

ACADEMIC WRITING DIFFICULTIES FACED BY LIBYAN EFL UNDERGRADUATES AT ELMERGIB UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the difficulties faced by EFL Libyan students in academic writing and the reasons that led to these academic writing difficulties. The study was conducted on English language students as their major specialization in the fourth year at faculty of Arts, Elmergib University. The data was collected via a questionnaire survey and face-to-face interviews. The results revealed that the students faced various writing difficulties: vocabulary (2.83); grammar (1.79); spelling (2.45); style rhetorical problems (1.58); punctuation (1.48); L1 Interference (2.07). Also the results through the interview showed that the most common reasons that led to these academic writing difficulties in English are: lack of motivation which is the main reason followed by lack of writing practice; lack of ideas and then lack of reading. From the results it can be concluded that Libyan students at Elmergib University are similar to the other EFL learners in general and EFL Arab learners in particular which they face the similar writing difficulties in English. This study may help teachers to resolve the problems faced by Libyan students studying English as a foreign language to improve their academic writing in English.

KEYWORDS: *Academic Writing; Difficulties; Reasons; EFL Libyan Students*

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the fundamental language abilities. It assumes a significant part in communicating one's thoughts, contemplations, conclusions, and feelings. Writing is constructive ability. It is a hard for undergraduates to build and learn, particularly in EFL setting. English writing guidance is along these lines expecting an expanding role in foreign language learning. Academic composing hence can be characterized as a psychological and intellectual movement since it is a result of the brain (Al Fadda, 2012). Most college students are demand to write a mixture genres of writing, including business writing, summaries, internship report, and research proposal. EFL learners frequently find that writing is a challenging mission. One explanation is that a suitable composing requires a text with intricacy of grammar and morphology, a wide range of lexis, and a suitable command over conventional forms and over the means of signaling the connection of the texts (Cumming, 2001). With all above details, the foreign language students claim English writing is a tough and challenging task. It is impossible not to make mistakes when composing.

Concerning the issues of academic writing, different studies have found out the position of writing skill in EFL context. The students come across a lot of obstacles and challenges that negatively affect their creativity in writing. As for studies conducted to examine obstacles that face students while writing in English, Ridha(2012) examined Iraqi college students' mistakes in English essay writings of EFL students. The mistakes were labeled according to the following

classification: linguistic, lexical, semantic, mechanics, and word order types of mistakes. The linguistic and the mechanical mistakes were the most obvious and common ones.

There are number of reasons why students have issues in writing, the factor of motivation have an important role in learning this skill. Motivations have a very significant role in improving the students' English learning functioning. The learners who prefer English subject as major and study as a foreign language are interested towards the motivational aspects that play an important role in academics, progress of skills and practicing English language in everyday use (Ekiz & Kulmetov, 2016).

Lack of practice is one of the reasons that led to academic writing problems, which is the writing complexities were categorized into psychological, linguistic and intellectual problems. Ahmed (2019) advises that there should be sufficient practice on writing on top of the close and constant follow-up to the students' writing activities. Al-Khasawneh & Maher(2010) showed that the students recognized that the teaching model and the setting are the leading reasons of their limitations in English. Their faint qualification in English is either connected to the lack of student motivation, or the teacher's concern. Many learners use their mother language because of the isolated culture. Yet, models of teaching English included the medium of advices, using mother tongue in English classes, writing done in Arabic, teachers' low proficiency in English, and lack of writing practice in educational organizations (Al-Khasawneh & Maher, 2010).

Lack of reading is another excuse that led to academic writing, however, proofs have shown that good readers are good writers and good writers are a lot of seemingly to language exposure than poorer readers. In order to communicate in both written and spoken form, the learners need to get a lot of exposure from reading activities in the target language. Krashen(2016), mentions that we tend to don't learn to write by writing, however rather by reading. It means that reading and writing are well associated with one another each at the same time. Firstly, middle school level, for instance, the voluntarily reading activities in their schools redoubled their reading comprehension, their literary genre, their vocabulary, their orthography and their grammatical development (Arndt & Woore, 2018).

Writing in English is one of the four skills that students must acquire, considered the most difficult, but it is also the most significant skill for students to understand. Writing as a creative skill is considered harder than any other creative skill. According to Rass(2015) writing is a hard skill for native and non-native speakers, as writers have to balance several issues in their writing such as content, organization, purpose, vocabulary and mechanics, which means using correct punctuation, spelling and capitals. On the other hand, the development of writing skills becomes a multidimensional challenge for students, teachers and institutions. EFL students in general face many difficulties when writing in English, as noted by (Tahaineh, 2010).

Regarding Libyan college students, the trouble in their humble writing is expanded because of the shortage of writing assignments and exercise from the early stages in their learning process. Thus, most college students seemed to be not able to write clearly and coherently about topics associated with their fields. They face problems in producing thoughts, supporting, and organizing them of their logical order. They have restricted vocabulary, and they have got trouble managing spelling, punctuation, and grammar.

The vast majority of Libyan college students join the college without applicable proficiency in English and they are essentially hesitant to compose due to the fact that writing in English is a tough mission through itself. Therefore, the current study attempts to investigate the difficulties faced by EFL Libyan student's fourth year in academic writing and the reasons that led to these academic writing difficulties at Elmergib University in Libya.

METHODOLOGY

This study consists of thirty three students whose studying English language as their major specialization in the fourth year at faculty of Arts, Elmergib University for the academic year 2020-2021 in order to attain the main objectives of this study. To collect data regarding the writing difficulties faced when writing in English, this study employed quantitative research approaches.

The data was collected using questionnaire that adapted from (Farooq et al., 2012). It consisted of 18 items close ended questions related to vocabulary, first language interference, spelling, grammar, punctuation and rhetorical problems. The responses to each of the item were designed on a five-point Likert scale where 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = undecided, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree. Responds took 15 minutes of time to fill up questionnaire form. A total of thirty three copies of the questionnaire were distributed to participants, and they were asked to answer the questionnaire individually and not to discuss their answers with their friends. This was to ensure the responses were honest and based on their own experience. From returned questionnaires there were two copies of questionnaires were incomplete and so invalidated from the samples. The usable responses comprised of thirty one participants questionnaires. This gave a total response rate of about 94% of students. The data obtained from questionnaire were analyzed and computed based on the means of the items in each construct to identify which aspect had the most influence in terms of difficulties faced in writing among the students.

In interviews, there is interactivity, which not only enables the researcher to explain any confusing issues to the interviewees but most importantly, it allows for a deeper insight to be obtained by using a probing technique, that is asking follow-up questions to provide a more complete and comprehensive explanation of the studied phenomenon (Berg & Lune, 2014). The semi-structured interview (a face-to face) was conducted to explore the students' beliefs and thoughts about the reasons that led to academic writing difficulties. Students were invited to talk about that reasons of 10 minutes for each sample. The students were supposed to feel free and talk about anything they perceived that might cause their difficulties of writing. The interviews were audio taped and then transcribed and analyzed by the researchers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main objective of the present study was to investigate the difficulties faced by Libyan EFL students in academic writing. The results show that students encountered difficulty in their EFL writing in all concepts. Table 1 presents the overall analysis of the difficulties based on the six domains examined. The results indicate that the first difficulty faced by Libyan students in academic writing is vocabulary. This confirms previous results that vocabulary is still an obstacle in students' writing (Fareed et al., 2016). The second difficulty in writing in English was spelling. This finding is consistent with Rahman & Hasan(2019) who stated that about half of respondents agreed that spelling was another serious issue of academic writing struggle. In addition, a study conducted by Al-Khasawneh & Maher(2010) showed that misspellings were another serious issue on academic writing issues among Arab students. Further, Alsaawi(2015) stated that even among second language students, Arabic students would have more difficulty with English spelling than any other non-native speaker. The results of this study

could be attributed to a lack of vocabulary. When students do not know the new words or do not know what words to use in their writing, they are more likely to commit spelling mistakes. The third difficulty in writing in English stated is L1 interfering. This is followed by the grammar; rhetorical problems; and punctuation.

Table 1: Overall Analysis of the Difficulties Based on the Six Domains Examined

Domains	Mean
Vocabulary	2.83
Grammar	1.79
Spelling	2.45
Style Rhetorical Problems	1.58
Punctuation	1.48
L1 Interference	2.07

Table 2 presents the detailed analysis of each of the areas examined. The result of each of the statements of the questionnaire made it possible to find out the contributing factors to the students' difficulties in academic writing. The findings show that the biggest barrier to writing in English encountered by students' worries is vocabulary. Vocabulary ranks first among the difficulties encountered by students of academic writing. This confirms previous findings that vocabulary is still an issue in students' writing (Farooq et al., 2012; Fareed et al., 2016).

These difficulties may be due to less experience and practice in using word choice, shortage of reading may also be the main reason for these difficulties. In this case, students need linguistic support with the very basic vocabulary elements and grammatical structures. These results are in agreement with the results of Raimes(1983), who refers that when students whine about the difficulty of writing in a second language, they are not just talking about the struggle of finding the suitable vocabularies and using good grammar, but also the struggle of finding and revealing ideas in a new language. The students stated that writing was tough for them because they did not have the enough vocabulary to write. The analysis, as in Table 2, shows that the students used certain strategies to help them cope with the vocabulary issues in writing. These results are in agreement with who Ghulamuddin et al., (2021) stated that students had thoughts for writing, but the shortage of vocabulary prevented them from creating good writing. Additionally, the results of this study may be due to the fact that a reasonable vocabulary size is required for students to perform effectively on their programs. Rababah(2002) stated that students frequently lack the essential vocabulary when involved in authentic communication situations like writing and speaking. Consequently, students will not be able to declare their thoughts freely and accurately due to their limited vocabulary. These struggles can be addressed by offering more discipline-specific reading classes to advance the size and depth of students' vocabulary to help them with academic writing.

The results revealed that another aspect of the difficulty faced by the student concerns spelling. It is classified in the second rank of the difficulties faced by students in academic writing. This problem is closely related to the vocabulary issue. Ghulamuddin et al., (2021) reported that when students are unfamiliar with new vocabulary or do not know the suitable words to use in their writing, they tend to face word spelling problems. This, in turn, can lead to other writing problems such as making the correct meaning. As showed Silva & Yarborough(1990), the inability to write can lead to word choices that can distort meaning. Due to the influence of other languages, pronunciation variations and other historical causes, the English spelling system that has become variable is complex for learners (Gowere et al., 1995). As the analysis shows, the students were faced with the problem of spelling the word which was new to them. Additionally, the shortage of knowledge of English spelling system and their exceptions can be confusing for students. This result is in

agreement with the analysis showing that the students took some time to remember the correct spelling of the vocabulary. This is consistent with Alfaki(2015) who mentioned that, the spelling is one of the common mechanical errors among students, aside from punctuation and capitalization. Ghulamuddin et al., (2021) mentioned that, learners often did not memorize spelling rules because the word's pronunciation and spelling vary.

The results showed that the third rank of difficulty that students face in academic writing is L1 interference. The results show that L1 plays a significant role in molding student writing. Most of the students said that when writing in English they would first think of an L1 sentence and then transform it into English. This result confirms previous studies that L1 interference is one of the difficulties faced by students and therefore contributes to their writing errors (Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013; Nalliveettil & Mahasneh, 2017). Likewise, students would find it difficult to use the appropriate parts of speech, such as articles and gender pronouns since some of them are not available in their L1 either. As attested by Fareed et al., (2016), EFL students have relied too much on the sentence construction theory of their mother tongue. As a result, they purposed to translate any word or phrase from their L1 to English directly, which mostly may affect the structure of the sentence and grammar. Allaith & Joshi(2011), initiate that the Arabic phonological system has an influence on the English spelling organism, which is consistent with several studies that looked at the same problem but with different L1s. It also declared that Arab students are particularly muddled with phonemes that do not available in Arabic.

Another difficulty faced by the students was grammar. It is classified in the fourth rank of the difficulties faced by the students in academic writing. This is in consent with other researches that have also revealed that grammar is a major difficult for English language learners, even at advanced levels (Goldsmith & Sujaritjan, 2020; Nair & Hui, 2018). Students face a number of issues when trying to write in a second language. Since verbs have different forms conditional on the tense and subject with which they are used, they create difficulties for students writing in a second language (Tyner, 1987). Grammar is really important in delivering accurate messages. Key grammatical forms involve tenses, voices, modals, articles, nominalizations, and logical connectors (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). It is therefore advisable to limit these forms and to create supports allowing students to advance in academic writing. This agrees with Hutchinson & Waters(1987), who assures on recognizing the grammatical forms and produced materials which have taken these forms as their syllabus.

The rhetorical problem is classified in the fifth rank of the difficulties faced by students in academic writing. Academic writing obliges to students to write from a formal point of view, applying all the rules of writing and using the right process of citation when delivering evidence for the claims. Ankawi(2020) stated that academic writers lack vocabulary especially academic writing vocabulary. Saudi students encountered problems using formal language. They also encountered problems in choosing the right articles to sustenance their writing. This is also confirmed by Al Fadda(2012) who initiate that English as a second language (ESL) learners face many obstacles and constraints in their academic writing, such as struggle in distinguishing between spoken and written English, making an outline before writing a draft, identifying the skills needed to write successfully and avoiding plague words and phrases.

According to Ariyanti & Fitriana(2017); Pratiwi (2016) the learners might now no longer be capable of explicit and arrange their thoughts in writing once they lacked vocabulary and had inadequate mastery of English spelling, shape and grammar. Arab learners recognize writing in the conventional style, where it sticksto the rules, and a firm structure. They are not able to reflect of various rhetorical approaches. Arab learners find composing in English tough due to the fact the writing procedure may also require them to think (Doushaq, 1986). Purves (1988) indicates that ESL college students

must first understand the rhetorical styles in their local language to recognize the rhetorical styles of the English language better. He provides that variations amongst rhetorical styles do now no longer constitute variations in cognitive ability, however as an alternative in cognitive style. In the Arab culture, the students think about writing as just transmitting thoughts rather than rhetorical organization. It was discovered that there is a strong absence of students' personal voice in writing as they lack critical thinking and just summaries what has already been written before (Shukri, 2014).

However, in this current study, punctuation is the lowest level in the difficulties faced by the students in their academic writing. Although they already knew that their misuse of punctuation may lead to poor writing performance, only a minority think that they did not master the use of punctuation ($M = 1.51$) and the reason for poor writing performance is the incorrect use of punctuation marks ($M = 1.64$). Croll & Willson(1995) claim that students' writing encounters punctuation problems because there are no universal punctuation rules. Punctuation is one of the difficulties that students encounter in their writing in English, perhaps due to the student's lack of understanding of the use of the punctuation mark in the question tag, the lack of knowledge of the use of the capital letter in the first word in the direct question, confused about the use of punctuation when students did not get what the phrase means and shortage of interest and motivation in getting the rules of punctuation, students were in a hurry to take the test, negligence and lack of mastery of Language.

Therefore, students need to understand the use of punctuation, especially in the use of the comma, since the comma is the dominant mistake made by students in the text. Students should pay more attention and apply the material in all writing subjects, especially academic writing. Thus, students should put the right punctuation marks on the right breaks as punctuation sentences. This will properly convey their ideas, clarify and emphasize the meaning of the sentences so that readers understand each sentence quickly and easily from the first reading.

Table 2: Detailed Analysis of the Difficulties Based on the Six Domains Examined

Vocabulary		
No.	Statement	Mean
1	Writing is difficult for me because I have lack of vocabulary.	2.52
2	I use some simple words to replace the difficult ones.	3.26
3	I use different words to express the similar meanings.	2.72
Spelling		
4	I face problem to write spellings of the word that is new to me.	2.68
5	I take time to recall what exact spelling is.	2.91
6	I get poor grades because of poor spellings.	1.77
Grammar		
7	The frequent problem which I face while writing is the correct use of tenses.	1.11
8	I usually find difficult to understand sentence structure in English.	1.88
9	Grammatical mistakes affect my expression in writing.	2.38
Punctuation		
10	I am often confused in the use of punctuation marks.	1.51
11	My sentences don't convey complete sense as I am not good at marking commas in sentences.	1.31
12	The reason of poor performance in writing is the incorrect use of punctuation marks.	1.64
Rhetorical Problems		
13	My written expression is not good in describing the past events.	2.11
14	I feel confused while referring to the things which I have already mentioned in my writing.	1.38
15	I face problems in connecting one paragraph with the other.	1.27
L1 Interference		
16	I write English essays in the way I do in L1.	1.88
17	I think of a sentence in L1 first and then translate it into English.	2.61
18	I sometimes use L1 words when I can't find the exact English expressions.	1.72

The results of the interviews with the students showed that the lack of motivation takes a first rank with regard to the reasons which led to the difficulties of academic writing. Students' lack of motivation to write inside the class generally led to poor writing skills. Writing assignments can be developed quickly when students' concerns and interests are recognized, when they have ample opportunity to write, and when they are encouraged to participate. This means that students will be encouraged to write if writing homework motivates and keeps them interested (Novariana et al., 2018). Pincas(1982) believes that, for all ages and all levels, motivation increases if writing is placed in a realistic context. Reasonable and motivating to allow students to choose their own topics, and when students have this freedom their work is more successful.

The results of the interviews with the students also revealed that the lack of writing practice takes a second rank to the reasons which led to the difficulties of academic writing. According to Grabe & Kaplan(1996), writing is not come naturally but rather acquired through constant effort and a lot of practice. He also mentioned that the best method to learn a skill would be to practice it. The best way to become a talented writer is to write a lot and a lot. Also, Hedge(1988) declared that my experience says that to become a good writer a student has to write a lot.

In addition, the collected information from interview also reveals that the lack of ideas comes in the third rank concerning to the reasons that caused academic writing problems. This outcome had been in line with Mohammad et al., (2020) findings, which discovered that the lack of ideas was held by third rank of items. EFL instructors' function in EFL writing ability could be very critical due to the fact they are required to train strategies and competencies associated with standards of "mapping ideas and organization". Any failure or much less attention to doing that might actually cause problems of brainstorming for ideas on topics of writings and therefore problems for writing in general. Mohammad et al., (2020) noted that, the students claimed that they had been now no longer provided with enough time to accumulate their ideas about the topic of reading or watching. Therefore, they advised to be given sufficient time to generate and retrieve thoughts about the topic.

The acquired statistics from interview discover that the lack of reading comes in the fourth rank concerning to the reasons that led to academic writing difficulties. Reading habit is appeared because the maximum influenced issue in writing considering that people generally finds out new ideas, fact, information, knowledge and experience from reading activity. Belkhir & Benyelles(2017) found that one of the problems in English writing confronted by the learners is because of lack of reading. Learners who have larger receptive vocabulary are probably to know extra of these words productively than learners who've smaller receptive vocabulary (Webb, 2008).

This suggests that individuals who study more acquire more of the written language. Reading textbook triggers the readers to add extra knowledge and to increase their crucial thinking. It impacts the manner they arrange ideas that allows the learners enhance their writing talent. Khoirunnisa & Safitri, (2018) mentioned that academic writing talent has integration with reading due to the fact reading is one of the steps of writing system functioned to collect information.

CONCLUSIONS

Writing is a literacy talent and a complicated form of self-expression. English is a common language being understood and used for verbal exchange in the world. The present study aimed to investigate the difficulties faced by EFL Libyan college students in academic writing and the reasons that led to those academic writing difficulties at Elmergib University. The result revealed that the students have various writing difficulties: vocabulary; grammar; spelling; style rhetorical problems;

punctuation; L1 Interference. Also the results showed through the interview the most common reasons that led to those academic writing difficulties in English are lack of motivation followed by lack of writing practice; lack of ideas and then lack of reading. It can be concluded that Libyan students at Elmergib University are just like the alternative EFL learners in general and EFL Arab learners especially which they face the same writing problems.

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