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Postgraduate Academic Writing in a New Intellectual Culture: Challenges Faced by Multilingual International Students in American Universities

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the multilayered academic writing challenges and navigation strategies of multilingual international graduate students navigating unfamiliar Anglophone/Western scholarly environments, with a specific empirical focus on Kazakhstani postgraduates at American universities. Drawing upon Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as a mediational framework, data were collected through four semistructured focus groups comprising 21 master's and doctoral students (N = 21). Thematic analysis of the qualitative data generated four primary structural, cognitive, and cross-cultural challenges: the transition from narrative to analytical writing; the navigation of the hidden curriculum of academic writing; the development of cognitive barriers to critical and independent thinking; and the influence of prior academic culture. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how international students negotiate new intellectual cultures and offers practical insights for enhancing academic writing support across global educational contexts.

Keywords: academic writing; bolashak program; cultural adaptation; intellectual culture; graduate students

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization is central to modern academic trends in the 21st century. These trends have contributed to the increasing number of international graduate students from non-English-speaking continents choosing Western universities as their preferred destinations of study. These students arrive in their selected host country with diverse academic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, aiming to increase their academic qualifications, particularly at the graduate level (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Jiani, 2021; Masuda & Wharton, 2024; Zhou & Zhang, 2023).

As dominant sites of academic culture and intellectual exchange, American universities play a central role in producing, circulating, and legitimizing contemporary scientific discourse. During the past decade, the number of international students enrolled in various programs at American universities has steadily increased (Gao & Wesely, 2024; Leong, 2015). According to the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (NAFSA, n.d.), international students contributed \$43.8 billion to the American economy and supported the creation of 378 175 jobs nationwide. These trends highlight the growing importance of international students, not only as participants in the knowledge economy but also as important actors in supporting the broader economic and institutional stability of American higher education systems.

The proliferation of English as the primary language of scholarly communication and the dominant lingua franca of academia has been well documented (Pradier & Larivière, 2026). As a result, the ability to write effectively in English has become a critical requirement for international postgraduate students from non-English speaking backgrounds seeking membership in global academic and research communities. For these students, success in higher education depends not only on linguistic proficiency but also on understanding the academic norms and expectations that govern scholarly communication. However, adapting to American intellectual culture often involves more than mastering the English language. Students must adjust to educational traditions that emphasize argumentation, critical thinking, and the development of an independent academic voice—practices that may differ significantly from those in their home countries (Qin & McNaughtan, 2023). Moreover, academic writing is widely recognized as one of the most demanding aspects of graduate education, even for native English speakers. These challenges are often amplified for nonnative English-speaking students, who must navigate linguistic, cultural, and disciplinary expectations while developing advanced academic literacy skills (Atkinson, 2003; Flower & Hayes, 1981; McKinley & Rose, 2025).

In recent years, the number of international students in the United States of America has steadily increased, including a growing population of Kazakhstani students pursuing master's and doctoral degrees. This trend has been reinforced by Kazakhstan's state-funded "Bolashak" scholarship program, which supports talented students in obtaining graduate education abroad, with many selecting American universities as their primary destination. According to data from the Kazakhstan Center for International Programs n.d., historically, the U.S. has been among the top destinations for Kazakhstani students since the program's inception. Since 1994, the U.S. has produced *4 028 specialists for Kazakhstan, accounting for 28.8% of all program graduates over 31 years (JSC Center for International Programs, n.d.).

In 2026, the total number of Kazakhstani students in the United States exceeded 3 000 (a 70% increase over the past five years), and the "Bolashak" Program is among the main sponsors and catalysts for this process for those applying for master's and doctoral programs and research internships (JSC Center for International Programs, n.d.). In addition, the NAFSA reports that 2 712 students from Kazakhstan were studying in the United States during the 2024–2025 academic year, with a stable annual growth of approximately 11.1% compared with the previous period (NAFSA: Association of International Educators, n.d.). Many international students encounter significant challenges during their graduate studies in the United States, and Kazakhstani students are no exception (Gautam, Lowery, Mays & Durant, 2016). These

challenges are not unique to Kazakhstan; rather, they reflect a broader pattern across post-Soviet educational systems, where Russian-language academic traditions continue to shape teaching and writing practices (Emmelhainz, 2017). Within these contexts, students are often socialized into academic cultures that emphasize descriptive or reproductive writing, place limited focus on argumentation and critical analysis, and rely heavily on teacher-centered instructional approaches (Tleuov, 2024). Consequently, Kazakhstani students' academic experiences represent a wider regional issue affecting learners from diverse post-Soviet backgrounds as they transition to Western academic environments that prioritize independence, critical engagement, and genre-specific scholarly writing.

Despite the growing number of Kazakhstani graduate students in American universities, empirical research that examines how these students experience, interpret and navigate American academic writing expectations within a new intellectual and cultural context remains limited. Existing studies often group Kazakhstani students within broader international or post-Soviet populations, thereby overlooking their distinct educational trajectories and sociocultural backgrounds. This gap underscores the need for a focused investigation into the academic writing challenges faced by Kazakhstani graduate students in the U.S., as well as the strategies they employ to adapt to Western academic discourse practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic writing is widely recognized as one of the most demanding components of postgraduate education because it requires idea generation, disciplinary reasoning, clear argumentation, and iterative revision (Akosile et al., 2025; Badenhorst et al., 2015; Li, 2025; Paltridge, 2020). For multilingual international students, these demands are compounded by the need to adapt to unfamiliar rhetorical norms, citation conventions, and expectations for critical engagement in American graduate programs.

Linguistic Challenges

Across studies, international graduate students consistently struggle with productive vocabulary use, discipline-specific terminology, and grammatical accuracy (Gao, 2026; Munyanyi, 2026). Several researchers argue that these linguistic constraints limit students' ability to engage in higher-order argumentation (Akosile et al., 2025; Teng & Zhang, 2021). Research on Chinese students supports this pattern, linking limited academic vocabulary to insufficient preparation for English-medium academic genres (Jiang, 2022; Wang, 2022). However, other studies particularly on Indian students, suggest that a strongly receptive vocabulary does not always translate into confident academic writing, highlighting a gap between linguistic knowledge and its functional use in writing (Cennetkuşu, 2017; Ravichandran et al., 2018). Together these findings suggest that vocabulary difficulties are widespread but may manifest differently across international linguistic groups.

Rhetorical and cultural challenges:

Previous studies consistently show that students educated in indirect or inductive rhetorical traditions struggle to adapt to the linear, explicit structure of Anglo-American writing. Research with Chinese students frames this challenge as both rhetorical and epistemological, arguing that differing conceptions of knowledge affect how students construct arguments (Yuan, 2022; Zhang & Hasim, 2023). Similar patterns appear among Indian students, whose prior academic cultures emphasize different expectations for scientific writing (Ravichandran et al., 2018). The research largely converges in showing that rhetorical transfer—not just language proficiency—is a major barrier. Notably, there is almost no work examining how these rhetorical issues play out among Central Asian or Kazakhstani students, indicating a clear gap.

Affective Challenges: Anxiety, Identity and Confidence

A strong thread across the literature concerns affective barriers such as writing anxiety, fear of negative evaluations, and uncertainty about academic identity. Studies involving Chinese and Saudi learners have shown that linguistic pressure combines with unfamiliar pedagogical norms to heighten writing-related anxiety (Khadawardi, 2022; Zhang & Tan, 2024). Some work also suggests that difficulty expressing a confident authorial voice contributes to self-doubt and reduced participation in academic writing tasks. While these affective themes appear across regions, no research has explored whether Kazakhstani students experience similar patterns or whether culturally specific attitudes toward authority and error influence their writing confidence.

Cognitive Demands (Critical Thinking and Analysis)

A recurring theme is the difficulty students face in moving from descriptive to analytical writing. Multiple studies note that students often summarize sources rather than synthesizing or critiquing them, partly because of unfamiliarity with Western expectations for argumentation (Bacha, 2010; Coffin & Donohue, 2012; Yuan, 2022). The research agrees that cognitive demands—not just language—play a significant role. However, the findings diverge as to why this is the case: some attribute it to a rhetorical background, whereas others highlight limited training in research writing. This inconsistency indicates a need for research that disentangles cognitive, cultural, and linguistic contributions to analytical writing challenges.

Institutional and Supervisory Challenges

Beyond individual factors, several studies emphasize structural obstacles. Research on international postgraduate students in the UK highlights inconsistent supervisory feedback and unclear expectations as major barriers to dissertation writing (Abrar et al., 2023). Comparable findings emerge in the American context, where international students often report limited explicit instruction in genre conventions and insufficient writing support. The institutional dimension appears in all contexts, but most studies focus on large groups (e.g., Chinese students), leaving smaller populations—such as Central Asian students—underrepresented.

Post-Soviet Academic Heritage

A substantial body of research shows that international students struggle with conciseness, analytical reasoning, and the productive use of discipline-specific vocabulary (Akosile et al., 2025; Li, 2025). Studies focusing on Chinese students—the largest international student group—identify linguistic barriers, limited preparation for US academic writing conventions, and epistemological differences as major obstacles (Jiang, 2022; Wang, 2022; Yuan, 2022; Zhang & Hasim, 2023; Zhang & Tan, 2024). Many rely on trial-and-error learning because of the misalignment between previous educational experiences and American academic expectations. Research on foreign language anxiety (FLA) further shows that linguistic pressure, fear of negative evaluations, and unfamiliar pedagogical norms intensify students' writing-related stress (Zhang & Tan, 2024).

Research on Central Asian students remains limited. However, related comparative studies indicate that language anxiety among learners from the region varies depending on their linguistic environment and opportunities for English practice (Zhang & Tan, 2024). The study compared Chinese and Russian university students and revealed that Chinese learners experienced substantially higher levels of FLA, a pattern attributed to limited opportunities to practice English in predominantly Russian-speaking environments (Zhao, Guo & Dynia, 2013). Notably, the “worry” aspect of anxiety was more prominent than emotionality, with fears related to speaking in class and misunderstanding among instructors strongly associated with overall FLA. These results underscore the dynamic nature of FLA, highlighting its sensitivity to cultural, social, and institutional influences rather than viewing it as a stable, learner-internal trait (Wai et al., 2025). Similarly, findings from Saudi and other international contexts show that

constructing coherent arguments and maintaining positive attitudes toward writing pose recurring challenges for nonnative English speakers (Khadawardi, 2022).

Despite the growing number of Kazakhstani students in US graduate programs, their academic writing experiences remain underexplored. Given the above, it is evident that the transition from one academic culture to another poses numerous challenges for international students, particularly in the area of academic writing. Kazakhstani graduate students studying in the U.S. are not exempt from these threats. They encounter a unique set of obstacles rooted in differences in educational systems, linguistic structures, and cultural expectations that require urgent attention. Despite their growing presence, Kazakhstani students are frequently subsumed within broader categories of Central Asian learners, resulting in a lack of focused research on their specific needs and experiences. A more nuanced examination of this group would contribute significantly to the development of targeted academic support and a deeper understanding of the interplay between national educational reforms and academic adaptation abroad.

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no study has investigated the challenges faced by Kazakh postgraduate students in academic writing. Addressing this gap is crucial not only for expanding the body of knowledge but also for supporting both current and future international students in Western universities who may struggle to navigate the demands of academic writing. Furthermore, such research could help demystify academic literacies, which often overlook post-Soviet contexts.

Theoretical Framework: Sociocultural Theory

This study adopts sociocultural theory (Vygotsky) [Tzuriel, 2021] as its theoretical lens to understand the postgraduate academic writing challenges faced by multilingual international students in American universities. Sociocultural theory conceptualizes learning as a socially mediated process in which cognitive development occurs through interaction with others who are more knowledgeable about and participate in cultural practices (Hyland, 2019; Lantolf et al., 2018). Academic writing, therefore, is not only a linguistic task but also a culturally situated activity that involves internalizing the norms, rhetorical conventions, and expectations of the host academic community.

Studies have shown that scaffolding and collaborative instructional practices, which are central to sociocultural pedagogy, significantly enhance second-language learners' writing skills—improving aspects such as coherence, cohesion, and task response—by mediating learning through social interaction and guided support (Bitchener & Storch, 2016; Lee, 2020). Research on writing instruction also highlights the role of feedback literacy and scaffolded writing within the zone of proximal development (ZPD) in bolstering resilience and writing proficiency among L2 learners, illustrating how sociocultural mechanisms can mitigate writing challenges. Additionally, qualitative studies demonstrate the importance of communication, peer support, and interactional processes in addressing academic writing hurdles in blended learning contexts, further validating sociocultural constructs in multilingual learning environments (Anderson et al., 2021; Paltridge et al., 2019).

By foregrounding the mediational role of language, interaction, and social support, the sociocultural theory provides a robust framework to explore how multilingual international postgraduates negotiate new academic discourses and develop greater competency in academic writing within American higher education settings. Therefore, the aim of this study is to determine the major academic writing challenges experienced by Kazakhstani postgraduate students in American universities.

RESEARCH METHOD

A qualitative exploratory research design using a thematic approach was adopted for this study. This design was considered appropriate for this study because it allowed for an in-depth focus-group exploration of the lived experiences of the participants.

Participants

In this study 21 participants were recruited using the purposive sampling technique, with 7 participants assigned to each of the 3 groups. The participants were Kazakhstani postgraduate students (master's and doctoral students) who were studying at various American universities. The sample is cut across a range of academic disciplines across diverse educational contexts to allow for the exploration of common experiences. The participants consisted of Kazakh graduate students who were awarded an international scholarship from the Republic of Kazakhstan. Furthermore, they had to be academically required to complete a variety of academic writing tasks during their studies at American universities. The selection criteria for the respondents were as follows:

- (a) They had to be full-time Bolashak scholars in American academia;
- (b) They had to be in their second term or further in postgraduate social sciences (Humanities) studies to ensure that they would have had the opportunity in their first semester to adapt to the new intellectual culture in their academic writing practices.

Research Questions

The following research questions were proposed:

1. What are the major academic writing challenges experienced by Kazakhstani postgraduate students in American universities?
2. What strategies effectively enable Kazakhstani postgraduate students in American universities to navigate the identified challenges?

Data collection

Data were collected through three semistructured focus group discussions conducted online via Zoom. Each focus group lasted approximately 90–120 minutes and followed a protocol designed around the study's research questions and theoretical framework. The participants were invited to discuss their previous educational experiences, the challenges encountered in adapting to American academic writing conventions, and the cultural and linguistic adjustments and strategies used to improve their writing. Example topics included the transition from narrative to analytical writing, experiences with critical thinking and argumentation, perceptions of academic feedback, and the role of self-directed learning. All discussions were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized using participant codes (e.g., FG1-P1).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the reflexive thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). The researchers first familiarized themselves with the transcripts through repeated reading and note-taking. Initial codes were then generated inductively from meaningful segments of text relevant to the research questions. Related codes were grouped into broader categories, which were subsequently refined into themes through an iterative process of reviewing, defining, and naming the themes.

Coding Procedure

As noted in the research design section, three focus groups were formed for the study. The groups were coded as FG1, FG2, and FG3, with seven participants in each group. Individual participants were coded from P1 to P7 within their respective groups; therefore, participants were identified as FG1-P1 to FG1-P7, FG2-P1 to FG2-P7, and FG3-P1 to FG3-P7 respectively.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed several strategies aligned with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was established through member checking, wherein preliminary findings were shared with three participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations. Transferability was enhanced through a thick description of the participants' backgrounds and the research context, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar populations. Dependability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail that documented all stages of the research process, including interview protocols, coding decisions, and analytical memos. Confirmability was addressed by grounding interpretations in the data through extensive use of participant quotations and by reflecting on researcher positionality.

Researcher positionality

The authors acknowledge that their positionality, particularly their familiarity with the Kazakhstani educational system and post-Soviet academic traditions provided both advantages and potential biases in this study. This insider perspective facilitated rapport with participants and enabled nuanced interpretation of cultural references and educational practices. However, to mitigate potential confirmation bias, the researchers engaged in reflexive journaling throughout the analysis process, systematically questioning their assumptions and interpretations. Regular debriefing sessions between the research team also provided opportunities to challenge emerging themes and consider alternative explanations.

RESULTS

This section presents the study's findings, followed by a discussion of each theme derived from the three focus groups.

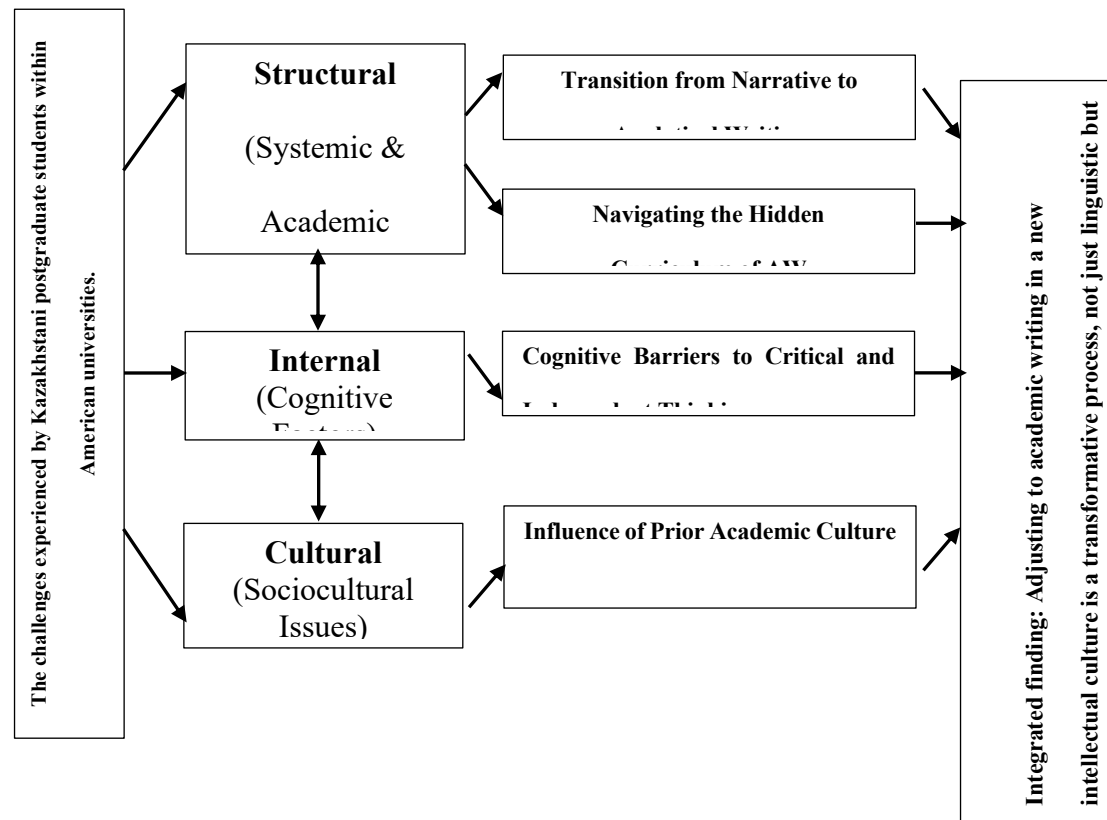
Research question one:

The first research question was "What are the major academic writing challenges experienced by Kazakhstani postgraduate students in American universities?" The thematic analysis generated four interrelated themes that captured the challenges faced by Kazakhstani postgraduate students in adapting to academic writing in U.S. universities. The following themes emerged:

- Transition from narrative to analytical writing.
- Navigating the hidden curriculum of academic writing.
- Cognitive barriers to critical and independent thinking.
- Influence of prior academic culture.

The findings can be conceptually organized into three categories: structural challenges (transition from narrative to analytical writing and navigating the hidden curriculum) internal challenges (cognitive barriers), and cross-cultural challenges (cross-cultural and linguistic adjustment) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Final thematic map, indicating the four finalized themes and the theme descriptions. The relationships between themes are indicated by directional lines



Theme 1 Transitioning from narrative to analytical writing

The transition from descriptive and narrative writing to analytical, argumentative academic discourse emerged as the primary challenge reported by the study participants. The participants across all three focus groups described this shift as one of the most difficult aspects of their academic adjustment. Their previous writing experiences were largely grounded in narrative and expository approaches, where the primary objective was to demonstrate knowledge through explanation, paraphrasing, and the presentation of multiple perspectives. Upon entering American graduate programs, however, students encountered fundamentally different expectations. Written work was no longer evaluated primarily on the amount of knowledge presented but rather on the extent to which arguments were clearly developed, supported with evidence, and critically situated within existing scholarship. Many participants found this transition disorienting, particularly during the early stages of their studies, as it required them to rethink not only how they wrote but also how they engaged with knowledge and academic inquiry. As one participant noted

"When I start my first semester (the name of the institution is deleted), it may be hard for me. The greatest challenge was mastering an objective and precise writing style... with evidence from previous research. I have come to believe that good academic writing is about precision from beginning to end, not sentence complexity or the presentation of a multitude of ideas" (FG-1-P2).

Another participant described difficulties in developing argumentation:

"The biggest challenge for me was the transition from narrative to analysis.... I tended to introduce ideas in general terms without supporting them with facts... more like my opinion.... Feedback from professors often said, 'Be more direct' or 'What is your claim and evidence?'" (FG-2-P5).

This difficulty was not limited to structure or language; rather, it extended to how students perceived the writing itself. The participants reported difficulty understanding that each paragraph should serve a clear argumentative purpose and directly contribute to the thesis:

"I was used to using colorful Kazakh proverbs to express my ideas.... However, when I submitted my draft, my professor noted that my writing was too informal and descriptive and did not meet the analytical standards expected at the graduate level. This made me realize that I needed to move from storytelling to more structured and evidence-based writing." (FG-1-P2).

Thus, the participants' accounts indicate that the shift from narrative to analytical writing was perceived not simply as a technical adaptation but as a deeper transformation in their approach to knowledge construction, argumentation, and academic identity.

Theme 2: Navigating the hidden curriculum of academic writing

Another challenge identified by the participants was navigating the hidden curriculum of academic writing. The hidden curriculum refers to the implicit norms, values, expectations, and practices that exist within educational settings but are not explicitly taught through formal instruction (Alsubaie, 2015). In the context of academic writing, these unwritten expectations include constructing persuasive arguments, critically engaging with sources, organizing ideas logically, and demonstrating an authoritative academic voice. In the opinion of the participants, many Kazakhstani students participated in postgraduate programs and believed that carefully following assignment instructions would be sufficient for successful academic writing. However, they soon discovered that success also depended on mastering a range of unspoken academic conventions. Because these expectations were rarely explained directly within courses, students were often required to learn and internalize the norms of academic writing independently. These findings align with previous research showing that international students frequently struggle with implicit academic conventions because of limited explicit instruction and guidance (Abrar et al., 2023).

As two participants stated

"The hardest part was that the expectations were invisible you do not see them until you make mistakes.... I had to go extra mile—read more articles, analyze how others write, and revise my work several times—just to understand what was actually required" (FG-2-P6).

"On top of everything else, I had to master knowledge and skills familiar to other students but completely new to me.... I had to explore the 'hidden curriculum'—everything that lies behind the formal curriculum and is never explicitly explained" (FG-1-P3). The participants described writing academic assignments, such as literature reviews or introductions—central genres in graduate school—as particularly challenging, since they required not only technical skills but also an understanding of how to synthesize sources and formulate a critical stance. This aligns with prior findings that students often struggle with synthesis and analytical writing.

Another participant emphasized the extra effort required to “catch up” with peers:

"It was not enough to just follow the assignment instructions—I also had to learn all these implicit academic norms that everyone else seemed to already know.... I ended up spending a lot more time trying to figure out these unwritten rules just to be on the same page" (FG-3-P5).

These narratives demonstrate that participants were challenged by the hidden curriculum of academic writing. Although they gradually learned to navigate these expectations through repeated exposure, feedback, and self-reflection, the process of internalizing academic norms was often cognitively demanding and emotionally taxing. Many participants described experiencing uncertainty, self-doubt, and pressure to meet implicit standards that were rarely articulated explicitly. These experiences are consistent with previous research highlighting the relationships among academic writing, anxiety, and the broader challenges of academic adjustment among international students (Khadawardi, 2022; Zhang & Tan, 2024).

Theme 3: Lack of critical and independent thinking

The participants described a lack of and difficulties in developing critical and independent thinking skills, particularly when they transitioned from reproducing knowledge to engaging in argument-driven academic writing. They reported that their prior educational experiences emphasized understanding and reproducing existing knowledge rather than constructing original arguments, questioning established ideas, or critically evaluating sources. As a result, many have found it challenging to adopt the analytical and evaluative approaches expected in American graduate-level writing:

"I was used to writing on the basis of existing knowledge and then drawing general conclusions at the end of the paragraph. However, here I am expected to produce something original—my own perspective. At first, I felt completely lost. I didn't know where to begin and it made me question my ability to think critically" (FG-3-P7).

This shift was often experienced as a fundamental change, not only in writing practices but also in ways of thinking. Students expressed uncertainty about how to formulate arguments, justify their reasoning, and take an independent position:

"When I first started my writing assignments, even when I had ideas, I found it difficult to structure them appropriately and, my argument was coherent. I also struggled to express my ideas critically in English. I often had to think across multiple languages simultaneously (Kazakh, Russian, and English), which significantly slowed down the writing process" (FG-1-P4).

In addition to cognitive challenges, participants highlighted the influence of educational norms that shaped their approach to knowledge. In particular, the expectation to critique established scholars was perceived as unfamiliar and, at times, uncomfortable:

"In my bachelor's journey, it was an untold academic norm to respect authors and their ideas. Criticizing them feels uncomfortable, as if I am doing something wrong. However, here, critical evaluation is expected" (FG-2-P5).

The experiences and observations of the participants in this study align with those noted by Ravichandran et al. (2018), who reported that *"critical thinking is a key component of American university education, and it is expected that all students can engage deeply in the process through reading, reflection, synthesis, analysis, and writing upon entrance to graduate programs. Many international students have little exposure to this process before coming to the US"* (p. 773).

One respondent from Focus Group 1 (FG-1) similarly described difficulties in transitioning to this expectation of critical engagement: *"When professors asked questions such as 'What is behind your why?', I felt confused. I thought I had already explained everything, but I didn't know how to go deeper or justify my reasoning"* (FG-2-P6).

Notably, these challenges are not solely linguistic but reflect deeper cognitive and epistemological differences shaped by prior educational experience.

Theme 4: Influence of prior academic culture

The final theme that emerged in this study was the negative impact of prior academic culture. The participants expressed surprise that upon transitioning to Western universities, they encountered norms, expectations, and writing conventions that differed immensely from those in their home countries. This adjustment involved both cultural and linguistic challenges, which influenced how students organized arguments, constructed sentences, and developed an authorial voice (Yuan, 2022; Zhang & Tan, 2024).

The participants described adapting to the American academic writing style as a complex cultural and linguistic transition that required them to rethink deeply embedded academic norms. A key challenge involved shifting from a collective-oriented voice to an individual authorial voice. As one student noted

"In my previous experience, it is common to use 'we' ('biz') in academic writing. For example, 'We can see that...'. We almost never use expressions such as 'I did' or 'my contribution', as this is considered inappropriate or even disrespectful toward other scholars who have contributed to the field in our academic culture. I tend to generalize theoretical ideas rather than sharing my own perspective. However, in the U.S., professors often prefer the use of 'I' when they make an argument. Learning to use my own voice was new for me" (FG-3-P2).

Beyond this shift in authorial positioning, the participants emphasized a broader cultural transformation in rhetorical expectations. Writing in their traditional Soviet method was often associated with indirectness and neutrality, whereas American academic writing demanded clarity, assertiveness, and a clearly articulated stance:

"In prior learning experiences, academic writing avoids strong statements or directness, as it's considered polite to remain neutral. In Western culture, writing must be assertive and confident...precise. This was a big cultural transition for me" (FG-3-P7).

"When I write in English, my brain naturally wants to put all the explanations first, just like in Kazakh. I write the whole background and only at the end do I put the action word, which makes my professors say my English sentences are upside down" (FG-1-P5).

Beyond simple grammatical errors, moving from an elastic, morphologically rich subject–object–verb (SOV) system to a rigid subject–verb–object (SVO) system triggers a profound sense of rhetorical disempowerment (Abd-ul-Azeez & Suleiman, 2025). Multilingual graduate students frequently experience a form of intellectual subtraction. Because they perceive the short, linear sentences demanded by US academic conventions as monosyllabic or unsophisticated, they experience deep psychological resistance. They are forced to compress their complex, highly developed ideas actively into a linguistic framework that feels inadequate for graduate-level thought:

"At first, my writing sounded unnatural. I was still thinking in Russian or Kazakh, as I have a strong proficiency in both languages while writing in English. Sometimes, when I write in English, I feel like I lose my voice or that my writing sounds different—as if the ideas are no longer truly mine. Over time, I adjusted my sentence structure to match English academic conventions" (FG-3-P4).

A student's native SOV structure can quietly sabotage how an American audience perceives their scholarly identity. Because English syntax requires a writer to anchor their stance right away, the delayed verb mechanics of SOV writers create an immediate cultural clash. For these students, leading with a major critique is premature (Yusuf & Ali, 2025). They lean on weak, passive sentence starters as a sort of rhetorical shield.

In addition, one participant from FG-2 highlighted differences in stylistic conventions, particularly the use of figurative language and culturally grounded expressions or idioms: *"In the past, we often write in a more flowery and indirect style, using idioms or famous people's quotes. For example, I can start essays or academic articles with phrases related to the teaching process, such as 'The quality of a teacher is reflected in the character of their students' or 'Without students, a teacher's role is incomplete'" (FG-2-P5).*

All of these once again point to cultural differences. In Kazakhstan, academic writing often incorporates proverbs, quotations, and more elaborate, indirect introductions, whereas US academic writing prioritizes conciseness and direct argumentation.

Research question two:

The second research question was "What strategies effectively enable Kazakhstani postgraduate students in American universities to navigate the identified challenges?" This theme focuses on the strategies that Kazakhstani graduate students use to develop their academic writing skills and overcome the difficulties they face. The thematic analysis generated two themes:

- Feedback from supervisors/supervisory guidance/direction.
- Self-learning/Self-directed learning/imitation.

Theme 1: Feedback from supervisors/supervisory guidance/direction

In academic writing, it is essential to receive feedback from an expert, as this strategy proves highly effective. This approach is widely supported by a substantial body of prior research (Bitchener & Storch, 2016). Consistent with prior findings, the data gathered in the present study also support this claim:

"In academic writing, it is important that someone experienced, in my case, my supervisor, gives me feedback; such a strategy is very effective. They teach the specific, often unwritten conventions, formatting styles and expectations of their specific field of study... besides what I already mentioned, my supervisor shared crucial papers, authors which were very helpful for filling gaps in my literature review" (FG-1-P5).

"While writing my paper, I sent my written work to the professor once every two weeks, and he wrote me comments. They truly helped me understand the structure of academic writing and what was required of me. Sometimes, when I had difficulty understanding these comments, we met on Zoom. These meetings were very useful and steered me in the right direction" (FG-3-P3).

"My supervisor pointed out that my sentences were way too long and complex—which is how we often write elegantly in Kazakh or Russian. His feedback about the peculiarities of English academic writing taught me that being precise and clear with short, punchy sentences is much better" (FG-3-P7).

Theme 2: Self-learning/Self-directed learning/imitation

Self-directed learning was another effective strategy. The participants shared similar views: they usually searched for academic papers, examined their writing styles and then replicated them.

This was evident in the quotes taken from the interview:

"In writing my dissertation, I realized that reading helps to connect ideas, the more I read, and not just for reading but also for analysis, it all helps to understand clearly and then apply all this in my own academic writing" FG-3-P2.

Another participant also shared a similar response:

"During my writing assignment I studied well-written academic papers in order to understand the effective structure of information" FG-1-P7.

Adding to these perspectives, one graduate student noted the positive influence of using artificial intelligence (AI) in the self-learning process, showing how learners perceive it as a valuable supporting strategy:

"If I do not understand some concepts related to academic writing, I ask the AI (artificial intelligence). Then, I check with a book or other credible sources; this saves a lot of time and helps me understand complex parts of academic writing myself, or I ask where I have a weak point in my writing and it analyzes it and gives me a clear, structured answer. This all helps me identify my own gaps in academic writing or even be prepared for supervisors' meetings". FG-2-P5

Modern research highlights that integrating AI and automated evaluation tools serves as a powerful strategy that enhances learner autonomy and helps students self-regulate their writing process. In short, the experiences shared by Kazakhstani learners from the three focus groups demonstrated how self-learning strategies can improve the academic writing skills of multilingual postgraduate students.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this thematic analysis reveal that Kazakhstani graduate students face significant challenges in adapting their academic writing to international standards, particularly the shift from reproductive, descriptive practices common in post-Soviet educational traditions to the thesis-driven, analytical writing expected in American universities. Four major themes emerged: (1) the transition from narrative to analytical writing; (2) navigating the hidden curriculum of academic writing; (3) cognitive barriers to critical and independent thinking; and (4) the influence of prior academic culture. These findings underscore both the dominance of English in global academic communication and the need for greater preparation in international academic norms, critical thinking practices and scholarly conventions among Kazakhstani students pursuing graduate education abroad.

The Distinctiveness of the Post-Soviet Academic Experience

A critical contribution of this study is the illumination of what is distinctive about the Kazakhstani/post-Soviet experience in adapting to American academic writing. While many of the challenges identified such as analytical writing, critical thinking, and the hidden curriculum have been reported in studies of other international student groups, the present study reveals specific features that distinguish the Kazakhstani experience.

First, participants described a three-language burden that is rarely addressed in studies of bilingual international students. Thinking simultaneously across Kazakh, Russian, and English increased the cognitive load, slowed the writing process, and affected students' sense of authorial voice. As one participant explained, "I often had to think across multiple languages simultaneously (Kazakh, Russian, and English), which significantly slowed down the writing process" (FG-1-P4). Structural differences between Kazakh, a subject-object-verb (SOV) language, and English, a subject verb-object (SVO) language, also contributed to what participants called "upside down" sentences. This linguistic shift created a sense of intellectual loss, as complex ideas had to be reformulated within an English academic framework that sometimes felt inadequate for graduate-level thought.

The first theme, the transition from narrative to analytical writing, aligns with the literature that identifies this shift as a major challenge for international students (Liu & Carney, 2017). Previous studies link this difficulty to limited exposure to English academic genres, differing rhetorical traditions, and insufficient preparation in critical source analysis (Yuan, 2022; Zhang & Hasim, 2023). Students educated in indirect or inductive traditions often struggle with the linear, explicit, thesis-driven structure of Anglo-American academic writing. This study extends that literature by showing that, for Kazakhstani students, the transition is not only linguistic or rhetorical but also cognitive and epistemological. The participants had to move from knowledge reproduction toward knowledge construction, which required them to unlearn deeply rooted descriptive writing habits and reconsider their relationships with academic knowledge.

Participants also described the hidden curriculum of academic writing as a set of implicit expectations, norms, and practices that were rarely explained in formal instruction. The contrast between collectivist and individualist authorial voices revealed a deeper epistemological divide. In Kazakhstani academic culture, the collective "we" (biz) reflects a communal understanding of knowledge, where emphasizing individual contribution may be viewed as inappropriate or disrespectful. As one participant noted, "We almost never use expressions like 'I did' or 'my contribution', as this is considered inappropriate or even disrespectful toward other scholars who have contributed to the field in our academic culture" (FG-3-P2). Therefore, adopting an assertive "I" in U.S. academic writing required more than a stylistic adjustment; it involved renegotiating authorial identity and cultural positioning. These findings are consistent with research showing that adjustment to Western academic norms often requires intensive self-study to bridge linguistic and pedagogical gaps (Han et al., 2021; Ramjan et al., 2023). Academic writing is time-consuming for nonnative English speakers and often depends on self-regulation and digital scaffolds to achieve parity with local peers (Taye & Mengesha, 2024). This study contributes to that work by showing that, for Kazakhstani graduate students, navigating a hidden curriculum involves cognitive, procedural, and temporal demands that require sustained self-directed effort.

Cognitive barriers were especially prominent. Participants reported difficulty moving beyond knowledge reproduction because their prior education had socialized them to respect authorial authority rather than critique it publicly. The norm of respect for authority in post-Soviet educational contexts made the expectation to evaluate established scholars particularly uncomfortable. This reflects a broader pedagogical tradition that values knowledge transmission more than knowledge construction. The participant who described "an untold academic norm to respect authors and their ideas" (FG-2-P5) captured a shift that extends beyond language learning: students had to learn to view knowledge as something to be questioned and constructed rather than simply received and reproduced. These findings support those of Ravichandran et al. (2018), who argue that many international students have limited preparation for

rigorous critical analysis. However, the present study extends this view by showing that Kazakhstani students also manage the added burden of translating ideas across Kazakh, Russian, and English. This multilingual cognitive load creates challenges that are not fully captured in studies focused mainly on bilingual international students.

The influence of prior academic culture appeared as a form of academic culture shock in participants' textual choices. The collective academic voice commonly used in Kazakhstani writing conflicted with the assertive individual voice often expected in U.S. academic contexts. Similarly, participants had to replace flowery, proverb-based introductions with the concision valued at Western academic writing. These findings show that adapting to academic writing requires more than technical skill development; it also involves renegotiating authorial identity and cultural positioning.

These challenges were further intensified by the cognitive demands of writing in a second or third language. Participants found it difficult to move between distinct syntactic systems: English follows a relatively fixed subject–verb–object (SVO) order, Kazakh is an agglutinative subject–object–verb (SOV) language, and Russian allows more flexible word order. Native or dominant Kazakh speakers described the difficulty of restructuring ideas from a verb-final system into English academic prose. In Kazakh academic discourse, contextual information and modifiers often appear before the main verb, whereas English typically requires the writer's stance and action to appear earlier. When transferred into English, this pattern produced dense, inverted sentences and weakened fluency, coherence, and voice. As Zhang and Tan (2024) observe, US faculty may misinterpret such structural delays as a lack of confidence or critical voice, even though they are rooted in linguistic difference.

Together, these findings show that the adaptation of academic writing among Kazakhstani graduate students is linguistic, rhetorical, cognitive, cultural, and procedural. Effective support must therefore address not only English proficiency but also critical thinking, genre awareness, and cultural adjustment. The findings have implications for predeparture preparation programs, university writing services, and faculty development initiatives that aim to create more inclusive support for international graduate students. They also suggest that Kazakhstani students' experiences are not merely variations of a universal international-student challenge but reflect specific cultural, linguistic, and epistemological issues rooted in post-Soviet educational traditions.

To overcome these structural and cultural barriers, students employed two primary navigation strategies. First, iterative expert feedback functioned as a crucial scaffolding mechanism within Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Lee, & Chen, 2026). Regular face-to-face and online consultations helped students decode field-specific conventions and refine their academic writing, particularly by learning to produce more concise and rhetorically effective English sentences. These findings align with previous research that has demonstrated that expert feedback is an effective strategy for improving academic writing among international students (Bao & Feng, 2023; Lee, 2020; Lu & Fu, 2026). Second, self-directed learning strategies were identified as essential for nonnative English-speaking students' academic writing development. Participants reported actively engaging with model texts by analyzing and imitating well-written academic papers to internalize disciplinary conventions. This aligns with prior research that suggests that self-directed learning and textual imitation of published academic work can significantly enhance writing proficiency in international academic contexts (Hyland, 2021; Teng, 2022). A key contribution of this study is the role of artificial intelligence as an emerging self-learning support tool. Participants reported using AI systems to clarify complex concepts, identify weaknesses in their writing and refine drafts prior to consulting instructors. These findings support recent findings that AI-assisted writing tools can enhance learner autonomy and self-regulation in cross-cultural academic writing contexts (Ding & Zou, 2024; Liu et al., 2024).

Sociocultural Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this study can be productively interpreted through the lens of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky). The challenges experienced by participants represent the struggle to mediate their thinking and writing through unfamiliar cultural tools—the rhetorical conventions, argumentation norms, and expectations of the American academic community. The transition from narrative to analytical writing, for example, involves learning to use a new set of symbolic tools to construct knowledge, a process that requires the internalization of fundamentally different ways of thinking and communicating.

The hidden curriculum of academic writing can be understood as the unspoken system of cultural tools that mediate academic discourse. The participants described the difficulty of learning these implicit norms because they were rarely made explicit through formal instruction. As one participant stated, “the hardest part was that the expectations were invisible; you do not see them until you make mistakes” (FG-2-P6). This highlights the importance of explicit mediation and scaffolding in helping international students access the cultural tools of their new academic community.

The navigation strategies identified in this study reflect sociocultural processes of learning within the ZPD. Scaffolding through supervisor feedback served as the primary mechanism for bridging the gap between students' current writing ability and the expected standard. As one participant noted, “my supervisor shared crucial papers, authors which were very helpful for filling gaps in my literature review” (FG-1-P5). This expert guidance provided targeted support that enabled students to perform at a level beyond their independent capability.

Similarly, self-directed learning and the imitation of model texts can be understood as attempts by learners to create their own scaffolding within the ZPD. By studying well-written papers, students engaged in a form of cognitive apprenticeship that helped them internalize the conventions of the expert community. The emerging use of AI as a self-learning tool represents an innovative form of self-scaffolding that enhances learner autonomy and self-regulation (Ding & Zou, 2024; Liu et al., 2024).

IMPLICATIONS

These findings have important implications for two distinct audiences. For host countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, and France, which collectively represent primary destinations for global educational migration, the results underscore the need for more robust, culturally responsive writing support systems tailored to international graduate students. With respect to sending regions, particularly Central Asian and other post-Soviet countries with similar pedagogical traditions, this study highlights the urgency of reforming undergraduate curricula to incorporate more analytical writing and critical thinking training prior to students' departure abroad.

While this study offers rich qualitative insights into the lived experiences of Kazakhstani graduate students, it is methodologically limited by its thematic analysis, which captures patterns without quantitative verification. Additionally, the empirical focus is confined to U.S. institutions, leaving open the question of whether these findings transfer to other host countries with different academic cultures. Future research should explore comparative designs across multiple national contexts and incorporate longitudinal tracking to assess how writing competence evolves over the course of graduate study. Ultimately, this research amplifies the voices of students navigating profound academic transition voices that must inform institutional policy and pedagogical practice if international scholarly success is to be supported.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers rich qualitative insights, it also has several limitations. The thematic analysis relies exclusively on self-reported perceptions, which, while valuable, cannot objectively measure actual

writing proficiency gains. Methodologically, the findings are bound to humanities and social science studies only and a cross-sectional design; they do not capture how writing competence might evolve longitudinally over a full graduate program. Furthermore, the sample does not account for disciplinary variations between STEM and the humanities, where writing conventions and faculty expectations differ markedly. The sample is limited to Kazakhstani graduate students in American universities, restricting transferability to other contexts. Additionally, the absence of longitudinal and comparative institutional data limits the understanding of developmental trajectories and contextual variation. Future research should address these gaps through mixed-methods designs, incorporating longitudinal draft analysis and comparative studies across multiple host countries.

Conclusion

This study reveals that Kazakhstani graduate students encounter significant linguistic, rhetorical, and cultural barriers when they adapt to American academic writing standards. Although far from being limited by these challenges, participants demonstrated considerable agency by actively seeking expert feedback, reverse-engineering successful published models, and integrating digital self-learning tools—including AI—into their writing processes. These adaptive mechanisms, supported by both institutional scaffolding and self-directed effort, enabled students to navigate the implicit expectations of US academic discourse.

A critical finding is the marked mismatch between students' predeparture readiness and the actual demands of graduate-level writing in American universities. Participants consistently reported that their prior training in post-Soviet educational contexts emphasized knowledge reproduction over critical analysis, leaving them underprepared for the thesis-driven, argumentative prose expected in their new academic environment. This gap must be addressed proactively, either through prearrival writing preparation programs or through intensive early-semester interventions.

The contribution of this study is primarily contextual and empirical, providing a detailed examination of how well-documented challenges in academic writing adaptation manifest in an underrepresented population—Kazakhstani graduate students. By illuminating the specific features of the post-Soviet academic experience, including the three-language burden, the collective voice expectation, and the norm of respect for authority, this study extends the existing research to a new and growing population of international students. Ultimately, this research amplifies the voices of students navigating profound academic transitions—voices that must inform institutional policy and pedagogical practice if international scholarly success is to be supported.

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