

Investigating Problems of English for Academic Writing of Saudi Girls Students at *Shaqra* University

NADIA ELZAIN AHMED DAWINA
Shaqra University, KSA

Abstract:

This study was intended to explore the obstacles that undergraduates at Shaqra University encounter when start academic writing. The focus on academic writing processes is because of their importance in writing outcomes. The study will attempt to cover this issue thoroughly trying to find different types of writing and what writing processes should involve. To do this, there are two research questions of this study. The first question is linked with the identification of mistakes undergraduate girls commit in academic writing. The second dealt with the issue of the difficulties of writing students perceived in writing. The data was collected through distributing a couple of questionnaires for students and tutors as well as a writing task. The respondents to questionnaire and tests are 85 girls' students at Shaqra University. The findings of the study could be used to recommend effective teaching approaches to teach academic writing.

Key words: academic writing, committed mistakes, respondents, explore undergraduate

1. INTRODUCTION

Lindemann (2001) defines writing as "a process of communication that uses a conventional graphic system to

convey a message to a reader”(p.10). When people write, they use graphic symbols: that is, letters or combinations of letters which relate to the sounds people make when they speak. According to Byrne (1991), writing can be said to be, “the act of forming these symbols: making marks on a flat surface of some kind.” (P.1). The symbols have to be arranged, according to certain conventions, to form words, and words have to be arranged to form sentences (Byrne, 1991).

Writing is an intricate act of meaning making (Elbow, 1986). It is a complex process of problem solving involving memory, planning, text generation, and revision (Flower & Hayes, 1981). A unique language act, writing requires thinking methods different from those used for listening, reading, or speaking (Emig, 1983). As well as being the means through which testing and assessment of learning regularly take place, for the learner writing is an important skill in supporting other learning experiences, “ as a mean of recording assimilating and reformulating knowledge, and of developing and making through his or her own ideas. It may be a means of personal discovery, of creativity and self-expression.” (Johnson 1999.359). According to (Keith, J.& Helen, J. 1999) writing is viewed as, “ a problem-solving cognitive activity, involving strategies of goal-setting, idea generation, organization, drafting, revising and editing (p.346).

2. IS WRITING A DIFFICULT PROCESS?

Many professional writers believe that writing is a difficult activity for most people. According to (Yavuz&Genc, 1998), most students, low and high achievers alike, find writing difficult and view it as something they just have to persevere through in order to pass certain exams (cited in Al Asmari, 2013). Byrne (1991) attributes this to three factors:

1. Psychological factors: As we use speech as a normal medium of communication in most circumstances, we

normally have someone physically present from who we get feedback. Writing, on the other hand, is essentially a solitary activity and the fact that we are required to write in our own makes the act of writing difficult.

2. Linguistic factors: As oral communication is sustained through a process of interaction, the participants often help to keep it going. Because speech is normally spontaneous, people pay little attention to organizing their sentence structure or connecting their sentences. Through interaction, people can repeat, backtrack or expand depending on how other people react to what they say. Unlike speech, in writing, people have to compensate for absence of speech features. To keep the channel of communication open, people have to use their own efforts. They have to ensure that the text they produce can be interpreted on its own through the choice of sentence structure and by the way how sentences are linked together and sequenced.
3. Cognitive factor: People grow up learning to speak and in normal circumstances; people spend much of their time doing it. People appear to speak without much conscious effort or thought and generally they talk because they want to. People usually talk about matters which are of interest and relevant to their social affairs or professions. Writing, on the other hand, is learned through a process of instruction. In order to write, people have to master the written form of the language, and to learn certain structures which are less used in speech, but are important for effective communication in writing. Also, people have to organize their ideas in such a way that they can be understood by a reader who is not present. To many people, writing is a task which is often imposed on them. In many situations, people find it difficult: what to write. For many of us, being at a loss for ideas is a familiar experience especially when are

obliged to write. According to Hedge (2010), writing is a difficult task to large numbers of English-language students. He agrees with Byrne that a writer is unable to exploit all the devices available to speaker such as gesture, body movement, facial expression, tone of voice, stress, and hesitation. Hedge (2010), stated that:

Effective writing requires a number of things: a high degree of organization in the development of information, ideas or arguments; a high degree of accuracy; the use of complex grammatical devices for focus and emphasis; and a careful choice of vocabulary, grammar patterns, and sentence structure to create a style which is appropriate to the subject matter and the eventual readers. (p.7)

4. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Classroom observation and English teachers' reports, in addition to the undergraduate girls' students low achievement in English writing show that students face writing difficulties either to lack of awareness of writing mechanics or inappropriate use of them. The researcher, being a teacher of English for nearly ten years, thinks that this weakness is a crucial result of adopting traditional approaches that mainly focused on the product of writing which resulted in restricting students in what they can write, and encouraging them to use and memorize the same forms of writing regardless to content. White (1988), Jordan (1997), and Escholz(1980) argue that adopting the product approach encourage students not to produce texts but to focus on model, form and duplication.

Thus, this paper focuses on what goes on before students write. In other words, the study focuses on the writing processes that will enable students to make clear decisions about the direction of their writing by means of brainstorming, drafting and feedback.

More importantly, the study attempts to find better ways to train and encourage students to use good writing processes to ensure good writing products and bearing greater responsibility for making their own improvements.

To achieve this goal, the study attempts to analyze and evaluate the academic writing processes of second year students to find out what writing processes they use. In order to, enhance, on one hand good writing processes, and, suggest remedy for the ineffective ones on the other hand.

The choice of second year undergraduate students, as a target group, is opted for on purpose for different factors. First, second year students are considered to be good informants. Second, these students are approaching a new stage of education where they need approaches that enable them to write meaningful essays and reports by means of planning, drafting, reviewing and editing.

5. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

1. To investigate the type of mistakes committed by the undergraduates in academic writing
2. To find out whether they can respond effectively to the teaching of mechanics of writing and apply them to their writing efficiently.

6. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This paper seeks to provide English Language tutors with the best techniques for teaching academic writing. The result of this study might help teachers, educators; syllabus designers exploit the findings to be yielded. The researcher, being an old practitioner has managed to detect the types of errors students make in writing their essays or compositions.

Learning a language involves becoming proficient in the four skills of speaking, listening, and reading and writing.

Mistakes are an inevitable part of this process and neither the teacher nor the student should become fixated on them. It is useful for both, however, to have an understanding of the variety of typical errors in written English, since these are the most amenable to correction. Written errors can be categorized as errors of *mechanics*, *grammar* and *usage*.

7. MECHANICAL ERRORS

Mechanical errors are those of orthography (spelling and capitalization) and punctuation. Everyone who writes in English makes such mistakes, whether native speaker or ESL student. In many cases mechanical errors are the consequence of quick writing where the focus is on the content rather than the form. Although English spelling is difficult, it is possible with attentive use of a dictionary and/or computer spellchecker for every writer to eradicate all or almost all of the spelling mistakes in a piece of writing.

As far as punctuation is concerned, there are a very few occasions when a non-native speaker is more prone to make a mistake than a native speaker (for example, the German student who puts a comma before the subordinate clause in reported speech.) The most common punctuation mistakes, however, arise when the student does not correctly end a sentence (producing either a fragment or a run-on.) These are typical of immature writers who do not understand the concept of a sentence, and are neither more nor less likely to be found in an ESL student's work.

Although a number of errors have pinned down, only some of them are going to be considered in the present study. Some errors are due to poor understanding of the contrastive devices and their proper use, hence resulting in what is commonly known as sentence *fragments*. Atypical mistake is (I totally failed the exam. **Although** I worked hard enough the

previous night.) Another more agonizing type of error is sentence *srawl*

(The trip was planned for Tuesday, November 2, but not all the students could come, so it was rescheduled for the following Thursday, and then all the students could attend.) Incorrect. The correct version would then look like that (The trip, which had been planned for Tuesday, November 2, was rescheduled for the following Thursday so that all students could able to attend.)

Mechanical errors can hardly be said to worsen understanding, but can reflect negatively on the writer, particularly in formal/academic settings. Mainstream teachers can be sure that ESL teachers will have identified students who make a large number of mechanical errors and will be working with those students to rectify the problem. Mainstream teachers are probably best advised not to make a big issue of general mechanical errors but it is not unreasonable for them to insist on the correct spelling of the key subject-specific words that are currently being learned by the whole class - *environment, desertification, conference*, etc. These words will no doubt have been written on the board and will appear in class and homework worksheets.

8. GRAMMATICAL MISTAKES

Grammar mistakes are observed not occur in native speakers' writing but very commonly do in the work of less proficient ESL students, whose mother-tongue "interferes" with the production of correct English*. ESL students make numerous mistakes in the use of verbs (for example, incorrect tense choice, incorrect tense form), the articles (*a/an, the* - particularly Asian students in whose languages these words do not exist), and word order.

A typical interference mistake of an Arab student of English is: "*I am here since 2 weeks*" instead of "*I have been here for two weeks*". A further example is: "*I tell you tomorrow*"

instead of "I'll tell you tomorrow." Grammar mistakes in writing occasionally disrupt comprehension, but usually they do not. The student who writes "I goed to school yesterday ", for example, will have conveyed his meaning perfectly intelligibly. Since there is no clear evidence that ESL students benefit from correction of grammar mistakes, even in contexts where the explicit focus of the teaching is grammar, the mainstream teacher is advised not to make a big fuss about such mistakes in pieces of science or history homework, etc. Such mistakes will disappear as the learner's interlanguage (implicit grammar system) begins to approximate the intuitive grammatical knowledge of a native speaker.

On the other hand, there is no reason why it could not be made clear to ESL students who are writing an account of a historical event, for example, that they are expected to write verbs in the past simple tense, and mistakes in this aspect of their homework will be identified.

Table 1.Types of writing mistakes identified in this study:

No.	Type of Errors
1	Sentence fragments
2	Sentence sprawl
3	Misplaced and dangling modifiers
4	Faulty parallelism
5	Unclear pronoun reference
6	Incorrect pronoun case
7	Omitted comas
8	Superfluous commas
9	Comma splices
10	Apostrophe errors
11	Words easily confused
12	Misspellings

There is what is commonly known as usage mistakes. A usage mistake is a word or a string of words in a sentence that is grammatically possible , but not usual in Standard English. Hence native speakers rarely make usage mistakes, but ESL students very often do. Such mistakes frequently occur in ESL

students' work when they look up a word in their own language and select the wrong English equivalent for the meaning they wish to express. Conversely, failure to use the dictionary can result in the *false friends* usage mistake. For example, *cut* in colloquial Arabic means *cross*, so the following problem in an Arab student's writing is not surprising: "*It is important to cut the road at the zebra lines.*"

Faulty usage in larger passages of writing is often the consequence of the attempt to render word-for-word into English the mental or written *version* that the ESL student has in the native tongue. It is such mistakes in an ESL student's work that can make it difficult to understand what meaning is being conveyed.

Usage mistakes, like grammar mistakes, are not particularly susceptible to eradication by direct correction. And like grammar mistakes they will eventually disappear, particularly if the student reads extensively in English. However, the mainstream teacher is advised to alert an ESL student to usage mistakes in the way he or she conveys a meaning that is common or integral to the subject. For example: "*The dictator was thrown over (overthrown) in a people's revolt.*"

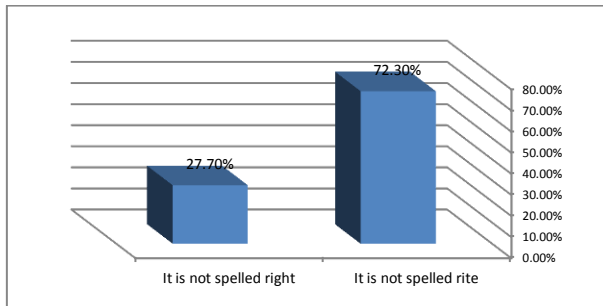
Table 2 Correct and incorrect versions

No.	Item	Incorrect Version	Correct Version
1.	Spelling mistakes	It is not spelled <i>rite</i>	It is not spelled <i>right</i>
2	Run-on sentences	My dog barks at the beggar <i>but</i> she is too lazy to chase him	My dog barks at the beggar, <i>but</i> she is too lazy to chase him
3	Sentence Fragments	The problem of inflation has reached an <i>epic</i>	The problem of inflation has reached an <i>epic point</i>
4	Comma after an introductory phrase	While a Thanksgiving commercial played on the <i>TV</i> she was at the library trying to study	While a Thanks giving commercial played on <i>TV</i> , she was at the library
5.	Wordiness	Mary <i>ended up having to walk all the way home</i> due to the fact that she missed the last train	Mary <i>walked home because</i> she missed the last train.

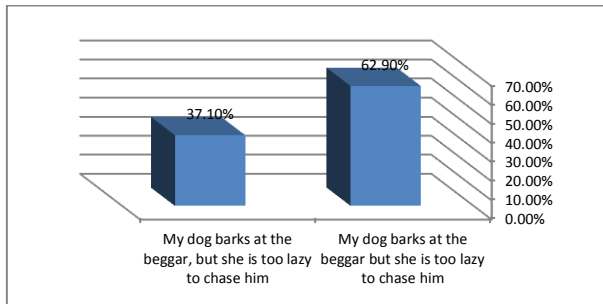
6.	Comma splicing	He bought back-to school clothes, his mother bought a scarf	He bought back-to school clothes <i>and</i> his mother bought a scarf.
7.	Comma misuse	My roommate, and his brother, went to see a movie.	My roommate and his brother went to see a movie
8.	Interrupters commas	I was unfortunately the end of winter vacation	It was, unfortunately, the end of winter vacation
9.	Squinting modifiers	Students who study <i>rarely</i> get bad grades	Students who <i>rarely</i> study get bad grades.
10	Subject verb agreement	Ahmed study at the library everyday	Ahmed studies at the library everyday

Table 2 Correct and incorrect versions

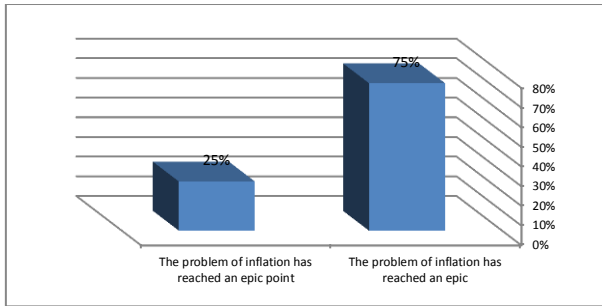
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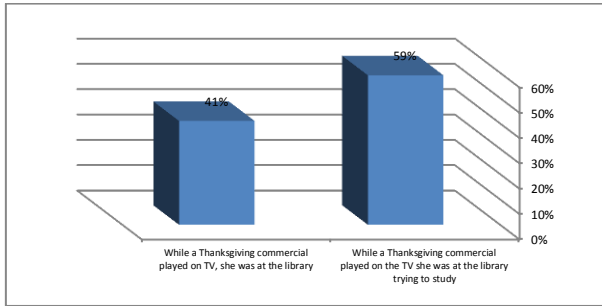
2. Run-on sentences



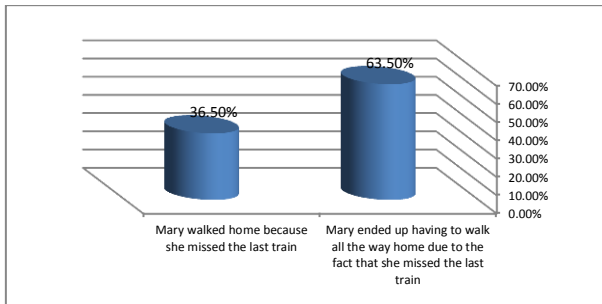
3. Sentence Fragments



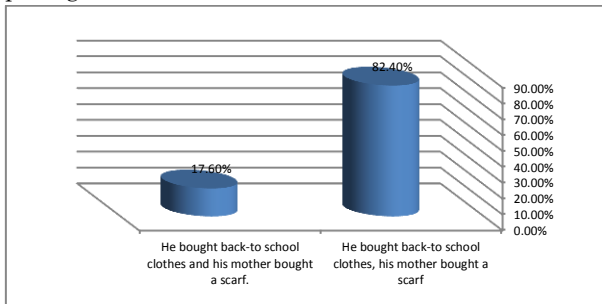
4. Comma after an introductory phrase



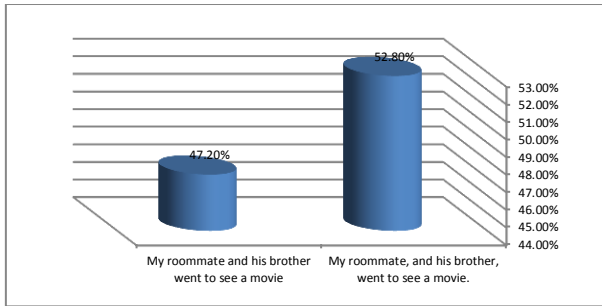
5. Wordiness



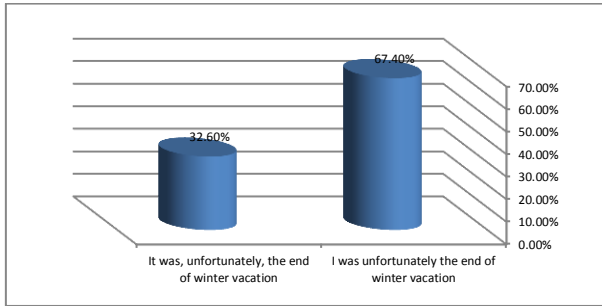
6. Comma splicing



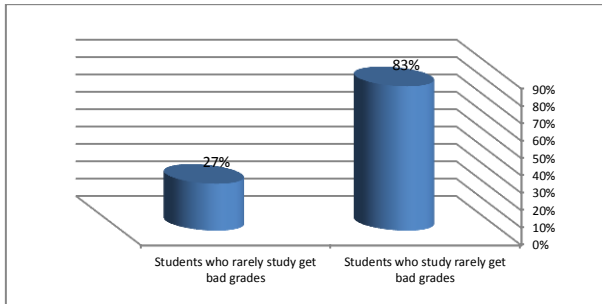
7. Comma misuse



8. Interrupters commas



9. Squinting modifiers



Subject verb agreement

