks) and provides 4 ECTS credits. The course is taught in English and combines practical classes with independent learning. Master's students are expected to have English language skills at level B2+ or higher in terms of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Master's students take this course in order to become competent in writing scientific papers. The following scholars considered academic writing in their studies: Zhang et al. (2023) note that writing a thesis in English is an especially complex task for students who have less experience in academic writing or searching independently for academic resources. Goodman and Montgomery (2020) observed that Kazakhstani students "applied academic skills learned in English" (p. 1). Hajar and Mhamed (2021) reported that "the number of multilingual students writing their master's theses in English is increasing" (p. 187). However, there are insufficient studies related to the use of sources by master's students. Despite the fact that the course has a lot of benefits, there are different challenges that master's students encounter when using sources. Thus, the purpose of our study is to illuminate the challenges master's students face when using sources and try to give some recommendations for improving the use of sources by master's students. Consequently, the research questions of the study are as follows.

- 1) What challenges do master's students face when using sources?
- 2) What support could be presented to increase master's students' ability to use sources?

2. Theoretical Framework

Nowadays, the ability to use sources in a thoughtful and ethical manner is considered to be the new literacy for all students, irrespective of their language backgrounds (Wette, 2019). Writing based on sources is regarded as a requisite threshold ability for students to pursue academic studies successfully in a second language context (Zhou et al., 2022).

The use of sources is the process of reading and comprehending scholarly theory, research, and/or primary sources and then integrating relevant content into one's own text through paraphrasing and conventional citation practice (Cumming et al., 2016; Davis, 2013; Wette, 2019). The use of sources is considered to consist of "choosing relevant ideas from the source texts" (Zhou et al., 2022, p. 1).

According to Sun et al. (2022), the use of sources is a complex task involving a range of interrelated skills. It requires students not only to understand the content of the texts but also to distinguish between opposing points of view presented in the texts, as well as to formulate their own points of view on the content. When analyzing these papers, it becomes obvious that students' interrelated skills relevant to the use of sources are still important issues, and there are more unanswered questions.

Let's begin with Thompson's question, "How do students know which authors to select or what kind of source materials to use?" (Thompson et al., 2013, p. 99). Of course, we could use an accurate understanding of source information (Doolan, 2021; Neumann et al., 2020) or an understanding of how and why to cite (Davis, 2013) as the answer to the question. However, Doolan (2021) points out that integration of source material into writing is a difficult task for native speakers (L1), which obviously becomes even more difficult in a second language. For instance, L2 learners might struggle with their low English proficiency or insufficient linguistic knowledge (Chen & Wang, 2022; Liu et al., 2016) and linguistic competencies (Kushkimbayeva et al., 2023).

Another question is connected with referencing styles and conventions (Sun & Soden, 2021), i.e., how writers acknowledge the author they refer to. It is worth noting that researchers discuss the citation practices of students (Wette, 2019) focusing on multiple perspectives (Lee et al., 2018) of master's students' skills of selecting and incorporating source materials into their own writing as novice writers, e.g., when paraphrasing with minimal quotations (Cumming et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2018; Sun et al., 2022; Wette, 2017; Zhou et al., 2022), because the integration of sources (citing, paraphrasing, and quoting) and source material selection support novice writers' goals effectively (Zhang et al., 2023). Moreover, one of the key features of the use of sources is the interaction between the writer and the experts, i.e., proper usage of reporting verbs (Liardét & Black, 2019) and improving master's students' authorial stance (Liardét & Black, 2019; Zhang, 2023), i.e., enhancing their autonomy in expressing their personal contribution as an independent writer. Along with the previous questions, the next issue to consider is students' experience of their own practice, as exemplified by the following characteristic flaws, such as lack of subject and academic expertise (Zhang, 2023), difficulty in searching for and integrating sources (Chen & Wang, 2022), source misuse, vague references, patchwork writing, and confusing quotes and paraphrases (Hyland, 2009), and exact copy, as Pecorari (2003, p. 342) note "plagiarism behavior", which "could be seen as a challenge to core academic values, a lowering of standards" (Pecorari, 2003, p. 342) and as reusing the same paper (Chen & Wang, 2022; Pecorari, 2022; Vieyra & Weaver, 2023). Chen and Wang (2022) listed the following problems Chinese students face: difficulty in defining search terms, limited repertoire of technical words, topic familiarity, or patience; struggle to identify and select which important information to use; problems with crafting a paraphrase to integrate source information into essays, and uncertainty about whether to provide a reference to some of the source information used.

The following essential issues have to be focused on "instructional interventions designed specifically to build source use skills" and "instructional efforts focusing on self-efficacy" of master's students (Du, 2019, p. 53). Perhaps master's students are still not doing as well in the use of sources as they should be due to insufficient research into instructional strategies. Therefore, researchers have looked into interventions and strategies to enhance master's students' ability to use sources.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

A total of 85 female and male master's students studying at L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University in Astana participated in the study. The average age of participants ranged from 21 to 50. They were trained in various educational programs such as Physics Teaching, ICT, Chemistry, Nanotechnology, Design, Math Teaching, Biotechnology, Thermal Power Engineering, Metrology, Mathematics and Statistics, Transport, Transport Equipment and Technologies, Geodesy, Civil Construction, Architecture, Automation, Management, and Philology. All master's students participated in the survey voluntarily and remained anonymous. The aim of the study was explained to them.

3.2. Instrument

The questionnaire consisted of 3 personal questions and 8 questions of various types: open-ended, multiple-choice, and Likert scale. The open-ended questions explored the challenges that master's students encountered when using sources for writing scientific papers and the strategies they adopted to overcome those challenges in academic writing. The multiple-choice questions assessed their weaknesses in working with scientific sources and the criteria for selecting sources. Questions based on the Likert scale determined how difficult master's students find writing assignments in English. The questionnaire was created, shared, and conducted through a Google form. Previously, to check the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, which consists of 23 (open-ended, Likert scale, multiple-choice) questions, a group of experts from the Department of Foreign Languages, Theory and Practice of Foreign Languages was invited, and the results of pilot questioning were discussed. After the experts' feedback about the most effective questions that identify master's students' challenges in the source using an accurate review of questions was made. The questions are presented in the Appendix 1. The questionnaire was validated by a group of experts from the Department of Foreign Languages, Theory and Practice of Foreign Languages, who provided feedback on the content and format of the questions.

3.3. Procedure

The data collection was conducted online through a Google form that was sent to the master's students via email. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaire within a week. The questionnaire took about 20 minutes to complete. The participants were assured that their responses would be confidential and used only for research purposes. The data analysis was performed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the frequency and percentage of responses for the multiple-choice and Likert scale questions. We used thematic analysis and frequency analysis to identify the challenges that master's students face in using English language sources. Frequency analysis was done by means of an iterative comparison of answers to calculate the number of times each difficulty was mentioned in students' responses. Thematic analysis was done by closely examining the data to identify common themes – topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that came up repeatedly in the open-ended questions. The themes were then organized and named according to their relevance and significance for the research question.

4. Results

We report the results of data analyses about the two above-mentioned research questions. The first question was related to master's students' English language proficiency: 27.8% of students can write with the help of a dictionary, 19% have general English proficiency, 39.2% have an average level of English, and 13.9% speak fluently. There was no one who did not learn English at all. However, 34.5% of master's students find academic writing, specifically assignments requiring the use of sources, very difficult, 29.8% find it difficult, and only 11.9% consider it easy, while 23.8% of master's students say that it is neither difficult nor easy for them. Table 1 illustrates master's students' preferences in using sources.

Table 1

Master's Students' Thoughts on the Use of Sources

| Very difficult | Difficult | Easy | Neutral |
|----------------|-----------|-------|---------|
| 34.5% | 29.8 % | 11.9% | 23.8% |

Master's students mostly use references from Internet sources (34%), Journals (28%), and, more rarely, Books (5%), while 28% of participants use both journals and books. The answers to this question show that students mostly use different sources from the Internet that may be more or less reliable.

Moreover, master's students reported on the weaknesses they should improve on as well. The answers are presented in Figure 2. Further, we asked participants to choose skills that they find difficult in using sources. They gave the following responses (Table 2).

Figure 1
Master's Students' Reference Use

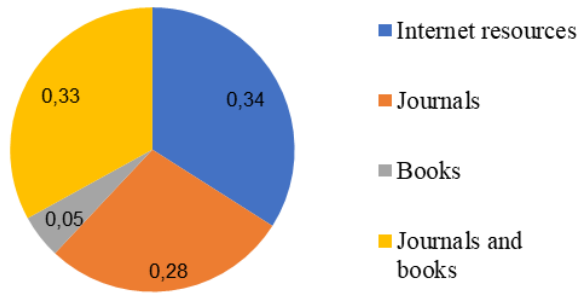


Figure 2
Master's Students' Weaknesses in Academic Writing

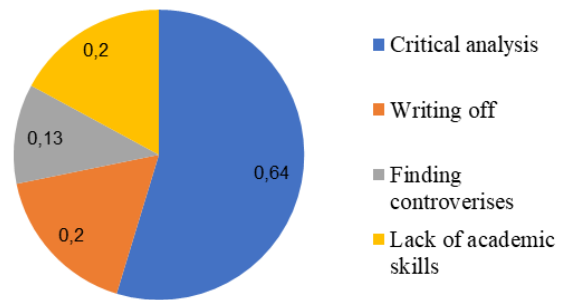


Table 2
Master's Students' Answers on Weaknesses

| Weaknesses | % |
|------------------------------|-------|
| Choosing a significant topic | 17.3% |
| Reference and citation | 24.1% |
| Coherence and cohesion | 23.5% |
| Paraphrasing | 8.8% |
| Summarising | 9.2% |
| Language use | 17.1% |
| Expressing your own voice | 32.1% |

The next part of the questionnaire consisted of open questions and aimed to identify what problems students have when using sources and what strategies they use to overcome them. The most frequently mentioned difficulties in the use of sources were as follows.

- Lack of paraphrasing skills
- Insufficient open sources for ENU students
- Remembering important information and using academic and scientific vocabulary in classwork
- Operating with academic, scientific, and specific words
- Identifying and evaluating sources on the web and finding highly relevant information
- Critical analysis, comparing, and finding gaps
- Correlating information from different sources if the number of sources is more than 4-5
- Mixing several sources about one topic

The purpose of the subsequent question was to ascertain the criteria that the participants employed for selecting sources. The majority of the participants reported the following criteria as their primary consideration when searching for sources: relevance (88.2%), timeliness (70.6%), and a respected author (41.2%), as well as the accuracy of the source (17.6%). The participants prioritized relevance, indicating that a text should match the topic of their academic work and that it should be a recently published text, emphasizing the importance of up-to-date information. For 41.2% of the respondents, a respected author was deemed to be authoritative, either because the supervisor had mentioned their name or because they had been cited multiple times. The reliability of the source ranked almost last, which will be explained later.

The following open-ended question's aim was to identify what strategies master's students use to overcome difficulties in academic writing. The most frequent answers are given below. Some master's students stated that planning was helpful for them.

- *Get around possible difficulties when writing a dissertation; it is worth using the following work preparation plan.*

- *Consider the relevance of the issues under consideration and review known techniques, their strengths and weaknesses.*
- *Prepare the theoretical component of the project.*
- *Design the practical part of the dissertation.*
- *Determine the areas of practical application of the data obtained, announce the results of the work, and draw conclusions.*

Other students mentioned that they should improve their language skills: *I don't know English very well, I should expand my vocabulary, I try to speak more English, I try to learn grammar.*

There were comments that indicated that they try to solve the problem themselves using the Internet, but it is difficult for them to find the correct information. *Really, I don't know about any strategies to help overcome my difficulties in academic writing. I search the Internet, but it has too many websites, and I don't know which one is suitable.*

There were master's students who tried to overcome the difficulties by doing relevant things. For example, *I consider other works, I read other sources, I read specialized literature, I read relevant books to improve my ability to use sources, I read writing skill tips, I first read other works and formulate thoughts for my work.*

The answers demonstrate that master's students try to overcome difficulties by using different strategies. It is noticeable that there are no structured regulations concerning academic writing, specifically the use of sources, that students could follow; this dynamic varies from country to country. It is obvious that students try to overcome difficulties on their own.

5. Discussion

This paper made an attempt to study the challenges master's students majoring in various educational programs face when using sources. The study illuminates their difficulties, weaknesses, and awareness of the use of sources as a whole. The ability to locate relevant and credible sources is fundamental to the research process, and the use of sources is a multifaceted issue with various interrelated skills; at the same time, the field of academic writing still faces many challenging issues.

When analyzing student responses, it became obvious that most of the respondents found the use of sources very difficult. There are probably many reasons for that. First of all, they do not have the background knowledge and skills; secondly, their English language level is not sufficient, and consequently, they have difficulties working with sources, finding relevant sources, and incorporating sources into their papers.

The key challenge that master's students indicated is coherence and cohesion, finding controversies in the opinions of the authors, and analyzing them critically. However, these challenges cannot be considered in isolation from each other. The complex integration of sources (Du, 2019) brings excellent results. On the other hand, the aforementioned challenges are interrelated.

Coherence and cohesion are crucial elements in effective writing and are one of the topics of heated discussion (Delu & Rushan, 2022). Cohesiveness (Alsubaie, 2022) helps to create a clear and logical flow of ideas, but creating a well-structured piece of writing is not easy for struggling writers (Dunn, 2021). If we look deeper into the problem, its root might be connected with the students' monologic skills instead of the interactive dialogic nature of a discourse (Chanock, 2008). Lack of interaction and ability to engage in dialogue with the sources result in, as master's students noted, their responses to the questionnaire, difficulties in finding relevant references, referencing, and citation.

Students' ability to make ideas coherent and find controversial issues in papers depends primarily on their critical thinking skills. Lack of critical thinking skills is the core reason behind challenges with selecting materials, analyzing arguments, evaluating one's own and others' arguments, expressing one's own ideas, and solving complex problems (Rahmat et al., 2020). The findings revealed the students experience difficulties in paraphrasing, summarizing, and expressing authorial voice, which require

practice and critical thinking. As we mentioned before, few researchers have studied issues of academic writing as a whole in our country.

Tajik et al. (2022) assert that students' difficulties in academic reading and writing stem from the fact that English has remained a foreign language in Kazakhstan. In our survey, even though master's students claimed that their English language proficiency is average, we argue that English proficiency level is not the leading challenge. Lack of academic literacy from the very beginning of education and a general lack of crucial instructional interventions (Neumann et al., 2020) for improving the interrelated source use skills and abilities in the country lead to low-quality academic writing and problems with the use of sources. At the university, master's students have to master academic writing and source use skills in a limited time. The process of finding, reading, and analyzing sources can be time-consuming, especially when conducting comprehensive literature reviews, which complicates the process of forming academic writing skills. Furthermore, it is worth stressing that the students' perception of academic writing plays a significant role. The use of sources requires a more responsible approach on their part.

Despite the fact that difficulties with using sources have been studied before by scholars, our research has found that insufficient English skills, lack of academic vocabulary, or the ability to use sources are the most frequent challenges. The other obstacles that our research identified are connected with critical analysis, coherence and cohesion, and identifying controversies. In the meantime, the authors faced several limitations, which are characterized as opinion-based. While conducting a survey, not all master's students were responsive, probably because of a lack of confidence about the questions. We are not sure if master's students comprehend all the terms and notions related to academic writing because some of them don't attend practical classes.

In surveys, most master's students indicated weaknesses connected with reading, like reading other sources, analyzing, reading specialized literature, and reading relevant books to improve the ability to use sources, reading and writing as much as you can, etc. To address the aforementioned challenges, universities and academic institutions have to provide support and resources tailored specifically for master's students to improve the quality and reliability of their research and written assignments. Workshops and training sessions on the topic of academic writing culture, research skills, source evaluation, citation practices, and academic writing can equip students with the necessary tools to navigate the complexities of using sources effectively. Overcoming these obstacles necessitates the development of abilities in source evaluation and integration, time management, and language skills. Supervisors and mentors can also play a crucial role by providing guidance, feedback, and clarification regarding the appropriate use of sources. It is essential to bring effective instruction relating to the use of sources to the curriculum because any perceived inadequacy in the effective use of sources undermines the clear expression of authorial voice and contributes little to knowledge building in the research community. Master's students should be able to effectively paraphrase, summarize, and synthesize material from several sources. Training in critical reading, note-taking, and correct citation procedures can provide master's students with the tools they need to effectively navigate obstacles. Master's students should also be given advice on efficient search strategies. In addition, the relevant skills should be taught starting from high school and continued at Bachelor's programs and developed during master's studies. Having analyzed challenges related to the use of sources, we claim that they occur not only because of a lack of language proficiency, insufficient skills, and practice but also due to the master's students' own responsibility and attitude towards the use of sources and academic writing.

In conclusion, the challenges faced by master's students in utilizing sources are multifaceted and require proactive measures for effective resolution. By acknowledging and addressing these challenges, academic institutions can empower master's students to excel in their research and written assignments. Last but not least, we suggest further research into academic writing, related specifically to reading skills, and conducting research with a larger number of respondents. Another direction for further research is to explore the impact of different types of sources on the quality and reliability of academic writing. Sources can vary in terms of their authority, credibility, currency, relevance, and accuracy. Master's students should be able to evaluate and select sources that are appropriate for their research topic and purpose. However, there is a lack of empirical studies on how master's students use different

types of sources, such as books, journals, websites, reports, etc., and how they integrate them into their own work. It would be interesting to investigate how master's students perceive and compare different types of sources, how they use them in different sections of their papers, and how they cite them according to different citation styles. Such research could provide insights into the challenges and strategies of master's students in using sources effectively and ethically.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

I.

1. Your speciality?
2. Your age?
3. Your gender?

II.

4. How could you identify your English language proficiency?
 - a) with the help of a dictionary;
 - b) speak general English;
 - c) have an average level of English;
 - d) speak fluently;
 - e) did not learn English at all.
5. In general, you find assignments requiring the use of sources in English:
 - a) Easy
 - b) Difficult
 - c) Very difficult
 - d) Neither difficult nor easy
6. The reference(s) you mostly use:
 - a) Books
 - b) Journals
 - c) Internet resources
 - d) Books and journals
7. What weaknesses of working with sources would you like to improve?
 - a) Critical analysis
 - b) Writing off
 - c) Finding controversial ideas
 - d) Lack of academic vocabulary
8. Which of these skills do you feel that you are weak?
 - a) Paraphrasing
 - b) Summarising
 - c) Language use
 - d) Expressing own voice
9. Put a tick next to the skills that you find difficult in academic writing:
 - a) Finding relevant references
 - b) Referencing and citation
 - c) Coherence and cohesion
 - d) Choosing a significant topic
10. What other difficulties do you have in source use?
11. What strategies do you use to overcome your difficulties in academic writing?