



Grammatical Problems Encountered by English Language University Students in Writing

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ABSTRACT

Writing skill plays a vital role in academic and professional success. It is an extremely complex skill in which the students are required to produce well-structured essays, research papers, and reports that demonstrate their understanding of the subject matter and their ability to articulate complex ideas. This article investigates the problems that face the second semester students at faculty of Education Nasser / Zawia university and offers some remedies and suggestions in order to minimize the problems of punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and grammatical structures. The students were asked to write a paragraph to test their writing abilities. Moreover, close ended questionnaire was conducted in order to obtain information from the students to identify their difficulties. The results showed that 95% of the students struggle in their writing due to the fact that they lack the necessary basics of writing, vocabulary, resources and support to improve their writing. In addition, the study offers some suggestions that the researcher suggested to minimize such problems.

Keywords: writing skill, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, grammatical structures, and remedies.

المشاكل النحوية التي يواجهها طلاب الجامعات في الكتابة

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ملخص البحث:

تلعب مهارات الكتابة دورًا حيويًا في النجاح الأكاديمي والمهني. إنها مهارة معقدة للغاية حيث يُطلب من الطلاب إنتاج مقالات وأوراق بحثية وتقارير جيدة التنظيم تظهر فهمهم للموضوع وقدرتهم على التعبير عن الأفكار المعقدة. يبحث هذا المقال في المشكلات التي تواجه طلاب جامعة الزاوية ويقدم العلاجات والاقتراحات من أجل تقليل مشاكل الترقيم والكتابة بالأحرف الكبيرة والهجاء وبعض التراكمات النحوية.

Introduction

Writing skill is essential in higher education as it facilitates effective communication, critical thinking, and the ability to convey ideas coherently. Teaching or developing writing is not an easy task. It is a very difficult for teachers and students. Strauch (2006) said that " Writing has always been considered as a pain for both learners and the ELT practitioners as well" (p.25). Writing skill has been neglected by linguists, applied linguists and language teachers. Although interest has grown quite rapidly during the last years, there is certainly not much evidence of interest in writing in the last forty years taken as a whole, and relative to investigation at other linguistic levels.

Unfortunately, writing instruction often takes a backseat in the curriculum. Writing tends to be neglected skill. This lack of focus can result in students not receiving the necessary instruction and practice needed to develop their writing skill fully. However, despite its significance, developing writing skill has always been a suffer for teachers and their students and remains a challenge for them (Strauch,

2006). Writing is considered as one of the most difficult language skills to be developed. The researcher himself, in the twenty-three years EFL teaching experience in university level, has experienced that the learners always struggle in their writing and face many problems especially in punctuation, capitalization, spelling, vocabulary, coherence, cohesion, and grammatical structure. Effective writing skills are essential in today's information-driven society, where communication through various mediums plays a crucial role. Strong writing abilities empower individuals to express themselves clearly, articulate their thoughts, and engage in critical thinking (Seaton, 1998). Furthermore, proficient writing is closely linked to academic success, as it supports comprehension, knowledge acquisition, and analytical reasoning across all subjects.

Writing is more than just putting words on a paper; it is a fundamental skill that plays a vital role in our daily lives. From composing emails to crafting persuasive arguments, effective writing skills are essential in communicating our thoughts and ideas clearly to others (Nasser, 2018). Whether it is in school, the workplace, or personal relationships, the ability to write well can make a significant difference in how we are perceived and understood. In the realm of academia, writing proficiency is crucial for students to succeed. It goes beyond simply completing assignments; it is about expressing one's understanding, critically analyzing information, and constructing coherent arguments. Students who excel in writing have an advantage in various subjects, as they can effectively convey their knowledge and ideas. Additionally, strong writing skills can lead to higher grades, increased confidence, and improved overall academic performance.

Aim of the study

The study aims to investigate the problems in writing that face the second semester students at faculty of education (Nasser)/ Zawia university to minimize such problems.

Research question

1. What are the problems that the second semester students at faculty of education Nasser / Zawia university face in their writing?

Literature Review

Writing skill is a crucial component in Zawia English department, as it plays a vital role in academic success and future professional. It is defined by Seaton (1998) "Writing skills are specific abilities which help writers put their thoughts into words in a meaningful form and to mentally interact with the message". (p. 188). Developing writing skill empowers students to express their thoughts, ideas, and arguments effectively. It also enhances their critical thinking abilities and helps them communicate with clarity and precision. Writing skills are like the secret weapon every university student needs in their arsenal. And for students in Libya, honing those skills is very crucial for success. Whether it is crafting stellar essays, writing research papers, or simply communicating ideas effectively, the ability to write well opens doors to endless possibilities. So, in this study, the researcher ventured into the world of the second semester students at faculty of education Nasser and explore how the researcher can help them improve their writing.

Many studies (Zughoul and Taminian, 1984; Kambal 1980; Zughoul and Husain 1985; Hisham, 2008; Abdul Haque, 1982; Ababneh, Sana M. Omar 1996; Chen, Y-M. 2002) have been conducted in the Arab world to investigate the problems that face students in writing tasks. Zughoul and Taminian (1984) found that some students commit serious errors while they write in English. Also, Kambal:

analyzed errors in three types of free composition by first year Sudanese university students. His research focused on the major syntactic errors made by these students in the verb phrase and the noun phrase. Kambal also found that the three main types of errors made in the verb phrase are verb formation, tense, and subject-verb agreement. He discussed errors in tense within five categories: tense sequence, tense substitution, tense marker, deletion, and confusion of perfect tenses. The findings of this study reveal that the third-person singular marker was used

redundantly, and they also revealed the use of the incorrect form of verb to be. (Kambal, 1980)

Furthermore, Strauch (2006) considers writing a demanding challenge to produce "the coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing" (p. 271). In their study, Zughoul and Husain (1985), found three problems that the students experience in writing skill and these are the lack of lexical variety, misuse of conjunctions, and their heavy reliance on redundancy that does not add any new information to the text. Hisham (2008) studied the problems of Arab students who were studying at Business College at University Utara Malaysia. He found that those students experienced difficulties in vocabulary register, grammar, and referencing.

In addition, Abdul Haque (1982), conducted research on grammatical structure in composition on Jordanian secondary students and states that "one of the linguistic areas in which students in the secondary cycle commit errors is in the writing skills. As a result, ESL/EFL teachers are still in search of a coherent, comprehensive theory of the teaching of writing. It is the area in which learners need to be offered adequate time to develop their writing skill, therefore more time should be devoted to it in classrooms containing ELLs so that they will be prepared to effectively communicate in real life as well as academic situations (Nasser, 2018).

Thus, this study specifically focuses on the problems of punctuation, capitalization, spelling, lexical items and grammatical structures in writing among the students of writing skills courses at Zawia University. This study offers some remedies and suggestion for the above-mentioned problems.

Methodology

This section aims to discuss the research methodology that was applied in this research. The researcher adopted a mixed methods design of data collection and analysis. The design is characterized by the combination of qualitative and quantitative research. According to

Schoonenboom and Johnson (2017), the main purpose of mixed methods research is to expand and strengthen a study's conclusions. Therefore, the researcher delved into the research design and data collection techniques employed to investigate the writing problems of English language students in the second semester of the English Department, faculty of Nasser, Zawia university. In order to collect data, the researcher decided to conduct a closed-ended interview (a questionnaire) in which the students answered 10 questions. These questions were constructed on the basis of the literature review. Some of these items were adopted from Rahima (2016) study. A test was administered to the same students to investigate the problems of writing. In this test they were asked to punctuate several written sentences as well as writing a paragraph in which the students had to write a short story.

This research was carried out at Nasser faculty of Education. Only thirty-five students out of fifty-six were chosen from second semester students to be involved in this study. These students were randomly selected from two classes (A and B). They were given some tasks on writing (e.g. punctuate some sentences, as well as writing a paragraph) and then the researcher did the interview to the same students in order to get writing samples from them.

This study limits its coverage on the second semester only. Its main purpose is to identify the common problems in writing that the students face in their writing in the second semester to propose possible solutions.

Results

A questionnaire is considered as a suitable tool of obtaining information from the students in this area. In order to collect data relevant to this issue, the researcher questioned the second semester students about their writing difficulties. Students were given enough time to answer the questions at ease. The result of the questionnaire is as follows:

1. Question one: the researcher asked the students whether they studied the subject of writing before or not. All of them 100% answered they did.
2. In question two, the researcher asked the students whether they did the task of writing as homework or not. 80% of the students said they did not do homework.
3. In question three, the researcher asked them if they studied punctuation marks. 95% of them answered yes, they did, but they did not do enough exercises.
4. Question four, the students were asked if they have problems regarding to punctuation marks. 95% of the students answered that they face problems in their writing and always struggle in the use of full stop, comma, colon, semi colon, question mark, and quotation marks while they write.
5. Question five: the researcher asked the students whether they have problems in capitalization. The answer was about 70% of the students said that they misuse the capital / lower case letter in their writing.
6. Question six: On the question regarding the spelling problems in writing, most of the students (94%) answered that they have spelling problems.
7. Question seven: the researcher also asked a question regarding the problems of language use in writing. Here the respondents agree that all of them always struggle while they use foreign language and face problems like inappropriateness, synonyms and antonyms, sentence structure.
8. Question eight: the researcher also asked the students whether they do a lot of reading activity. 60% answered that they do not do any reading activity.
9. Question nine: The researcher also asked the students if they are interested in writing. 90% of them answered that they do not like this subject.
10. Question ten: the researcher asked the students to arrange the four language skills from the most difficult to the easiest skill. 92 % of

them choose writing as number one whereas 8% chose reading as number two.

Discussion

From the above results, it can be seen that all the students answered the first question about whether they studied the subject of writing before or not. All of them 100% answered they did which means that they should have an idea about types of sentences, capitalization and punctuation marks. The results show that 80% of the students did not do homework which means that they did not do any practice in writing. The problems of misuse of vocabulary, misuse of punctuation marks come as a result of lacking of writing practice. Question three and four about studying and practicing punctuation marks, 95% of them answered that they studied them, but they did not do enough exercises. This means that the students face many problems in their writing and they struggle in the use of full stop, comma, colon, semi colon, question mark, and quotation marks while they write. This area should be taken into consideration by the teachers especially when they are correcting the students' writing.

The results also showed that question five, the students were asked whether they have problems in capitalization. 70% of them said that they misuse the capital / lower case letter in their writing. This is because they lack practice. Moreover, the data revealed that question six and seven related to spelling problems and language use 100% of students have spelling problems and they always struggle while they use foreign language and face problems like inappropriateness, synonyms and antonyms, sentence structure. This can hinder their progress. These findings are in line with El-Aswad (2009, p.1) arguments when he stated that the main reason of these problems is that "the subjects used L1 to facilitate their composition in L2".

Furthermore, one of the interesting results was the answer of the questions eight, nine and ten, the answers were that students do not do any reading activity, do not like writing and it is a very difficult and boring subject. This result is in agreement with Petrosky (1982,

21) when he stated that the processes of reading and writing are undeniably connected. The more students read, the better their writing becomes.

Therefore, the problems committed by the students in this level come as a result of the students' poor background. Limited vocabulary, grammar errors, and lack of familiarity with writing can hamper their ability to express themselves effectively. The students commit serious lexical errors while communicating in English.

Moreover, Libyan students seem to be suffered from the influence of their first language while learning second language. This can be easily detected from their writing. Arabic word order is different from English word order. For example, in Arabic, adjectives come after nouns whereas in English come before nouns. Odlin (1989) explained that the transfer model is causing difficulties in learning second language. The students face many difficulties when they think in Arabic and write in English. They tended to comment and repeat sentences, phrases, and words.

The following sentences are examples taken from the students' writing where the students committed different types of errors.

1. *she live in and works is teacher...*
2. *I mother born in the city,*
3. *I am go to the school...*
4. *My mather not work.*
5. *I my sister beautiful...*
6. *When the children are not teaching will be bad*
7. *Children are varieties from each other's*
8. *She is Rewa and is married and have one girl and one boy, is name girl Boshra and boy is Ahmed.*

To conclude, many Libyan students struggle with the basics of writing, like constructing coherent paragraphs or using appropriate grammar. As we can see from the above examples that the students have many problems in writing related to punctuation marks, grammar, vocabulary, etc. due to the fact that they accustomed to

think in Arabic and write in English. Also, they accustomed to use unlimited number of commas in their first language. Therefore, they use unlimited number of commas in their writing in English too. The use of other punctuations rarely appears in some students writing. About 65% of the students did not use any punctuation marks. Therefore, there is a great need to teach punctuation marks in separate sessions. Moreover, Structure is another problem that is often associated with the process of writing. Verb agreement, pluralization are the most serious problems that face the students in their writings. This can be seen in the following example: *They name friends is Malak and soha, they single and not children, live is Malak in trapoli but.* Finally, another problem that may face the students is spelling. About 98% of the students committed spelling mistakes. The results of this study showed that the students suffer from different problems such as: weak background, poor grammar, lack of practice, and low motivation.

Conclusion

By analyzing of the students' questionnaire and the examination of the students writing samples, the researcher found that the students frequently repeat the errors regarding structure, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and language use, which, in my opinion, is a hindrance in developing writing skill at this level and need to be looked very seriously. Therefore, the EFL teachers are advised to pay more attention in their pedagogical applications while teaching writing. The researcher also recommended a further study in order to measure the effectiveness of the remedial exercises offered in this study. Therefore, the following are some suggestions that the researcher suggested to minimize such problems.

- Writing classes must witness more practice than delivering lectures.
- Teacher must explain the use of punctuation marks and the rules of capitalization with extensive exercises.
- Teacher must engage the students in memory/vocabulary games.

- Teacher must motivate and encourage the students before actual writing task.
- Teacher must provide the language support on every single topic.
- Students should be encouraged to do home assignments as much as possible.
- Writing skills can be developed when the students' interests are acknowledged and when they are given frequent opportunities to actually practice writing.
- Teachers should assist their students to read loudly with proper punctuation.
- Teachers should give them titles exercises, word completion exercises, and
word formation exercises, memorization exercises, Form and functions exercises, sequence of tenses exercises, and gap filling exercises.

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