

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE MOST COMMON DIFFICULTIES IN WRITING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: A CASE STUDY OF ARAB EFL STUDENTS AT BENGHAZI UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Writing is an important skill to master a foreign language. From this perspective, this study aims to investigate the most common difficulties of writing in English made by English as foreign language learners. The study was conducted at English department - Benghazi University using a qualitative research method. A sample of four English language students were selected to make semi-structured interviews, which were supported with a text contains 88 words. The interviewer dedicated the text and the students write down what they heard to observe the students skills in writing English. Based on the interviews results and the text wrote, the students have serious problems in writing in English. Moreover, the most frequent difficulties were punctuation, capitalization, spelling mistakes and grammar mistakes. Finally, writing requires learning vocabulary and grammar.

Keywords: writing, problems, foreign language, punctuations

Introduction

Learning a foreign language depends on learning the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. These skills allow students to comprehend, produce and use the target language in effective interpersonal communication. Among the four language skills, writing is known to be the most complex skill to master. The written language has now days an important social and educational function and its status has a high social prestige (Urbanova and Oakland, 2002). Writing in a correct form is a challenge for non- native students, especially Arab EFL learners because of the differences in the alphabetical system between the two languages. As a result, when the language learners make an error, it might be due to the lack of knowledge of the linguistic system of the target language.

Writing is a productive and expressive activity. In this activity, the writer should be skilled in utilizing graphology, language structure, and vocabulary. From this viewpoint, capitalization, punctuation and grammar errors are some of the most common errors made by Arab EFL learners in English. In which, punctuation and capitalization are

important signs that help to make the message meaningful and direct the reader how to read and comprehend the sentences.

Literature review

As mentioned earlier, writing is a significant skill in the process of learning a foreign language. It contains several sub-skills including composing, spelling, and hand writing. Writing might be considered as an important skill that needs more lucidity because it is a productive skill to reading.

Academic writing is a mental and cognitive activity, since it is a product of the mind (Al Fadda, 2012). Thus, it is the representation of a student's mind working as a mental and cognitive activity. Jeremy (2007) defined writing as "the process that is, the stages the writer undergoes to write something in its final form.... this process has four main elements which are planning, drafting, editing and final draft" (p.4). From this perspective, writing is constructed by putting sentences in sequence, one after another and it should be understandable. In writing, the student should be good in grammar to be able to form correct grammatical sentences (Effendi et al., 2017; Al-srdawy & Zeidan, 1988).

Writing is a complex activity because it is not just about grouping letters or sentences together, but it is about writing in a right way using different vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation. Graham and Berin (2007), states that writing plays distinct role: it is a skill that draws on sub-skills and processes such as handwriting and spelling; a rich knowledge of vocabulary; mastery of the conventions of punctuation.

According to Coffin et al (2003), students compose writing for a number of reasons such as to be assessed, to develop their critical thinking skills, to help their understanding and memory, to broaden their learning beyond the classroom, to enhance their communication skills, and to be prepared as future professional in different fields of knowledge. As a result, according to Cocuk (2018), writing skills are important because they support student performance. Dini and Syahrul (2017) also adds that writing skills are applied to improve student creativity so that through writing activities students can convey knowledge and information that students know to the public.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative method. Qualitative research allows researchers to deeply explore behaviors, different perspectives, and live experiences to discover the complexities of the situation through a holistic framework (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002). Furthermore, qualitative method allows the researcher to directly interact with the candidate. From this perspective, semi-structured interviews were designed to collect richer sources of information from a small number of people.

The semi-structured interviews were supported with a text contains 88 words, three commas, eight full stops, and semi colon. The text was written in the past tense. There were two interviews: pre-writing interview and post-writing interviews with the four candidates. The interviewer asks predetermined questions and the rest of the questions were not

planned. The interviewer dedicated the text to students and they wrote what they hear.

Research question

The present study aims to answer the following question:

What are the common errors committed by Arab EFL learners when writing in English?

Sample

The participants selected were four EFL students to answer the interview questions. The participants were from second and third years at English language department Benghazi University – Alkufra faculty of Arts and Sciences.

Data analysis and Presentation

The main purpose of this study was to diagnose some difficulties in learning writing in English. Here we will discuss the interview questions and analysis the difficulties that faced by EFL learners while writing.

The first question of the pre-writing interview process was about the way of learning how to write in English. S1 said that " *the first thing I learned how to write paragraph the first thing we take the topic then I have to get a general overview about topic sentence then the supporting sentence then the conclusion sentence*". This quotation shows that the student's background about writing is limited to the simple information that were supposed to be learn earlier stages. While S2 stated that, "*until now I do't learn it.*

It is the most difficult subject". S3 added that "punctuation, compound and complex sentenceswe did not take deep information". In this research, second and

third year students were selected instead of first and fourth year students. For the reason that, the first year students are in the early stages of the learning process and fourth year students must be in higher level of learning with academic writing. However, according to what S2 mentioned it is important to investigate the main causes of writing difficulties. S3 mentioned that he had studied punctuations when he started learning writing. That is a contrast with what the students wrote in the text. In the text he wrote, he did not use any punctuation.

S4 also stated, "*actually, I do not learn nothing about writing. Just all what I learn about writing is how to write simple sentence, complex sentence without applying just I know how to write what to use when write simple sentence and what to use when complex sentence. However, if you ask me to write right now I do not know anything about it*". This extract might illustrate that foreign language teachers are focusing on the theoretical side rather than giving the chance to the learners to practice their writing skills.

It is clear from the above quotations that the four students do not have enough knowledge about the writing skills. To get further information about the difficulties that students face while writing the following question where asked: "What are the most common mistakes that you face while writing in English? The reposes where as follows:

S1 "*grammar mistakes sometime and I have..... punctuation and also the vocabulary*"

S2 "until now I still have a problem with punctuations and I do not know how to arrange the words and how to format full sentences"

S3 "the most difficult things maybe when I say a sentence, I face difficulties with complex sentences I do not have too much mistakes but sometimes I do not know where I have to put punctuation"

S4 "spelling and vocabulary that unfamiliar with. New vocabulary".

The responses of four students exposed that the most frequent error is the use of punctuations. Moreover, the approaches that used in teaching the writing skills are the main reason of facing difficulties while writing.

After the two pre-writing questions, the students were required to write a text to check their writing and to compare the students answer of their writing, which should be academic writing. The first post-writing question was "how do you write the text?"

S2 responded that "it is easy and simple" "but when he wrote the text he has many mistakes. For example, the title of the text was "The fisherman" S1 wrote "The faicer man". Furthermore, he did not use any punctuations marks plus a lot of spelling mistakes.

In terms of grammar, it is clear that most of the participants faced difficulties with grammar. For example, they wrote the verb "set" instead of "sat", "eat" instead of "ate". Moreover, many spelling mistakes were written like the words "hok" and "hoik" instead of "hook", "net" instead of "nit". When the students were asked why do they write in this way? S4 stated, "I write

the capital letter as I remember the capital letter come in the beginning of a sentence. Then I use the capital letter after the full stop when come full stops that mean the sentence is ended. Then I use the capital letter began the new sentence and the full stop at the end of sentence and the coma ... I use coma that mean the sentence not ended but have a complement". S1 " the first thing I write the title then I write without punctuation". S3 " According to what you have said I wrote according to what I listen". Writing is an important skill in learning foreign language so facing difficulties in writing of course requires searching for the reason to try solving problem. Students might need updating of the way of learning writing. That is in line with what S4 said, "syllabus, the way of teaching writing and the students do not have the desire to study because the syllabus is boring so they have no desire and there are not something new".

Punctuation, capitalization, grammar mistakes and spelling mistakes are some of the most common errors in writing English for Arab EFL students. Students were asked about the importance of writing in correct way. The question was as following: Why is it important to write using correct spelling, punctuation and grammar?

The student's answers were as follows:

S1 " the first thing because these are the writing rules when the person want to read a paragraph the shapes must be arranged in a good way".

S2 "in order to the other people understand what I have write. know you cannot understand what I wrote because I wrote it without any additions"

S3 "in order to be correct writing"

S4 "to make the message clear".

Students were also asked about if the teachers considered one the causes of writing difficulties.

S3 stated, "this problem is made by teachers because we had not take it correctly"

S1 "they should explain in a best way"

S2 "teachers was not learn us in details so we were not understand well."

Students have lack practice and experience in academic writing. Teachers during their classes should pay more attention to the development of academic writing skills and as it has been stated in the beginning, writing is important skill to master a foreign language.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, the main purpose of this study is to diagnose the difficulties of Arab in learning English as a second language particularly in writing. To conclude, the present study founded that the most frequent errors made by Libyan EFL learners were in using punctuations marks in the right position. It is important to write punctuations in order to convey and clarify the meaning of written language. On the other hand, errors in capitalization were founded to be some of the committed errors in students' written paper. Students should be aware of the correct way of using capital letters. Moreover, students need to work hard to improve their writing skills, which

might help them convey meaning. Furthermore, learners of English should read a lot. Reading will help them increase their knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical structures. We believe that the findings of the present study will help the students develop their writing skills, and learning of the writing skills in the language classroom.

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Appendix 1:

The fisherman

Every day, a fisherman sat on a bridge. He ate apples and spit the seeds into the water. He had a simple way to catch fish. He cut a branch off of a tree and tied a line to it . He put a sharp hook on it and made a tight knot. Then he whispered, "Come here fish." Like magic, the fish bit the hook. He put them in a big net and took them home to make big pots of fish soup from them.

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