



Analysis of Some Students' Hurdles in Writing

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Abstract:

Writing plays a prominent role in educational success. In spite of its importance, EFL students still have difficulties in written production. A well-written extended essay is considered to be the prime objective for students' success. Since writing is a complex cognitive process, it is of great importance of composition teachers to train their learners to be able to take control of their own understanding of the process. Second year university students utilize a wide range writing strategies to achieve their learning goals. These strategies could be used consciously or unconsciously when endeavouring to produce a writing piece. Indeed, writing strategies demonstrate how student writers undertake a particular task and how they understand the writing process.

Key words: Efl Learners, Cognitive, Writing, Metacognitive, Strategies.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problem is primarily related to the fact that the students lack the effective strategies that enable them compose different writing tasks easily and without any obstacle; and consequently produce correct essays. Therefore; they need to be provided with more efficient writing strategies to overcome the hindrances they encounter while writing. Since learning to write coherently is something which many people never know or manage in foreign language; it is believed that the mastery of writing requires an understanding of how the writing process works. Teachers are required to help students to have a thorough understanding about the successful strategies for writing in English.

Therefore, the study addresses the following questions:

1. Writing is a complex and a troublesome skill
2. What are the strategies used by EFL learners to write an essay? and are these strategies similar or different among the students?

Thus, the research also addresses the following hypotheses:

1. Written production could be a complex task for the students to learn.
2. There might be a similarity between the strategies used among the students when writing an extended essay.

INTRODUCTION

Learners in different academic settings regard writing as a complex skill. In fact, they are unable to master all aspects of writing; and thus they do not produce acceptable texts, paragraphs and essays. Although learners have dealt with the writing skill in the different activities for a long period, they still make mistakes and produce enormous errors, i.e. they do not use the language appropriately. The problem is mainly related to the fact that students lack the necessary strategies that enable them tackle the different writing tasks and activities in a simple way, and therefore, produce correct compositions and improve the effectiveness of writing.

PARTICIPANTS

The sample of the present research is university students who are enrolled during the academic year 2015-2016 to carry on their second year at Djilali liabes University in Sidi Bel Abbès. It should be pointed out that the current investigation is a case study which involves a great deal of university learners who are randomly selected. Hence, the students' questionnaire is handed out to a hundred (100) of second year university students, however, only seventy six (76) turned in the questionnaires. In order to identify more the students' use of writing strategies, the investigator favours examining the written expression examination papers of those who are already answered the questionnaire; the number of the examined papers is ninety five (95), but the researcher takes only samples of some students who represent the large majority.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

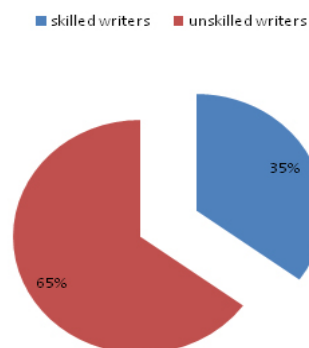
Definition of Writing

Writing is a complex process which EFL learners do not acquire naturally, i.e. it is learnt. Written composition requires the control of the mind (Smit, 2004). He argues that writing ability is a "mental" process, for it is an operation that happens in one's mind. Studies show what our minds can do while composing in order "to create a sort of composition portrait of all the possibilities of mental life when we learn all of the many kinds of knowledge and skill we need in order to compose".

Al-Mahrooqi, Thakur & Roscoe (2015) quote Walterz (1983: 17) who notes that "writing is the last and perhaps the most difficult skill students learn if they ever do". Tyner (2008) defines writing as a process of discovery and creation where one word or a sentence may provoke a new idea. Writing is based on ideas or principles and linguistic processing.. Written composition is important and a complex task to acquire and is a communicative skill which is required in today's information society (Melouk & Merbouh, 2014: 149)

Ahlsén & Lundh (2007: 4) quotes Brown (2001) that written language is merely the graphic representation of spoken language. Indeed, writing is regarded as a complex skill; as Brown claims that writing is different from speaking "like swimming is different from walking"; he implies that composition totally differs from speaking. In fact, Brown argues that written production comes most often from thinking; that is to say, speculating results in written production. Whereas, Zamel (1982: 201) points out that writing is a medium of discovery which contributes in the creation of thoughts and ideas.

DATA ANALYSIS



Graph. 1 Students' average in written expression exam

The above graph suggests that most of the students' grades are less than twenty (./20), i.e. seventy six (76) students perform poorly in written expression exam. Whereas, only nineteen (19) students obtain more than (10/20) and are considered to some extent as skilled student writers, and mainly whose grades are 15/20. This implies that writing poses a problem for EFL learners.

On the other hand, 35% of the students obtain the average. The obtained result is considered to be very weak compared with that of the novice student writers. Indeed, the analysis tackles the different components of English language such as:

1. Grammar correctness.
2. Precise and correct vocabulary.
3. The employed strategies.
4. Adequate ideas expression.
5. Spelling and writing mechanics.

ANALYSIS OF THE SKILLED STUDENT WRITERS' ESSAYS

After the correction of students' written production, the instructor grades the learners' performance, and is considered of course as a semester evaluation. As a matter of fact, the experienced students' grades vary between very good and less better. Most of the students' grades are less than twenty (./20), i.e. seventy six (76) students perform poorly in written expression exam. Whereas, only nineteen (19) students obtain more than (10/20) and are considered to some extent as skilled student writers, and mainly whose grades are 15/20. This implies that writing poses a problem for EFL learners. On the other hand, 35% of the students obtain the average.

Grammar

Grammatical mistakes are commonly made by EFL students. For example, learners often do not choose the correct English verb tense for expressing an idea or do not use it in its correct form. They are unaware of using the articles (a/the) correctly, and unaware of words order in a sentence. Analyzing the learners' examination essays reveal plenty of grammatical mistakes, wherein most of the learners confuse between the tenses and mainly the present simple and simple past. Notably, the grammatical mistakes that are found in the students' extended essays affect profoundly the meaning of their compositions. The below example is extracted from a student's writing piece who obtains 14.5/20:

"Since the first moment he looked me he was attracted to me, and was the more fondest than all other men whose I met them in my daily life...everyday, both of us seated under a...each one on his garden's house... we looked the most shiness star on the sky to pass our emotional sentiments...we decided that our hearts will never separated...he always get benefactions..."

Spelling

Spelling is an important criterion in any language, primarily in writing academically. Accordingly, the latter seems to be troublesome for the students in which no extended essay is clear and coherent at the level of spelling. The beneath passage is taken from another student's essay who gets 13.5/20:

"One of the solutions is practicing sport. I say sport, I don't mean running and jumping untill you fall. But I mean following a program with coach or instructor who would show you...An other solution is eating by programe, that is to say we should not eat foods just like that or depending our personal desire. In order to lose weight we have to consume alot of vegetibals...our body needs a certain cantity of culluries..."

Vocabulary choice ideas expression

Inappropriate vocabulary selection and inadequate ideas expression are explicitly found in all the students' compositions. In some instances, EFL learners choose their vocabulary from their L1, i.e. ineffective translation, and in other examples the ideas are not well expressed and misleading. The beneath example is taken from the effective student's essay obtains 14.5/20, s/he produces as follow:

"...we stayed sent emotions without me during one year. He wanted to announce his desire in marriage, he never attend that his family will refuse his choice."

It is important to point out that the first sentence contains two conjugated verbs which mislead the reader and affect greatly the clarity of the written idea. Besides, the second sentence contains the verb "attend" which is taken from L2 (French), because that learner has a firm belief that the verb "attend" means the same thing as in French. It is also important to note that the second sentence contains inadequate vocabulary:

"...tried many times be he was always disappointed, we suffered a lot from this situation, while absence made our hearts more founder...it was a picture full of words he adhered me when I felt that his heart who cried not his eyes."

In the above sentence there are some words which are missing such as "tried many times to convince them but was always disappointed". In the second sentence, it is exceedingly difficult to figure out what the student writer wants to say, i.e. the idea is unclearly stated.

The results of the unskilled students' examination's essays

Grammar coherence is problematic for the unskilled writers who embody the large majority. The weaknesses occur in the use of tenses, auxiliaries, definite and indefinite articles, etc. Furthermore, the hindrances are recorded mainly in the use of the present simple and simple past as shown in the following instance:

"Fati have a hobbies like play hand ball, she die about the Indian movies and of course the actors, she love shahis kapoeur, she like sleeping all the time, she want to be a future teacher of English. I forget something she is a girl coffee she love the coffee very much, it's like a drug for her, she hate cats and dogs. no one can touch her face I don't know why?"

Vocabulary choice and ideas expression

The poor performers depend a great deal on ineffective translation; i.e. they think in their mother tongue (the Algerian Dialect) to be able to put the combined words together into a paper. However, when the reader takes a look at the examination papers, it seems like reading meaningless language, due to the huge and unacceptable mistakes that make their writing unreadable and do not grasp the audience's attention. Basically, inappropriate translation from the Algerian Arabic into English overwhelms in their compositions and affects negatively their writing performances. It is worth noting that translation falls under the category of cognitive strategies. However, since the students are not proficient in English language, they find it complex to translate effectively, and thus produce poor texts.

The beneath instance is extracted from a student's essay which shows how s/he reckons while writing and the strategies s/he utilizes for composition, s/he writes as follow:

"So Ive went to the station of the train to travel and in the chamber of train each moment I looked Amel watched for me, because I was very crazy, and she remarked me, although I needed to smile in her face but I couldn't. So she said for me, "when look Bachar, you didn't regret of this trip", so I was to talk with her, and I watch every time in the places around Bachar, all the places I like it..."

Results' discussion of skilled student writers

The marks are considered to be good, but the essays cannot be considered as accurate writing pieces, because of the number of mistakes that are recorded in the qualitative analysis of the best graded students. The three best graded learners who obtain 15/20 make some mistakes. However, the mistakes which are recorded are not too important, because the meaning does not change, i.e. the mistakes do not have a negative influence on the meaning or the structure of sentences to a large extent.

Notably, it is worth studying the strategies used by the skilled writers. It seems like the students rely heavily on metacognitive strategies in that they use a wide range of different techniques that enable them to write adequately and accomplish their written tasks correctly. Whenever there is an exam, students read the given topics carefully in order to figure out what to write and how to start it.

Similarly, the proficient writers read the subject very well, that is why their extended essays are well-structured and well-organized. Moreover, their compositions are outlined in the right form unlike the less proficient writers.

The use of translation of particular ideas or vocabularies seems to be like an alternative for the learners whenever they do not know how to express their thoughts appropriately. Since dictionaries are not allowed during examinations, students are obliged to use what is in their linguistic repertoire. The best graded learners employ the above mentioned strategy which falls under the category of cognitive strategies in order to be able to carry on writing, because they find themselves helpless and incapable of producing. Therefore, it is important to note that the best graded students employ the same strategies, namely metacognitive ones, and this shows what kind of strategies use and confirms also the hypothesis which states that second year university students employ the same strategies when writing a text.

Results' discussion of the unskilled student writers

As it was previously mentioned in the quantitative analysis of students' written expression examination that 65% obtain less than 10/20, and are considered as less effective students since 65% represents the large majority of student writers. It is important to study learners' general weaknesses and the strategies used for producing a written text. The analysis shows that all the unskilled students have writing problems in a multitude of areas.

Basically, learners do not master the tenses, mainly the present tense which poses clearly a great problem for the unskilled student writers in which; whether they do not conjugate the verbs or they conjugate all of them. Nevertheless, tenses instruction and mainly the present simple, simple past and the auxiliaries are tackled with the pupils in the middle school for four (04) years, and then re-instructed all over again in high school for three (03) years, and finally at the tertiary level with plenty of examples and with different tasks provided by the teacher. Grammar is similar to a pillar or a backbone to the language. So how would these students learn or review the grammatical rules if they do not attend all their classes, since all the modules are complementary to each other, and most importantly, taught in English language.

Vocabulary choice and ideas expression are exceedingly poor and is shown clearly in their essays, and which indicates that they lack the adequate vocabularies related to the given topics. Moreover, the large majority of students lack linguistic competence and ultimately, do not have language proficiency. Reading one of their compositions implies that these students combine and join words incorrectly together in order to form sentences, and thus passages. Their essays contain unforgivable and unacceptable mistakes which make their compositions too poor. Most importantly, the vocabulary chosen by the students are taken from their mother tongue, i.e. the Algerian Dialect. The unskilled writers depend heavily on translation which makes their writing meaningless and does not grasp the reader's attention. Most of the learners utilize the ineffective translation as a strategy which they find more effective and efficient, and which enables them to carry on writing and accomplish their written task successfully.

Question one: Do you find writing a complex skill?

Options	N	%
Yes	51	67.11
No	25	32.99
Total	76	100

Table 4.2 The students' perception of the writing skill

The above table reveals that 67.10% of the students agree that writing is a complex skill to master. Whereas, 25 learners (32.99%) report that written production is easy and a simple task to be handled. Most of the respondents are aware that writing is a troublesome skill for them because, it entails specific knowledge at the levels of grammar, lexis, vocabulary...etc. The students find writing a complex skill, for they do not know the techniques that are efficient for writing any production.

Question two: What do you do to overcome writing difficulties?

1. Look for vocabulary in the dictionary
2. Translate the idea from Arabic or French into English
3. Ask for teacher's help
4. Other, specify

Options	N	%
a	28	36.84
b	31	40.78
c	29	38.15

Table Strategies used to overcome writing difficulties

The table above indicates the students' use of strategies to overcome the obstacles while writing any extended essay. 28 out of 76 students reply using dictionaries to overcome writing difficulties whenever they do not know how to express an idea or a particular vocabulary. 31 informants translate ideas from whether Arabic or French into English. 29 students claim that they ask a classmate or a teacher for assistance, and that is what has been noticed by the researcher in the ethnographic observation.

Nevertheless, the recorded strategies fall under the categories of cognitive and social/affective as it is indicated in the table. In other words, 40.78% translate ideas from one language to another in order to be able to produce in English; and this strategy is found to be a cognitive one. Whereas, 38.15% ask a classmate or the teacher for assistance and this is a social/ affective strategy.

RESULT DISCUSSION

Dealing with the complexity of writing in question one, the large majority of the informants reply "yes", whereas only few students do not consider writing as a complex task. This implies that most of the students do not master grammar, vocabulary, lexis, ideas as well as the mechanics of writing, and that what has been revealed in the observation when the students were asked by their teachers to produce extended essays about specific topics. So, most of the students were unable to generate the first drafts and most of the time their teachers intervened in order to help them generate the first ideas coherently and clearly.

Writing is a multi faced task, i.e. it requires several aspects. Composition entails grammar cohesion, correct spelling and more importantly, writing mechanics which plays a fundamental role in the writing skill, for the latter has an impact on meaning. This confirms the first research hypothesis which states that writing is a mental process, complex and a troublesome skill.

In question two, only twenty (20) out of seventy six (76) questioned students claim thinking in the target language. The rest of the informants use Arabic or French, i.e. they first speculate in Arabic and then translate their ideas into English language. Typically, translating from Arabic or French could be a habit that is used by a wide range of the students, for they are not well trained.

Translation is classified under the category of “cognitive strategies” by O’Malley & Chamot (1990: 126) in which they consider translation as “being the first language as a base for understanding and/ or producing the second language”. However, the case here is not a second language, but English as a foreign language (EFL). Nevertheless, it is known that those who translate to some extent whether from L1 or L2 into English are found to be less proficient students and these strategies refer to as “self- instruction” and are using such strategies in order to solve problems, or to overcome their writing difficulties as far as cognitive tasks are concerned (Cohen, 2014: 236).

These results support the second research hypothesis which states that there is a similarity between the strategies that the students use when writing extended essays, i.e. the great majority of the students use translation as a technique that helps them write.

Concerning overcoming students’ writing difficulties in question two, a great deal of the informants relies upon translation when they do not know how to express themselves appropriately. This strategy is identified as a cognitive strategy and is a strategy that is used by students with a low ability in writing. Likewise, Yigzaw (2012: 13) “L1 use is determined by the learners’ L2 proficiency level; less proficient learners repeatedly switch to L1 while writing in an L2 when they face task difficulty”

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Reading reinforces writing

For many years reading and writing skills were taught separately. However, research has suggested that both skills are interdependent in that reading affects writing and writing affects reading. Teaching written composition is efficient when it is interrelated with reading. The latter goes hand in hand with writing; in that reading a variety of genres help students learn language and structural texts which can be transferred in their future writing.

Additionally, intensive or extensive reading reinforces EFL learners’ knowledge that they can employ in their writing pieces, it broadens their thoughts and facilitates the flow of information. Indeed, many EFL teachers at the Department of English of Sidi Bel Abbes complain about the absence of the reading skill that must be integrated as a separate module in the syllabus. Besides, they also shed light on the importance of reading in enhancing the students’ written production capacities.

Summarization

Summarizing is a strategy that ameliorates both proficient and novice student writers’ written production skills. It falls under the category of cognitive strategies. Basically, the process of summary writing is a good instance that shows the interrelation of reading and writing. According to Heller (2009: 157) summaries require reading first a given text, fully understand it and then reduce the prose into its gist.

Offering texts can be a good writing activity for EFL students for the purpose of learning more about production. Relying on summarization as a cognitive strategy for producing a writing piece build the students’ comprehension skills; in that they read, understand and summarize using their own vocabulary. Reading and then writing a

synopsis provide opportunities for EFL students to learn how to read, acquire spontaneously new vocabularies, the author's style and grammar. Most importantly, they use reading to promote their production abilities. The researcher suggests also another writing activity which requires also summarizing.

A book report

A book report is a writing piece which requires a brief summary of a book. It often includes the reader's own understanding of the book (Rollins, 2009). To put it differently, a composition teacher can select a novella or a short story that grasp the learners' attention and that is not beyond their level. For instance, the written expression teacher may suggest to the learners "Rappaccini's Daughter" by N. Hawthorne. In that phase, the composition teacher asks the students to read the story outside the classroom; because 1 hour and 30 minutes do not suffice the students to read and summarize at the same time.

In order to compose a book report, the teacher demonstrates to the students the different steps to be followed which will be shown in the beneath instance:

Student's name:.....

Introduction:

- Suggesting another title.....
- Type of the story.....

Developing the body paragraphs (summarizing the following aspects):

- Introducing the main character (the protagonist).
- Where and when the story takes place.
- Stating the gist (the main theme of the book).
- Summarizing briefly the story (distil the most important thoughts).

Writing what happened in the end of the story.

The concluding paragraph:

- Suggesting another end.
- Stating the student's own opinion about the story.

It is essential to mention that learners must be provided with opportunities to direct their own learning; students' centeredness. Indeed, self-dependence expedites students' autonomy, motivation and ultimately highly productive students. The researcher moots other tasks that prompt students' thinking skills and most importantly their creativity. The exercises encompass reading.

Task: A written expression teacher can bring passages from literature in which characters are described effectively. Making a photocopy of these paragraphs would be efficient to make the learners see the target language or the author's style (D. Rice, 2005).

- Teach the students that they will be producing descriptive texts about themselves.
- Ask the students to read carefully the samples from literature.
- They should first start by brainstorming descriptions on themselves on the first draft.
- Teach students that they ought to organize the brainstorming and utilize it to compose a descriptive passage or two.

The instances from literature would serve as examples that may enable second year university students to pen similar texts. Not to mention that they will acquire descriptive vocabulary and the way the author expresses his/her ideas. Notably, they will read and think about the writer's thoughts and the way s/he deploys those ideas. Furthermore, the instructor should also illustrate the different points that the learners need to go through. For instance, asking the students to reread the literary examples in order to identify how the author moves from one sentence to another and from one passage to another.

Additionally, explaining to the learners the importance of utilizing the literary devices when producing descriptively. Such devices encompass metaphor, simile and alliteration, etc. Typically, adjectives and adverbs are the most essential descriptive instruments (D. Rice, 2005: 99). The teacher should remind the learners to speculate of the audience and to be mindful of the language use. In other words, in order to obtain an effectual impression, grammar, spelling vocabulary and writing mechanics should be deployed efficiently. At the end, the teacher ought to explain explicitly the importance of revision.

Importance of revision instruction

Thus, teachers of written production must devote some time to instruct revision to their students via displaying thoroughly the role it plays in composition. Furthermore, they also must train their students to revise their extended essays as a separate and essential activity, not solely in written expression, but in other learning areas. Additionally, learners ought to review their paragraphs at each stage of the writing process for thoughts adjustment, vocabulary, grammar, writing mechanics and organization.

Students need to be taught to revise throughout the writing process and to make content changes as well as surface changes. Students should reread their written text for content and organization as a separate activity... (J. Shrum & E. Glisan, 2015: 286)

Indeed, revision allows student writers to refine not only grammar and vocabulary, but content. However, some students think that proofreading their final drafts is a simple a stage, rather than an important activity that should be implemented effectively during writing as a process and as a product (J. Wyrick, 2015). Frequently, EFL students struggle to put their thoughts on a first draft, so, it is due to revision stage which allows student writers to adjust, refine and polish their written communication. Teachers of writing ought to display clearly to their learners the revision stages which are eminent, in that their writing pieces would be to a large extent written appropriately and coherently.

Reviewing is a metacognitive strategy which is a critical part that most EFL students never manage to do. The student writer may come across a number of hurdles when endeavouring to draft an essay. Hence, revision is an instrument that turns a simple writing piece into an accurate and coherent one. For instance, during the refining part, details are added that "Make characters and places come alive in readers' minds, dialogue is polished, repetitive words are deleted, and unclear comments are rewritten" (J. Kissel, 2005: 6).

It is worth noting that each student has his/her own method for revising a writing piece. As it is indicated in the literature, that skilled students spend much time on reviewing, whereas, less proficient learners revise less (see chapter 2). As the student becomes proficient performer, s/he develops ways that help during the revising process. F. Galko (2001: 75) recommends some suggestions that show to the student writer how to review. The suggestions will be summarized in the following points

- Read carefully the writing piece and very critically as if the writer is the intended audience. It is often helpful to read the essay aloud in order to evaluate what the paper communicates.
- Content revision: the introduction should grasp the reader's attention and it ought to display explicitly the main theme and prepares the reader's for what comes next. Sentences must be correlated and paragraphs ought to be ordered logically. The concluding passage should end the writing piece. Overall, the student

writer should make it clear that the written text meets the intended objectives and the course goals.

- The student writer may come up with composing an entirely second draft, that is more accurate and coherent via changing some details, misspelled words and confusing sentences.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the findings, we may conclude that the teaching/learning of writing requires a variety and a multitude of procedures, tasks and activities in the writing classroom to develop different writing strategies. In fact, it is the role and responsibility of the teachers of writing to help student view composition not only as a piece of text, but as a process in which they have to go through and to be trained at. Students need to be encouraged to deal confidently with the stages of planning, drafting, re-writing, revising and editing. It is also the role of written expression teachers to integrate reading as a major skill in their classes in order to make students' performance in English more effective and successful.

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