

Academic Writing among Saudi University Students: Problems and Solutions

A Case Study: English Language Students, Department of English, College of Education in Zulfi- Majmaah University

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Abstract: *This study aims at investigating the problems of academic writing facing English Language students in College of Education in Zulfi in order to find solutions for these problems. Two tools were adopted, a questionnaire and an experimental task for collecting data. (20) teachers from English language department in College of education at Zulfi responded to the questionnaire. The graduate students in the second semester for this academic year chosen randomly to sit for the task. Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) is used for analyzing data. Findings are summarized in these points: Students are not able to express themselves through writing, students commit spelling mistakes as well as facing vocabulary and structural difficulties when they write and the existed Academic Writing Curriculum doesn't cover the writing Techniques. Accordingly, the researchers suggested that: Writing and reading skills should go together and students should be encouraged to have extensive reading practices to improve their critical thinking. There should be a lot of writing practice on the part of students in the shape of assignments and Extensive writing practice to improve their writing techniques. Improving students' writing skills through using computer. Adopting writing syllabus that concentrates on practicing writing rather than teaching about writing.*

1. Introduction

Many studies were conducted to investigate language errors commonly found in EFL learners' academic writing. Other studies focus on Arab EFL students' serious difficulties in writing in English that would limit their ability of expressing their thoughts on paper.

The aim of this study is to identify the problems of academic writing among English Language students belonging to English department in the College of Education at Zulfi - Majmaah University and to suggest solutions to these problems.

Although those students study three writing courses in their programme that teaches them the aspects of academic writing like using effective word expressions, strong vocabulary, organizing paragraphs by using adequate style of word structure, and appropriate conjunctions. The researchers noticed that during examinations most of the students avoid answering the questions that concern writing, therefore this study is meant to investigate the difficulties that students encounter in the writing process and that affect their written performance and to suggest some solutions for these problems.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

This study centers on the difficulties in academic writing that encounter English Language students of the College of Education at Zulfi, Majmaah University. The researchers observed that the students' writing skills are very weak. This issue has not yet been significantly considered in the English department. The experience of teaching the course (which is taught over the three different levels) has encouraged the researchers to work on this important issue so as to highlight the problems and suggest the suitable solutions.

1.2 Significance of the Study

This study will mainly investigate the problems of academic writing facing English Language students in College of Education in Zulfi in order to find solutions for these problems. The findings of this study might be of great help to do useful reforms concerning academic writing among our students.

1.3 Research Questions

This study is expected to answer the following questions:

- 1) To what extent English Language students in College of Education -Majmaah University are able to express themselves through writing?
- 2) What kinds of difficulties do students face in academic writing?
- 3) To what extent the academic writing curriculum covers the writing techniques?

1.4 Hypotheses

- 1) Students are not able to express themselves through writing.
- 2) The students face spelling, vocabulary, and structural difficulties when they write.
- 3) The academic writing curriculum does not cover the writing techniques.

1.5 Methodology

This study will adopt a descriptive analytical method (an experimental task will be given to the students) and a questionnaire will be used as a tool for collecting data. A questionnaire will be specifically designed for teachers engaged in teaching the academic writing curriculum in the department.

Procedure for treating data:

After collecting and organizing data relevantly, Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) will be used for analyzing data. Based on the results and findings, some recommendations and suggestions will be stated.

1.6 Limitation of the study

This study will be limited to academic writing problems facing English Language students in faculty of education in Zulfi, University of Majmaah 1437-1438.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definitions of Academic Writing

Learning to write is a gradual process which begins with simple copying and ends with free expression. Students should be trained systematically, under the guidance of the teacher through several stages of writing experience namely: handwriting, copying, dictation, controlled, guided and free writing.

Academic writing is expected to address an intellectual community in which the students engage in active learning. Some basics or rules must be established. Using information to one's advantage is a key part of learning. Success at the postgraduate level depends on the students' ability to access, evaluate, and synthesize the words, ideas, and opinions of others in order to develop their own academic voice. When presenting what they have learned, it is therefore vitally important that students are able to show clearly what they have drawn from others and what is their own (Bristol Business School, 2006, p. 3).

The answer to the question 'What is good academic writing?' is Writing that meets the expectations of the audience.

Effective academic writing is vital to success in higher education and in professional life beyond the university (Rai & Lillis, 2012). Getting it write' in social work: Exploring the value of writing in academia to writing for professional practice. Teaching in Higher Education, 18(4), 352-364. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2012.719157>

Ellis (1999). argues that proficiency in reading comprehension is a prerequisite to writing competency. Conversational ability, obtained through reading and speaking a second language, is needed to prepare learners to express themselves in the written mode.

2.2 Characteristics of Good Academic Writing:

Yugianingrum identified four characteristics of good academic writing:

- Writing should play a significant role in the related community.
- The topic should be interesting for the writer, who believes that there is more to discover about it.
- The writer must care about the aesthetic quality of the text he/she writes.

- The community should help writers in accessing relevant resources and finding support and guidance. (Yugianingrum, 2010, pp. 40–41)

2.3 The Reasons for Writing

A good deal of writing in the English language classroom is undertaken as an aid to learning, for example to consolidate the learning of new structures or vocabulary or to help students remember new items of language. In this context, the role of writing is little different from its role in any other subject; it allows students to see how they are progressing and to get feedback from the teacher, and allow teachers to monitor and diagnose problems. Successful writing depends on more than the ability to produce clear and correct sentences. (Tricia, 2003: 7)

3. Previous Studies

- 1- Difficulties in Academic Writing: From the Perspective of King Saud University Postgraduate Students- Published: March 1, 2012 Hind Al Fadda King Saud University, Saudi Arabia

The purpose of this study was to determine what difficulties King Saud University students encounter when learning to write academic English and to differentiate between students' learning needs and objectives. The sample consisted of 50 postgraduate students enrolled in King Saud University during the academic year 2009-2010. Analysis of the data showed that English as a second language (ESL) students face many difficulties and stresses in their academic writing, such as difficulty distinguishing between spoken and written English, making an outline before writing a draft, identifying the skills needed for successful writing, and avoiding plague words and phrases.

In view of the data presented, the following conclusions were reached regarding the difficulties of academic writing:

- 1) ESL students face many difficulties and stresses in their academic writing, including those caused by distinguishing between spoken and written styles in English texts. Regarding this point, I must mention that Arabic is quite different from English in both its spoken and written forms. Factors attributing to these differences include: a) differences in alphabets and b) differences in writing styles, in that Arabic tends to have more metaphoric phrases and lengthier sentences than English does.
- 2) There are many approaches for teaching academic writing; some of them can facilitate success, such as computer-assisted writing instruction, and others can impede success, such as the use of different writing styles.
- 3) Native English speakers can play an important role in the improvement of ESL students' academic writing, as native speakers can help these students identify the skills important for such writing.
- 2- Challenges Face Arab Students in Writing Well- Developed Paragraphs in English -Online Published: September 7, 2015

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This study aimed to investigate problems facing Palestinian Arab students from Israel who are majoring in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in developing well-written paragraphs in English. The data had been accumulated for the last fourteen years include samples of 205 students, which show similar repeated types of mistakes and errors made by the participants of the first-year writing course. The accumulated data show that students face many problems in writing good topic as well as concluding sentences, supporting details by adding examples and reasons and using discourse markers appropriately.

3- Deficiency of Writing English among Arab Students

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The study aims at using the scientific techniques of using the modern techniques for teaching writing skill in order to promote meaningful language learning. The main source of data collection is the questionnaire, beside, different references, books, forums and internet as secondary resources. The main results of the study are:

- 1) Students' weak performance in writing tasks refers to the complicated rules of punctuation.
- 2) The ignorance of capitalization rules leads to the deficiency of writing English among Arab students.
- 3) The shortage of vocabulary and the grammatical structure reduced the value text and caused poor writing.

4. Data Analysis

Testing the results against hypotheses

4.1 Hypothesis one: Students are not able to express themselves through writing.

	Extremely agree	agree	neutral	Dis agree	Extremely dis agree
Most of students cannot distinguish between the parts of speech.	35	50	5	10	0
Most of students can not differentiate between phrase and sentence.	40	55	5	0	0
Students cannot construct a complete sentence.	35	35	20	10	0
Students cannot write a complete paragraph.	55	45	0	0	0

As stated in table (1-4)87.5% of the respondents to the questionnaire agree that students cannot express themselves through writing. Based on the results of the task most of the students are unable to write a single clear, error- free

sentence. They commit sentence error; fragments, run-ons in addition to the use of faulty parallelism and faulty modifier sentences. Most of the students can't organize sentences. They can't even write and arrange paragraphs in essay writing. Also, Students do not follow writing format in their writings.

4.2 Hypothesis Two: Students face spelling, vocabulary and structural difficulties when they write

	Extremely agree	agree	neutral	Dis agree	Extremely dis agree
- Students make spelling mistakes in their writing.	30	40	15	15	0
Students' English Language vocabulary is limited.	25	45	20	10	0
Students do not master subject verb order.	40	35	5	20	0
Students are weak in developing writing sentences.	40	25	15	15	5

As stated in table (2-4)70% of the respondents to the questionnaire agree that the students face spelling, vocabulary and structural difficulties when they write. According to the results of the task most of the students cannot choose or select the words properly or carefully, therefore, their work is full of wordiness, beside that there are many spelling mistakes and the students are unable to use the punctuation marks correctly as well as capitalization in their writing. Also, most of the students are unable to develop or support the statements in an essay or any other topic sentence related to writing.

4.3 Hypothesis Three: The Academic Writing Curriculum doesn't cover the writing Techniques

	Extremely agree	agree	neutral	Dis agree	Extremely dis agree
There is a repetition of topics in the curriculum of writing.	35	45	10	10	0
The curriculum of writing lacks selection and gradation.	30	40	20	10	0
The curriculum concentrates on describing writing rather than practicing	45	40	5	10	0
The curriculum lacks variations in topics.	40	25	15	15	5

As stated in table (3-4) 75% of the respondents of the questionnaire agree that the Writing Curriculum doesn't cover the writing techniques.

The findings of the study:

- 1) Students are not able to express themselves through writing.
- 2) Students commit spelling mistakes as well as vocabulary and structural difficulties.
- 3) The existed Academic Writing Curriculum doesn't cover the writing Techniques.

According to the above-mentioned findings and the writing problems found the researchers recommended that:

- 1) Writing and reading skills should go together and students should be encouraged to have extensive reading practices to improve their critical thinking.
- 2) There should be a lot of writing practice on the part of students in the shape of assignments and Extensive writing practice to improve their writing techniques.
- 3) Improving students' writing skills through using computer.
- 4) Increasing the number of credit hours.
- 5) Adopting writing syllabus that concentrates on practicing writing rather than teaching about writing.

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