

The Reasons behind the Weaknesses of Writing in English among Pre-year Students' at Taibah University

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Abstract

This paper is intended to explore the reasons behind the weakness of writing among pre-year students at Taibah University. For the purpose of this study, only one research question was provided and discussed. The participants of this study were 10 pre-year male students at Taibah University "Yanbu Branch" in Saudi Arabia for the academic year 2012-2013. This study is a qualitative study. The data for this study was collected through semi-structured interview from male students only. The findings of this study revealed that grammatical weakness, knowledge and understand, less practice and educational background were the main themes discovered by the students. The implementation of this study may help the teachers to resolve the problem and may find some strategies to help them. It is hoped that this study would enhance the findings all over the world to improve students writing, especially in the Arab society.

Keywords (Writing, weakness of writing, qualitative study, semi-structured interview Saudi students).

1. Introduction

Acquiring English is a difficult issue among second or foreign language learners ESL/EFL especially Arabic learners (Abbad, 1988; Rabab'ah, 2005; Zughoul & Taminian, 1984). Researchers have stated that learners face difficulties to write effectively. It has been found that most language learners at all levels believe that writing is one of the most difficult language skills to master (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Kurk & Atay, 2007; Latif, 2007) or a sophisticated skill compared with other skills (Daud, Daud & Kassim, 2005; and Abu Shawish & Atea, 2010).

Writing in English goes through different stages such as pre-writing, free-writing, and re-writing (Hughey et al., 1983). However, Zamel (1983) describes the process of writing as nonlinear, exploratory, and generative whereby writers discover and generate ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning. The process of writing involves sub-processes of planning, collecting data, drafting, revising, rewriting and editing. These sub-processes of writing are dynamic, non-sequential and interactive processes not as sequential stages. Arab learners of English which include Jordanians and Egyptians encounter major problems in writing. This problem has been discussed by many researchers such as Abdul Haq (1982); Abbad (1988); Wahba (1998); Rabab'ah (2005); and Huwari and Noor Hashima (2010).

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(2010, 2011). In fact, Salem (2007) states that second/ foreign learners face difficulties to write effectively because of the limited number of vocabulary, idioms, cultural knowledge, and less experience with second language rhetorical strategies. A study conducted by Salem (2007) explored the views of 50 male undergraduate students majoring in English in relation to writing in English at the University of Al- Azhar Egypt. Most of the students felt overwhelmed when they were required to write on a certain topic. They did not know how to start, how to develop their ideas or how to conclude the essay. They also lacked the technical skills of writing acceptable compositions in English. They often repeated their ideas, reported few if any valid points, made serious mistakes in grammar and punctuation, and included irrelevant information.

Researchers believe that Arab EFL Learners are responsible for their weak writing performance (Ezza, 2010). EFL learners showed that they have many problems when writing in English such as organizing the ideas. That's because they rarely write in English. For students to succeed in a foreign language generally, and writing skills specifically, they need to surround themselves in a language learning environment. Arabic society misses the opportunity to use a foreign language like English in their daily life. As a result, many problems occur when they study at a university where the medium of instruction is a foreign language like English (Al-Khasawneh, 2010).

Educators declared that teaching writing for EFL is a challenge job because teachers face a lot of problem. Ansari (2012) mentioned that more than 50% of students in Saudi Arabia do not know how to write English. Most of them are unaware of the cursive writing. To solve this problem, teachers at University of Umm Quara followed practical approaches while teaching an EFL class. Before you start teaching of English writing you should do the following things:

1. Teach them how to use the right stroke while writing anything in English. Wrong strokes make the writing slow and ugly.
2. Make them learn cursive writing. Most of Arab students do not know cursive writing. Two or three lectures should be devoted to this task.
3. Dictate them to write sentences ---simple, short and then long sentences.
4. Dictate some words and tell students to use them in their own sentences.
5. Encourage them to learn more and more words with correct spelling.
6. Students should be given a lot of class-work as well as home work on writing because practice makes the students good writer.

Ansari (2012) described the environment of English language in Saudi Arabia. English here is not a serious subject. In their schools level, students are not taught English in a proper way. Consequently, in the university level, students are required to study all the subjects in English, so in this case English become very important and students feel frustrated because they do not know how to read and write in English properly. At the end, they lose the interest to write in English. Ansari (2012) commented that teachers of English in Saudi Arabia face a lot of problems because of the social and cultural backgrounds. The reason behind this problem is that the Arab students' especially Saudi students have no knowledge of even basic English although they are taught English in schools. Perhaps the school teachers do not pay proper attention towards the teaching of

English. Consequently, the researchers have realized the weakness of writing among the pre-students university. This problem has promoted the researchers to discover the reasons behind these problems. In order to achieve the aforementioned objectives, the questions of this study are as follows:

- To discover the reasons behind the weakness of writing among pre-year university students at Taibah University “Yanbu Branch” in Saudi Arabia.

2. Research Question

- What are the reasons behind the weakness of writing among pre-year university students at Taibah University “Yanbu Branch” in Saudi Arabia?

3. Methods

This study is a qualitative case study to enable the researchers to understand the reasons of the weakness of writing. It is assumed that through a qualitative study, the students’ perceptions of writing difficulties would not be misled by the ready-revealed survey instruments, which cannot provide in-depth details about students’ perspectives of the reasons behind the weakness of writing. It utilized semi-structured interviews in a face-to-face interaction to explore the students’ beliefs and thoughts about certain topics; this is in line with Lynch’s (1996) view that, the use of semi-structured interviews enhances the understanding of the data and makes the data collection more systematic as compared to the informal conversational approach. Students were invited to talk about the reasons behind their weakness of writing in a face-to-face interview of 20 minutes for each sample. The students were supposed to feel free and talk about anything they perceived that might cause their weakness of writing. The participants in this study were 10 male students at pre-year in Taibah University “Yanbu Branch”. Students name have been replaced with fictions to be aware of the ethical and legal considerations.

4. Significant of Study

The researchers noticed that most of the studies in the field of writing difficulties have done through quantitative method. A few research have used qualitative studies that neutrally elicits students’ reasons of the weakness of writing through a semi-structured interview questions from students’ own aspects. Most of the findings in this filed were discovered through researchers perspective, but not the student’s perspectives. It is hoped that this study would enhance the findings all over the world to improve students writing, especially in the Arab society. This study would provide findings that are closer to students’ real feelings. By identifying the reasons behind the weakness of writing, this study hoped that the pedagogue as well as the university will try to overcome the weakness of students’ writing.

5. Results and Discussion

The results of this study showed that students face many problems when writing English. Students declared that they are struggling when they write in English. It is based on the questions posed on the students’ interviews.

The reasons behind the weakness of writing

What are the reasons behind the weakness of writing?	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	Total 10
Grammatical Weakness	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	10
Knowledge and Understanding	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	10
Less practice	√		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	9
Educational background	√	√	√		√	√		√	√		7



This study showed that four main themes were mentioned by the students to clarify the reasons behind their weakness of writing. Most of the students were failed in the writing exams because of several reasons. Students declared that their weakness of writing because of grammatical errors that students make when are required to write, knowledge and understanding, less practice of writing in English, and educational background.

The first theme of this study was grammatical weakness. It is mentioned by all the interviewees in this study. Students showed that they are unable to write a short paragraph, article, or passage without a lot of grammatical mistakes. Some students said that they cannot express their ideas in the context, while others said they do not know how to write even single sentences. These problems make the students feel anxiety to write because they are looking for the marks. At the same time, they do not want to make mistakes. Student 1 said that

Sometimes, I can write a sentence without grammatical mistakes, but the problem is how to gather these sentences in a paragraph form. This problem stops my mind and makes me feel frustrated about writing session.

Other student declared that making mistakes in grammar is a big issue. He said that:

Most of the time I use wrong tense in the correct situations, maybe because I do not understand the tenses in the context. Sometimes, I cannot write even a single sentence.

Another student talked about why he cannot write even a single sentence. He referred his problem of writing to the mistakes that he always make. He said

Sometimes, I cannot differentiate between subject, verb and object. So, I do a lot of mistake and I always repeat the same mistakes. In that case, I feel upset and frustrated to continue writing and I just leave it.

While others claimed that too many mistakes make their writing like a rubbish work. Their teachers are not satisfy with what they have written because a lot of grammatical mistakes. One student said:

I always try to write in class, but I always get in mistakes even with the same mistakes that I do before. My teacher always works hard with me because my paper is a kind of rubbish work.

The second theme emerged from this study was knowledge and understanding. This theme means that students misunderstanding the requirement of writing. They do not know the process of writing. They do not know how to write a main topic and a theme. This theme was mentioned by all the students also. Students 1 said that:

I don't understand what the topic wants from me. Sometimes, I can't write the same topic in my own language because I don't know how to determine the main topic and the sub themes in the paragraph.

Another student have declared that he feel struggling when he write in English even for simple topics. He said that:

My teacher gives us a simple topic such as writing a short paragraph about myself. But I can't write it because I don't have vocabularies.

Another student said that expressing ideas in the topic is very difficult because it is a part of process of writing that he missed it. He said that:

First, I am not interesting in the topics that books asked us to write. Then, I feel upset and cannot concentrate to express my ideas clearly. This problem makes me focus on what I am doing.

The third theme emerged from this study was less practice of writing. Almost most of the students have mentioned that they never write outside the classroom even for homework. Through my experience as a lecturer, students in most of the Arabic context in general lack to practice writing in English in their free time. They just write in the classroom. One student said:

Opss, writing. I hate it. I don't like to write at all. That's why I never write outside the classroom. Even, in the classroom, I always submit my paper in a blank which I always failed in the writing exams.

Another student declared that he doesn't need to write in English in his life because he hates English. He said that:

I hate English, so, I don't want to learn it. I believe I don't need it in my life. So, I don't practice writing in English even if the teachers give us homework.

One more student stated that most of my friends do not write after classroom. He said that:

For me, I don't like writing, I don't write after classroom because it will take me long time and because I will not do it in the right way. So, I avoid writing after the class even most of the times inside the classroom as well.

The last theme emerged from this study was educational background. Students declared that their educational background plays a major role of their weakness of writing. They mentioned that students at the early stage of school teachers as well as the curriculum did not focus on the writing session. Teachers are rarely asked us to write in English. Curriculums are focused on reading, listening and grammar rather than writing and speaking in English. Furthermore, most of the students said that they are very weak in writing in English. One student said that:

Yaaaa, writing in English. I always failed to write a short paragraph correctly. I believe that I don't have enough background which adaptation my writing with the new stage of learning. I really need many hours of studying to follow the level of writing that I have to be now.

One student declared that education background is the main problem to not write effectively. He said that:

What I believe is that the process of leaning is very important to produce a good writer. I have missed this opportunity to be a good writer in English. I assumed that this problem was because various reasons, firstly, curriculum and teachers didn't focus on the writing and how to write a good piece of paper. They focus more on reading and grammar. Secondly, students are not serious in the school level to learn English. Thirdly, the nationalities of the teachers may affect them to learn how to write effectively.

Another student has mentioned that the curriculum is quite good for the school level but the problem was teachers themselves. Some of the teachers did not have enough experience to teach us. Some of them used different strategies to teach us while it is not succeed regarding to the students environment.

6. Conclusion

This paper explored the reasons behind the weakness of writing among pre-year students' at Taibah University. The researchers interviewed 10 male participants who are studying at the pre-year University. The finding of this study showed that students declared main themes behind their weakness of writing which were grammatical weakness, knowledge and understanding, less practice, and educational background. Thus, teachers as well as curriculum should focus on these themes and pay more attention to these problems, in order to reduce the weakness of writing.

These four themes grammatical weakness, knowledge and understanding, less practice, and educational background, which were emerged from this study have shared the similarities and the differences with other studies all over the world. Ansari (2012) is partially agreed with this study by saying that the first and the most important reason is that the Arab students have no knowledge of even basic English although they are taught English in schools. Perhaps the school teachers do not pay proper attention towards the teaching of English. In fact, the teaching/learning situation in Saudi Arabia reveals that

Saudi students do not practice enough writing in and out of the classroom, and that the grammar rules their teachers focus on are not put into practice in actual writing. Therefore, Saudi students need much practice in writing (Alhaysony, 2012).

The limitations of this qualitative study are the participants of this study were male students only. The results would be more generalizable if both sexes were included in the study. The participants were pre-year university selected from one branch of the University. Therefore, the findings in this research may not be generalized to other group of Saudi EFL learners.

The researchers of this study recommended for further research to investigate a lower academic level such as intermediate school students whether in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, it is very important to compare the results of intermediate school students with high school and university students. It's also recommended for more studies through teachers' perspective as well as to find some techniques that students use to reduce their weakness of writing.

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