



The impact of covid-19 pandemic on students' written performance: the case of third year economics students at mascara University

L'impact de la pandémie covid-19 sur la performance écrite des étudiants. Le cas des étudiants en troisième année d'économie à l'université de mascara

Hadjira AMAIRI¹

Mustapha Stambouli University- Mascara | Algeria
hadjira.amairi@univ-mascara.dz
Laboratory: LTALA- Tlemcen University

Mohamed GRAZIB

Dr Moulay Tahar University- Saida | Algeria
mfgrazib@hotmail.com

Abstract: *The precautionary decisions imposed by the Algerian government after the declaration of covid-19 pandemic led to a state of instability in all domains. This paper investigates the relationship between third year Economics students' writing deficiencies and the late Covid-19 circumstances at Mascara University. Three research tools were employed: text analysis, students' questionnaire and teacher's interview. Data analysis indicated that the pandemic caused a serious disruption on students' written performance. This finding was reflected in the huge number of errors committed due to the challenges that hindered English language writing courses. As a remedy, the researcher suggests devoting more teaching hours to the English language and providing training sessions to ESP teachers to be prepared for future outbreaks.*

Keywords: *Covid-19, deficiencies, errors, writing, written performance*

Résumé : *Les décisions de précaution imposées par les gouvernements après la déclaration de la pandémie de Covid-19 ont causé un état d'instabilité dans tous les domaines. Cet article explore la relation entre les déficiences en écriture des étudiants de troisième année d'économie et les circonstances de Covid-19 à l'Université de Mascara. Trois outils de recherche ont été utilisés : l'analyse de texte, un questionnaire et un entretien. L'analyse des données a indiqué que la pandémie a créé une grave perturbation des performances écrites des étudiants. Cette constatation s'est reflétée dans le grand nombre d'erreurs commises en raison des défis qui ont entravé les cours d'écriture en anglais. Comme remède, le chercheur suggère de consacrer plus d'heures d'enseignement à la langue anglaise et d'offrir des sessions de formation aux enseignants.*

Mots-clés : *Covid-19, déficiences, écriture, erreur, performance écrite*



¹ Corresponding author: HADJIRA AMAIRI | hadjira.amairi@univ-mascara.dz

Writing is one of the most important communicative skills needed in different discourse communities and fields. Effective written communication is highly demanded in nowadays business world where face to face transactions are becoming less and less. Mastering that skill is, however, still a challenging task for Algerian business students and employees. Unlike speaking, writing is governed by less flexible rules. An error in a sentence, for instance, can lead to misunderstanding. That is why acquiring effective writing requires much practice. The Covid-19 pandemic circumstances urged Algerian universities to make certain decisions. During the years of the pandemic, Mascara University used three different modes of teaching ordered as follows: distance learning, blended learning and limited face to face leaning. Consequently, acquiring English language proficiency becomes quite challenging. Henceforth, the present work was designed to explore the writing difficulties of ESP students and to see whether the pandemic teaching circumstances impact their written performance. Such a study would help ESP teachers prepare the right remedial actions in future post pandemic writing courses. In addition, it serves as a reference for those seeking to improve their teaching practices. Results of this research would also help stakeholders and decision makers assess the outcomes of the pandemic era so that they provide the appropriate solutions and interventions. To reach such ends, a mixed method research design was used. More particularly, three research tools were employed to collect quantitative and qualitative data namely text analysis (student's written assignment), students' questionnaire and teacher's interview. This paper starts by introducing the key concepts related to the research topic. Then, it describes the research methodology employed to reach the objectives of the inquiry. Later, it summarizes the results. Finally, it discusses the research findings.

1. Definition of Writing

According to Warburton (2006) writing is a kind of thinking. Generating and organizing ideas build foundation of good writing, "professional authors spend a lot of effort and time in identifying, developing, searching and organizing ideas before they begin writing" (Muschla, 2011:01). From another perspective, Taylor (2009) states that a good writing requires a balance of four elements, the writer, the reader, the object of the analysis, and the formal properties of the language itself. Taylor (2009) is, thus, insisting on the appropriateness of language use. In this context, Hyland (2002:18) claims, "we don't just write, we write something to achieve some purpose: It is a way of getting something done."

2. Teaching Writing

There are three major approaches to the teaching of writing ordered chronologically as follows: The Environmentalist approach, the Innatist approach and the Interactionist approach (Uso-Juan, Martinez & Palmer, 2006). In the environmentalist approach, writing was considered as a reinforcement tool of learning grammar and vocabulary. Programs adapting this approach were designed to achieve accuracy in students' writing. This view was later challenged by the innatist approach proponents such Chomsky (1957). In the late fifties, Chomsky introduced revolutionary theories and ideas. In his works, the focus shifted from language forms to how compositions were produced and processed. To put it

differently, writing was considered as a process not a product. This view was, however, criticized for neglecting the socio-cultural background of writers. This criticism paved the way for the appearance of another approach that saw writing as a social act used by people to achieve social purposes. The genre- based approach to teaching writing is a result of such an approach (Uso-Juan, Martinez & Palmer, 2006).

3. Writing Difficulties Facing English Language Learners

Several researches were conducted to investigate ESL and EFL learners' writing deficiencies. Al Khairy (2013) focused on undergraduate students. He found that learners made errors related mainly to word choice and spelling. Another research by Al Badi (2015). His research aimed to investigate writing problems facing ESL learners in different Australian universities. The results showed that the majority of the participants failed to write cohesive and coherent compositions. This deficiency, according to Al Badi, arises due to the lack of disciplinary knowledge and practice. In the context of Business, Uba and Souidi (2020) conducted a study with students of Commerce and Business administration. This investigation revealed that errors of spelling and capitalization were highly prevalent. Another study was done by Alkhasawnah and Maher (2010) to explore writing problems faced by Arab postgraduates of the college of business. It was found that spelling errors were frequently occurring. Based on these thoughts, it is concluded that ESL and EFL learners' common errors are mostly related to mechanics. Additionally, a few if not none studies discussed the correlation between the pandemic and students' writing deficiencies.

4. Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Higher Education

The earliest Covid -19 cases were observed in China in 2019. World Health Organization (WHO) later declared it a pandemic in 2020. In an attempt to reduce the spread of the disease and protect citizens, governments worldwide took several measures including lockdowns, travel restrictions and social distancing. These conditions impacted all domains such as tourism, economy, and education. According to Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021:1), "the Covid has created the largest disruption of education systems in human history". Teaching and learning moved from normal classrooms to virtual distance platforms. This unplanned transition gave birth to different discrepancies related mainly to accessibility, affordability, flexibility, learning pedagogy, lifelong learning and education policy (Murgatroid, 2020). Also, teaching writing became challenging due to "limited time and space to meet, to discuss to collaborate and provide feedback to students' writing" (Sulfiana, Kurniawati & Nurwanti, 2021:26).

5. Research method and instruments

This research used a mixed method research design. It was carried out in the department of Economics at Mascara University where English is taught as an important module to students of different grades and sub-specialties. Due to the pandemic, the time allotted to the module of English shifted from one hour and a half per week to one hour only. Concerning writing skill, the widely used teaching approach is the process approach i.e. Students are mostly given texts about different topics such as globalization, bankruptcy, etc. Then, they are asked to individually write a composition about a topic they have dealt with in the class

To reach the research objectives the investigator worked with randomly selected 20 third year students and their ESP teacher. These students spent their years of study under the

pandemic circumstances. In addition, three data collections were employed namely students' written assignment (text analysis), students' questionnaire and teacher's semi-structured interview.

5.1. Text Analysis

To identify students' linguistic difficulties, a one hour written assignment was conducted with them. They were asked to individually write a short descriptive composition about products of daily use. They were not allowed to use mobiles or dictionaries but questions in Arabic and in English were tolerated to reduce their fears and anxiety. The collected corpus (20 compositions) was later analyzed and encoded by the researcher who is actually an English language teacher in the department of English at Mascara University. The codification process or what Ellis (1997) called error analysis aimed to identify students' common errors. The targeted error categories were mainly related to grammar, vocabulary and mechanics. Grammar here refers to word order, verb form, tenses, preposition usage, article usage, conjunction usage, etc. Vocabulary means the use of the appropriate terminology, rich vocabulary as well as their level of formality whereas mechanics are about errors of punctuation, spelling and capitalization.

5.2. Students' Questionnaire

According to Brown (2001) a questionnaire is a written instrument that presents participants with questions to which they react either by writing answers or simply choosing from already stated alternatives. Generally speaking, questionnaires are conducted to solve problems, to assess needs, to determine whether objectives have been met, to analyze trends across time and finally to describe in what amount and in what context (Isaac, 1997). The current research used a questionnaire as a second data collection tool to get more insight on students' writing deficiencies as well as inquire about the relationship between the pandemic and the participants writing difficulties and see whether the pandemic times have an impact on the students' written performance. The target questionnaire was conducted during the academic year 2021-2022 with third year Economics students at Mascara University. It consisted of two sections. Each section included a set of Likert-scale questions (Strongly agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and strongly disagree) written in a form of statements.

5.3. Teacher's Interview

To get more insights on those difficulties and the effect of the pandemic, a semi-structured interview was also run with an ESP teacher. This sort of interviews was favored for the flexibility and freedom it offers to interviewers and interviews in asking and answering (Bryman, 2008). The interviewee has been teaching third year Economics students for three years. His answers helped the researcher have more depth on things were not shown by the previously mentioned research tools. The questions in the interview were split into four rubrics: background information, students' writing difficulties, challenges facing effective writing courses during the pandemic, and suggestions.

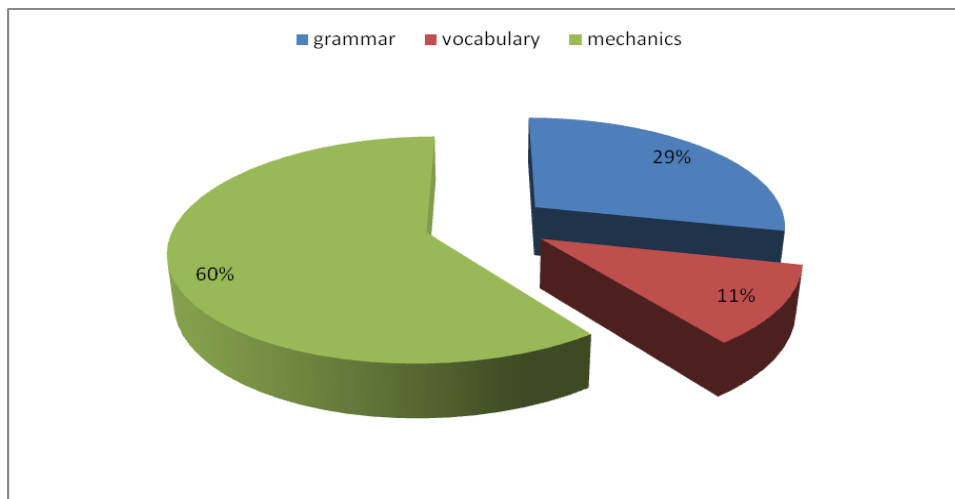
6. Data Analysis

Under this title the researcher introduces the entire results of the study. This section quantitatively and qualitatively summarizes the data gained from texts' error analysis, students' questionnaire as well as ESP teacher's interview.

6.1. Findings from Text Analysis

An error analysis of students’ written compositions was done to find out students’ writing deficiencies and errors. As it has been stated earlier in this research paper, the error categories used in this research are mainly related to grammar, vocabulary and mechanics. The figure below provides the percentages of each category from the total number of errors committed by the students.

Figure 1: Amount of Errors in Students’ Compositions



From the data displayed in Figure 1, it is evident that students committed errors of all kinds. Mechanics errors predominated. They represented a percentage of 60%. Grammar errors had a percentage of 29%, whereas the lowest percentage went to vocabulary errors (11%). To be clear, a table is provided below:

Table 1: Errors Found in Students’ Compositions

Error Category	Specific Type	Errors Number	Error Rank
Grammar	-Word/Sentence order	20	6
	-Tenses	30	4
	-Prepositions usage	14	9
	-articles usage	17	7
	-Conjunctions usage	12	8
Total number of grammar errors		91	<u>2</u>
Vocabulary	-Appropriate terminology	28	5
	-Length	8	10

Total number of vocabulary errors		36	<u>3</u>
Mechanics	-Spelling	75	1
	-Punctuation	60	2
	-Capitalization	57	3
Total number of mechanics errors		192	<u>1</u>
Total number of errors			319

As it is shown in Table 1, the students committed 319 errors .They made 91 errors of grammar, 36 errors of vocabulary and 192 errors of mechanics. The table also indicates the rank of errors per type. The most committed errors were mainly related to mechanics followed by grammar, then vocabulary. Some examples are provided below along with their suggested correction.

✓ **Grammar Errors**

Tenses

[X product] is highly develop....

Correction

[X product] is highly developed

Preposition Usage

..saves money and on the same time

Correction

saves money and at the same time

Articles usage

...it is international mobile phone service operator

Correction

...it is an international mobile phone service operator

Conjunctions Usage

This smart phone contains a camera, and a microphone and other stuffs.

Correction

This smart phone contains a camera, a microphone and other stuffs.

✓ **Vocabulary Errors**

Terminology

It provides the buyer ...

Correction

It provides the consumer/ client.

✓ **Mechanics**

Spelling

X smart phone has an engine wich is a new revolutionary technology

Correction

X smart phone has an engine which is a new revolutionary technology

Capitalization

Brands were not capitalized.

6.2. Findings from Students’ Questionnaire

The questionnaire was administered to 20 third year students of Economics in Mascara University. It was used to obtain data about students’ writing difficulties as well as to inquire about the effect of the pandemic on their business writing skills. The informants’ answers are displayed below in Table 2 and Table 3.

• **Students’ Writing Difficulties**

Numbers in Table 2 show that the majority of the informants (75%) strongly agreed that writing is an important English language skill, 20% agreed with the statement whilst 5% disagreed. Moreover, a large proportion of the students (90%) revealed that writing texts in English is a hard task. Concerning the third statement, 10 participants (5%) strongly agreed, 6(30%) agreed, 4(20%) disagreed and only 1(5%) student disagreed. It is also clear from the answers that English vocabulary is the least problematic category since a minority of the students disagreed with the statement. The last item indicated that 50% of the participants strongly agreed, 30% agreed, 10% disagreed, 5% strongly disagreed while 5% stayed neutral. These numbers were tabulated below.

Table 2: Students’ Writing Difficulties

Statements	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Neutral%	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %
1-Writing is important.	75	20	00	5	00
2-Writing English texts is an easy task.	00	10	00	20	70
3-English grammar is hard to master.	50	30	00	20	00
4-business vocabularies are hard to learn.	35	35	0	20	10
5-English spelling, punctuation and capitalization are very difficult to master.	50	30	5	10	5

• **The Impact of the Pandemic on Students’ Writing Skill**

The purpose was investigating the relationship between the informants’ writing deficiencies and the late pandemic circumstances. Data analysis revealed that almost all the students agreed on the effect of the pandemic on their written performance and only

5% disagreed. The percentages depicted in Table 3 also show the students' dissatisfaction with the writing courses delivered during the pandemic times (10 % agreed, 30 disagreed and 60 strongly disagreed).In addition , 80% of the informants strongly disagreed , 15% disagreed and only 5% agreed that writing tasks were effective. Moreover, answers indicated that students' business writing was not improving during the pandemic, 65% strongly disagreed, 25% agreed and only 10% agreed on the statement. The last item shows that the majority of the students (95%) felt anxious and did not really enjoy the act of writing under the Covid -19 conditions.

Table 3: The Impact of the Pandemic on Students' Writing Skill

Statements	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Neutral %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
1- The pandemic times affected my English writing.	95	00	00	5	00
2- Pandemic times writing courses were effective.	00	10	00	30	60
3- I am satisfied with writing tasks used during the pandemic.	00	5	00	15	80
4- I improved my writing skill during the pandemic.	00	10	00	25	65
5- I cannot write proper English compositions under time constraints.	75	20	00	5	00

6.3. Findings form Teacher's Interview

The interview was run with an ESP teacher. The results gained through this research tool are presented in four headings: background information, students' writing difficulties, challenges facing effective writing courses during the pandemic, and suggestions.

- **Background Information**

The teacher is a male. He has 4 years teaching experience. He was in charge of the English module during the pandemic. His teaching background and answers helped the researcher meet the objectives of the enquiry.

- **Students' Writing Difficulties**

The interviewees' answers proved that writing skill is problematic for the students. They really had no writing background that qualified them to write. He added that students writing deficiencies were mainly related to grammar, lack of specialized vocabulary and mechanics especially spelling. Besides, he insisted that these difficulties were the major factor behind students' anxiety to write. Finally, he argued that "*students tend not to write or even participate in the class simply because they are afraid of making errors and mistakes*".

- **Challenges Facing Effective Writing Courses during the Pandemic**

The interviewer added this rubric to see whether the pandemic has an impact on students' written performance. Overall, the teacher indicated that the pandemic has devastating impacts on students' English language learning in general and writing skills in particular. He insisted that the sudden unplanned transition that occurred in education affected teachers and learners negatively. According to the interviewee, there were several challenges faced effective writing courses and caused students' writing deficiencies. The researcher grouped those problems as follows:

Table 4: Challenges Facing Effective Writing Courses during the Pandemic

Problems related to the students	Problems related to the ESP teacher	Problems related to the institution
-Having no internet access -Lack of training on e-learning. -asynchronous e-learning(no chance to discuss the course content with the instructor) -Lack of motivation	-lack of training -time constraints (teachers did not have enough time to conduct needs analysis and designing courses that fit students' needs and requirement) -lack of students' and teacher's collaboration.	-inappropriate time-tables -lack of teaching materials -lack of students practice(English was taught 1 hour per week and 1 semester per 1 academic year)

• Teacher's Suggestions

According to the teacher, a lot of effects and remedial actions are required in post pandemic times. He asserted that ESP teachers' training is more of a necessity in Algerian universities, "*because most ESP teachers are new graduates*", he explained. He also invited the administration to dedicate more time and sessions to the English language. By doing so, students will have more practice and chance to brainstorm, draft, revise and edit. Hence, Teachers will be able to provide the right feedback in the right moment. The teacher also insisted on providing the appropriate teaching/learning conditions such appropriate timing and setting. He claimed that "*it was very hard to chat and reach all my students in an amphitheater. Classroom management was really a nightmare*".

7. Discussion

The analysis of the raw data revealed very interesting points. Analysis of the corpus reflected the high rate of errors committed. In comparison with students' texts length, a large number of errors appeared in the corpus (16 errors per student). They made mistakes and errors of all kinds. More precisely, mechanics errors were markedly frequent, then grammar ones. Vocabulary and terminology, on the other hand, were the least problematic. This finding is in line with the statistics mentioned in Table 2. All Informants were aware of their writing deficiencies. Most of them agreed that English grammar and mechanics are difficult to learn. Henceforth, this result corroborates with the studies aforementioned in the literature review such as Alkhasawnah and Maher (2010), Al Khairy (2013) and Uba and Souidi (2020).

Besides, the results obtained revealed that the precautionary measures made during the pandemic worsened students' written performance. According to the interviewee, lack of training, teaching materials, time, interaction, collaboration and feedback, all participated in dropping students' level and proficiency.

According to Dudley-Evens and St Johns (1998) effective ESP courses require five complementary components which are needs analysis, course design, teaching and learning, assessment, and evaluation. The stages were difficult to follow during the pandemic due to the limited time devoted to the English module. ESP profession itself is hard because ESP practitioners are supposed to do many tasks simultaneously, teaching, searching, designing courses, collaborating and evaluating. Lack of training in teaching and using new technologies was also another issue. In Mascara University, the majority of ESP teachers receive no training sessions. This situation results in poor teaching performance with no clear plans and no problem-solving skills.

Conclusion

The study at hand employed a mixed method to explore the impact of the pandemic on students' writing skill. In other words, it tried to inquire the correlation between learners' writing deficiencies and Covid-19. The results gained reflected the negative impact of the late circumstances on the students. The number of errors committed was very high. They lacked the writing background that allows them to write. It is noteworthy to say that absence of the necessary bases for delivering writing courses was the major reason behind students' failure. Like other studies, this research has a set of limitations related mainly time constraints and sampling. The number of the surveyed students was small; the findings may differ if the sample is large.

Written communication is very crucial in nowadays business relations. Hence, students are seriously requested to write as much as possible inside and outside the class because "practice makes perfect". ESP teachers are also recommended to consider improving students' writing a priority in post pandemic times. They should foster students' integration, collaborative learning and peer feedback. Furthermore, it is strongly suggested to implement different approaches to teaching writing such as the genre-based approach. Such an approach might recover what the process approach fails to offer. Besides; many efforts are required in part of universities. Institutions should urgently provide training sessions to ESP teachers and devote more sessions to the English language.

Bibliographical references

- AL BADI I. A. H. 2015. Academic Writing Difficulties of ESL Learners. *WEI International Academic Conference Proceedings*, 1(1), 65-78.
- AL-KHAIRY M. A. 2013. Saudi English-Major Undergraduates' Academic Writing Problems: A Taif University Perspective. *English Language Teaching*, 6(6),1-12.
- AL-KHASAWNEH F. M. S., & Maher, S. 2010. Writing for Academic Purposes: Problems Faced by Arab Postgraduate Students of the College of Business, UUM. *ESP World*, 9(2), 1-23.
- BROWN J. D. 2001. *Using Surveys in Language Programs*. Cambridge University Press.UK
- BRYMAN. A. 2008. *Social Research Methods*. Oxford University Press.UK
- DUDLEY-EVANS T. & ST JOHNS, M.J. 1998. *Developments in English for Specific Purposes*. Cambridge University Press.UK
- ELLIS R. 1997. *Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford University Press.UK
- HYLAND K. 2002. *Second Language Writing*. Cambridge University Press.UK

- ISAAC. S & MICHAEL W. 1997. *Handbook in Research and Evaluation: A Collection of Principles, Methods, and Strategies Useful in the Planning, Design and Evaluation of Studies in Evaluation and the Behavioral Sciences (3rd Ed)*. Educational and Industrial Testing Services. San Diego
- MURGATROTD S. 2020. *Covid-19 and Online Learning* . Alberta. Canada
- MUSCHLA G.R. 2011. *Exploring Writing*. McGraw-Hill Companies.USA
- POKHREL S. 2021. A Literature Review on Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Teaching and Learning. *Higher Education for the Future*. 8(1), 133-141.
- SULFIANA F, KURNIAWATI.N & NURWANTI.D.I. 2021. Indonesian EFL Students' Writing Anxiety in Post-Pandemic Online Classroom Context: A Survey. *International Journal of Research on Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, 2(2), 26-36.
- TAYLOR G. 2009. *A Student's Writing Guide*. Cambridge University Press.UK
- UBA. S & SOUIDI.N.M. 2020. Students' Writing Difficulties in English for Business Classes in Dhofar University, Oman. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 9(3), 86-97.
- USO-JUAN. E, mARTINEZ.F .P.S & PALMER.S. 2006. "Towards Acquiring Communicative Competence through Writing". In Uso-Juan.E & Martinez.F (Eds) , *Current Trends in the Development and Teaching of the Four Skills*. Mouton De Gruyten. Berlin- New York. p.283-400
- WARBURTON. N. 2006. *The Basics of Essay Writing*. Routledge. England-USA