

Writing Problems of Non- English Students

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Abstract

To be a good writer is one of the most difficulties that faces most of students who are majoring in English. It is known that writing skill is an important for educational, business and personal fields. This paper will spot the lights on EFL learners' writing difficulty of Jordanian students at university of Jordan /Aqaba branch and the teachers' concerns and efforts to explore and the nature of the students' errors of first year students. These errors which are usually investigated may reflect poor linguistic competence on different levels including phonological awareness and knowledge of orthography, vocabulary, morphology and semantics relationship, and mental orthographic images. (Apl and Masterson, 2001; Apeh, Masterson and Nissen, 2004).

Key words: Learners' writing errors; Jordanian EFL learners; Writing difficulties

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INTRODUCTION

Writing is the use of graphic symbols to represent specific linguistic utterance (Rogers, 2000, p.2). A writer uses such representation to convey a message to a reader who should be able to grasp it. Thus, a writer has to use his

language correctly in terms of grammar, vocabulary, mechanics. However, for a message to be conveyed and understood it is not enough for the writer's language to be formally correct; his presentation of ideas has also to be contextually appropriate. Hence, both correctness and appropriateness are significant in any piece of discourse. It is known that the students who are at English Department most of them are weak in English writing and this is observed when the students take courses like Writing 1 and advanced writing, in which this problem reflects on their performance in other courses since the students need to write without mistakes. This which makes this problem a serious one that needs to investigate and find possible solution which makes the students face difficulties in writing. In general, good spelling is regard as a sign of good education whereas poor spelling is considered ill (Fegeberg, 2006).

No one can deny that good spelling knowledge is an important thing that lead to recognize the words. Shane Templeton and Darnel Morris claim that "Orthographic or spelling knowledge is the engine that derives efficient reading as well as efficient writing" (1999, p.103). Where as poor spelling will limit the writer's choice of words, which negatively impacts creativity and leads to short and sometimes incoherent of writing. In addition, poor spellers have low motivation to write (Sitton, 1995). Gill and Scharer, 1993; Griffiths, 1998; Templeton and Morris, 1999 state that there are many reasons that lead to poor spelling; first, good spelling is not an acquired thing is an innate ability, and this is the reason which makes many poor spellers do not try to improve their spelling problems. Second many of them dealing with spelling as minor part of their progress. Third many students depend on spell checker or complete programs to check their spelling. Fourth, the lack of proper pre service training for novice teacher is considered as an important research that effect spelling competency.

So since writing plays an important skill that students have to learn in which they can express their ideas, thoughts and opinions that teachers must identify these problems and help the students to overcome the problems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers found that most of students who are learning English commit the same problems which usually related to the grammar, preposition, irregular verbs, article, punctuation marks, suffixes and prefixes. Also researchers like Seyabi and Tuzukova (12) try to find the gaps which are existed in English language teaching and learning between post-basic schools and universities in the Sultanate of Oman.” Majority of students’ representation both educational contexts struggle with lexical and context aspects of writing ; however, university students’ perceptions of the kind of problems they encounter and strategies to address them are more assertive”.

Khuwaleh and Shoumdia (2009) made a study on Jordanian students who study English, they found that students commit many types of errors while they are waiting and most frequent once were the lack of cohesion and coherence, and tense errors. Abdel Malak (2000) found depending on study on 55 Arabic university that all students made the same errors in which they tend to transfer the usage of preposition from L1 to L2. Smith (2001) states that “the indefinite article causes the most obvious problems as it is commonly omitted with singular and plural countable” (p.2025). He also added that that most of Arabic learners commit errors usually related to consonants cluster, word order, question and negative, auxiliaries, pronouns, time, tense and aspect.

Scott and Tucker cited in (1977), according to analysis made of 22 Arab speakers (EFL students at the American university of Beirut concluded the following:

- “ For these students, native language inference was a persistent problem in the use of prepositions and article.”
- “The nature of corpus led the researcher to posit a rule governed inter language system which was changed and organized during the term. They state that we may say were dealing with two approximate system, the second being a closer approximation than the first to adult native English.

Mukattash (1978) also finds that most of errors that students commit refer to the negative transfer from L1. David Nunan states that writing could be considered as physical and mental act. It is considered act since it is an action of committing words or ideas to some medium, whereas it is considered as mental one because it involves the action of creating ideas, and thinking about the way to express are recognize them in paragraph. Alam mentioned that “it is often found that students may have knowledge about vocabulary and grammatical aspects (e.g. using of the right tenses, collocation, and prepositions) but they face problems in writing coherently and restructuring ideas after evaluating them”. (p.6)

Heaton (p.9) states that writing skill in a foreign language is complex and difficult to learn not only the ability to use structure, but also conceptual of varied skills such as stylistic and mechanical skill. Duddly – Evans and St. John (p.5) states that success in the relevant fields depends on the factor that how effectively the students handle different writing genres like summaries, essays, reviews, ect. The applicable to the students of all disciplines in English – major and non- major the students in particular.

Brant (1946) states the learners of English language have to write by following good grammatical structure, appropriate punctuation marks, verbs in their right tenses and pronouns in their right case and correct spelling of words. Santango and Olinghouse (2009, p.16). Graham Harris and Fink –Chorzempa, 2003 claim that these skills are the “building blocks of proficient writing “and students who fail to develop these skills are at risk for writing difficulties. Many researchers like (Fender, 2003; Mitton and Hoplcins,2006; Ryan,1997; Rayan and Meara,1991 state that Arab learners of English are better and faster in oral and verbal –proficiency than with English literacy skills, whereas they face difficulties with word recognition spelling.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Thirty students participated in this study. The participants are studying English literature, Applied English and English language and French at first semester at university of Jordan /Aqaba Branch. All of these students are native speakers of Arabic were asked to write at least two paragraphs in two different familiar topics. The written samples were collected and analyzed in order to identify the areas of strength and weakness in their writing.

Purpose of study

It has been observed by most of English teachers that students who are weak in writing. This problem reflects on other English courses which require them to write in a good manner without writing problems such as capitalization and punctuation problems for example, inexplicitness or fuzziness, poor reorganization or illogical sequence, spelling problems and grammatical errors. Consequently, it is important to investigate this problem and find if possible a remedial procedure which may help the students to write better English. So this paper tries to find the areas of difficulty in writing skills as well as help the students overcome their r weakness.

Ramis (1983, p.13) states when students complain about how difficult it is to write in a second language, they are talking not only about the difficulty of finding the right words and using the correct grammar but also about the difficulty of finding and expressing ideas in a new language.

Consequently, it is important to investigate this problem and find if possible a remedial procedure which may help the students to write better English. So this paper tries to find the areas of difficulty in writing skills as well as help the students overcome their weakness.

Learner's writing problem

Article problem: The omission or addition of article. English article system is complex, so it is one of difficult area to be acquired. As it is known that English there are the definite article (the) and the indefinite article "a" and "an" and the zero article. The definite article (the) is used with specific noun, whereas (a) and (an) the indefinite article is used with non-specific noun. Quirk et al (1972).

The reason which makes the Arab students commit mistake in using the article is that there is only two articles in Arabic; the definite article "al" and the zero or indefinite article, so the main difference between English and Arabic is that in Arabic the users often use definite in the context where in English they do not.

There are some examples are related to the use of article are given by Kharama and Hajjaj (1989) as following:

- Nouns used generically in Arabic, where singular or plural take "al" (the).
- Abstract nouns in Arabic take "al" more frequently than in English.
- When a mass noun refers to the whole kind, it takes "al".
- Some proper nouns take "al" such as "al kahera" * (the Cairo)
- When two nouns are joined by "and", "al" is repeated even when these nouns represent one unit such as "al Zawjuwa al Zawjatu"* (the husband and the wife.)

These are reasons which make the learners misuse article in English. Many researchers like Maros (2007) and Abushihub (2011) state the reason which make the learners misuse the article in English L1 interference.

Spelling: the most common error that students commit in their writing. They tend to omit, add or replace letters. One of the reasons which makes the students to make this is related to the complexity of English spelling system. Gowere et al (1995) as mentioned in International Journal of English Language Teaching (p.45) state "Due to the influence of the other language, variant pronunciation and other historical reasons, the English spelling system which has become inconsistent is complex for students' spelling as the most common error that students make is also related to differences between L1 and L2, which means that they spell words according to their pronunciation.

Spelling errors that students usually make can be divided into seven types:

- Homophones/confusables: words that have same pronunciation, but different spelling, or words that can be easily confused due to minor spelling differences.

Examples; Homophones: brake and break

Confusable: well and will

- Mispronunciation: words that pronounced in a wrong way.

Examples; laboratory the mispronunciation is labtory.

- Misapplication of spelling rules: words that are exhibit a violation of spelling rules.

Example: studying – studing

- Misrepresentation of vowels: the word exhibits a wrong spelling of a consonant.

Example: mother --- mather

- Misrepresentaion of consonants: the word exhibits a wrong spelling of a consonant.

Example: beautiful ---- peautiful

- Silent letters: the word misses the representation of a silent letter, where vowels or consonants or erroneously includes a silent letters.

Example: when ---wen.

- Double consonants: the word misses the representation of a double consonant.

Example: until ----until.

Cited in:

Spelling Errors among EFL among High – School Graduate, Dr Dina EL- Dakhs and Dr Alia Mitchell

Capitalization: Is one of the difficulty that faces EFL students and that is because capitalization rule in English is mostly confusable. Mistakes of this type usually occur with national adjective, nouns and names of language. Gowere et al, 1995 "The rules of capitalization are not universal and classifying nouns as proper nouns is difficult for students."

Verb tense: one of the most difficulties that faces the students is selecting of correct verbs tenses in their writing. In which they tend to replace one for another resulting many errors. The source of these errors is the negative transfer from Arabic to English (i.e. interference according to Selinker, 1969). In Arabic there are only two tenses which are past and non-past (Mukattash, 1978; Al-Buainian, 1992). Most of the students tend to mix between present and past tense in the same paragraph or sentence and also the students get confused about the tense that is needed to express the meaning that they want to convey.

At the end it is good to mention the issue of punctuation. Students usually have a problem in choosing the correct punctuation mark or placing the punctuation in the correct place. According to Byrne (1988, p.16) "the fact that punctuation has never been standard to extent as spelling, makes it is problematic." Carrol and Wilson (1995, p.191) state "students writing encounter punctuation problems as there are no universal rules of punctuation."

FINDING

Writing considers as a complex process because it requires the writer to master grammar, and be able to think and judge correctly. Byrne (1988, p.4) classifies

this complexity in writing into psychology, linguistic and cognitive problem. Norish (1993, p.4) states about the complexity of writing “In writing medium, information has to be transmitted without any aid from sources other than the language itself. It seems to follow from this that attention is needed to be paid to the language as a code in short to the grammatical and lexical system than is the case with speech”.

Bell and Burnaby (1987) write about the difficulty in writing as it is cited in Nunan (1989, p.36) “Writing is an extremely complex cognitive activity in which the writer is required to demonstrate control of a number variables simultaneously. At the sentence these include control of content, format, sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation and letter for action. Beyond the sentence the writer must be able to structure and integrate information into cohesive and coherent paragraph are texts”.

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