



Sudan University of Science and Technology

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Investigating Writing Skills Difficulties Encountered by EFL Sudanese University Students

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating writing skills difficulties faced by EFL Sudanese university students. The study adopted the descriptive analytical method, the researcher collected data by using a diagnostic test for (30) EFL students at Sudan University of Science and Technology .To analyze the data the researcher has used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings of the study revealed that EFL Sudanese university students encounter some serious difficulties in writing skills; they can not express intended ideas clearly, students are unaware of formal writing aspects such as neat hand writing, correct spelling, proper use of punctuation, acceptable grammar, varied vocabulary, precise construction and correctness of expressions. In addition, when students write about a particular topic, they do not organize their thoughts and ideas and present them in a significant way as they lack balance between content and form. In light of the findings of the study, the researcher recommended that students should be aware of the importance of writing skills in the process of EFL learning, teachers should use materials that suit the students' levels, needs and interest. Furthermore, university textbooks need to give more attention to writing skills and strategies.

Key words: writing skills, aspects of writing, foreign language learning.

المستخلص

هدفت هذه الدراسة لتقصي صعوبات مهارات الكتابة لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية بالجامعات السودانية . استخدم الباحث المنهج الوصفي التحليلي و جمع البيانات بواسطة الاختبار التشخيصي الذي أجري لعدد (30) طالبا وطالبة بجامعة السودان للعلوم والتكنولوجيا . استخدم الباحث برنامج الحزم الإحصائية للعلوم الاجتماعية لتحليل البيانات. أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن هنالك بعض الصعوبات التي تواجه طلاب الجامعات السودانية في مهارات الكتابة فهم لا يمكنهم التعبير عن الأفكار المقصودة بوضوح وليسوا على دراية بجوانب الكتابة الرسمية مثل الكتابة اليدوية المرتبة والتهجئة الصحيحة والاستخدام الصحيح لعلامات الترقيم, القواعد المقبولة, والمفردات المتنوعة والبناء الدقيق و صحة التعبير. بالإضافة الى ذلك عندما يقوم الطلاب بكتابة موضوع معين فهم لا ينظمون أفكارهم ويقدمونها بطريقة مميزة اذ انها تفتقد التوازن بين المحتوى والشكل . بناء على تلك النتائج فإن الباحث يوصي بأنه ينبغي ان يكون الطلاب على دراية بأهمية مهارات الكتابة في عملية تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية لغة اجنبية. ينبغي على المعلمين استخدام المواد التي تناسب مستويات واحتياجات واهتمامات الطلاب . علاوة على ذلك ينبغي على ادارة مناهج الجامعات زيادة الاهتمام بمهارات واستراتيجيات الكتابة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مهارات الكتابة , جوانب الكتابة , تعلم اللغة الأجنبية.

1. Introduction

It has always been noticed that among the four skills of EFL learning, writing is the most significant productive skill to acquire as it plays a crucial role in EFL language teaching and learning, Buck (1995:P.65) argued that language learning should start with writing skills and providing large amounts of writing is the best way to teach a second or a foreign language.

According to Hadley (1993:P.76) writing involves composing in order to tell or retell pieces of information in the form of narrative or description, or to transform information into new texts as in expository or argumentative writing. Flower & Hayes(1981:P.87) claimed that writing is a complicated process which involves a number of cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies such as brainstorming, planning, outlining, organizing, drafting and devising.

Harmer (2004) argued that writing is frequently useful as preparation for some other activities especially when students write sentences as a preamble to discussion activities; writing enables students to think up ideas rather than having to come up with instant fluent opinions (P.65).

Apsari(2017) remarked that writing is used to help students perform different kind of activities . Thus, writing skill becomes crucial in teaching and learning as it is important for career and personal life because others

will judge our thinking abilities according to what we write and how we write (P.43).

In spite of being an important skill, writing is supposed to be rather difficult and boring subject among EFL learners; hence it was not given its importance in language teaching for the following three reasons: first of all, writing was not accepted as a separate skill to be taught explicitly for a long time. Secondly, teachers felt insecure about teaching writing and finally, the traditional materials for language teaching were not efficient enough to teach writing skills(Mendelson ,1994:P.98).

When teaching writing, teachers do not use suitable learning materials that suit the levels and the needs of the students, Porter& Roberts (1981: P.9) pointed out that " We cannot expect learners to handle different types of language they have never or hardly ever been exposed to, when we choose authentic materials, we can set different tasks to suit the levels and the needs of the students". As a result EFL learners tend to have some serious difficulties in writing skills and consider it "the most demanding language skill" (Field, 2008: P.98). In this paper the researcher investigates writing difficulties among EFL Sudanese university students.

2. Statement of the problem

From his observation and experience of teaching EFL for several years ,the researcher has noticed that most EFL Sudanese university students face numerous serious deficiencies in writing skills; they can not express ideas and convey the intended message clearly, students are unaware of some formal aspects such as neat hand writing, correct spelling, proper use of punctuation , vocabulary and acceptable grammar as they have poor awareness of important aspects of writing such as varied vocabulary, precise construction and correctness of expressions. In addition, when students submit a piece of original writing as when they are given assignments or reports on a particular topic or theme, the ideas and events are not presented in an interesting and a significant way as their writing need to be more matured as long as they practice writing on narrowed topics and work on outlined and organized materials; they do not organize their thoughts and ideas and present them in a way so that the readers can read that easily and feel pleased to read as they lack balance between content and forms .So, the

researcher finds it important to explore these writing hurdles with the intention of suggesting the appropriate rectifications.

3. Objectives of the Study

This study is carried out to achieve the following objectives:

1. To shed light on writing difficulties that face EFL Sudanese university students.
2. To suggest some suitable solutions to overcome these writing difficulties.

4. Questions of the Study

The following questions formed the basis of the study:

1. To what extent do EFL Sudanese university students face difficulties with writing skills?
2. How do EFL Sudanese university students perform when they are asked to do exercises based on writing?

5. Hypotheses of the Study

The following hypotheses are postulated:

1. Most EFL Sudanese university students face some difficulties with writing skills.
2. EFL Sudanese university students perform poorly when they are asked to do exercises based on writing skills.

6. Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it contributes to the existing literature in the field of teaching EFL writing skills; teachers could have better understanding of their students' difficulties and examine their own teaching techniques and materials accordingly. In addition, learners can identify their problems and be aware of the factors that contribute to their difficulties and apply the right strategies and techniques of EFL writing skills. The study shall also form a point of departure for syllabus designers and material writers to make further improvement in their teaching materials. Furthermore, researchers who are interested in EFL research to use the findings of the study as a basis for

further studies in the area as the current study paves the way for other researchers to conduct further studies on developing EFL students' EFL writing skills.

7. Limits of the Study

This study is limited to investigate writing difficulties encountered by Sudanese university students who study English as a foreign language and possess approximately the same English abilities during the academic year (2022-2023).

8. Methodology of the Study

As has been mentioned, the purpose of this study is to investigate the difficulties of writing skills among EFL Sudanese university students, to achieve this goal, and in an attempt to answer the study questions, the data has been collected through using a diagnostic test which was administered to (30) Sudanese university students. Then the data has been analyzed statistically by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

9. The Concept of Writing

Writing refers to the method of representing language in visual forms through using sets of symbols to represent sounds and other aspects of language in order to convey experience, feelings and ideas. Lado (1964:P.76) stated that writing is a partial representation of units of language expression. According to Zulfani (2001:I7) writing can help students to use grammatical structures, idioms, and vocabulary as the most important things in learning a language. Asmuti (2002) remarked that by mastering writing skills, the learners can elaborate their ideas in a systematic arrangement as before writing they need to think how their ideas can be understood by the readers as they have to use the correct written language, so that the reader can understand the ideas of the writer (p.4).

Heaton (1975) stated the following varied skills which are necessary for good writing:

1. Language use: the ability to write correct and appropriate sentences.
2. Mechanical skills: the ability to use correctly those conventions peculiar to the written language such as punctuation, and spelling.
3. Treatment of content: the ability to think creatively and develop thoughts, excluding all irrelevant information.

4. Stylistic skills: the ability to manipulate sentences and paragraphs, and use language effectively.

5. Judgment skills: the ability to write in an appropriate manner for a particular purpose with a particular audience in mind, together with the ability to select, organize and order relevant information.

The need to express ones' thoughts and feelings is innate and both speaking and writing are methods to express ourselves. According to Kroll(1981) when oral and written resources are systematically integrated, a person can make choices within a flexible, organized system of voices, registers, styles and choices which are appropriate for the purpose, audience, and context of communication as the written language plays an equally important role in human communication and social activities such as speaking, especially when achieving a high level of mastery of language and communication are considered(p.53).

10. Characteristics of Writing

Ur (1996) stated the following characteristics of writing:

1. Permanents: it means that the form of discourse should be fixed and stable, so that the reader can read that in any condition.

2.Explicit: it means that there must be clarity in the context and reference. The writer must be careful for arranging the form of words, so that the readers are directed to the same interpretation about the written work.

3. Densities: the information that is given to the reader should be conveyed effectively, this suggests that writer should avoid the repetition of words as written form is different from the spoken form.

4. Detachment: the writer must have the ability to predict their readers' reaction about their writing, because the writer doesn't interact directly to the reader.

5. Organization: the writer usually has an opportunity to edit the written work before it is available to be read. So the written work tends to be organized and well- purposed.

6. Slowing of production: speed and reception are slower than the spoken form.

7. Standard Language: for the written form to be acceptable, it should match the standard language.

8. A learnt skill: writing must be learnt and thought to acquire the skill.

Starko (2005: P.98) proposed the following characteristics of writing:

1. Fluency:

Fluency refers to the ability to generate a large number of ideas. The more ideas the learners have, the more likely it is that at least one of them will be a good one.

2. Flexibility:

Flexibility means the ability to change the opinion of someone hence it involves an openness to check ideas or thoughts in an unexpected way.

3. Originality:

Originality refers to thinking of unusual ideas and solutions to a problem and the way the ideas are joined together.

4. Elaboration:

Elaboration is the ability to add more details and to develop ideas by generating rich and more interesting ideas.

11. Main Sources of Writing Difficulties

Like all learning problems, EFL learners encounter some writing difficulties. Heaton (1975) stated that writing skill is complex and sometimes it is difficult to teach as the mastery is not only of grammatical and rhetorical devices but also of conceptual and judgmental elements.

According to Flower (1979) there are some common problems in academic and professional writing which are consequences of the absence of referent, immature and imprecise ideas, some senseless discussions and being unsuccessful to convert private thoughts into a public, besides the misuse of language written aspects such as punctuation, spelling, grammar, vocabulary and so on (p. 19).

Marzano (1982) argued that there are eight major problems that cause some difficulties to EFL students' writing skills such as spelling problems,

pronoun usage, agreement between subject and predicate, and the avoidance of run-on sentence, capitalization, punctuation, usage of slang or nonstandard terms and modification problems. But if there is no mistake in writing still that particular writing cannot be considered as a good piece of writing (p.19).

According to Evans (1959) in schools it is very common that the quality of students' writings depend on teachers' expectation since if the students were given more writing tasks like assignments and reports on a particular topic or themes then the students would get more opportunity to write and practice. He also stated that students' writing will be more matured as long as they practice writing on narrowed topics and work on outlined and organized materials (p. 14).

EFL writing is affected by several factors such as language proficiency, L1 writing competence, use of cohesive devices, meta-cognitive knowledge about the writing task, writing strategies and writers' personal characteristics. Bryne (1988) stated the following main sources of writing skills:

- (1)Linguistic factors: grammar, vocabulary, language use and choice of sentences in writing must be fully monitored by EFL learners.
- (2)Physiological factors: they focus on the writer because there is no direct interaction and feedback from the readers when they are writing.
- (3) Cognitive factors: writing has to be taught through formal instruction such as spelling, punctuation, capitalization and paragraphing.
- (4)Absence of Writing Strategies: There are different strategies that can be used to teach EFL writing skills effectively such as editing, presentation, written feedback, self-review, peer review, extensive reading, pair work, group work..etc, hence the absence of these strategies causes writing difficulties to EFL learners.

Research shows that writing skills can be best learned when teachers involve students in the process of writing (Hyland, 2000). Ahmad (2010) stated that some EFL students are less careful about their performance and have learning disabilities and these issues hinder students' writing performance. It is very common to almost every class that students' have different spelling styles; handwriting is not clear and neat and sometimes their writings do not make any sense (p. 14).

According to Raimes (1985:P.65) writing is difficult to promote and test and is emphasized less than other language abilities hence there are several reasons for writing to be the last acquired domain of learning , one being that more detailed and analyzed knowledge of a language is needed to write it than to understand it .

In addition, EFL learners do not come to school with the same background knowledge; therefore, it is difficult for them to write with meaning. Their vocabulary is often limited, and while they can communicate orally they can be understood through face expressions, body language and gestures, writing proves to be frustrating for them as they attempt to express their ideas without using their body language.

Ahmad (2010) further argued that traditional methods of teaching writing hinder EFL learners' writing skills. Bolaji (2014) expressed that if there is interaction between students and the teacher during the lesson then this is better than the traditional lesson method as it has little effect on the writing skills of students but it also saves time for the teacher.

Similarly, teaching grammar in an English writing classroom is part of traditional classroom settings as most EFL teachers use the grammar-translation method instead of the direct method of teaching. Although grammar includes all the rules, principles, and structures but being used for those who have poor skills of writing. According to Korhonon (2010) the grammar - translation method is followed when the proficiency level of students is low and find it difficult to understand when teachers use methods other than this.

12. Previous Studies on Writing Difficulties

Mohammed (2017) made a study under the title "Investigating the Writing Difficulties Encountered by EFL Learners in Sudanese Secondary schools", the study adopted the analytical descriptive method, the data has been collected through two tools; a diagnostic test for (40) secondary school students and a questionnaire for (40) secondary school teachers. The results of the study revealed that EFL Sudanese secondary school students face some difficulties in writing skills, besides, the syllabus does not include enough writing materials, besides that teachers need more training.

Chowdhury (2015) investigated “Observing Writing Classes to Explore Students’ Writing Problems: A Secondary Level Scenario of EFL Class” with the aim to find out students’ writing problems at secondary level. For data collection and data analysis the researcher observed three different classes of one school and took (30) students’ interviews and assessed (30) scripts. After the data collection and data analysis the researcher found out that EFL students face some writing problems not only due to inabilities but also to the drawback in the education system.

Al-Lawti (1995) studied " A Diagnostic Study of the Difficulties Encountered by Omani Secondary School Students in Their Creative Writing Production of English" the results of the study showed that vocabulary , grammar , punctuation , and discourse are the most difficult for the students to use appropriately ; teachers claimed that these problems are due to the fact that the curriculum does not provide enough opportunity for learning and practicing new vocabulary and writing tasks besides the large number of the students in classes.

13. Data Analysis and Discussion

In this study a diagnostic writing test was given to (30) Sudanese university students to collect the data, the main purpose of this test was to investigate the main writing difficulties that the students encounter in writing skills .

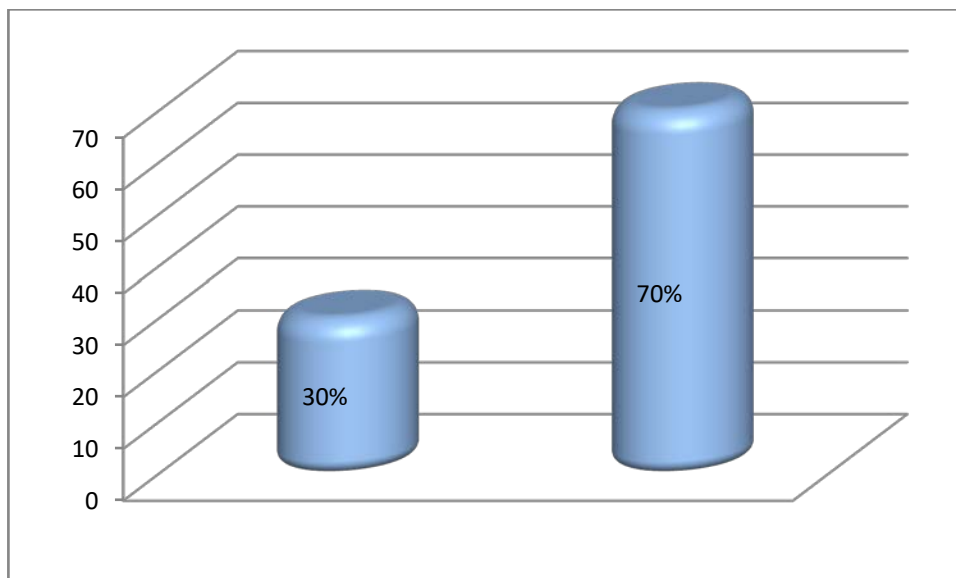
Hypotheses of the study:

1. Most EFL Sudanese university students face some difficulties with writing skills.
2. EFL Sudanese university students perform poorly when they are asked to do exercises based on writing skills.

Table No. (1) The Frequency Distribution for the Respondents' Answers of overall diagnostic writing test

Answers	Frequencies	Percentage
Pass	9	30%
Fail	21	70%

Total	30	100%
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From the above table and figure, it is obvious that only (9) students in the sample of the study (30%) have passed the diagnostic writing test, while (21) students (70%) failed the overall test.

Table No. (2) The Frequency Distribution and decisions for the Respondents' Answers of all the sections of the diagnostic writing test:

Sections	Pass		Fail		Decision
	frequency	Percentage	frequency	Percentage	
Section 1	6	17%	24	83%	Acceptable
Section 2	7	23%	23	77%	Acceptable
Overall	9	30%	21	70%	Acceptable

The above table shows the summary of the results of the study. For section one and two, it's clear that the percentage of students who failed in both

sections of the test is greater than the percentage of students who gave correct answers (83%) and (77%) respectively.

Table No.(3) one sample T-TEST for the questions of the study:

Sections	No.	SD	t-value	DF	P-value
1	30	7.2	11	29	0.00
2	30	9.81	17	29	0.00
For all	30	8.03	15	29	0.00

The calculated value of T -TEST for the significance of the differences for the respondents' answers in the overall test was (15) which is greater than the tabulated value of T -TEST at the degree of freedom (29) and the significant value level (0.05%) which was (6.54). This indicates that, there are statistically significant differences at the level (0.05 %) among the answers of the respondents. On the basis of these findings we can conclude that the hypotheses of this study are verified.

14. Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of the study revealed that the highest percentages of EFL Sudanese university students face the following serious writing problems:

- They can not express their ideas and convey the message clearly, they are unaware of some formal aspects such as neat hand writing, correct spelling, proper use of punctuation , vocabulary and acceptable grammar; they have poor awareness of important aspects of writing such as varied vocabulary, precise construction and correctness of expressions.
- They find it difficult to understand writing tasks instructions', besides, they find the topics unfamiliar due to their weak grammar, and vocabulary.
- When students are asked to perform a task in writing, it is observed that the ideas and events are not presented in an interesting and a

- significant way; their writing need to be more matured as long as they practice writing on narrowed topics and work on outlined and organized materials; they do not organize their thoughts and ideas and present them in a way so that the readers can read that easily and feel pleased to read that as they lack balance between content and forms.
- Understanding and applying the English grammatical rules was not easy for the students because verbs are usually formed differently to have subject-verb agreement according to the tenses. Besides, it was hard for them to learn how to use articles, prepositions, pronouns, and connecting devices appropriately.
 - They find it difficult to write the necessary information.
 - They are unable to infer meanings of unfamiliar words and make predictions using their personal knowledge and experience.
 - They lack knowledge of contextual and cultural aspects of English.
 - They have poor awareness of the features of written English.

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher recommends the following points:

- Students should be aware of the importance of writing skills in the process of foreign language learning as such problems in writing lead to other language learning problems in other language skills as students express their ideas through writing.
- EFL students should be encouraged to express ideas and convey the intended message clearly, students should be aware of some formal aspects such as, neat hand writing, correct spelling, proper use of punctuation, acceptable grammar, varied vocabulary, precise construction and correctness of expressions.
- When students submit a piece of original writing as when they are given assignments or reports on a particular topic or themes, they should be instructed that high marks are given to those who present their ideas and events in an interesting and a significant way as their writing need to be more matured as long as they practice writing on narrowed topics and work on outlined and organized materials; they should organize their thoughts and ideas and present them in a way

- so that the readers can read that easily and feel pleased to read that as they should create a kind of balance between content and forms .
- When teaching writing skills EFL teachers should use writing materials that suit the levels, interest and the needs of the students.
 - EFL teachers should provide students with immediate feedback to correct errors and promote self-confidence.
 - EFL teachers should teach writing strategies and try as possible as they can to encourage students to apply them before and while they are writing.
 - University textbooks need to give more attention to writing skills and strategies.

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