Writing Skills Problems: Causes and Solutions

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ABSTRACT: *The purpose of this research was to discover the problems of writing skills that General Foundation Programme (GFP) students have and to come up with effective solutions. In Feb 2023, the study was carried out at A'Sharqiyah University, Oman. A descriptive study approach (content analysis) was adopted by the researcher. 36 GFP students were chosen at random and instructed to compose a paragraph of 100–120 words on a certain topic. Six GFP instructors had marked the essays of the students twice; to identify errors made by students. The study found that students struggle with the selection of words, punctuation marks, spelling, capitalization, verb tenses and the structure of sentences, when writing. Following those conclusions, various recommendations were made. For example, students should read a lot because it improves their vocabulary, grammatical skills, and general understanding. Additionally, the writing instructor should place more emphasis on the good aspects of students' work rather than their shortcomings.*

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important language abilities is writing. Writing is crucial for conveying beliefs, opinions, and attitudes. People could desire to send emails, reports, blogs, letters, or notes for a variety of reasons. As a result, when writing, taking the audience into account is important. Writing, for instance, can be addressed to a male or female audience, an individual or a group of readers, or both. The intended reader may be well-known or obscure.

Writing comes in two different forms: formal and informal. The use of standard English, more sophisticated sentence structures, limited utilization of personal pronouns, and the absence of slang or colloquial words are characteristics of formal writing. On the other

hand, the usage of nonstandard English forms, common terminology, and typically short sentences are characteristics of informal patterns.

For several reasons, a foreign or second language program should include writing instruction. Writing, for instance, encourages learning. It allows students to use the language creatively and extend what they have already learned, claims Raimes (1983). Furthermore, according to Hedge (1988), learners learn better in English language classes when they write more, for example, to reinforce the understanding of newly acquired vocabulary or grammatical ideas or to aid in the acquisition of novel language elements. Students can refine their writing in this setting by getting teacher feedback. Writing also aids educators in managing their students and identifying their writing issues. This demonstrates the value of writing in language learning. Hedge (1988) contends that writing requires different skills than speaking, including the capacity to organize thoughts and information, write with clarity and precision, utilize the correct grammatical structures, and cautiously choose the right language, syntax, and sentence construction to generate writing that is appropriate for the subject matter and the target audience.

This research aims at pinpointing the difficulties that GFP students at A'Sharqiyah University deal with. The ultimate objective is to spot these challenges and offer solutions.

Omani students at colleges and universities frequently lament that writing is tough and that it is challenging for them to explain themselves in writing in a way that is accurate, precise, and understandable. Students at A'Sharqiyah University are not an exception and frequently express the same worries. Additionally, the college-level teaching staff has seen that students' writing contains many errors that need to be corrected. Problems with students' paragraph writing might stem from a variety of causes. Undoubtedly, one of the reasons is how difficult it is to write well. In contrast to Byrne (1988), who claims that psychological, linguistic, and cognitive factors are the causes of paragraph writing problems, Raimes (1983) writes:

"When learners express concern about how hard it is to write in a second language, they are talking about the challenges of finding and expressing ideas in a foreign language as well as the challenges of using the right vocabulary and syntax. (p. 13)."

The purpose of this study is to assess the writing problems that GFP students at A'Sharqiyah University encounter and to pinpoint the best fixes.

The objective of the study

The purpose of this study is to discover the difficulties GFP students at A'Sharqiyah University have with composing paragraphs and to offer helpful solutions.

Research questions

Three research questions are the focus of the study:

1. What challenges do GFP students at A'Sharqiyah University have with writing?

2. How do GFP instructors view the sources of problems with paragraph writing?

3. What can be done to help students write better paragraphs?

Research hypotheses

1. GFP students at A'Sharqiyah University may encounter problems with word selection, sentence construction, mechanics, topic, and organization when writing paragraphs.

2. English language teachers at the GFP blame students' misconceptions of the English language, interference from L1, a lack of vocabulary, bad grammar, and poor spelling for difficulty with paragraph writing.

3. Teachers should encourage students to read a lot, assign a lot of in-class writing, and pay attention to the good things in students' writing.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The researcher will go over significant writing techniques, earlier studies on writing instruction, writing difficulties, and causes of writing problems in this section.

Writing Techniques

The process approach and the product approach are the two basic writing strategies.

Process-based writing techniques

Process writing is a significant trend in L1 composition pedagogy and research, occurred in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Those who, strongly, backed the process writing method included Raimes (1985) and Zamel (1982). According to Zamel (1982), L1 writers' composition skills can also be used by ESL writers, but the main difficulty in teaching ESL is teacher-guided revision. Process approaches take into account the particular writer as a writer of genuine thoughts, as they are now referred to. It was thought that the concepts were encoded in written discourse, serving as a means of expressing one's views and asserting one's unique voice, or authorial character, as a writer. Process writing is a strategy that focuses on techniques for solving problems, coming up with new ideas, presenting them in written form, and rewriting new manuscripts. This approach is often used independently without any potential cultural, educational, or social or political setting for writing. Zamel (1982) adds that the writing style is also complicated, unpredictable, and recursive. It's a method of finding and creating meaning, he continues.

Product writing techniques

Nunan (1989) asserts that the product method places emphasis on the linguistic material that students may be required to compose for their final project. In the product writing

approach, students focus more on evaluating and writing the type of text they are required to produce than they do in the process writing approach. Getnet (1994) defined the product approach as an orientation whose main objective is the output of what students produce in their writing. Formal precision and grammar accuracy, spelling, word use, and conference of arrangement are given top importance. Additionally, the product approach writing teacher could be consulted to ensure that the written work is readable and clear of any distorted discourse. Byrne (1988) asserts that the product technique to writing is a method that focusses on correctness; its primary goal is to manage inaccuracies and remove them from a piece of writing. According to Raimes (1983), with limited likelihood of producing errors, the product approach enables students to copy and manipulate grammatically sound material.

According to Hedge (1988), there are a few things that students should keep in mind when using the product writing method. These include:

1. Structure and format

2. Correct spelling

3. Vocabulary variety

4. Proper grammar

5. Intense punctuation

6. Cohesive devices

7. Different sentence types

Writing problems with learners

According to Byrne (1988) and Hedge (1988), the author must maintain a line of discourse by selecting suitable patterns and transitions so that the text's content could be comprehended by itself. The writer must meticulously organize their writing before starting. as well as pick their words and grammatical structures. According to Byrne (1988) and Hedge (1988), learners' writing issues might take the form of grammatical issues, mechanical issues, issues with sentence structure, and diction issues.

Word-Choice problems

According to Norish (1983), good writing should include acceptable and diversified vocabularies, correct syntax, and various sentence patterns. Reid (1983) asserts that when a learner uses appropriate terminology that reflects the purpose of the writing, the material they produce may come across to the reader as logical. However, second language learners still struggle with word choice since they frequently utilize lengthy words and phrases in

their writing to capture the reader's interest, White (1980). Dictation problems will eventually arise because of this.

Sentence structure problems

According to Reid (1983), sentences can have a variety of syntactic patterns. Tsegaye (2006) contends that some learners do, however, utilize run-on, inaccurate, and fragmented phrases. According to Kharma (1986), some students are unable to create longer phrases. Conjunctions were shown to be difficult for second language learners, according to Zamel (1983).

Spelling errors

Gowere et al. (1995) believe that the impact of other languages, diverse pronunciations, and other historical factors contribute to the complexity of the English spelling system for students.

Problems with capitalization

According to Kroll (1991), capital letters are used at the beginning of sentences, key terms, topic headings, etc. Students' problems with capitalization are, however, probably caused by the fact that there aren't universal capitalization rules and that differentiating between proper and common nouns is a challenging task for students (Gowere et al. 1995).

Grammatical problems

When writing, second language learners encounter several grammatical challenges. Second-language learners are more prone to have problems with tenses, subject-verb agreements, pronoun references, and connecting words, according to Tyner (1987) and Kharma (1987).

Organizational problems

Students struggle with topic development and paragraph development, Kharma (1986). According to West (1966), the most typical problem students encounter in writing is when a single topic isn't adequately developed or when the paragraph doesn't discuss it at all. According to Raimes (1983), some students were unable to distinguish between main sentences and supporting concepts. Pincas (1982) also asserts that students' limited familiarity with linking terms prevents them from writing cohesive paragraphs.

Cognitive Challenges

Grammar, spelling, capitalization, subject matter, and layout are a few of the cognitive problems that students encounter. Punctuation has never been considered to be one of the major writing problems, say Byrne (1988), Carroll (1995), and Wilson (1995), and

"students' writings experience punctuation problems as there are no universal rules of punctuation."

Content problems

Learning to communicate with others in a second language can be challenging for second language learners (Clifford, 1987). Leki (1991) also attributes this to the use of conventional instructional techniques. Clifford (1987) also contends that rather than emphasizing grammar, spelling, and punctuation, educators should assist students in concentrating on the concepts and messages they want to get across.

Reasons for Learners' Writing problems

Students' writing problems can be caused by a variety of factors, including a lack of practice, a lack of time, a lack of motivation, feedback from the instructor, and the nature of the writing process.

Lack of practice

According to Davies (1998), writing is an artistic process and authors should organize their thoughts coherently to capture the reader's interest. It takes a lot of practice to do this. According to Grabe and Kaplan (1996), writing skills are developed through consistent effort and lots of practice. Additionally, learners must take ownership of their education for it to be effective. He also emphasizes that practicing a skill is the best way to learn it. Similarly, writing frequently is the best method to improve as a writer.

Insufficient Time

According to Hedge (1988), writing activities have discrete stages that require enough time. Students need time to arrange their thoughts, compose rough drafts, edit them, and then write the final versions. According to Colions and Gethen (1980), a significant portion of writing is determined by several conditions that must be satisfied at several levels, including written content, paragraph format, structure of sentences, and word selection. They noted that organizing all these criteria is a tough task that requires time. In agreement with this, White and Arndt (1991) assert that time is essential for the formation of ideas. Similarly, Raimes (1983) thinks that time is an important component of writing method and a feature that sets it apart from speaking. Time can also play a significant role in generating a writing that is cohesive and coherent with complete control. Additionally, many students and teachers believe that writing under time constraints is not natural and incapable of producing quality writing (Kroll, 1990).

Insufficient Motivation

Zamel (1997) asserts that writing needs to have a purpose and that students should have the chance to practice writing on subjects that interest them. Similarly, Davies (1998) thinks

that students should be encouraged to write on topics that interest them. Leki (1991) asserts that it is much simpler for students to write about subjects that fascinate them. Additionally, Silva (1997) argues that if given the flexibility to choose their own topics, students can write effectively. Similar findings were made by Hudelson (1989), who found that learners generated excellent writing when given the flexibility to select their own topics. Pincas (1982) believes that motivation is important for students of all ages and academic levels and that it is improved when teachers introduce writing in a practical setting. Byrne (1988) found that when students are required to write on subjects they don't particularly care about, they tend to write less.

Teachers' Comments

According to Zamel (1985), teachers should behave as engaged readers rather than as judges and assessors while offering constructive criticism on their students' writing. Additionally, Byrne (1988) contends that teachers should focus on the benefits of writing rather than its drawbacks. This may enable student writers to gain feedback from instructors and apply it while rewriting their work. In a similar vein, Edge (1989) believes that teachers must employ constructive criticism to help students. According to Ferris (1995), teachers should always offer constructive criticism in addition to words of support. Ellis (1994) believes that learners' motivation is essential for language learning. Once they receive feedback from students, teachers must write supportive comments to encourage them. However, if the instructor's criticisms are ambiguous and unbalanced, it won't assist students improve their writing skills (Cohen & Cavalcanatic, 1990: 155).

The Writing Process' Nature

According to many studies, writing is a challenging activity that necessitates the use of numerous linguistic components. Writing difficulties can be viewed as psychological, linguistic, and cognitive challenges, according to Byrne (1988). Grabe and Kaplan (1996) assert that writing is a complicated talent that requires constant work and extensive practice.

Bell and Burnaby (1984) also believe that writing is a difficult cognitive activity that requires the display of numerous factors both inside and outside of individual sentences. At the sentence level, the writer is responsible for maintaining consistency in the content, format, language, and punctuation. The writer must be able to show the coherence of paragraphs above the level of the sentence.

Abu (2001asserts that writing is a difficult undertaking for both native and non-native speakers, since writers must balance several criteria, including content, layout, purpose, target readers, vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and mechanics. According to Ur (1996: 163), writing typically requires a far higher level of language than speaking, including greater attention to composition, more thorough and diverse words, and generally correct phrasing.

She continues to say that writing is a messy endeavor that necessitates going through several revisions before producing a polished product.

METHODOLOGY

The subjects, instrument, data analysis, and research paradigm make up the study's research methodology.

Participants

36 GFP students from A' Sharqiyah University participated in the study. After finishing level 3, these students are expected to join their first-year college education. The students were chosen at random. All the subjects are native Arabic speakers, and they all come from similar social and cultural backgrounds. The interview questions and the marking of the student paragraphs were given to six English language instructors.

Instrument

Content analysis and interviews with teachers to get their opinions on study questions two and three are the tools for data analysis. Content analysis is a qualitative approach for analyzing the content and its aspects. The research framework is a positivist framework.

Procedure

The subjects were requested to compose a paragraph of between 100 and 120 words on the subject: *Studying abroad is preferable to studying at home. Do you agree or disagree?* The writing was finished in the classroom. It lasted for about forty-five minutes. Two different teachers double-checked the students' paragraphs. This is to assure objectivity.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The data includes student essays as well as responses provided during teacher interviews. The chosen English language teachers received 36 paragraphs authored by students as part of their writing assignments. These were, again, checked by the instructors. The teachers supplied corrections for the errors and feedback on the entire work. The samples below show the instructor's comments together with the sentences that were judged to be erroneous in the students' paragraphs.

1. Everyone **have** to learn. (has)

2. **In our country** money is not important to us. (Punctuation)

3. **Study** is crucial to our **live**. (Studying   life)

4. The students pick up a lot of **vocablery** and grammar. (vocabulary)

5. **Whoever**, when we investigate... (However)

6. Different **study** happen in each **country**. (studies   country)

7. Living in **new place** helps students to know new people. (Missing article)

8. For example, they can speak with **this** people. (these)

9. I think **study** abroad will give you good knowledge. (studying)

10**. Many** information about that nation. (much)

11. Interact with my classmates, teachers, students, and friends, for example. (Cognitive problem)

12. We should study overseas to **now** about the local culture. (know)

13. First, studying overseas **learns** students a lot of knowledge (Word of choice: teaches)

14. Second, if you live abroad, your language skills will be **strong more**. (stronger)

15. To begin with, when you **studying** in your home country, you are aware of its demands. (Tense: study)

16. **As I was said**, students have many problems abroad. (Tense: As I said)

17**. In the conclusion**, studying at home will give us more information and experience than studying abroad. (In conclusion)

18. In my opinion, studying abroad is **more prefer** than studying at home. (more preferable)

19. **Sevelar** universities and schools are located elsewhere. (Spelling: Several)

20**. also** we can observe and learn... (capitalization)

21. Improving **their selfs** (Pronouns: themselves)

22. may study with new friends. (Subject missing).

23. I **thinked** studying abroad was a smart idea. (I thought)

Additionally, the follow up interviews with level 3 writing instructors revealed the following results:

Participant 1 stated, *"I believe that L1's influence is the primary factor contributing to students' writing problems. Many students typically do their writing assignments on their smartphones. In other words, people compose their texts in their mother tongue and transmit them to a machine that will translate them.*

Participant 2 said, *"Many students believe that writing is a time-consuming process. Due to the sheer number of pieces that must be fitted together, writing assignments can be quite challenging for certain students. Some processing issues, such as dyslexia or dysgraphia, are the root cause for others."*

Participant 3 added: *"I think one of the main reasons why students have writing issues is a lack of practice," said teacher number three."*

Participant 4 commented: *"Writing requires a variety of subskills. Without dissecting and honing each of these sub-skills separately, teachers shouldn't just assume that students can write well."*

Participant 5 said*, "Some beliefs are thought to be the root of students' difficulties composing paragraphs. For instance, a lot of students think that learning English is challenging. Therefore, as long as individuals hold onto this belief, they are more likely to commit mistakes."*

Participant 6 stated: *"I believe that the use of digital gadgets has contributed to a drop in the caliber of students' writing abilities. For instance, students frequently use text messaging rather than emailing or writing letters. Texting is a simple and quick way to communicate. However, it is distinguished by the use of its own informal language, which over time has an effect on students' writing abilities. Furthermore, most students find it difficult to complete their writing assignments because of easy access to a wealth of written material and sources online. Instead of using their own words, students believe all they need to do is simply copy a previously published piece."*

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the writing skills problems that GFP students at A'Sharqiyah University face. The study also investigated teachers' perceptions about the causes of these problems and the best strategies to deal with the challenges. 36 students participated in the study and 6 teachers were interviewed to elicit their perceptions about the causes and solutions of paragraph writing problems. Findings showed that students encounter various types of writing problems including mechanical, Linguistic, cognitive, and psychomotor problems. Considering this, the participants offered a few solutions to the problems (see conclusion section).

Compared to the previous studies on the topic, the results of this study largely support those of the earlier ones.

Implications to research and practice

The implications of this study can be seen as pinpointing the writing problems and outlining the suitable strategies that can be used to teach the writing skills. Therefore, this study added to the topic of teaching the writing skills and learning and teaching English language.

The study has made a methodological contribution by using content analysis approach and interviews to collect the data and analyze it. As a result, other researchers may use the findings emphasized in this study to support their own research using different tools. Additionally, the results of this study can assist institutional administrators, educational officials, and academics in creating efficient plans for teaching writing skills.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to look at the writing problems that GFP students at A' Sharqiyah University face. The objective is to pinpoint these problems and suggest solutions. There are 36 students in the sample. They were instructed to produce a paragraph on the topic: "*Studying abroad is preferable to studying at home. Do you agree or disagree?"*

Six English teachers had reviewed students' responses and evaluated them. The research found that students frequently struggled with mechanical, linguistic, cognitive, and psychomotor writing problems. Therefore, the research's conclusions and earlier investigations in the area are supported by this study.

Based on these findings, the following suggestions are made:

1. The writing instructors ought to exchange suggestions and methods for handling issues with paragraph writing.

2. Writing instructors must offer directions during the entire writing process.

3. Students ought to read frequently. Students who read more often have better vocabulary, grammatical skills, and general knowledge.

4. Writing instructors must regularly assign in-class writing exercises.

5. Students should regularly practice writing. Writing is a skill that is acquired through practice.

6.. Rather than emphasizing the shortcomings of the students' writing, the writing instructor should commend their efforts.

7. Teachers should require students to peer-review their assignments. Their critical thinking will be strengthened as a result.

The results of this study are expected to have a significant impact on EFL students, syllabus designers, and English language teachers.

Future research

The current study collected and analyzed data using a qualitative descriptive approach. Content analysis approach and interviews were employed by the researcher. As a result, the study may be utilized in the future by other researchers using a different tool (quantitative),

which could produce some reliable findings. Additionally, the number of participants in the study is quite small, which could restrict the findings to a small population. A larger study with more participants from various colleges would produce more accurate findings. Furthermore, a study of receptive skills may also reveal some good strategies on how to develop writing skills.

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