

The Linguistic And Content Knowledge Deficiencies Of EFL Learners' Freewriting. UKMO Master Students

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Abstract :

Among the major factors that could hinder EFL learners to acquire good freewriting writing are linguistic competence and the constant practice in writing innovatively (innovative writing). The study digs deep in what terms exactly and to what extent these reasons can be the major weaknesses in students' writing. The aim behind this research is to help learner develop their writing competence. A questionnaire administered for a purposeful sample of 20 students of Master classes (linguistics, translation and literature) at Kasdi Merbah University Ouargla who are randomly selected for this study, with a test of freewriting given to just 2 students of the same sample. The results of this descriptive study show that EFL learners, though they reach an advanced stage of learning, they are still struggling with improving their syntactic, lexical and content knowledge of their writing.

Keywords: EFL Learners, linguistic competence, freewriting, questionnaire, UKMO Learners

1. Introduction

Writing is a very important part in learning and teaching English language. It is a complex task which, therefore, calls all students and teachers at university to step up efforts and rise to challenge in order to master it. Once persuaded and involved in writing, EFL learners and teachers are targeting into improving and discarding most of their pitfalls and weaknesses, which may well stand against good academic writing. This latter takes great part of EFL syllabus and it tends to take more and more, and this due to multiple reasons. We write not only

for the purpose to communicate to each other, but writing helps students to learn. How? First, writing reinforces the grammatical structures, vocabulary, idioms, phrasal verbs and all parts of speech that s/he has been learning throughout the course or out. Second, writing exposes the learner to language, s/he discovers it, and s/he, thus, is able to go beyond just what he learnt to say. Third, writing joins the hand, eye and brain together, and this is an extraordinary and unique way towards learning.

A number of issues have been raised regarding academic writing at our universities. One of the striking issues is the fact that students are becoming more and more speakers than writers, they fluently speak English to the extent that they seem native speakers or pre-native, and, paradoxically, they really show very poor writing and inappropriate style of writing. Students are now spending much time in listening and speaking language in public and chatting with their mates through social media, a virtual world which has handicapped learners ability to formally write. This is one part of the issue. Yet, the heart of the academic writing crisis today lies on two main reasons. First of all, students now do not form enough their linguistic competence, either at the micro level or the macro one. It has been observed during the writing sessions at university that when students are given tasks to write any kind of paragraph or essay, they fail to appropriately develop the target topic. Second and this is a truth that students do not embrace language as a powerful instrument and an innate capacity for conveying their personal feeling and thought. Therefore, they are unable to take risks and go beyond to write innovatively.

This study comes as part of continuous studies investigating reasons that may face EFL learners while learning writing in English. It is a particular study in which it takes University Kasdi Merbah Ouargla students as a case study. It digs deep and disclose difficulties that students encounter when forming their language appropriately to write academic papers, and locates exactly where is the most and crucial problem.

Before we start the analysis part of this study, we try to sketch out some particular notions and theories which may be relevant with this topic. We shed light on the language structure, at the surface structure (micro level) and discourse or language use (macro level). And then we go over creative (innovative) writing, how it is processed, how can the learner takes a grip or master it, and do EFL students really master it.

2. Language structure (Micro level).

Writing can be defined as coherent arrangement of words, clauses and sentences, structured according to a system of rules called Grammar. Before writing, L2 learners start first to acquire the grammatical knowledge of language, its vocabulary, syntactic patterns and connectives that comprise the essential building blocks of a text. Writing is regarded as a product of the writer's command of grammatical and lexical knowledge, and it is a means to reinforce language patterns by well-formed sentences.

To teach writing in the classroom, teachers go on four-stage process. First they start by familiarization, where learners are taught grammar rules and vocabulary through studying texts. Second, learners are controlled to manipulate what they have learnt, fixed patterns and certain vocabulary. Third, learners are given texts models and are requested to imitate. Last, learners are free to write essays, letters, emails and so forth.

Students learn how they structure well their sentences so that they keep the text cohesive and coherent. The teacher purposefully gives them different exercises vary between filling the gaps, transforming or putting verbs in the correct form, providing the text with suitable connectives, completing sentences by the appropriate verbs or nouns and so forth. The aim is to give accuracy to the text and avoid errors. So accuracy and clear exposition are considered one of the main criteria of good writing. However, L2 learners may face a problem with using the formal patterns in different situations. So they learn accurate grammatical structure, but they encounter difficulties in producing appropriate written texts (Hyland, 2003: 5).

The writing process involves paying attention to both the surface form and the deep form (meaning). Control over the surface feature of the text is crucial, and students need to understand how words, sentences and larger discourses structures can shape and express the meanings they want to convey. Many teachers dwell in their grammar courses to provide students with the maximum of grammatical structures, and in the meantime, they ensure that students must understand what they mean. They teach not only to organize the structure of the paragraph or text, but they also work on the necessary grammar and syntax. For instance, to write a clear set of instructions on how to operate a calculator, the writer needs more than the appropriate vocabulary. He needs the simple form of verbs; an organizational plan based on chronology; sequence words like first,

then, finally, and perhaps even sentences structures like “When..., then...” So this approach links the purpose of a piece of writing with the forms that are needed to convey the message.

As a particular case study noticed at my University (Kasdi Merbah, Ouargla), students at all levels, undergraduate, graduate and even PhD, are still committing grammar mistakes in their writings, among these bad syntax, inappropriate use of tenses, incorrect use of prepositions, incorrect use of punctuation, confusing singular and plural, using unnecessary words, using informal phrases, not starting new sentences when appropriate, inappropriate use of definite article, inappropriate or incorrect use of capital letters, insufficient proof-reading. These gross mistakes could collapse their writing and make it loss. Figure 1.1 down shows the surface ingredients that should form the writing of a text.

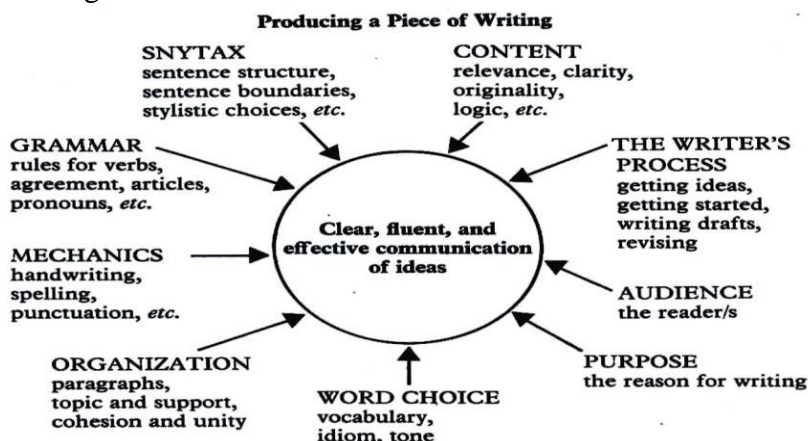


Fig.1. The relevant syntactic and content elements for producing a piece of paper

Source: (Raimes, 1983: 6)

3. Writing text as discourse (macro level).

We looked at writing at the surface structure and how important are grammar and the organization of the text to convey meaning. Another way of seeing text as material artefact looks beyond surface structures to see it as discourse. Discourse is defined as language use to communicate, to achieve goals in particular contexts and situations (Widdowson, 2007). To achieve these goals, there should be a link between them and language forms.

There are variety of ways writers organize language to produce coherent and purposeful text (discourse). An early contribution was the ‘functional sentence perspective’ of the Prague School which sought to describe how we structure text to represent our assumptions about what is known (*given*) or *new* to the reader. This was taken up and elaborated in the work of Halliday (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004) in the concept of *theme–rheme* structure. Theme is the topic of discussion and rheme is what he or she is saying about it. So theme and rheme help the writer to put clauses into information units and, hence, to make up a whole meaningful text.

Part of what makes writing coherent lies in the reader’s background knowledge and interpretive abilities rather than in the text. Readers’ knowledge imposes a coherent frame of the text. They interpret discourse by analogy with their earlier experiences which are organized in their heads as *scripts* or *schemata* (Schank and Abelson, 1977).

One of the indispensable roles of the teacher towards his students is to help them to acquire this schema, or knowledge of the topics and vocabulary they need to create an effective text. Schema development exercises usually include reading for ideas in parallel texts, reacting to photographs, and various brainstorming tasks to generate ideas for writing and organizing texts (p.15). Figure 1.2 down shows a spidergram or mind map on how to stimulate ideas and build relationship between them. This is so useful for personal account, and it enable the writer to come up with as many ideas as possible.

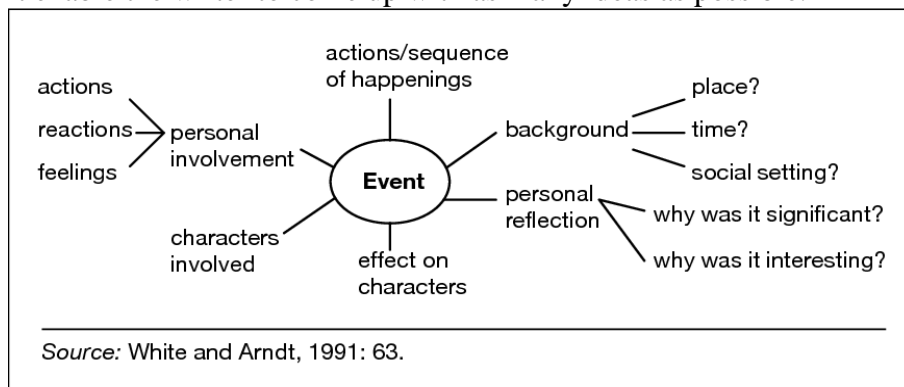


Figure 1.5: A spidergram for brainstorming a writing task.

Fig.2. A spidergram for brainstorming a writing task

Source: White and Arndt (1991) as cited in Hyland, 2003: 15

Another approach, which it seems more pragmatic, proposes that the writer creates texts which are as relevant to readers as possible, and that readers anticipate this when recovering meaning. This means that the writers are fully aware about what is going on, and he is corporative by thinking of the readers' needs. This approach originates with Grice's (1975) principles of conversational inference, which try to explain successful communication in terms of interactants' mutual assumptions of rationality and cooperation.

4. Creative (innovative) writing

As a teacher at university, I always encourage my student to write what they feel, see and hear. Students respond at the instant by producing writings that are fresh and spontaneous. Many teachers foster their students' abilities by writing creatively. So writing is a creative act of self-discovery (Friere, 1974). This can help generate self-awareness of the writer's social position and literate possibilities, as well as facilitate "clear thinking, effective relating, and satisfying self-expression" (Moffett, 1982: 235).

Creative writing is a big challenge to many EFL learners. After fostering their grammatical competence, students start to write creatively expressing their opinions, feelings and experiences. Teachers believe that students own a power to construct their ideas and opinions on a given topic. They simply guide and provide them with the space to make their own meanings within a positive and cooperative environment. It is necessary that teachers should give feedback to students, correct their content and formal errors.

The learner has an innate creative potential which enables him to write freely. Expressivism is an important approach used by teachers who write creatively. It encourages writers to explore their beliefs, engage with the ideas of others, and connect with readers (Hyland, p.9). Expressivism assumes that all writers have a similar innate creative potential, and can learn to express themselves through writing if their originality and spontaneity are allowed to flourish. Rohman (1965) quoted on good writing and said:

Good writing' is that discovered combination of words which allows a person the integrity to dominate his subject with a pattern both fresh and original. 'Bad writing', then, is an echo of someone else's combination which we have merely taken over for the occasion of our writing . . . 'Good writing' must be

the discovery by a responsible person of his uniqueness within his subject.

Rohman (1965: 107–8)

Yet, this approach, though its big influence on L1 classroom, was used cautiously in foreign language classrooms, and it proved its utility and success, despite the fact that others might experience difficulties, as it tends to neglect the cultural backgrounds of learners, the social consequences of writing, and the purposes of communication in the real world, where writing matters.

Creative writing is now seen as an independent academic discipline and taught in many universities. It is the student's self-expression. Its aspects appear in the students' poems, fictional writings, and outside activities such as publishing clubs, university literary magazines and newspapers, and writing contests. Unfortunately, these writing practices are seldom at our universities, and if they exist, they receive no care and die soon.

We should draw attention to the fact that teaching students to write freely fosters their ability to think and be creative in producing good texts. Freewriting is helpful at the initial stages of academic writing. Elbow & Belanof (2003) argue that freewriting is about trusting yourself and your words. Though it seems pretty difficult at the beginning, and some learners may say "I can't think of anything to write", but later on as they do it more and more often, they find it not frightening and they soon develop fluency and accuracy. The teacher should not each time stop and do correct grammatical mistakes. This is really frustrating and may hinder the student's thinking. Thus, we do not have to worry about grammar, but we do appraise students for their good ideas and being creative. We should not restrict the learners to rules, we let them write whatever they want, and this leads them to enjoy the writing process.

4. Literature Review

A number of studies have been conducted in second language (L2) writing process to determine the quality of students' writings and enhance their writing skills. Great deal of surveys was carried by different teachers in the classrooms in order to describe all aspects of L2 composing processes. Early L2 researchers are apparently trying to grasp whatever they can learn about the nature of L2 composing, especially concerning which behaviours seem to be successful or unsuccessful in producing effective L2 compositions. In an early L2

study done by Jones (1982) on rhetorical concerns and composing, he investigated the written products and written processes of two L2 writers, designating one “poor” and the other “good”, thus distinguishing between effectiveness and ineffectiveness in writing. The poor writer is Turkish speaker, a graduate-level student, and he demonstrated somewhat less L2 grammar proficiency. The good writer is German speaker, freshman level writer, and has better grammar proficiency. Jones analysed the composing strategies by noting two composing behaviour: writing or generating text and reading the text already generated. His finding indicated that the writing strategies affected writers’ rhetorical structures. According to Jones, the poor writer was bound to the text at the expense of ideas, whereas the good writer allowed her ideas to generate the text. Jones concluded that the poor writer had never learnt to compose, and this is the source of her difficulty in L2 writing.

Also, there are factors beyond the L2 writer’s linguistic competence that could impede the student’s composing process. Jones (1985) videotaped nine advanced L2 students while writing three different compositions. He gave them unlimited time, and the topics were drawn from Pianko’s L1 (1979) writing process study. Applying Krashen’s monitor theory to analyze the writing behaviours of the topics, Jones reported that “monitoring does not lead to improved writing”, and it was a factor constraining the L2 writing process. He speculated that monitor use might result from instructional methods. After diagnosing in general the main reasons of our students’ weakness of writing academically, and referring the general research question of this article to these two crucial and broad facts, this article practically examines in what terms exactly students are unable to write properly, and how come it is difficult for them to discard these linguistic barriers, and, once it is solved with the micro and macro level of language, how they can write innovatively. So this study explores two main research questions:

- What are the most deficiencies that hinder EFL learners to write academic papers?
- To what extent are EFL students capable of developing a good academic paper?

5. Research design.

For this purpose, the participants are a sample of different students derived from LMD level, master degree first year (translation, linguistics and literature), both female and male, and they

are targeted and asked a set of questions about academic writing. This questionnaire range between what is academic writing, what are the most challenges they face when they write formally and how they could overcome these difficulties. Through questionnaire method, 20 master students (first year) are going to answer these questions highlighting the main steps towards good writing. Additionally, a test of freewriting was given to just a sample of two students. They were asked to write short essays and they chose topics.

6. Data analysis

This study employs questionnaire as a method to collect data for analysis. The questionnaire is administered to master students first year of translation, literature and linguistics. The questionnaire is a set of questions about academic writing, what sort of difficulties they encounter while writing, how they assess their writing so far, what are the challenges they take to improve their writing, how can the teacher help students to write academically, what sort effect does the mother tongue has on the learner's writing, why cannot students nowadays write creatively and so forth. The data gathered from the questionnaire will be analyzed qualitatively because the questionnaire is a sort of questions which need critical thinking answers.

The results obtained from the questionnaire are:

6.1. Answers of the questionnaire

Question 1: What is academic writing? Do you give importance to it? Why?

For this question, most students define academic writing as a genre of writing, standardized way of writing, good language, formal style of writing found in educational settings and academic institutions and adhere to a set of rules and conventions. The students showed great awareness to the importance of academic writing because it is really important in their academic study and professional life. They need it to write articles and dissertations and other kinds of academic papers, and most importantly, for future academic researches, it is a conventional tool to grasp and a skill which is inevitable.

Question 2: What are the most difficulties you face when you write an academic paper? Please give more details.

Most of their difficulties are referred to both linguistic and content nature. They face difficulties in being not precise with its rules, and being not aware enough of the mechanics of academic style (brief and

to the point, objectivity and valid information). What is more, they still have issues with the following: Punctuation, transitional expressions, academic terms, appreciate structure, link the paragraphs, vocabulary, selection of words, cohesion and coherence, the difficulty in conducting thorough research, bringing thoughts together in a harmonious way and how should be expressed concisely and precisely using the appropriate vocabulary and the appropriate linguistic links. And finally, they encounter problems in finding and developing ideas and organize the content.

Question 3: Is grammar important in academic writing? How? Give details with examples.

They all agree that grammar is important because it is concerned with correct writing; it helps to avoid boredom and increase the richness of writing style. Grammatical structures (passive voice) are important in such writings as ESP. also, grammar increases clarity and accuracy of writing. Academic writing is all about communicating complex ideas and arguments clearly and precisely, and grammar plays a crucial role in achieving this goal. Moreover, Grammar helps make writing good and unique. Much interestingly, Proper grammar is necessary for credibility, readability, communication, and clarity. Grammar enables the learner to have the freedom of making stylistic choices. Sentences without correct grammar may have some vagueness in them, and if you do not have a full understanding of grammar, you might face a problem of conveying the intended meaning. For example, if you want to use a preposition to say an object is on something and is superior in position without touching, you can use "above" or "upon" which seem similar in meaning but slightly different because "upon" adds verticality to the position unlike "above" that can be placed somewhere else.

Question 4: To what do you pay attention most when writing academically: cohesion or coherence?

For this question, there is no such preference of giving priority to cohesion or coherence. Students believe that they both work interchangeably and are indispensable in academic writing. Coherence helps writing to flow in a logic and smooth way. Cohesion enables the reader to understand the idea and makes sense of it.

Question 6: Personally speaking, what do you suffer from most when writing appropriately?

In this particular question, every student tried to disclose his/her own deficiencies, for example, finding appropriate words and expressions to fit the context, correct tense, employing different types of sentences (simple, complex, compound), formal and informal sentences, correct spelling, finding accurate and relevant responses and knowledge which can considerably help sustain writing are all among the issues students face.

Question 7: Do you think “creativity” and “innovation” are important in academic writing?

Students consider that both creativity and innovation are the beating heart of creative writing. They help one to be original, consistent and being good future researcher. They also bring fresh perspectives to the topic being discussed. Creativity helps reduce prejudice in writing and broaden writing perspective. However, some contend they are not to some extent important because academic writing is rigid and follows certain rules.

Question 8: What other factors can really help you in writing academic papers?

Among the factors that lead to good academic writing are reading books, articles and dissertations. What is more, students make reference to their lecturers at university as sources of academia, mainly those who teach research methodology, ESP, oral expression, linguistics and translation. Critical thinking also can immensely add a nice touch to writing. More importantly, being clear and concise in writing, giving importance to details, knowing the audience and purpose of writing and, having strong research skills can all help in academic writing.

Question 9: Do you exercise academic writing or is it part of your learning English?

Yes, it is part of their learning English course. It is being exercised all times through writing academic papers. Yet, due to some reasons, some students cannot sustain it.

Question 10: Do teachers at university contribute and help you in improving your academic writing?

The answer for this question has divided students. Some confess the role of their teachers in developing their academic writing, and some deny it.

Question 11: Do you think native speakers, English book and other sources of English can help you in improving your writing? How?

They strongly agree that native speakers' academic writing and English books help so much in improving academic style. Memorizing or imitating their writings can have much influence on the EFL learner style, for instance, the right use of tenses, punctuation and some useful expressions.

Question 12: How do evaluate your writing in English so far?

They all show positive evaluation, but they are still struggling for better writing.

6.2. Freewriting topics assessment

students	Language surface form test	Writing text as discourse test	Creative writing test
Student 1	<p>-Problem with using tenses, especially past simple and past perfect</p> <p>-Punctuation problem (comma)</p> <p>-Problem with connectives(poor use)</p>	<p>-Problem with connectedness of ideas (cohesion)</p> <p>-informality</p> <p>-poor involvement of feelings, reactions towards the event sequence</p>	<p>-lack of feelings engagement</p> <p>-she could express more, but she could not sustain writing creatively out of vocabulary lack</p>

		happenings	
Student 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Good use of different tenses -Good use of punctuation -She uses different connectives with right use. -She varies and use advanced vocabulary. -Short and simple sentences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Coherent and concise writing -Effective writing -Formal language -Good sequence of event happenings -All ideas are well connected -Good structuring -she has an experience and analogy in organizing her writing well (schemata) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Huge engagement of her feelings and reactions. -she enjoys writing and has great potential in generating her ideas. - innate capacity of writing

Table1. Students' syntactic and content writing issue

The table above shows the pitfalls and the essentially main areas students are good and bad at. The test almost covers all the linguistic, discourse and knowledge issues. Therefore, the linguistic and content issues vary between the four students, and this is according to everyone's writing competence level.

7. Discussion and analysis of results

This research article has attended to many issues that can hinder and develop the learner of English competence of writing well. A

questionnaire was administered and given to some 20 master students at the University of Ouargla. Different questions were asked about the challenges that can hinder them to write formally and appropriately, and how possibly these deficiencies can be amended. Their answers varied according to everyone's weaknesses and deficiencies. Some said that lack of vocabulary could stop them of sustaining a good writing. Others said that their broken grammar and lack of knowledge of the topic could also hinder them to write a good academic paper. Also, a test was administered to 4 students. The results showed that their writings are lacking the most essential basic knowledge such as grammatical structure, vocabulary, coherent and cohesive ideal. Practically speaking, the list below contains the most ever issues that face learners of English write good academic papers:

- use of punctuation
- Coherent and concise writing
- Spelling mistakes
- Selection of appropriate words and expression
- lack of vocabulary
- broken grammar
- The interference of mother tongue
- Problem with using tenses
- Informality
- Lack of practice of academic writing
- Lack of engagement in the topic
- Coherence and cohesion

7. Conclusion

Writing is a process that needs the learner of English to be careful, well-formed and pregnant with knowledge. Though it is taught at universities and considered one of the major modules in the syllabus, teachers still feel that this field has not been given more efforts and update. Now, we really encounter difficulties to enable our students to write academically and appropriately. According to the results obtained, this research can enlighten teachers and learners of English and give them knowledge on how to amend and reinforce their writing weaknesses. The invasion of the social media and the youtube videos has all shifted the attention of the learner to the spoken side of the language, and they have immensely weakened the writing

style. This fact has engaged researchers and academics to think twice to find effective ways to draw the learner's attention to care about writing. We now know most of the challenges ahead of the learner of English, all have been listed in the analysis and the findings; what we really need is to help our students engage with their feelings process.

Overall, this research has answered the research questions put forward, and research in this area of writing is still open to further research. The powerful point in this research which is concerning EFL learners ability to write appropriately can be laid for more future issue.

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