

***EFL First Year Students' Writing Problems
and Proposed Remedial Strategies
The Case of 1st Year University Students at the English
Department University of Biskra***

Tayeb Bouhitem
University of Biskra

Abstract:

It's a pity, it is terrible, I hope I could only find one single grammatically correct sentence in their writing; they know nothing, who is to blame?: Or who is the responsible for this? How to overcome this; I do not know. This is what teachers at Mohamed Kheider University (MKU) English Department talk about in their departmental meetings. The participants were 80 first year students at the Department of English university of Biskra and concerns 2 classes of 40 students each. The present study seeks to explore EFL learners' major writing problems and to try to find out the main causes that hinder the development of students' writing competence. The results of the study indicate that learners' failure in writing is mostly caused by linguistic (students poor linguistic competence) and psycho-pedagogical problems (inappropriate teaching methodology) and this leads to psychological problem (learners' demotivation) or students' lack of interest. The remedial strategies were suggested so that teachers can apply or adopt them to enhance students' writing proficiency at tertiary level in Algeria.

Key Words: error analysis, writing problems, remedial strategies.

المخلص:

من المؤسف إنها لكارثة، أتمنى أن أجد و لو جملة صحيحة في تعبيرهم الكتابي ولكن من هو المسئول على ذلك؟ و ما هو الحل؟ هذا ما يطرحه أساتذة قسم الانجليزية في اجتماعاتهم البيداغوجية من أسئلة. أجري هذا البحث على 80 طالبا مقسمين إلى فوجين من قسم الانجليزية -جامعة محمد خيضر - بسكرة. حيث يتطرق البحث إلى المشاكل و العوائق التي يواجهها الطلبة أثناء التعبير الكتابي باللغة الإنجليزية. إن نتائج البحث تؤكد أن إخفاق الطلبة في التعبير الكتابي أسبابه الرئيسية راجعة إلى أولا: الجانب اللغوي) ضعف الكفاءة اللغوية لدى الطلبة (. ثانيا: الجانب البيداغوجي) عدم نجاعة طرق تدريس التعبير الكتابي. (و هذا ما يؤدي إلى لامبالاة الطلبة و نزوحهم عن الكتابة. حيث يسلب الضوء على الأسباب الحقيقية الكامنة وراء هذا الإخفاق و اقتراح بعض الاستراتيجيات الناجعة في تدريس التعبير الكتابي لدى طلبة الجامعة و تحسين كفاءتهم الكتابية.

Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language (T.F.L) writing is a headache for many teachers despite teacher's hard work many student's written English remains no idiomatic, poorly organized insufficiently developed, grammatically awkward, devoid of sentence structure variety and weak in vocabulary usage. Teachers taught writing skill using different ways. Every one of these teachers thought, even for a moment, that he/she had chosen the best method and the appropriate strategies for his/her learners. It is evident that in teaching language, teachers should provide his/her learners with the necessary techniques and motivation which would help them to perform an acceptable written communication.

What we have noticed is that learners have not been armed yet with the abilities that could facilitate a written production; then poor quality of the student's achievement in writing .At this level; a lot of questions are raised, answering them goes with the purpose of the present work.

- 1) What impedes our learners to write well in home situations and in official exams?**
- 2) What are the possible causes of our learners' poor writing?**
- 3) What can be proposed as solutions or remedies to overcome these problems?**

Aim of the study

We believe that there is not a tailor made panacea to be found. However, we can not sit back, relax and wait for top-bottom movers. It is high time class-room teachers to launch initiatives that may raise their awareness of their problem, we are the ones who plan the lessons, carry out activities, face problems, and look for answers to these questions will be of assistance not only to learners, who will learn how to cope more with the language they are learning, but also to teachers will certainly call for their potentialities and try to better their teaching and learning environment aiming at developing the skill of writing therefore, analyzing the different reasons and causes to these poor results obtained by our learners, appears as our major concern and interest in that it is worth examining and deserves a thorough investigation. Teachers always report that the candidates (learners) have serious drawbacks as far as their writing is concerned. Evaluation of the written assignments set to the students usually

reveals that they do not master the basic rules of writing for this reason, the present research purports to suggest a reconsideration and a reflective approach of the actual situation where students knowledge of writing remains insufficient. Teachers often find themselves correcting form rather than contents during examinations.

The purpose of this research is to look at writer and writing in the English language classroom and to offer suggestions for helping the colleague teachers to take a reflective stand on their used methods and techniques with the intention of getting them change what is non functional and reflect on some other new strategies that comply with their learners needs and home situations. Teaching learners how to write not what to write. Learners say that we know what we want but we don't know how to get what we want. This study attempts to help fill this gap in the teaching-learning to write. Enhancing learners acquiring the range of writing proficiencies needed for producing understandable and effective paragraphs is our ultimate goal. EFL students need to develop proficiency in writing skills in order to respond successfully to university writing assignments. They are required to have a good command of linguistic system of English and to master the sentence and paragraph structures to be able to produce different types of writings either as homework or class assignments. These students are required to write when doing exercises, research papers, reports, etc and when answering the examinations they are going to take in the various modules of their curriculum. Above all, these learners need to be able to criticize, synthesize, analyze accurately and coherently a situation and finally undertake a research.

In brief, these learners are formed to be either future teachers who must master all the four English language skills, and thus, will be competent writers who have a great knowledge of the writing conventions of the English language and will be able or ready to transmit them to their learners; or future researchers who need to present their findings in a written form coherently and convincingly. There is an Algerian proverb says "Someone who lacks some thing, he/she can not give it" In other words, who has nothing he/she can't give anything.

Review of literature

To have a clear idea about the first year university students' writing proficiency level, Ouarghi (2002) carried out a research work in the English Department(Telemcen University) and analysed short

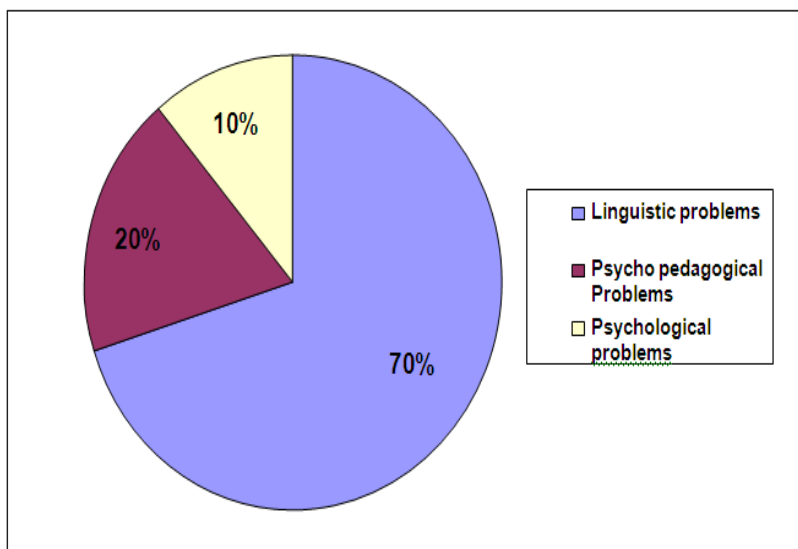
texts written by new university during their first two weeks at the university. He distinguished two proficiency levels: low-intermediate (nearly 80% of the new students) and high –intermediate (around 20% of the new students) describing each category as follows:

High- intermediate(developing) level	Low-intermediate (basic)level
<p><u>Abilities</u> :</p> <p>-accurate grasp and use of writing texts, division of texts</p> <p>Mechanics(fair accuracy in punctuation convey ideas with clear Spelling and capitalization)</p> <p>-correct construction of different sentence patterns; ability to write a syntactic structure meaningful text and to convey clear idea of writing mechanics despite the problem of inadequate writing micro-skills vocabulary strategies.</p> <p>-Good knowledge of cohesive ties and Discourse-organizing connectors</p> <p>-ability to expand short paragraphs into a whole text</p> <p><u>lacks</u></p>	<p><u>Abilities:</u></p> <p>* production of short into two paragraphs, difficulty.</p> <p><u>*lacks:</u></p> <p>* lack of control of basic .inadequate knowledge</p> <p>*Unawareness of useful and composing</p>

-lack of contextual knowledge
(unawareness of readership)
-insufficient composing strategies
{drafting and revising)
-a tendency to be prolific(free writing)
Without monitoring one's performance

**Table 1: Description of students' proficiency levels
(Ourghi 2002:24)**

**Sources of Learners' Writing problems can be represented
through the Following pie chart:**



I presented this chart on the basis of some important responses. Some of the items in the learners' questionnaire were meant to obtain information about the striking factors/ motives that are responsible for learners' failure in accomplishing a writing task.

What problems / difficulties face you when teaching the skill write? Through this question, we wanted to know if there are other problems in write besides the known ones. Indeed, we received a huge number of answers where teachers provided us with some problems and were classified in terms of priority in the below table as mentioned by the respondents:

- A) Inadequate mastery of grammar by students
- B) The students’ limited vocabulary register
- C) Deficient teaching methods
- D) The students’ lack of motivation
- E) L1 Interference (NT)
- F) Others specify please....

Table (2)

Identification and Classification of learners' Writing problems

	NT	%
A	2	20%
B	1	10%
A+E	6	60%
C	1	10%

Teachers' beliefs on the sources of the students writing problems

What linguistic problems do you face when writing an essay?

- A) Grammar, B) Ideas and organization, C) vocabulary, D) mechanics, E) L1Interference(NT)

Table (3)

Identification and Classification of Learners' Linguistic Writing Problems

	NS	%
A	18	30,00%
B	5	8,33%
C	12	20,00%
D	5	8,33%
E	20	33,33%

Suggestions and Recommendations

First year students are, according to this study facing three kinds of problems in essay writing linguistic, psycho pedagogical and psychological problems.

What should we, teachers do then?

Remedial Strategies

From our analysis and interpretations to the different First year students essay writings, we have to come to the following results: First year students have major writing difficulties in constructing complete sentences, using verb tense and in choosing appropriate words accurately. Causes of errors are mainly attributable to poor grammar knowledge; interference (negative transfer from L1) limited vocabulary size, construction of ideas and organization.

1) Instruction of Explicit Grammar Lessons

Good writing is certainly beyond grammar manipulation. Yet, it will be very difficult to compose clear, logical and fluent paragraphs if a writer is incapable to write reasonably acceptable simple, short sentences and doesn't possess the mastery of some complex sentence structures. Results of the present study indicate an urgent need in upgrading students' basic linguistic competence. Explicit teaching lessons on salient grammar points like types of sentences, sentence structures parts of speech structures Syntax, word order and verb forms of some commonly used tenses are highly recommended in the first semester. Grammar teachers and written expression teachers should need to get together in order to solve students' writing

problems. Grammar errors and essay writing rules and conventions (thesis statement, introduction, transition words etc...)

2) Vocabulary Learning

Students' failure of appropriate writing to the majority of students is attributed to the lack in finding appropriate words to express their ideas. Reading is the best solution to the problem of writing. Integrating reading as a base to writing, learners, according to what we have synthesized through their writings are poor in vocabulary, consequently lots of extensive reading is to be recommended. In this respect learners need extra texts where they are exposed to authentic material of diverse topics. It is essential for students to acquire the most frequently used words. It is common that students of level of the university have not reached the vocabulary size of 2000 words level.

Class-reading of theme –based units will give students a better chance of learning the recurring vocabulary. Vocabulary learning strategies like word association, analysis of parts of speech, affixes and suffixes, collocation activities, guess from textual content can be applied whenever appropriate to facilitate their learning process. It is evident that class teaching of grammar and vocabulary is necessary but insufficient to bridge the gape due to the limited class time. Free voluntary reading should be emphasized as a part of developing writing ability. There is a strong link and reading at the service of writing. Krashen has investigated this issue and came with the remark that 'Reading is good for language acquisition; it promotes better spelling, better writing skills, higher reading comprehension, and a more advanced vocabulary'.

3) Selective Error Corrections and Class Conference

The efficacy of error or grammar correction in second language writing has been a controversial issue. Truscott (1996) claimed that grammar correction should be abandoned because it is ineffective and harmful, On the other hand a number of researchers have provided empirical evidence on positive effects of error feedback. Regarding students' preferences, 70% university students preferred their teachers to show where the error was and to give a clue as how to correct the error, or directly providing the correct form. Ferris (2004) also concluded that error treatment error feedback by teachers is a necessary component of L2 writing instruction. However, error feedback for several large classes would be a very exhausting and time consuming task The heavy load of correcting 200 or 300 copies of writing each time may some how inhibit teachers' motive of assigning more creative writing activities. Therefore, selective error correction and class conferences are more practical and effective. Teachers should not correct every wrong grammar structure, but they can choose some sample sentences for the class and revise in groups. After group reporting, the teacher then makes further feedback and explanation to clarify confusing concepts.

4) More Writing Training and Practice

Writing is a acquired only through practice, it is like sport ,an activity that could be improved through practice(Andrews,1999),and through “the exposure to written texts in a natural process of communication rather than grammatical and rhetorical rules on writing”(Leki,1992:17).Therefore, our EFL learners do not need more work with language but rather with writing.

Basing our findings on what learners have claimed through the questionnaires and what we have collected as evidence from the observation phases, we may assert that learner's poor achievement in writing is attributed to the lack of sufficient training and practice. Writing is mainly regulated to a homework activity. It is perhaps not surprising that writing often tends to be an out of class activity: many teachers feel that class time, often scarce, is best devoted to oral work and homework is writing which can then be done at the students own pace. To be honest, the majority of learners do not practise essay writing either in the class or at home through the whole academic year. What learners just do is to copy down identical compositions from the best learners or they rely on their relatives to write their homework. Learners said they believe that teacher should give them more practice of writing in the class. Knowing the techniques of writing and being informed on the rules of grammar are not enough, what is needed is to put this knowledge in to practice under the close supervision of the teacher. In order to improve students' written performance, but they should urge them to try finding the problems of their students in order to remedy them as quickly as possible.

To learn through writing, it would be very useful to increase the number of assignments for the sake of which the students would have to do a lot of research during their free time. Therefore, most EFL writing will meet the institution requirements ie: reports, articles, summaries, outlines, abstract research papers and essays. In their writings students will be required to use different modes of discourse such as narration, description, exposition, and argumentation. Consequently, it is very

important that students be taught how to produce these types of writing as pointed by Reid (2001:135). The ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill; it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional settings or other environments. Writing instruction, writing practice and teacher's feedback that students' writing can be improved (S.Krashen, 1984). Writing skills must be practiced and learned through experience. Indeed, academic writing requires conscious effort and practice in composing, developing, and analyzing ideas. Compared to students writing in their native language (L1), however, students writing in their L2 have to also acquire proficiency in the use of the language as well as writing strategies, techniques and skills. It should be remarked that the benefits of effective use of writing strategies has been highlighted many times as conducive to writing competence (Jones 1982, Graham 1997, Kasper 1997). They noted that students showed little use of strategies when writing an essay in English. Many students didn't use those successful writing strategies such as brainstorming, key words, planning and revision. Moreover, a careful study of five met cognitive strategies. (Hamzaoui-El Achachi, 2006)

Monaghan (2007: 4) notes that teaching writing would include writing strategies, defined as methods of imparting necessary knowledge of the conventions of written discourse and the basis of grammar, syntax through various pedagogical methods. Ultimately, teaching writing means guiding students toward achieving the highest ability in communicating in words.

Learning to write by writing is the best way to encourage learners to become practiced writers is to have them often and experience first

the phases of the writing process by preparing for composing, revising etc... The gains of the process approach to writing can only be realized if students have an understanding of the various phases. Learners can use a revision process by asking specific questions for instance, have I checked my spelling? Proofreading is the process of checking a draft to make sure that the one of the writing conventions among them spelling is correct and appropriate

5) Awareness of L1 Interference

"To use two languages familiarly and without contaminating one by the other is very difficult," said Samuel Johnson in 1976.

As we have mentioned before, Negative L1 transfer/Mother tongue Interference is another major cause of errors in the English writings of 1st year students. The use of English is usually limited to the class room and outside the class room students generally use dialects, Arabic or French. When they come to write, they usually have ideas in Arabic. When they try to translate, unsuccessful translation usually results in writing errors. Switching interactively between first and second language has been recognized as one of the important characteristics of L2 writing. Wood (2002) suggested that language switching may be driven by the mental operations of private speech for solving L2 problems with L1 resources and the results of this study suggested that less proficient L2 learners to their L1 more frequently than more advanced learners. According to Wang's finding (2003), the low proficient participants often concentrated on direct translation from their L1 into L2 to perform their L2 writing to compensate for their L2 linguistics deficiencies. Teachers can help students become

aware of interlingual errors by highlighting the structural and lexical of English.

It would very useful to increase the number of assignments for the sake of which the students would have to do a lot of research during their free time, hence they would be reading a lot of English material and thinking in English, especially if they have to make oral presentations. In addition, teachers can implement team work in class and get students to work in groups .On their projects, they would have to practice together for their oral presentations, and speak English with each other instead of Arabic. Besides, they would, hopefully, correct each other's mistakes. In short, teachers need to incite their students to speak English at home and with their classmates in order to reduce the number of mistakes due to Negative L1 transfer, but we also need to try to teach more effectively the rules and conventions of writing. Teachers can give a few error analysis exercises that would help students be more accurate.

6) Writing Motivation:

“We cannot really teach language, we can only create conditions in which it will develop spontaneously in the mind in its own way”

Von Humboldt (Corder, 1967).

Writing motivation is the responsibility of the teacher who has to find the most appropriate ways to motivate his/her students and get rid of the writing problems. He or she can do so by varying the strategies and topics to meet the students' needs and interests. To boost students' motivation in English writing, the writing activities must be authentic, enjoyable and practical

Many students feel a sense of fear and experience failure when asked to write because they are not given the opportunity to learn and

practice the art of pre writing process, Purpose is to provide a variety of pre-writing activities which will encourage students to manipulate, explore, discover and fall in love with words.

Teachers should prompts for their learners some students are able to write without prompting but others require ideas from the teacher. This is usually remarked with low achievers and weak learners. Teachers should provide them with the necessary raw marital to start writing. A good initiative for teachers is to brainstorm their learners, simplify things and provide them with cues and clues to facilitate the writing task. Use pictures, maps ask questions, getting students to guess elicit from learners the most important ideas to get them started writing in a task often imposed on learners, this may cause a problem in terms of content – what to say – being at loss of ideas, learners simply cannot write. Writing is an introspective and often individual activity but collaboration enhances and motivates learning and writing in groups especially in the creative discovery phase helps to enhance deepen and broaden the conceptual schemata of each student. Peer response is also an effective method of providing an audience for student writing.

Students feeling of self confidence, or its lack, greatly influence their ability to manipulate multiple components simultaneously and successfully. The task of writing places many demands on a learner's working memory system: one must constantly switch attention between multiple goals and subtasks. Mel Levine in his book for teenagers describes writing as “the awesome juggling act”. Under a picture of a boy juggling eight balls, each containing a necessary

component for writing, he states, "to juggle, he has to keep all of these balls in the air at the same time. To write well, you have to keep all of the parts of writing in your memory while you are writing". Efficient writers need good working memory, patience, persistence and flexibility. Never the less, this does not hinder researchers from going to the different classrooms and discuss with teachers about what impedes learners from writing well at home situations and in official exams.

The process approach is applicable to low proficient students provided that thoughtful stimulus and guidance are available. As Zamel (1982, 207) concluded, "If, however, students learn that writing is a process though which they can explore and discover their thoughts and ideas, then product is likely to improve as well".

Writing program should incorporate elements of process and product approaches. The process approach has not been implemented by most teachers yet during writing lessons, the reason why traditional writing instruction remains dominant is the teachers' attitude. Teachers who were taught and trained in the product writing practices naturally conduct writing lessons according to the way the learnt writing. Their pedagogical belief strongly influences their teaching practices. Writing in the Algerian classrooms is still structural and teacher-centered although the process instruction was introduced in the late of 1980s. Min (2007:42) in her study writes down 'process writing is learning how to write by writing'

Conclusion

This study described and diagnosed linguistic, psycho pedagogical and psychological problems as the main causes of common errors committed by EFL 1st year students at the department of English, university of Biskra, Algeria and some remedial strategies were proposed to overcome students' general weaknesses in poor grammar knowledge, L1 Interference (NT), Limited vocabulary size and organizing ideas, which are the major causes of their writing errors. In other words to get rid of the first problem which is students' poor linguistic competence by introducing explicit grammar lessons, Selective error correction and class conference and Awareness of L1 Interference are strategies to help students write accurate complete English sentences. Students will make fewer errors in incorrect verb form, verb tense and missing subject. If they grasp the basic grammatical points essential to English writing and know the general convention of writing.

Growth of vocabulary size and vocabulary knowledge is anticipated with extensive reading and voluntary reading scheme. These two strategies aim to reduce students' errors in choosing incorrect words.

The other causes which are: ineffective teaching methods and students' lack of interest by integrating the process of writing, using writing strategies more writing practice, more group work and more collaborative work among learners. Learners need to know or to be aware of the entire process of writing they go through when they produce a piece of writing. They are required to accustom themselves to the proofreading strategy to get rid of spelling problem .Reviewing the methodology used by the majority of teachers. Teachers are not conscious of the theoretical aspects of methodology. Concepts of language acquisition and according to teachers they still focus on product not on process. They misunderstand the writing process, although, writing is a process, but there is an end result which we call the "product". So the teaching of writing should incorporate various theories and methodology rather being confined to just one

These are some of the strategies that have brought some positive results and have changed the traditional way of teaching /learning the writing skill .Surely, they are the only ones or the best ones to solve teaching /learning problems. They are remedial strategies that I have personally found worth trying and motivating.

Finally, Teachers need to understand the writing problems so that they can choose appropriate strategies and techniques to bypass difficulties or develop abilities in weaker areas. What I have mentioned before. These are some strategies and techniques are of value and deserve and to be considered.

I make it clear to my colleagues (teachers) and to students that I continually want to learn and improve, so they can feel comfortable with the fact that improvement as a writer never ends. This belief, a derivative of Socrates "As for me, all I know is that I know nothing" reminds me that students learn best when a teacher/ coach/ facilitator empowers them to discover their own of doing things specifically their own process of writing and communication. Since I believe in that for my self, I can honestly pass that value on to my colleagues and to my students, which is an awesome responsibility in the development of students as effective communicators and critical thinkers. Criticizing our learners 'compositions should be avoided while praise them is essential. Such praise will create trust through which we as EFL teachers will learn more from our learners who have a lot to say and write. is through trust that our students will write and write and write and it is writing that makes them feel brave ,enhances self-esteem and confidence, increases positive feelings and makes them think of themselves as writers.

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