

DIFFICULTIES OF WRITING IN ENGLISH ENCOUNTERED BY IRAQI EFL LEARNERS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the attitude of Iraqi EFL university students towards the difficulties they encounter when writing in English. It also aims to propose solutions that may be helpful for students to overcome writing difficulties. To this end, a sample of 80 English majors was selected from the University of Anbar, Department of English. The participants are third-year students studying a course in essay writing. An open-ended questionnaire was designed to include difficulties encountered by students and solutions to overcome them. The results showed that 'incorrectness in using mechanics of writings' occupies the top of difficulties faced by Iraqi university EFL students in writing English, followed by 'lack of assessment rubrics and marking scheme tools'. The third rank of items was 'lack of ideas', while 'Grammar Difficulties' ranked fourth. Other items 'Lack of teacher's help', 'Lack of materials for Consulting', 'Unsuitable methods of teaching writing', 'Topic inappropriateness', and 'Time restriction' were almost similar in rankings. The study proposed a number of suggestions and solutions that may help students to overcome writing difficulties.

Keywords: writing difficulties, Iraqi EFL learners, university students

1. Introduction

Writing is a language skill that is an essential medium people use in expressing their thoughts, ideas, and attitudes. It is a difficult skill for both native and nonnative speakers as they must regard multiple issues in their writing such as purpose, audience, content, organization, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization (Abu Rass 2015). However, Alsamadani (2010) points out that L2 writing is more demanding as it is a complex and challenging process in which writers are required to produce writing form considering the accuracy of syntax, the acceptability of semantics, and the appropriateness of culture. This means that writing, according to Byrne (1993) and Heaton (1990), "is a complex process because it requires the mastery of grammatical devices, conceptual thinking, and judgmental elements". Most importantly, Kereni (2004) states that one of the difficulties of L2 writing is that writers are generally believed to have some mastery in first language writing. There has been a view that once learners have the ability to write in their first language, they will automatically transfer such ability to L2 writing. However, this case may be possible when writers have some degree of proficiency in their first language.

Accordingly, the complexity of writing may increase the level of confusion in L2 students, university students are no exception. Such confusion, as Gere (1987) and Sharples (1993), postulate can often demotivate and hinder the

students' writing achievement, and thus students may show negative attitude towards writing. Most students, then, may find writing unattainable and looking at it as an obligatory task. Therefore, they only think of passing the exam (Yavuz and Genc, 1998). This may result in negative elements such as "student attitudes, writing apprehension and self-efficacy in writing" (Erkan and Saban, 2011: 167). Therefore, proficient writing would not be achieved with students lacking self-confidence and unwilling to disclose their feelings over writing. Most students, in this sense, are inclined to show negative attitudes towards writing. They are not confident to display their thoughts through writing for fear of making writing mistakes. Consequently, Erkan and Saban (2011) stated that "success with writing in a foreign language may be related to attitudes towards writing, apprehension about writing, and self-efficacy in writing" (p. 168). Such students "believe that writing is a natural gift rather than a learned skill" (Langan, 2000:12). In this sense, students may lose motivation towards successful L2 learning in general (Al-Mofti and Hussein, 2019).

In the Iraqi context, English language is taught at all stages of the educational system in Iraq starting from the kindergarten. However, the majority of students find writing a difficult task despite this long exposure to English and students of English at the University of Anbar, Department of English are no exception. Students at this setting face a lot of barriers and challenges that negatively influence their production in writing. Among these difficulties, studies conducted in Iraq on L2 writing-related issues indicate that most EFL learners face difficulties in writing English. The overwhelming majority of Iraqi students join the university without appropriate proficiency in English and they are basically hesitant to write since writing in English is a difficult task by itself. The difficulties involve issues related to starting to write, mechanics of writing, organizing and expanding ideas, grammar, using the appropriate vocabulary and writing a strong conclusion. As university teachers, the researchers observed that most EFL students are not able to express themselves in clear and correct English writing and they lack self-confidence in writing any piece in English. Iraqi students spend four academic years at university pursuing specialized courses in writing, however, they still face many difficulties in writing in English. Nunan (1999) states that, in language learning, producing fluent, coherent, and extended writing is the most difficult and challenging task for L2 learners. Students' writing problems may occur due to many factors involving linguistic, psychological, and cognitive. Therefore, students' complaints about the difficulty of writing in a second language, Raimes (1983) argues, does not only involve the difficulty finding the right words and using the correct grammar but also the difficulty finding and expressing ideas in a new language.

In this regard, studies by Ali (2012), (Jasim 2012), and Reishaan (2013), among others, have been conducted to show difficulties of writing encountered by Iraqi EFL learners and their attitudes towards writing in English. Ali (2012), for instance, studied paragraph writing of Iraqi EFL learners at University of Baghdad at three levels, namely: primary, intermediate and advanced. The study concentrated on identifying the most common errors committed by Iraqi EFL learners in paragraph writing. He found that most of Iraqi EFL learners had difficulty in writing a paragraph, particularly in the use of certain grammatical structures and in producing coherent sentences. Jasim (2012) investigated Iraqi EFL learners writing in English in Misan Province. The aim of the study was to determine why Iraqi EFL learners were poor writers. The findings of the study showed that Iraqi EFL teachers misunderstood the nature of the writing process whereas learners did not have enough practice in writing. Reishaan (2013) studied the use of tenses in final exam writing of fourth year Iraqi EFL learners at the University of Kufa. The researcher assumed that Iraqi EFL learners committed errors in tenses and verb-forms, and these errors could be due to different causes which are basically related to language interference. The research findings showed that Iraqi EFL learners have no mastery over the use of tenses even at advanced levels of learning.

Consequently, students often show negative attitudes towards writing. This is due to their fear of making mistakes in writing as they are not confident to express their thoughts through writing. In this regard, to the researchers' best knowledge, few studies, (Abdul-Kareem 2014, Yahya 2017), have been conducted to show the attitude of students towards writing. Abdul-Kareem (2014) investigated the "Difficulties Faced by EFL Students in Writing Composition at the Iraqi Preparatory Schools". To this end, a questionnaire was designed and distributed randomly to a sample from the fifth and fourth grade students of some secondary schools in Baquba, province of Diyala. The sample of the study was (142) students from the scientific branch and (117) students from the literary branch. The data obtained were processed statistically. The study showed that students of the literary branch is weaker than those of the scientific branch in writing a composition.

In a similar study, Yahya (2017) conducted a study entitled "Difficulties Faced by Iraqi University Students of English in Writing Composition from the Students' Point of View" which aimed at identifying and classifying the difficulties encountered by students in writing a composition. Therefore, the study attempted to address the

following question: "Which aspect of their writing practice do the students find most challenging?". The study was limited to second year students of English Department at College of Basic Education / Diyala University. The sample of the study was (100) second year students selected as the subjects. A scaled questionnaire was used as an instrument to measure the students' difficulties. The results of the study proved that Iraqi students of English face challenges in writing composition.

Though there is much research dedicated to difficulties encountered by students, there is not much research focusing on Iraqi EFL students' attitude in writing. Therefore, more research needs to be conducted to understand how EFL view writing and suggest the possible solutions to the problems that may face students from their point of view. Thus, the objectives of the present study are a) discovering the Iraqi EFL students' attitude toward writing in English, b) suggesting the possible solution to the problems encountered by students when writing in English. In other words, the current study is an attempt to identify the attitude of Iraqi EFL university students towards the difficulties they encounter when writing in English and to propose solutions to overcome those difficulties. Therefore, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What are difficulties of writing in English encountered and realized by Iraqi EFL learners at the university level?
2. What are the possible solutions that can be provided to overcome learners' writing difficulties?

Accordingly, the study is hoped to be of significance to EFL learners, teachers of English at pre-university levels and university instructors, as well as syllabus designers. For EFL learners, the study could help them be aware of the difficulties of writing, and for EFL teachers and instructors, and syllabus designers, the study could help them effectively address potential learners' writing difficulties.

2. Methodology

To explore difficulties of writing in English encountered by Iraqi EFL learners at university level, the researchers conducted a mixed mood research. Therefore, the researchers administered an open ended questionnaire results in order to reveal students' difficulties of writing in English. The students' responses were analyzed quantitatively using SPSS software program to discover the type of difficulties most frequently encountered by students. These difficulties were analyzed qualitatively to investigate students' attitude towards their difficulties. Then, this includes two subsections: the description of participants and questionnaire, the tool of the study.

2.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 80 English majors from the University of Anbar, College of Education for Humanities, Department of English for the academic year 2019-2020. The sample of the study involved all students of the third-year English majors. The reason behind choosing the whole students of the third year is that although they are studying a course in essay writing in the first semester and they are expected to experience good writing, they still face difficulties in writing showing a negative attitude towards it.

2.2 Instrument

The instrument of the study was a questionnaire about difficulties that may encounter EFL learners while writing in English. The questionnaire was adopted from Ibnian (2017). Ibnian conducted a study entitled "Writing Difficulties Encountered by Jordanian EFL Learners" which aimed at exploring difficulties faced by Jordanian university EFL students when they write in English proposing solutions to help them overcome writing difficulties. The questionnaire, as described by the author, comprised open-ended questions on suggestions and solutions that can help the students overcome writing difficulties. The questionnaire designed by the author was submitted to some experts in the field of curriculum and instruction (TEFL) to confirm its validity. The author already ensured the reliability of the questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha. The reliability coefficient was 0.88, which shows that the tool is reliable. The final questionnaire form involved the following proposed difficulties of writing: (1) Lack of ideas, (2) Grammar difficulties, (3) Vocabulary restriction, (4) Topic inappropriateness, (5) Lack of materials for consulting, (6) Lack of teacher's help, (7) Incorrect use of mechanics of writing (spelling, punctuation, quotation, and capitalization), (8) Unsuitable methods of teaching writing, (9) Time restriction, and (10) Lack of clear assessment instruments and marking schemes. They were asked to tick either *disagree* or *uncertain* or *agree* on the proposed difficulties they might face in writing. The participants' answers were analyzed statistically using SPSS software program.

3. Results of the Study

The main objective of the current study was to examine the difficulties facing Iraqi EFL learners in assignments of writing in English. To accomplish the study's aim, a questionnaire was distributed to the participants, containing a variety of writing difficulties. The answers of the students to the questionnaire items were collected, and statistically analyzed using SPSS. Table 1 below indicates the percentage and frequency of responses from the students' answers.

Table 1: Percentage and Frequency of student answers to the items in the questionnaire

No	Item	Disagree		Uncertain		Agree	
		Count	N %	Count	N %	Count	N %
1	Lack of ideas	22	26.8%	11	13.4%	48	59.8%
2	Grammar difficulties	18	23.4%	16	22.6%	47	53.0%
3	Vocabulary restriction	29	37.8%	8	7.3%	45	54.9%
4	Topic inappropriateness	44	52.8%	21	25.6%	15	22.6%
5	Lack of materials for Consulting	27	32.9%	23	28.0%	32	39.0%
6	Lack of teacher's help	30	36.6%	14	17.1%	38	46.3%
7	Incorrect use of mechanics of writing (spelling, punctuation, quotation, and capitalization)	16	19.5%	9	11.0%	57	68.5%
8	Unsuitable methods of teaching writing	22	26.8%	27	32.9%	33	40.2%
9	Time restriction.	40	48.8%	17	20.7%	25	30.5%
10	Lack of clear assessment instruments and marking schemes	15	24.0%	13	15.9%	54	61.1%

The standard deviation and mean for each item is highlighted in Table 2 below. It was used also to indicate the rank and level of each item.

Table 2: Mean, standard deviation, rank and level of items

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank	Level
VAR00001	2.11	.807	7	High
VAR00002	1.90	.890	2	Medi
VAR00003	2.23	.815	4	Medi
VAR00004	2.50	.911	1	Medi
VAR00005	2.06	.851	3	Medi
VAR00006	1.55	.740	10	High
VAR00007	2.33	.876	9	Low

VAR00008	2.17	.953	5	Medi
VAR00009	2.26	.829	6	Medi
VAR00010	2.28	.879	8	Medi
Total	2.12	.788		Medi

The information presented in the tables 1 and 2 above is used to indicate the students' highest and lowest frequencies of attitudes towards the difficulties they face in writing in their responses to the questionnaire. It is observed from the tables that item number 7 which reads 'incorrectness in using mechanics of writings' got the highest rank among the other items with 57 students agreeing to that item; this presents 68.5% percent of the total number of the students. The second item in rank was number 10 that asked the students about the 'lack of assessment rubrics and markingscheme tools'. In EFL writings, the students must know how they are evaluated and scored so that they are able to identify their mistakes, then, subsequently overcome them in their writings.

The third rank of items was number (1) i.e. 'lack of ideas'. EFL instructors' role in EFL writing skill is very important because they are required to teach techniques and skills related to concepts of 'mapping ideas and organization'. Any failure or less attention to doing that would certainly lead to difficulties of brainstorming for ideas on topics of writings and consequently difficulties for writing in general. In rank, Item number 1 was followed directly by item number 2. Forty-eight students agreed on item number 1 while 47 students agreed on item number 2 that reads about - 'grammar difficulty'. In writing, grammar is an essential element of a text because it is related to both coherence and cohesion aspects of that text. As such, a high number of students responded to item 2 of the questionnaire. Items 6, 5, 8, 4, and 9 were almost similar in rankings. Item 6, for instance, had the highest frequency with 46.3% percent while item 4 was the lowest with only 22.6% percent.

Discussion

The results explained above were consistent with some previous studies as in Ibnian (2017), (2013). For example, BaniYounes and Albalawi (2015) showed that the wrong or incorrect use of writing mechanics was one of the key difficulties students encounter in writing class. Additionally, the results were in line with Asmari's (2013) findings, which observed that students who have high anxiety do not usually take enough time to plan for their writing and have clear objectives for learning.

As far as overcoming students' difficulties of writing in English is concerned, the researchers collected students' responses to the open ended questions. The results revealed that item 7 'incorrectness in using mechanics of writings' was the highest problem faced in writing by Iraqi EFL students, followed by item number 10, 'Lack of clear assessment instruments and marking schemes'. Students complained about the lack of the mechanics of writing. They are confused about the appropriate use of spelling and punctuation marks. They suggested, in this vein, training them how to use mechanics of writing properly and without apprehension. One of the students said "We need first training on the mechanics of writing, this would help us express ourselves confidently". As for item 10, Students suggested having clear instruments for assessment as marking criteria in order to improve their writing. One of them said "In order to manage writing process, we suggest providing us with clear assessment tools in order to plan, set goals, and improve self-assessment and self-regulation". The findings also showed that the third rank was held by item 1, 'Lack of ideas'. In response to this item, students claimed that they were not provided with sufficient time to collect their ideas about the topic of reading or watching. Therefore, they suggested to be given enough time to generate and retrieve ideas about the topic. One of the students, for example, states "I spend much time thinking about the topic, because I have no clear ideas about the topic". The fourth and fifth ranks 'grammar difficulties', and 'Vocabulary restriction' were, however, similar. Students reported that they face difficulties in choosing the appropriate structure and tense especially when they are experienced to write different types of essay as each type of essay requires specific types of syntactic structures and tense.

The item 'Lack of teacher's help' dominated the sixth grade in writing difficulties. The item 'Unsuitable methods of teaching writing' occupied the seventh grade. In this item, the students criticized the unsuitability of teaching writing methods in that they are traditional and need to be updated in accordance with the modern methods of teaching writing. The eighth rank was 'lack of materials for consulting'. Students stated that the lack of materials including updated books and new technologies is one source of the difficulties in writing they encounter. However, this might not be a series difficulty especially under the revolution of information technology as everything is easily accessed.

That is why this item was not the focus of students. Lastly, the ninth and tenth levels were 'Time restriction' and 'topic inappropriateness'. In regard to 'Time restriction' item, students did not complain about time allocated to writing during an exam or exercise. This might be because lecture time is already fixed according to the regulations of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. As for 'topic inappropriateness' item, some students state that the lack of students' interest in the topic and the difficulty of understanding the topic itself. One of the participants said "Sometimes the topic is not interesting and sometimes it is difficult". Therefore, students suggested giving them interesting and easy topics in order to be able to express themselves easily. In addition, students focused on the idea of being given the opportunity to choose topics in terms of their interest. In this respect, a student said "The instructor always imposes topics to write about without giving us the opportunity to choose topics ourselves". However, few students agreed to item number 4 and which was the lowest among the other items. This may be attributed to the fact that topic selection and appropriateness as item 4 reads about is usually made by the instructors. Yet, these topics are usually taken from the course textbooks and not from materials outside the textbooks. This is why only a few students agreed to this item.

4. Conclusion

The study aimed to identify difficulties of writing in English encountered by university EFL students and their attitude towards them. Besides, it aimed to investigate solutions that may help students overcome their writing difficulties. The results showed that 'incorrectness in using mechanics of writings' occupies the top of difficulties faced by Iraqi university EFL students in writing English, followed by 'lack of assessment rubrics and marking scheme tools'. The third and fourth ranks were the items 'lack of ideas', and 'Grammar Difficulties' respectively. Other items 'Lack of teacher's help', 'Lack of materials for Consulting', 'Unsuitable methods of teaching writing', 'Topic inappropriateness', and 'Time restriction' were almost similar in rankings.

Based on the findings of the current study, a number of conclusions have been reached. The findings showed that the participants had realized many series difficulties of writing in English they encounter. The difficulties faced by Iraqi EFL learners are varied according to students' understanding of the writing tasks, their general performance in English, as well as the instructions and methods of the teaching skills and assessment. Iraqi EFL students' responses to the questionnaire revealed that some issues related to the time constraint of doing the tasks also pose difficulty to the students. Moreover, the findings of the study highlighted significant issues in writing English as a foreign language. The study is mainly significant for language teachers and instructors to enhance or develop students' writing skills. It was different from previous studies in literature in that students themselves disclosed the types of difficulties they may face in the writing process. This would indicate that problems of writing in English would be highlighted differently from other views as student is mainly concerned and targeted in teaching process, writing is no exception. Nonetheless, the interference of the mother tongue should be taken into account in the process of writing as the mother tongue use may enhance or hinder writing in a second or foreign language. Students, in this study, presented and suggested significant and considerable points that would mark their keenness in writing. However, their performance in writing was not tested to explore their real level in writing. This issue may require further investigation in another study. That is, the researcher, as university teachers, observed that the Iraqi learners of English experience various difficulties in writing such as spelling, punctuation, grammar difficulties, coherence/cohesion, and grammar.

5.1 Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn based on the findings of the current research:

1. Instructors of EFL writing courses are advised to focus their attention on teaching 'mechanics of writings' in the pre-writing stage so that they can brainstorm ideas and learn how to organize their writing.
2. Instructors are also advised to inform their students of the testing methods and scoring systems they would be graded on, and
3. Students must be given sufficient opportunities to select a subject to write on and be given adequate time to collect thoughts.
4. The various techniques used by students when they write is another significant issue that needs further scrutiny.

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