

Evaluating Sudanese EFL Students' Essay Writing with Reference to Syntactic Structures

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Abstract:

Essay writing is regarded as a series of appropriate grammatical structures in which sentences with different meanings can be generated. Therefore, writing requires ability to generate words and express them clearly. It is also the process of discovering the intended meanings in order to express more accurately. This study aims at assessing the performance of ELS students of the College of Languages at The Sudan University of Science and Technology at the academic year 2014-2015. A questionnaire was distributed to (15) English language lecturers at four different universities in order to gauge their responses to the main research questions of learners' abilities in writing an essay. The findings display that students cannot use correct grammatical rules and the texts lack cohesion and coherence. Moreover, the results show that participants have no ability to produce a final comprehensive text. The researcher recommends that grammatical rules should be taught to students to help them write more communicatively and meaningfully and also there should be designed courses in writing skills so as to encourage ESL students to write both free and controlled writings at tertiary level.

Key words: Cognitive processes – cohesion – coherence – ESL - intralingual

INTRODUCTION

Essay writing is a skill which can be consciously learnt, developed and taught to others. It is an art depends on creation, especially when students master how to use grammar, cohesion and coherence successfully in order to produced satisfactory written essays. Some previous studies have investigated in students' essay writing. That is to say essay writing requires ability to generate words and thoughts out of oneself, but it also requires ability to criticize them so as to decide which ones are more appropriate to be used. (King, 2010) mentions that the sequence of words in sentences in English formulates the meaning of a single thought, and the sequence of sentences in a paragraph makes the meaning of one general theme or idea with various levels of examples and details. He also said that in order to produce a long piece of writing, writers should use paragraphing to lead readers through a main idea reinforced with different main points and levels of detail for each one. (Starkey, 2004) says that texts are often seen as a series of grammatical structures, in which sentences with various meaning can be built. The structural direction in this way defines writing as mixture of lexical and syntactic forms and good writing as the explanation of knowledge of these rules used to make texts. The text is a unified when all the details are related in the thesis and with supporting sentences. (Erazmus, 2006) reports that to make free composition a useful device in order to improve students' abilities, certain practical matters should be put in mind. Composition must be produced in great quantities to be effective. The ability to produce written forms of language with patterns which can be seen as the end product which is intended to achieve, that is, fluency in written expression. According to this introduction, the main objective of this study is to assess and analyze the performance of ESL students in essay writing.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

ESL undergraduate students are supposed to be well-equipped with knowledge and writing skills. Mastering learning skills; especially essay writing acts as a cornerstone for learners' success in their university studies. Conversely, university students are incapable of producing any written text. Not only this, but also they cannot express their thoughts and feelings in comprehensive meaningful sentences. This study intends to investigate why ESL students at Dalanj University (Teachers' College and Faculty of Education) are unable to produce good academic written essays.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Writing performance is essential for ESL students in order to write systematically, by using suitable discourse markers as cohesive devices, (Penston, 2005) writes that discourse markers are mainly used to relate sentences or clauses to another, or to signal the writer's attitude or style. Without discourse markers we just have bare sentences, no discourse. (Sattayatham and Ratanpinyowong, 2008) conclude that students had difficulty in using correct English grammar. These findings are also reinforced by the study of (Hourari, 2008) who states that students made different types of grammatical errors that mostly were due to intralingual ones. (Zakaria and Mugaddam, 2013) conclude that students were unable to use different modes of writing, failed to use writing strategies, and they produced incohesive and incoherent paragraphs. (Hamza, 2009) mentions that students were unable to produce unified and coherent essay writing by their own. In addition, students could not express their own ideas in a free composition. The study of (Abdulkareem, 2013) also states that students were unable of using their own words to construct correct sentences. Besides,

they were unable to organize the function of writing. Many students committed many mistakes related to sentence structure. (Jones, 2007) reveals that native and non-native English speaking students were sometimes indistinctive in their quality of writing, and both of them suffered from a loss of coherence in writing.

(Sharples, 2003) introduces that the writer has to choose and arrange the ideas and put them into language that suits the context. The language must keep the flow of ideas and connect them to the existing text via a sequence of words that refer to the given text and present new information. He adds that the writer then translates this language into text on page or screen, assuring cohesion and coherence to produce a good written text. Mastering grammar helps students write correctly so as to produce meaningful structures. (Davis & Elder, 2014) mention that grammar is functionally decided by writers to simultaneously represent experience, manage their relationship with their co-participants and produce a written text, which is cohesive and coherent. (Finch, 1998) writes that reading about the subject is ok, but having to write something intelligible about it is another matter. He emphasizes the importance of thinking linguistically. He adds that if you think linguistically, then you should write linguistically, because it means studying language, and language use. Each elementary sign is a stable symbolic associated between a meaning and a form which may combine together in a ruled-governed way to form a complex signs which convey correspondingly complex meaning (Cruse, 2000). He also goes on to say that vocabulary of a language is not just a collection of words scattered at random throughout the mental landscape, but at least it is partly structured at various levels. (Alkhuli, 1989) argues that writing is not merely a group of sentences structured to make a text. It has to be restricted to grammatical rules which operate within sentences. These rules limit what words and what types of sentence can follow another. L2 writers must be conscious of their own

cognitive processes to manipulate and add existing writing competencies. (Whale and Menord, 2001) argue that L2 writers must be able to exercise deliberate control over these cognitive processes in ways that allow them to achieve pragmatic and textual goals defined by a given writing task. They must sustain a reasonable high level of lexicomorphosyntactic knowledge of the L2 to translate ideas into linguistic acceptable form. Students need to realize the importance of writing in English. (Smetanova, 2013) summarizes that students have to grasp the importance of writing in the process of foreign language acquisition. This process is connected to mental strategies such as thinking, remembering and using the foreign language. He adds that when students write, they do not only concentrate on the structure of the text, correct and selected thought, but they have to have aptitude to express themselves. They have to be aware of some techniques and strategies that help them understand better ideas and remember some new words. Essay writing, as defines by (Hyland, 1996) is combination of lexical and syntactic forms and good writing as the explanation of knowledge of these forms and of the rules used to create a text. (Zumbrum and Krause, 2012) mention that essay writing is essential to students' success in schools, because they can explain their knowledge. Writing plays very important role even when students leave their school. (Smith, 2005) reports that no text is ever completely new, original or independent. When we write, we are constantly taking from what we have read in the past, either directly or indirectly. (Mcleod and Soven, 2000) argue that essay writing is a mode of learning or that universities must present students to convention of thinking and writing in different training. Students have to be asked to read literary texts and write about them as training in literary criticism, be provided with various academic writing in disciplines.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of this paper are to:

- 1- Assess students' performance in using correct grammatical rules and expressing their thoughts and ideas logically and systematically.
- 2- It also attempts to investigate how far students maintain rich source of cognitive processes and strategies in writing essays.

METHODS

The study uses the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for breaking down and analyzing the data. A questionnaire was distributed to (15) English language lecturers at four different universities in order to gauge their responses to the following research questions of students' performance:

- 1- To what extent are students capable of using grammatical rules in writing essays?
- 2- How far can students express their thoughts and ideas logically and systematically?
- 3- Why do students fail to maintain rich source of cognitive processes and strategies in writing essays?

RESULTS

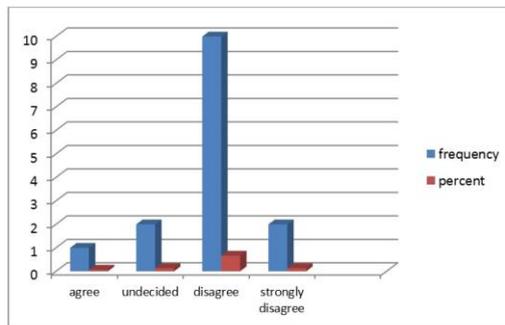
After breaking down the data collected from the lecturers' Responses, the study yielded the following:

Concerning to the first item which argues students' performance of using correct grammatical rules, the table (1) reveals that (6.7%) of the lecturers have agreed that the subjects are able to use grammar correctly while writing their essays, (13.3%) of the respondents did not decide on the claim. Whereas (66.7%) of the respondents did not think that students

are competent enough in using correct grammar in their essay writing and (13.3%) of the lecturers strongly disagreed. The mean of the respondent is 3.87. For further illustration see graph (1) below.

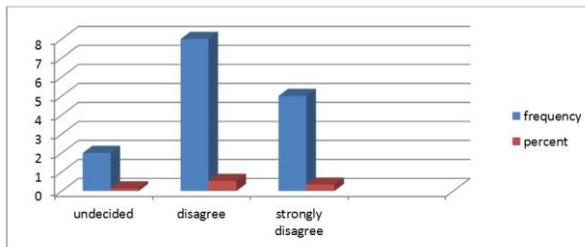
N0	item	Strongly agree	agree	undecided	disagree	Strongly disagree	mean
1	Students apply appropriate grammatical rules while writing their essays.	-	6.7%	13.3%	66.7%	13.3%	3.87
		-	1	2	10	2	
2	Students maintain good cohesion, coherence and a mode of developing paragraphs	-	-	13.3%	53.3%	33.3%	4.20
		5	9	-	1	-	
3	Students are capable of stating only one idea clearly in each paragraph.	6.7%	33.3%	33.3%	6.7%	20%	3.27
		1	5	5	1	3	
4	Students are able to state their thinking into pertinent forms and expressions.	-	-	6.7%	73.3	20%	4.13
		-	-	1	11	3	

Table (1) shows lecturers' responses to the four items



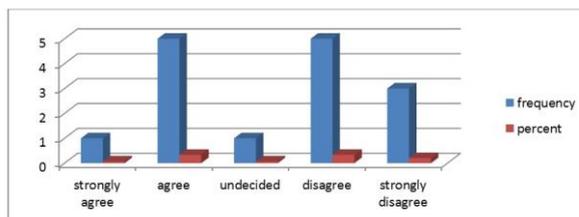
Graph (1) shows lecturers' opinions on students' ability of applying grammatical rules while writing their essays.

As for the second item, (13.3%) of the respondents did not decide whether students can write cohesively and coherently or not, (53.3%) of the respondents were not in favour with the idea that students are able to maintain cohesion, coherence and a mode of developing paragraph in their written texts. In addition, (33.3%) of the lecturers who strongly disagreed with the claim. The mean is 4.20. See graph (2)



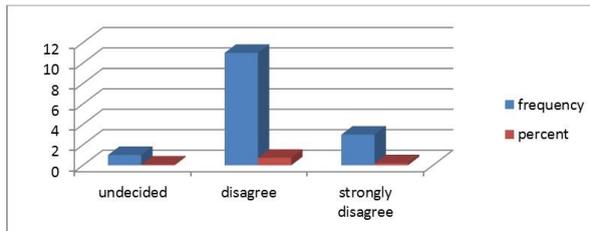
Graph (2) lecturers' opinions on students maintaining good cohesion, coherence and a mode of developing paragraphs

Responding to the third item, table (1) also shows that (6.7%) of the lecturers did not decide on students' ability of stating their ideas in inappropriate expressions, (73.3%) of the lecturers disagreed with idea that students are able to construct their thoughts into pertinent forms of arrangements, besides (20%) of the participants who strongly disagreed with the assumption, with the highest mean 4.13. See graph (3)



Graph (3) lecturers' opinions on students' incapability of stating only one idea clearly in each paragraph

Concerning the fourth item, the table shows that (6.7%) of the respondents strongly disagreed that students can maintain logical relationships between ideas clearly, (13.3%) of the lectures agreed with the claim, (13.3%) did not decide on the matter. On the other hand, (20%) of participants strongly disagreed with the statement.



Graph (4) lecturers' opinions on students' ability of stating their thinking into pertinent forms and expressions

DISCUSSION

No doubt that having knowledge of grammatical rules is significant for the mastery of language. One cannot use words if s/he does not have knowledge of how they can be put together to convey certain meaning. Not only this but also how and when each tense is used. Based on these facts, (66.7%) of the respondents do not think that students are competent enough in using correct grammar in their essay writing in addition to (13.3%) of the lecturers who strongly disagree that students can communicate effectively in using correct grammatical rules in their essay writing. This indicates that students completely lack mastery of the English language as whole not only grammatical rules. Students cannot construct one correct simple sentence in order to write good essays.

In essay writing, it is important to maintain cohesion and coherence in order to make the written easy for the readers. (53.3%) of the respondents think that students are unable to show relationships between the sentences and they

suffer from a loss of coherence in writing. Therefore, what students write as final production is merely unstructured and meaningless groups of irrelevant utterances.

Most effective written essays also make one main point; and all thoughts and ideas are built and unified around that point which is often explicitly stated. This technique of writing helps writer clarify and reinforce the main idea. It keeps the writers in the right path as they write, too. It tells the reader how the topic will be developed, as well. According to this, (73.3%) of the lecturers disagreed that students are able to state their main ideas clearly in their written essays.

Lastly, the ability to state thoughts into appropriate forms and expressions to produce written essays is essential. According to the lecturers responses (73.3%) of them state that students are unable to stating their ideas in inappropriate expressions and cannot make a last impression to give a sense of completeness. They cannot express their final thoughts successfully.

CONCLUSION

This paper investigates ESL students' performance in essay writing. It aims to assess students' written essays in terms of grammar, cohesion, coherence and cognitive processes and strategies in writing essays. The study uses a questionnaire for data collection. The findings show that students are unable to produce good written essays because they cannot use correct grammatical structures. Besides their written essays lack cohesion and coherence. The final production of their written essays is incomprehensive and meaningless.

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