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THE CHALLENGES FACED BY ENGLISH UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN
WRITING THEIR FINAL PAPERS

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FORTALEZA

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso da
Universidade Federal do Ceará, como
requisito parcial à obtenção do título de
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Orientador: Prof. Dr. Lídia Amélia de Barros
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JOSÉ FERREIRA LIMA NETO

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Curso de Língua Inglesa, suas Literaturas e
Tradução da Universidade Federal do Ceará,
como requisito parcial à obtenção do título de
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Aprovada em: ___/___/_____.

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RESUMO

O processo de escrita acadêmica em língua Inglesa é uma tarefa complexa enfrentada por alunos universitários espalhados ao redor do mundo. A complexidade tende a aumentar quando o aluno tem que escrever seu trabalho de conclusão de curso na língua estrangeira. Com a finalidade de encontrar evidências sobre a dificuldade encontrada pelos alunos do curso de letras Inglês noturno da Universidade Federal do Ceará (UFC), Foram aplicados três questionários e entrevistas a dois grupos focais de participantes, em três etapas. Na primeira etapa, o Grupo 1: composto por dez alunos recém-formados responderam ao questionário. Na fase 2, o Grupo 2, formado por sete alunos que se encontravam em fase de escrita do TCC responderam ao questionário. O presente estudo analisou quais fatores foram mencionados nos dois grupos focais. Na terceira etapa, uma entrevista de acompanhamento foi conduzida para auxiliar a compreensão de como este processo de ensino da escrita acadêmica em língua inglesa vem acontecendo dentro do curso de graduação da UFC. O referencial teórico utilizado para analisar as respostas foi um estudo realizado por Lavelle (2001), *The writing approaches of university students*. O estudo revelou que os alunos sentem que poderiam ser mais bem orientados desde o início do curso e não apenas no final, além de apresentar reflexões sobre a importância da escrita acadêmica para a vida acadêmica e profissional dos participantes. A análise de dados sugeriu que um dos fatores preponderantes para que os alunos não consigam um resultado satisfatório na escrita acadêmica em língua Inglesa, se dá ao fato dos estudantes terem pouca ou quase nenhuma prática com esse gênero na educação básica e secundária. Os dados evidenciaram que a necessidade de seguir regras específicas com relação ao gênero escrita acadêmica tendem a tirar do aluno a sua criatividade, fazendo com que o aluno encontre dificuldade de expor sua própria voz no texto.

Palavras-chave: Escrita acadêmica, Inglês como segunda língua, proficiência em língua estrangeira.

ABSTRACT

The process of English language academic writing is a complex task faced by college students around the world. Complexity tends to increase when a student has to write his or her homework in a foreign language. To find evidence about the difficulty encountered by the students of the night English language course of the Federal University of Ceará (UFC), three questionnaires and interviews were applied to two focus groups of participants, in three stages. In the first stage, Group 1: composed of ten newly graduated students answered the questionnaire. In phase 2, Group 2, Formed by seven students who were in the writing phase of the TCC answered the questionnaire. The present study analyzed which factors were mentioned in both focus groups. In the third stage, a follow-up interview was conducted to help understand how this process of teaching English academic writing has been taking place within the UFC undergraduate course. The theoretical framework used to analyze the answers was a study by Lavelle (2001), *The Writing Approaches of University Students*. The study revealed that students feel that they could be better oriented from the beginning of the course and not just at the end, and reflect on the importance of academic writing for the academic and professional life of participants. Data analysis has suggested that one of the major factors in preventing students from achieving a satisfactory result in English-language academic writing is that students have little or no such practice in primary and secondary education. The data showed that the need to follow specific rules regarding the academic writing genre tends to deprive students of their creativity, making it difficult for students to expose their voice in the text.

Keywords: Academic writing, English as a second language, foreign language proficiency.

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1 INTRODUCTION

This work has the objective of analyzing the main difficulties perceived by the students of an undergraduate program (English Major) at the Universidade Federal do Ceará. It also aims to analyze these difficulties based on google forms questionnaires. The answers provide information related to the problems faced by the students at the final stages of the program.

We verified that when students have to write in a foreign language, specifically English, they feel unprepared because they often do not master L2. We also investigated if the lack of confidence of not being able to express exactly what is aimed may come to hinder their academic writing.

The idea for this research gained strength in the first semester of the English program at the UFC during break conversations with colleagues at the campus. I noticed that many were not confident about delivering their final papers, especially written in English. The desire to expand the understanding of the process and to investigate what could be done in order to help other students who may face the same challenges started at this period.

In spite of the importance of academic English for Brazilians who are taking their undergraduate program, the subject has not been studied deeply. According to Bowers, Fitts and Jung (2010, p. 96), teaching academic English is almost always a novelty for elementary school teachers, English language students as a second language learners are submitted to a considerable pressure in order to achieve literacy in English rapidly. Generally, students complain not having the opportunity to practice academic writing during high school grades. Halliday (2005) states that grammar, word and meaning were integrated into some overall framework. This concept is referenced as a systemic functional linguistic (SFL). Mohan and Beckett (2003) state that SFL has to do more with meaning and grammatical form in context rather than making a transition from errors in rules to the correct form of rules. According to Lauer, (1994, p. 494), "learners avoid

words which they perceive as difficult (whether phonological, grammatically, or semantically) and prefer to use general and frequent words rather than infrequent and specific ones". This study investigates through google form questionnaires and follow up interviews the types of difficulties faced by the students enrolled in this program.

According to A. Oshima, and A. Hogue (2007) Academic writing in English is probably different from academic writing in your native language. The words and grammar and also the way of organizing ideas is probably different from what you are used to. It is likely that this is one of the main reasons why undergraduate students feel so frightened when they have to face this necessary and obligatory task in an undergraduate course. This work certainly does not intend to solve the problems related to academic writing, but maybe bring more light on the subject identifying some aspects so that new ideas can arise and contribute to a better understanding.

According to Lazzarin (2016), some specific aspects of academic writing were identified in order to taking an under-graduation degree in a different language, the aspects were narrowed into: vocabulary, ABNT standards, grammar and punctuation, text structure, cohesion, coherence, referencing and citation, avoiding plagiarism and others. Of course, we do not intend to finish all the matter related to this important subject, as it would be impossible to fulfil all implications. The intention of this study is to bring light to a theme that many times is not at the center of discussion, but deserving of attention.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing in academic English is difficult even to native speakers of the language, and it becomes even more complex to non-native. There are many factors that may have influence in the writing ability of ESL students, for example anxiety, strict deadlines, having to deal with pressure, motivation, self-confidence and others. ESL students' background also takes a very important role in this process, since the ability

and exposure to the target language may help to developed other abilities necessary to academic writing, as to read a research and paraphrase more efficiently for instance.

Nunan (1989) argues that writing is “an extremely difficult cognitive activity which requires the learner to have control over various factors”. These factors vary from academic background and personal interest of the writer to various psychological, linguistic and cognitive phenomena (Dar & Khan, 2015; Haider, 2012). As we can see it is not just a matter of writing on a sheet of paper, it requires a lot of effort from the students, mental and psychological ones. There are many factors that can be challenging to students when having to write their final papers in English, and to identify these factors becomes relevant, because it can increase our understanding of the process itself.

According to Halliday (1981), if the individuals believe that they will do poorly related to academic writing and do not want to take courses that stress writing, it does not matter how capable or skilled they are, they will probably fail in the task. So, it is very important that students acquire confidence in themselves according to their progression on writing assignments.

Writing apprehension is an important factor which may interfere on academic writing (Cheshire, 1984); sometimes students avoid situations where they will be required to write in a second language because they fear to fail the task. Self-esteem in language learning and writing is another factor that causes emotional frustration to the ESL students, occasionally causing them to drop out. According to Lawrence (1981), self-esteem is the person's effective evaluation of the sum of both mental and physical characteristics. Robison-Awana, Kehle, and Jenson (1986) also define it as the person's evaluation of himself. The person is not always right about the evaluation that he/she does about themselves; there are many factors which may have great influence on this evaluation, for example, what others says, the feedbacks received during scholarship life. According to Lavelle (2001), low self-efficacy occurs when the student doubts his capacity hence, he sees the writing activity as something difficult and painful. This ability

to recognize oneself as a good writer can greatly influence the performance of the task of writing.

Lavelle (1997) described students' approaches to learning as "reflective of the relationship between the student and the task". The same notion has been applied to college writing at the graduate level. However, further research is required to explore and examine the factors that affect writing skills of the students, because issues in writing can be more efficiently addressed if the factors that generate them are identified (Hyland, 2003). According to Lavelle (2001), writing does not occur in a tidy and linear sequence, the beliefs and writers' intentions must to be taken in consideration. When students write their works, it is their perception and beliefs that is put on the paper, although academic writing is not a personal work it becomes impossible to separate the creation from the creator.

Students' approach to learning strategies on academic writing is linked to the beliefs and intentions that students at UFC have when writing their academic papers. When the function of writing and the purpose of writing are understood by students it becomes much easier and satisfactory to write their academic papers. The assumption has been that students' beliefs may affect strategies they would choose which in turn may affect their learning outcomes (cf. Van Rossum and Schenk 1984).

According to Lavelle (2001) there are two main approaches to academic writing. "The basic distinction is between a deep, meaningful approach based on seeing the task as a whole and proactive engagement in learning, and a surface approach based on reproduction of information and memorization". These motivational factors maintain students' focus or alter their level on academic writing tasks.

When student's intentions are just to fulfil the task proposed the cognitive engagement is very low and makes use of mere memorization or repetition, and a linear and superficial outcome. This is what Lavelle calls surface approach. As Lavelle (2001) attests: "when the intention is to fully engage the task based on a need to know, the focus is at a higher conceptual level, geared toward manipulating layers of meaning, a deep approach".

These approaches are explained by Biggs (1999, p. 45):

When students feel this need-to-know, they automatically try to focus on underlying meanings, on main ideas, themes, principles, or successful applications. This requires a sound foundation of relevant prior knowledge, so students needing to know will naturally try to learn the details, as well as making sure they understand the big picture. In fact, the big picture is not understandable without the details. When using the deep approach in handling a task, students have positive feelings: interest, a sense of importance, challenge, exhilaration. Learning is a pleasure. Students come with questions they want answered, and when the answers are unexpected, that is even better.

As we can notice, students have to be motivated in order to learn the content more efficiently to continue improving during this process.

The framework used for coding in this study outlines some of Lavelle's (2001) factors that may influence student's achievement related to academic writing. Factors as the "**Elaborative**", the "**Low Self-Efficacy, Reflective-revision, Spontaneous-impulsive**" and the "**Procedural-approach** are mentioned. The Elaborative factor is a search for personal meaning, self-knowledge; it happens when students see the process of writing as a deep investment. The low self-Efficacy happens when students see the writing process as something painful, and have a feeling of doubt about the ability of accomplish the task. The Reflective-Revision is when students have a deep writing process based on revision, rebuilding makes part of the process all the time, the focus in the process of writing is high in order to make the writing meaningful to oneself and to the audience. The Spontaneous-impulsive factor occurs when students work in an impulsively and unplanned manner. This approach is defensive. The Procedural approach occurs when students tries to please the teacher more than oneself, the rules are strict followed but with minimal involvement from the student.

Although we can define students approaches as deep and surface approaches, it does not mean that students cannot shift their approaches during the writing process. Students may start by using a superficial approach and go to a deeper approach when they feel familiar with the subject they are working with.

In the present study we tried to investigate how these factors influence the way students face their tasks regards writing, and also if others emerge.

3 METHODOLOGY

This is an exploratory research, by which the objective was to identify the main difficulties encountered by undergraduate students (English Majors) from Universidade Federal Do Ceará when writing their final papers. The goal was to identify and analyze the causes of these difficulties, how students deal with them and suggest strategies.

The analysis adopted for the study was both qualitative and quantitative. Data were collected in three stages, For Stage one, the first focus group was requested to answer a google form questionnaire. For Stage two, the second focus group was requested to answer a google form questionnaire. For the third stage, a follow up interview was conducted where the interviewees could describe their experience in more detail. The Two focus groups that participated in the survey are described as Group 1 and group 2. Group 1 is formed by ten alumni recently graduated and group 2 consists of seven senior students.

A total of seventeen instruments were used for data collection. The first questionnaire aimed to identify whether students really have difficulty with academic writing. To this end, students were asked to answer four questions as follows: “what are your feelings regards academic writing? And to rate them according to the level of difficulty. They had to choose their answers according to the scale: Easy, difficult, very difficult, neither easy nor difficult”. The five Questions that composed the questionnaire can be found in the appendix. The second questionnaire was sent to the two groups students, now with the objective of identifying in which areas of academic writing the students feel most difficulty. The questionnaire consisted of seven objective questions and one open question. This questionnaire can also be found in the appendix.

The open question was: Qual foi a maior dificuldade enfrentada na escrita acadêmica do TCC? Eighty percent (eight of the ten students) from the focus group one answered this question, their answers will be discussed in the findings section. The question proposed to the focus group two was: Qual a maior dificuldade que você está

enfrentando no momento na escrita acadêmica do TCC? One hundred percent (Seven of the seven) students answer this question, their answer will be discussed in the findings section.

The third step in data collection was a follow up interview, which aimed to know student's experiences regards academic writing before and during this academic program. four students from both groups were chosen to participate in a follow up interview.

3.1 Scenario and context

The research was carried out at Universidade Federal Do Ceará, the subject of the study were seven students and ten former students of the English course nocturnal of the same university. Students in both groups answered the same multiple-choice questionnaire containing seven closed questions and one open about the main difficulties encountered by them as they wrote their final course paper.

After the students had answered the proposed questionnaire, four of those students who had very similar answers to a given topic were invited to participate in a follow up interview. To assure confidentiality, students names are not identified. The interview was of great value in order to deepen the knowledge regarding the academic writing. The follow up interview questions were: 1- How was writing for you in elementary school? Did you enjoy it? 2- How could writing skills be improved in your opinion? 3- What would you suggest teachers to do to help students improve academic writing skills?

4 RESULTS

In this Section, the results obtained are presented. They are organized on graphics and tables. As said earlier in regards of student's writing ability in L2, specifically English, may influence his or her choices when writing in that language.

Also, the extent to which the lack of confidence of not being able to express exactly what one wants in that language, could influence in their academic writing ability. According to the questionnaire 67% of students find that academic writing is difficult or very difficult

Hypothesis one is that students perceive writing as a difficult task. Hypothesis two is that students feel they lack confidence and fluency in English, and few practices on writing in English in general. The results confirmed these two hypotheses, since all students who participated in the research at some point described these difficulties. The students who participated made it clear that the lack of practice concerning academic writing in English before and during their academic life was a determining factor for some failures during this period.

Figure 8, which deals with grammar and punctuation, showed us a big difference in the answers given by the students in the two focus groups.

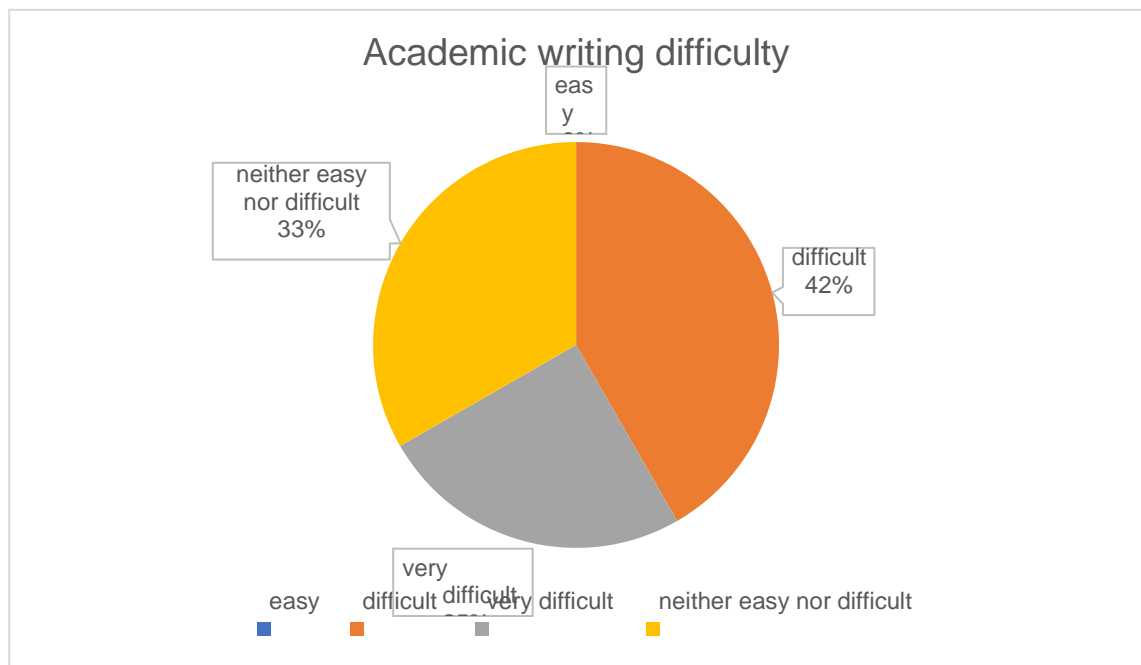


Figure 1. Academic writing difficulty.

According to what was stated before, writing is an extremely difficult activity, and the results confirmed the difficulty, As can be seen in Figure 1 most of the students find writing academic English to be difficult or very difficult. A complete description reveals that 42% of the students find it difficult, 25% very difficult, and 33% neither easy nor difficult. None found it easy.

Graphics from the first group of students (ten alumni recently graduated).

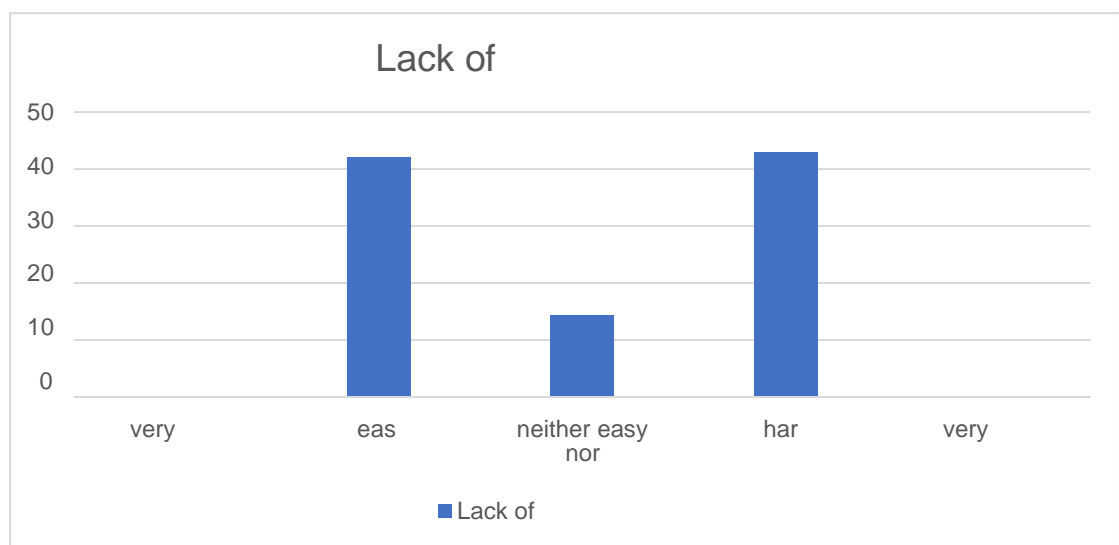


Figure 2 Lack of support and resource.

As we can see in the graph above, approximately half of the students who answered the first questionnaire experienced difficulties with support and resources.

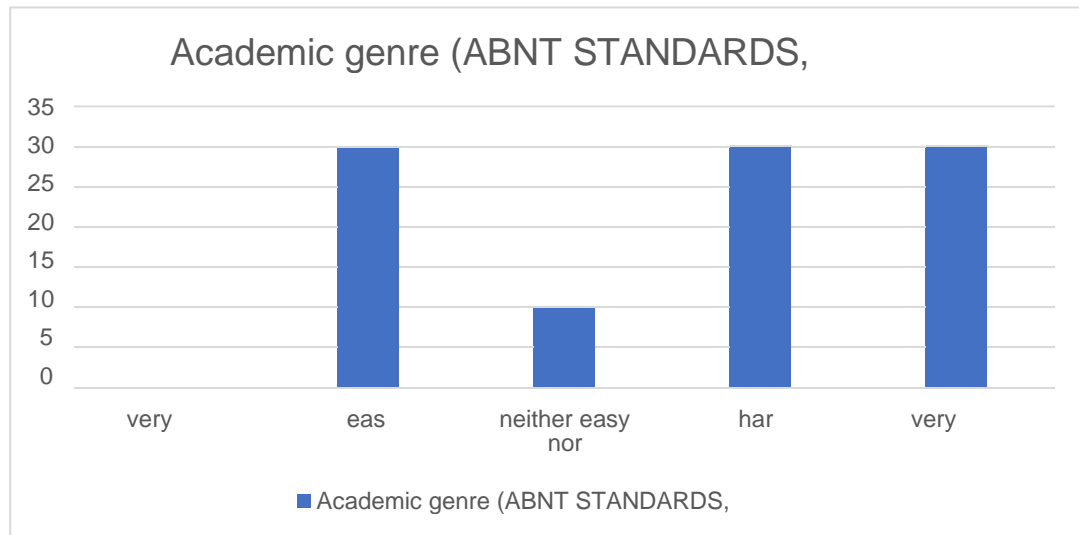


Figure 3. Academic genre (ABNT standards, formatting)

Figure 3 reveals the main problem reported by newly graduated students who answered the questionnaire. This difficulty was also manifested by the students who were interviewed. This difficulty was also manifested by the students who were completing the program.

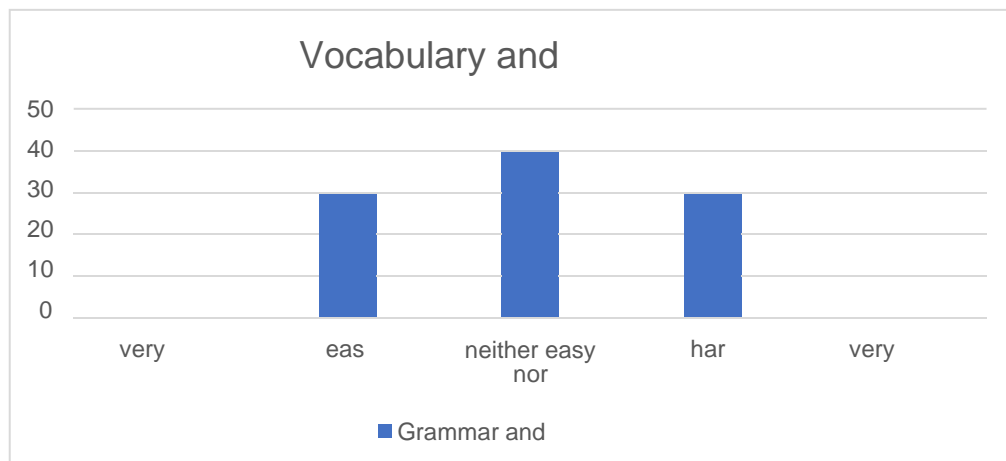


Figure 4 Vocabulary and punctuation.

According to the students who answered the first questionnaire (newly graduated students), vocabulary and punctuation was not one of their main problems.

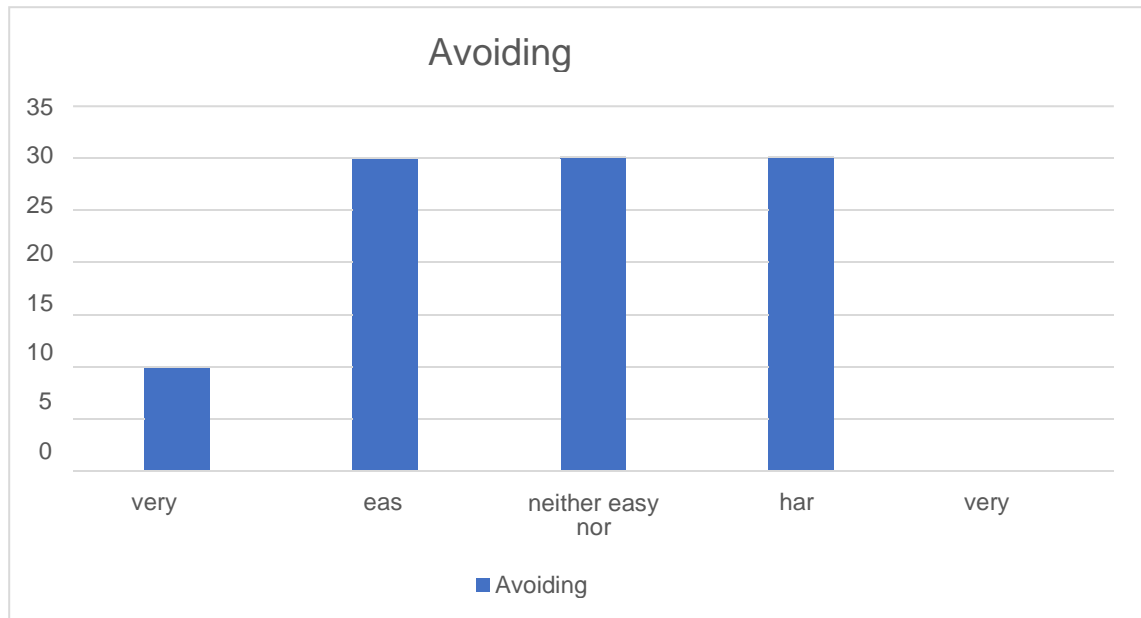


Figure 5 Avoidance of plagiarism.

Thirty percent of students who answered about plagiarism from the first group of students who answered the questionnaire found it difficult to avoid it.

As we have said before, these are only the graphics we found relevant to the study made, of course there were other graphics analyzed during this study, for example: text structure, referencing and citation and so on. The next table shows the answers of the novice teachers for the open question: Qual foi a maior dificuldade enfrentada na escrita acadêmica do tcc? This question was the last question on the questionnaire answered by the first group of students.

Dead line pressure (time).
Acredito que algo que me preocupava bastante era fugir do tema/perguntas de pesquisa previamente delimitados pra minha pesquisa. Apesar de isso não ter sido um problema real durante o processo de produção, era algo que me preocupava muito na época.
Em suma, as maiores dificuldades foram produzir o texto sem torná-lo maçante e repetitivo, e encontrar os autores certos para meu trabalho.
Minha maior dificuldade sempre foi "esquecer" a estrutura da língua materna e incorporar a

estrutura da língua-alvo.
Minha maior dificuldade foi ter dúvidas em relação a gramática. Durante os anos que passei estudando no meu curso de graduação eu tive quase nada de feedback sobre a minha escrita nos trabalhos feitos.
Conseguir um número suficiente de participantes nos testes
It was really hard to find studies directly related to the topic I elicited. Most of the texts and studies I used as resources were descriptive and they served as foundation for the analysis I ran.
Não foi difícil pra mim porque eu era bolsista de iniciação científica e tinha um bom conhecimento sobre como realizar pesquisas, formatação de artigos científicos e etc.

Graphics from the second group of students (undergraduate students.

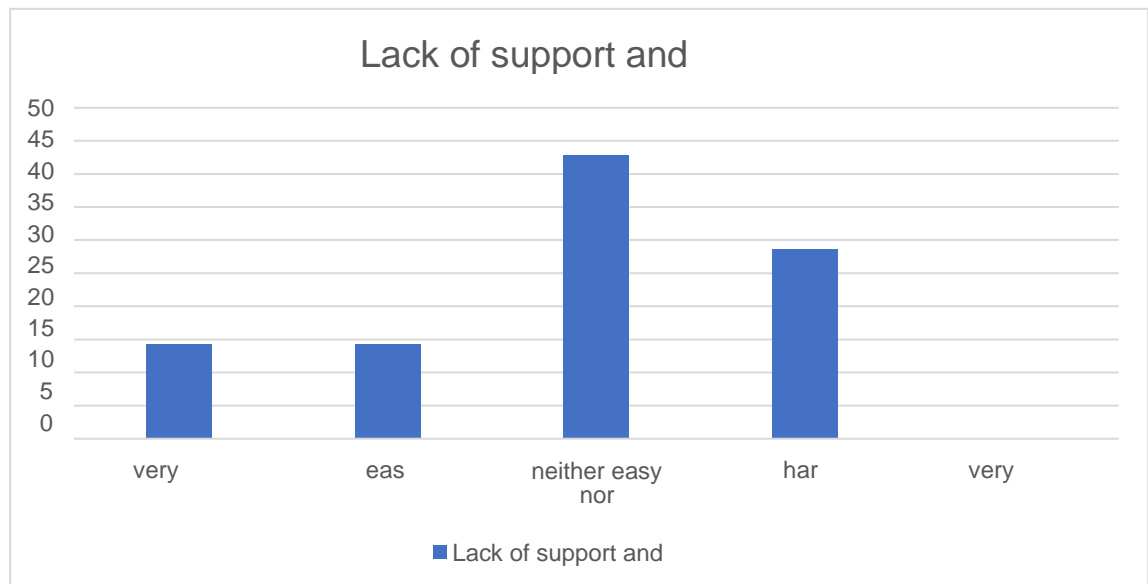


Figure 6 Lack of support and resource.

Unlike the first group of students who answered the same questionnaire, students in the second focus group feel that they have had more support and resources in writing their final assignments.

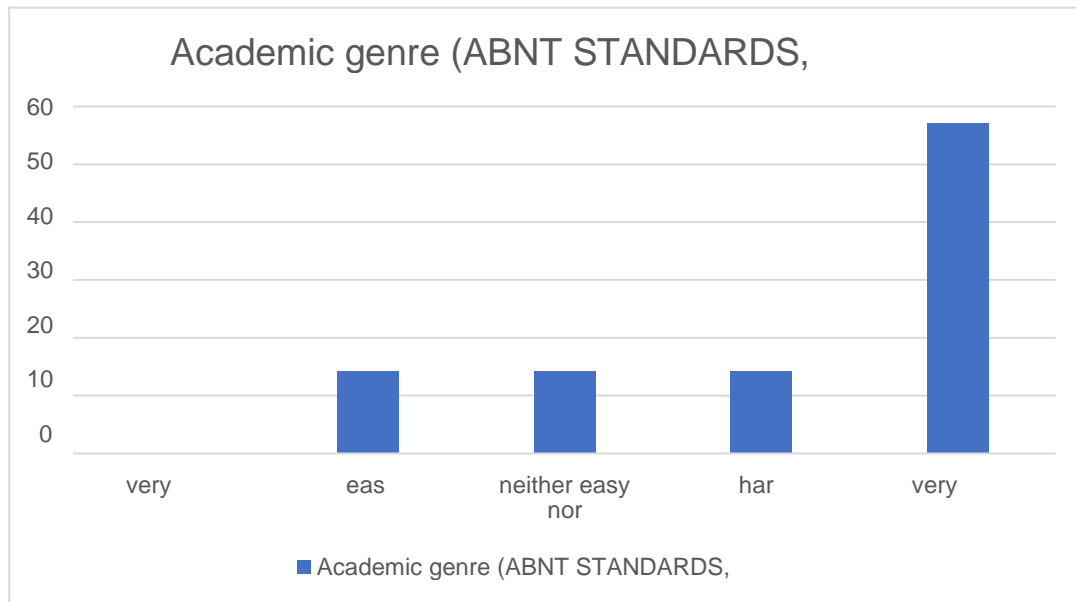


Figure 7 Academic genre (ABNT standards, formatting.

As the first group of students who participated in the research, the second group also showed great difficulties with this aspect of the language.

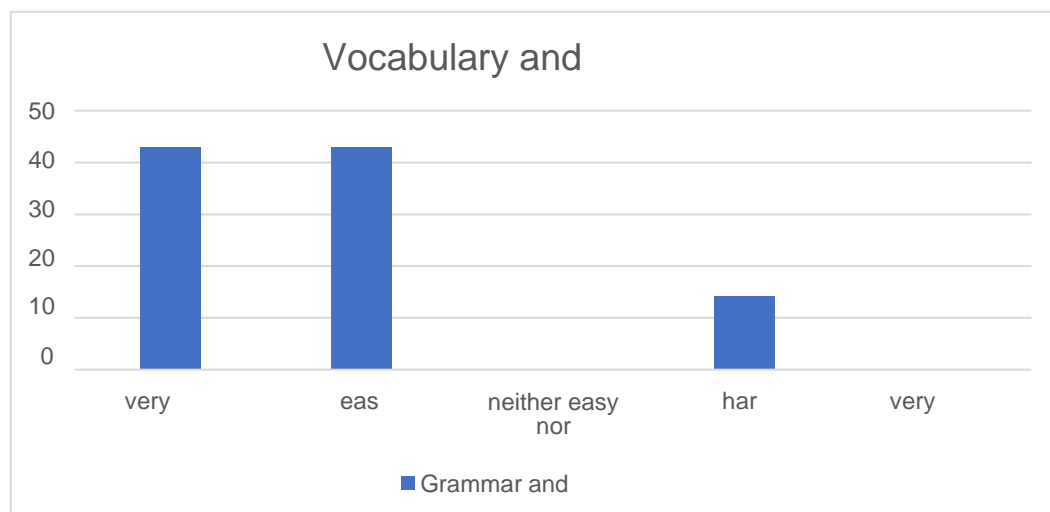


Figure 8 Vocabulary and punctuation.

Figure eight shows a relevant difference when compared to the responses of students in the first focus group. According to the answers given by the students in the second group, this is not an aspect of academic writing that they find very difficult.

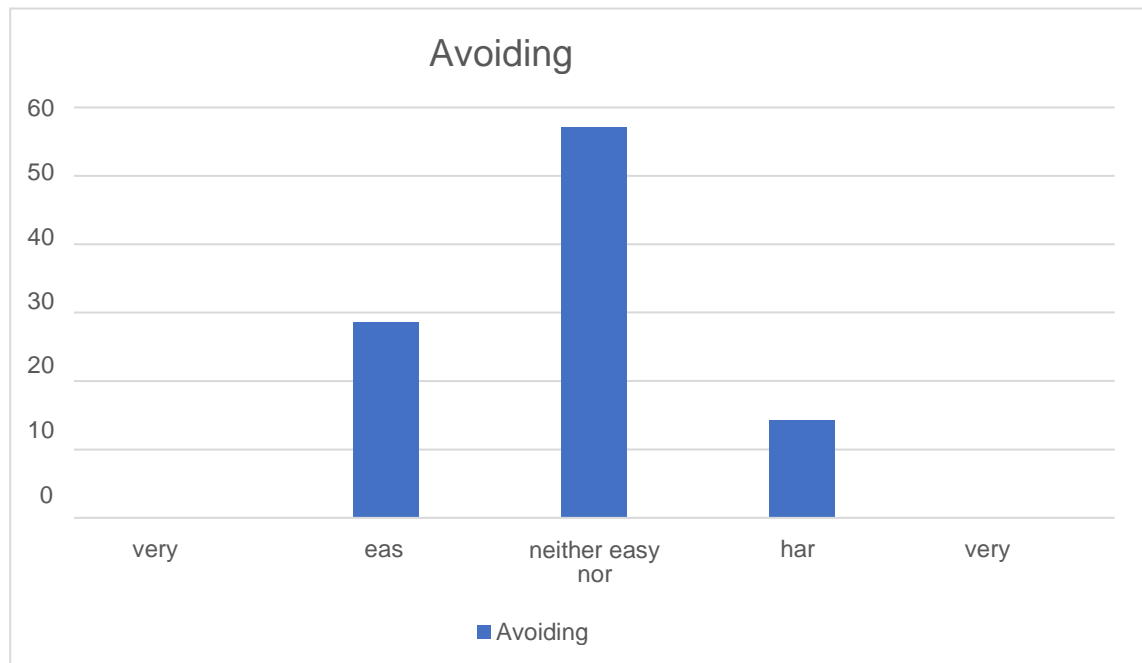


Figure 9 Avoidance of plagiarism.

This is another graph in which a relevant difference can be noticed in the answers given by the two groups of students. The graph shows that this group of students had no difficulty with this aspect of academic writing.

The table below shows the answer of the second group (undergraduate students), to the open question: Qual a maior dificuldade que você está enfrentando no momento na escrita acadêmica do tcc? This question was the last question on the questionnaire answered by the second group of students.

Tempo
A falta de motivação para escrevê-lo.
Vocabulary
Tempo para desenvolvê-lo

<p>Devido ao pouco contato ao longo do curso com a questão de realizar citações e referências, essa tem sido uma das minhas dificuldades. Obs.: Não lembro de ao longo do curso ter tido muitos trabalhos escritos onde isso fosse necessário ser utilizado, portanto, ter que utilizar algo que não foi muito bem explorado ao longo do curso é complicado. Talvez trazer esse conteúdo mais fortemente nas disciplinas de escrita acadêmica ou diluído ao longo do curso (que talvez fosse ideal) amenizasse essa dificuldade que parece “pouca”, mas que conta devido ao curto espaço de tempo que temos para produzir um TCC (sou graduanda do Letras-Inglês Noturno). E muito boa pesquisa Ferreira. Espero ter ajudado!</p>
<p>A maior dificuldade foi na delimitação do tema, foi o que me tomou mais tempo e reflexão. Tive dificuldade em escolher um tema que me inspirasse a escrever.</p>
<p>Organizar o tempo para progredir na escrita e análise dos dados. Gramática e vocabulário também são pontos que me dão um pouco de dificuldade.</p>

This section presents the results of the follow up interviews, the third stage of the research. After the questionnaires and the open question had been answered, four students were chosen to participate in an interview, the objective of the interview was to understand how students background influences in students choice regards skills they use during the process of writing their final papers, it also has the objective to come up with suggestion on improvement in the disciplines related to academic writing in the academia. Below we have students answers to the interview.

<p>Student one: How was writing for you in elementary or high school? Did you enjoy the activity? Answer: During elementary and high school I didn't like writing at all. We were never asked to be creative, concerning writing, during elementary school and then, suddenly, we were asked to write 15-to-30-line compositions focusing on Enem.</p>
<p>Question two: How could writing skills be improved, in your opinion? Answer: I think my skills would be improved if I were asked to write more, not only in high school but also during the under-graduation.</p>
<p>Question three: What would you suggest teachers to help them improve academic writing skills? Answer: I think that, in order to improve our writing skills in a foreign language, it is really important for us to know about writing strategies, which applies for writing not only in a foreign language but also in our native language, and practice as much as possible.</p>
<p>Student two: How was writing for you in elementary or high school? Did you enjoy</p>

<p>the activity? I have always enjoyed writing and it was a pleasure for me to write in elementary and high school.</p>
<p>Question two: How could writing skills be improved, in your opinion? Writing can only be improved through reading.</p>
<p>Question three: What would you suggest teachers to help them improve academic writing skills? Read more and practice whenever you can.</p>
<p>Student three: How was writing for you in elementary or high school? Did you enjoy the activity? I didn't have many activities in Elementary and in high school. We did exercises in our English book. Just it...To be honest, I never did composition or things like that.</p>
<p>What would you suggest teachers to help them improve academic writing skills? Eu penso que deve haver um esforço mútuo, tanto do professor em ensinar, treinar e pedir trabalhos, quando do aluno em aprender novas palavras e usá-las em seus trabalhos.</p>
<p>Student four: How was writing for you in elementary or high school? Did you enjoy the activity? In elementary and high school, writing in Portuguese was never problematic; meaning: I would do it, without any problem, whenever it was required from me like writing essays and short paragraphs. Regarding writing in English, there wasn't really many chances of it once most of it was writing test answers which was also never problematic.</p>
<p>I would say "enjoy the activity" is going too far when talking about writing. I never disliked it but I also didn't love it. Like I said before, I would do it whenever it was necessary.</p>
<p>How could writing skills be improved, in your opinion? I think anyone can improve their writing skills, a productive skill, by practicing a lot of its counterpart, reading, a receptive skill. In this respect, when you get in contact, by reading, with written productions you sort of start improving your own.</p>
<p>What would you suggest teachers to help them improve academic writing skills? I believe that if learners got in contact with academic writing from the beginning of their courses, they would eventually get less scared of doing it. Then, they would write more and also fail more which would give room for improvement.</p>

5 DISCUSSION

The study presented here so far has confirmed the first hypothesis that students who have to write in a language, even when it is the case that the language fits into the category of the second language they major in, may encounter difficulty. Also, it is common to feel a sense of inability to write in this language. This does not mean that these students are not able to write properly in terms of grammar, but sometimes it is just because other factors may influence their choices while writing their final papers even in an undergraduate program. One limiting aspect for the conclusion of this work was the fact that students who are in the process of finishing their under-graduation program have significant time limitations. It is not because those students are not willing to participate but because they are overwhelmed by their own activities in college and workload.

We can notice a tendency to the procedural approach during the production of the final paper by the students, the students who participate in this research try to be very straight forward and follow the rules but with minimal involvement. In addition, students have to deal with the deadlines and pressure for completing and submitting the task on due date. Confirming what Lavell says (2001, p. 377), "The procedural approach reflects wanting to please the teacher rather the intention to communicate or reflect". The graphics one to six also demonstrated that students from the two focus groups who participate in the research have very similar issues related to academic writing. Another factor that became clear was writing apprehension, as it has to do with lack of background from students and also (according to the students) lack of support on how to write academically. The comments made for this study refer not only while in college but mainly before they enter in college. It is a perception, To the majority of the students interviewed, that if they have had the opportunity to practice more frequently composing in elementary and high school, for example, the process of academic writing in college would be easier if they had more opportunities of previous practice.

The undergraduate students interviewed also have different perceptions with some aspects of academic writing. For some students, academic writing seems somewhat distant from their realities, while for others it is just an extension of their student life. What seems interesting to point out is the fact that students who had a good background in writing essays also demonstrated a good performance to academic writing. Just to demonstrate this factor we can see these different answers reflect very different levels of difficulties to academic writing. One participant who demonstrated a high level of anxiety and apprehension to academic writing said: I didn't have many activities in Elementary and in high school. We did exercises in our English book. Just it...To be honest, I never did composition or things like that. The other student who always had a high performance's level related to academic writing said: I have always enjoyed writing and it was a pleasure for me to write in elementary and high school. We can notice here a very different background from these two students and how the previous opportunities of practice can influence their performance in writing.

Analyzing the results, it seems that although there are some differences between the two focus groups we may notice more similarities than differences. The main difference found between the two focus groups was regarding the avoidance of plagiarism and also regarding grammar and punctuation. It was noted that alumni recently graduated students, have a greater concern with plagiarism and grammatical errors. Perhaps because they already have more experience with the subjects listed. The results showed that many factors mentioned by Lavell occur. One aspect that was frequently pointed was the lack of confidence during the process of academic writing. This challenge was an issue which appears in the both focus Four of them from a total of four, mentioned during the interview that it occurs because they had no or only few opportunities of practice during their student's life.

What makes the work of academic writing in English a complex task, according to them, was the fact that they have few or no chances to practice at all. Just to point it out, some of the answers for the questions How was writing for you in elementary or high school? Did you enjoy the activity? Were: 1. During elementary and high school I didn't

like writing at all. We were never asked to be creative, concerning writing, during elementary school and then, suddenly, we were asked to write 15-to-30-line compositions focusing on Enem. Another answer 2. from a different student was: How was writing for you in elementary or high school? Did you enjoy the activity? I didn't have many activities in Elementary and high school. We did exercises in our English book. Just it...To be honest, I never did composition or things like that. This is just a few examples from the interviews, but there were many other answers like that.

As students do not have exposure to practice writing classes before college, it reflects in the way they see the process of writing during college. The outcome is they do not feel comfortable when being asked to make compositions, essays, etc. Another aspect that cannot be neglected is the academic genre and ABNT standards. According to the findings, it became clear that the majority of the students do not know how to write using ABNT standards or do not know if what they have written is adequate according to the standards, and it let students apprehensive in a first time.

Another frequent complaint mentioned by the students was time. They consider that the time to submission of their final research projects has much influence on the quality of their academic work. The deadline becomes short because according to the students interviewed, there are just a few subjects during the course focused directly with academic writing.

Another factor that seems to exert a lot of influence on the academic writing of students who participated in the research was the Spontaneous-impulsive approach. According to Lavell (2001) the Spontaneous-Impulsive approach represents overestimating skill and fear of fully dealing with what the writer perceives as limitations; the approach is defensive. Often these students underestimate themselves, largely because they have not practiced writing during their student life.

The figure two and six also pointed to another extremely interesting data, the lack of support and resource felt during the undergraduate course, according to the participants in this research, the lack of support and resource is directly linked to the number of disciplines that focus on academic writing.

The need to maintain a standard and follow certain rules during academic writing has proven to be a problem for certain students, sometimes the concern to be able to maintain a high level of standards in relation to the ABNT norms takes away the creativity of these students in writing their academic work, during interviews with these students the fear of following these rules became evident.

6 FINAL REMARKS

During this research it became clear that academic writing requires a significant cognitive effort. This is so, as writing is an activity that requires a lot of discipline, concentration and even willpower. It was also clear during this study that students often do not know how to put their voices into the text. It is then that creativity tends to disappear.

The objective of this research was to identify the main difficulties experienced by undergraduate students (English majors) at the Federal University of Ceará. And it became clear that their main difficulties are related to the mastery of the English language. Those students who had a greater opportunity to practice the language before college also had great advantages during their journey in college.

One way to improve academic writing performance could be to have more subjects that focus on academic writing from the very beginning of the undergraduate program.

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**APPENDIX A - QUESTIONNAIRE ON THE DIFFICULTIES IN ACADEMIC WRITING
PERCEIVED BY STUDENTS AT THE UFC.**

Academic writing difficulty

What are your feelings regards academic writing? Choose one option from the options below.

Easy ()

Difficult ()

Very difficult ()

Neither difficult nor easy ()

**APPENDIX B – QUESTIONNAIRE ANSWERED BY THE FIRST FOCUS GROUP
(NEW GRADUATE STUDENTS).**

Academic writing difficulties

Dear participants, this is a 8 question questionnaire that consists of 7 objective questions and 1 open question. The aim is to investigate the difficulties faced in writing in English in an undergraduate course in Brazil. It will take 10 minutes to be completed. From 1 to 5, 1 being very easy and 5 very difficult, answer the questions below.

Academic writing

1. Name: (names will not be used)

2. Age:

3. Gender:

4. Vocabulary

Marcar apenas uma.

1 2 3 4 5

5. Lack of support/resource

Marcar apenas uma.

1 2 3 4 5

6. Academic genre (ABNT standards, formatting)

Marcar apenas uma.

1 2 3 4 5

7. Grammar and punctuation

Marcar apenas uma.

1 2 3 4 5

8. Text structure

Marcar apenas uma.

1 2 3 4 5

9. Referencing and citation

Marcar apenas uma.

1 2 3 4 5

10. Avoiding plagiarism

Marcar apenas uma.

1 2 3 4 5

11. Qual foi a maior dificuldade enfrentada na escrita acadêmica do TCC?

**APPENDIX C – QUESTIONNAIRE ANSWERED BY THE SECOND FOCUS GROUP
(UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS).**

Academic writing difficulties

Dear participants, this is a 8 question questionnaire that consists of 7 objective questions and 1 open question. The aim is to investigate the difficulties faced in writing in English in an undergraduate course in Brazil. It will take 10 minutes to be completed. From 1 to 5, 1 being very easy and 5 very difficult, answer the questions below.

Academic writing

1. Name: (names will not be used)

2. Age:

3. Gender:

4. Vocabulary

Marcar apenas uma.

1 2 3 4 5

5. Lack of support/resource

Marcar apenas uma.

1 2 3 4 5

6. Academic genre (ABNT standards, formatting)

Marcar apenas uma.

1 2 3 4 5

7. Grammar and punctuation

Marcar apenas uma.

1 2 3 4 5

8. Text structure

Marcar apenas uma.

1 2 3 4 5

9. Referencing and citation

Marcar apenas uma.

1 2 3 4 5

10. Avoiding plagiarism

Marcar apenas uma.

1 2 3 4 5

11. Qual a maior dificuldade que você está enfrentando no momento na escrita acadêmica do TCC?