

Difficulties Faced by EFL Students in Writing Composition at the Iraqi Preparatory Schools

Instructor

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Abstract

The majority of EFL students face difficulties in writing composition which reflect negatively on their exam results .

The researcher has noticed this problem and decided to trace the difficulties they face in order to put an end to them or at least to minimize them ; therefore , a questionnaire was designed and exposed to a jury of (12) specialists in EFLT . Then , the final version was distributed randomly to a sample from the fifth grade from four secondary schools in Baquba : (142) students from the scientific branch and (117) students from the literary branch . The data obtained were processed statistically .

Then , the conclusions have been made on the basis of the findings , and the recommendations have been drawn .

The research is of great use for EFL teachers especially for those who are novice .

ناطق طه عبد الكريم

ملخص البحث :

يعاني غالبية الطلبة من ضعف في مهارة الكتابة باللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية خصوصاً بعد تجاوز طرائق التدريس القديمة والشروع بإتباع الطرائق الحديثة في التدريس التي تؤكد على الطلاقة في الكلام أكثر من دقته وكتابته مما ينعكس سلباً على نتائجهم في الامتحان .

لقد تصدى الباحث لهذه الظاهرة مستفيداً من خبرته التدريسية الطويلة في المرحلة الاعدادية وملاحظاته ورصده لأداء الطلبة نطقاً وكتابةً وكذلك اعداده استبانةً تم عرضها على اثني عشر مختصاً في تدريس اللغة الانكليزية من جامعة ديالى والمديرية العامة لتربية محافظة ديالى وطبقت على عينة عشوائية من طلبة الخامس الاعدادي بفرعيه العلمي (١٤٢ طالباً) والادبي (١١٤ طالباً) في أربع مدارس من مجتمع البحث في مدارس المرحلة الاعدادية في مدينة بعقوبة لكشف وتشخيص الصعوبات التي تواجههم في كتابة الانشاء ، ونقاط الضعف التي يعانون منها .

وقد توصل الباحث إلى جملة صعوبات ، وتم تقديم توصيات مناسبة في ضوءها ، كما تم التوصل إلى ان طلبة الفرع الأدبي أكثر معاناة في كتابة القطعة الانشائية من طلبة الفرع العلمي .

يأمل الباحث أن يكون هذا البحث ذا فائدة لمدرسي اللغة الانكليزية ، خصوصاً اصحاب الخبرة القليلة منهم كي يتعاملوا مع طلبتهم بما يتلائم مع معاناتهم لتذليل تلك الصعوبات .

1.1 Introduction

It is obvious to language teachers that most EFL students dislike writing a piece of a composition in English , even when they are interested in the topic they are used to writing about because they are not in the habit of doing this type of work , i.e, they lack confidence . Students face difficulties in expressing themselves in writing , especially , since the inception of the audio – lingual movement in which the oral

skills have received major attention and writing has been considered less important (Harmer 2007 : 113) and (Chastain 1988 : 245) . Therefore , most students find themselves in bad situations especially in examinations in which they cannot write a piece of writing in English . This has created in students unproductive and inappropriate orientation towards composition (Chastain : 1988 : 252) . This difficulty , according to Al – Nakkash (1978 : 130) comes from many things :

a- The necessary information b- The ability to arrange this information in a suitable order and c- The power to express it clearly, pleasingly and effectively .

Consequently , students become overjoyed when they get a ready – made composition from hand – outs or from their teachers . The purpose behind this is to pass examinations . Many students (personal communication) claim that they have received no instructions in learning how to write composition when they were in the previous stages of education , i.e , the primary and the intermediate stages , but they received only feedback in the examinations when their teachers returned their papers filled with red marks and notes . In that case , their reaction was to complain .

Concerning the above – mentioned points , students need positive effective feedback from their foreign language teachers as a psychological therapy to stimulate them to maintain their motivation to continue and develop their writing skill . Teachers have to look for positives as well as negatives in writing . They should not pass judgement on its quality unless they are examiners and not teachers because good writing ability is highly sought by examiners . (Chastain : 1988 : 259)

Logically , writing a composition , which is not a discrete – point activity , requires activating imaginations , a greater in – depth knowledge of grammar , collecting thoughts , generating ideas and supporting them , organizing them in their logical order, putting them on paper and then revising what you have written and finally editing .

In short , writing a composition should pass four phases or stages as stated by Gebhard (2006 : 214 – 218) :

a- pre – writing : The starting point is brainstorming . It usually begins with an introduction to a topic by the teacher and then asking the students to think deeply of the title or the topic to collect their thoughts , list all the ideas related to the topic and think of all the words they know connected with the topic .

b- drafting : (writing) building appropriate sentences which convey the thoughts .

c- revision : shaping meaning and improving language .

d- editing : editing requires recognizing problems in grammar (e.g., subject – verb disagreement , improper pronoun use , incorrect verb tense) and mechanics (e.g., spelling and punctuation errors) .

Here , it is worth mentioning that both the content and the form are important aspects of writing a composition . Writing requires appropriate language use , text construction , lay – out , style and effectiveness (Harmer : 2007 : 112) .

The dilemma is the time allotted which forces foreign language teachers to think that writing a composition inside the classroom is time – consuming . This encourages the vast majority of them to let their students practise this activity outside the classroom and this gives them an opportunity to copy ready – made compositions from other students or from

hand – outs . This happens because , in the researcher's opinion , the biggest problem most students face in writing is their own fear . They worry about writing incorrectly .

1.2 Problem of The Study

Based on his long teaching experience in the preparatory schools , the researcher has noticed that most students are hesitant and show less self – confidence when they are asked to write a piece of writing (a composition , letter or e–mail) . This impression was supported by a number of surveys of students' test – papers .

From these surveys of the students' test papers , the researcher has noticed that the majority of the students do not do well in answering the questions of writing a composition , i.e, they either do it carelessly and get low marks or they do not answer it . Some compositions are so bad that teachers cannot decipher them . The researcher has also noticed that nearly all the students get good marks in oral tests , but they get low marks in written ones . This obviously indicates their weaknesses in writing , especially in free compositions .

Tracing such difficulties is very important in order to put an end to them or at least to minimize them . This task should be "insider job" i.e, the teachers who have direct contact with their students .

1.3 Aims of The Study

This study aims at :

1. diagnosing the difficulties EFL students at the preparatory stage face and the weaknesses they have in writing composition .

2. diagnosing the difficulties they face according to the variable of their specialty (scientific branch / literary branch) , and
3. realizing the weight of every difficulty they face .

1.4 Limits of The Study

This study is limited to writing composition in the preparatory schools to get a clear picture of the difficulties and obstacles students face in this activity after they had been studying this in the primary and intermediate stages for more than five years .

1.5 Procedures

In order to carry out the aims of the study , the following procedural measures have been adopted :

1.5.1 Design of The Questionnaire

The researcher constructed a first version of the questionnaire which was exposed to a jury of twelve specialists⁽¹⁾ in teaching EFL in the University of Diyala (henceforth U.D) and the Directorate General of Education in Diyala Governorate (henceforth D.G.E in Diyala) to decide its face validity , suitability and appropriateness . Their comments , suggestions and opinions were taken in designing the final version which was adopted to elicit students' opinions during the second term of the school year 2013 – 2014 .

1.5.2 Population and Sample

The population of this study is the students of the fifth preparatory schools in Baquba city (Diyala Governorate) .

The total number of them are (2499) students ; (1365) from the scientific branch and (1134) from the literary branch .

The sample was randomly taken from four preparatory schools in Baquba⁽²⁾ with an approximate average of ten percent of the population . Therefore , the participants are (259) students; 142 students from the scientific branch and 117 students from the literary branch .

2. Differences between Writing and Speaking

Although language is basically oral , writing should be paid more attention , especially for those who learn it as a foreign language because they have very few opportunities to be in contact with native speakers and also because they deal with that foreign language , i.e, English only inside the classroom . Consequently , students should be given high dose of motivation since they are not immersed in English environment . They are learning it as a school subject in addition to maths , science , geography and other time – tabled subjects . (Pinter :2006: 32) .

Realistically , writing is a skill that is often neglected . The amount of time teachers spend on it , as compared with other skills , is less . This is a general phenomenon, not only in Iraq , but it is also in other parts of the world . (Riddell : 2003 : 138) .

Writing is an important skill because :

1. Written language is more formal than spoken language .
For instance , in exams , students at the 6th preparatory stage are exposed to written language (80 marks) and oral language (20 marks) , while in the ministerial exams , they are exposed only to written language . (100 marks)
2. With writing , there is no nodding , gestures or body language to aid understanding .

3. With writing , there is no intonation , falling or raising of tone . There is no direct contact with the readers ; therefore, punctuation marks are essential .
4. With writing , students can proof – read and self – correct .
5. Writing is a lonely skills , i.e, an individual , solitary activity . We speak with other people , but we write individually . (Riddell : 2003 :132) .
6. With writing , the emphasis on accuracy is much greater than with speaking , while with speaking , the emphasis is on fluency . (Riddell : 2003 : 131) (McDonough and Shaw: 2003 : 157) .

From the above mentioned points , we can conclude that despite the fact that both speaking and writing are mediums of conveying language , writing is seen more difficult , Thus , teachers need to work on developing their students' writing and reduce the pressure that they feel when doing this activity .

3. Importance of Punctuation Marks

Punctuation is very important in writing since it plays a vital role in meaning . The meaning differs when the punctuation marks are used as in the first example below , or when they are used in different places as in others .

In order to attract students' attention to the importance of using the punctuation marks , teachers can write one of the following examples on the board and explain the meaning to them :

1. I met Ali Kareem and Bassim . (Two persons)
I met Ali , Kareem and Bassim . (Three persons)
2. The girl's dresses . (Singular)
The girls' dresses . (Plural)

3. A woman , without her man , is nothing . (This punctuation is in favour of males)

A woman , without her , man is nothing . (This punctuation is in favour of females)

4. Written Communication

We cannot ignore the technological advance and its effects on formal writing which has lessened in written communication since the late 20th century . The world has witnessed huge development in communication technology (e-mail , web forums , and internet messenger services) . Therefore , the role of writing in everyday life has changed . Using these technologies requires writing quickly and briefly , i.e, in limited words and that necessitates inventing simple spelling and using abbreviations . As a result , that spelling is reflected badly on many students' spelling .

There is another point connected with what is being discussed about technologies . It is the American spelling which is widely used in these technologies . This spelling has considerably affected the British spelling .

Below are some samples of the spelling used in written communication :

u = you	x = kiss
4u = for you	ic = I see
2 day = today	l8r = later
gr8 = great	B4 = before
pls = please	ur = your

Two years ago , we saw this spelling appeared in the title of the Iraqi syllabus of English for the fifth preparatory stage "Learn 4 Iraq" .

5. Analysis of Results

In order to achieve the aims of this study , students' responses to the items of the questionnaire are collected and the data obtained are processed statistically . The statistical tools used in this study are mean and percentile weight .

Table (1)
Statistics of the whole sample

Sample	Mean	Theoretical Mean	SD	Calculated t – value	Tabulated t – value	
259	84.16	75	8.7	16.96	1.96	Significant

A glance at Table – 1 – reveals that the mean of the sample is (84.16) , the theoretical mean is (75) and the calculated t – value is (16.96) .

In comparison the calculated t – value with the tabulated t – value which is (1.96) , it is found that the former is bigger than the latter and this result proves that the sample suffers from difficulties in writing .

This affirms that the students are not given sufficient practice in this activity and that the teachers do not devote enough time to writing a composition .

Table (2)
Statistics of the Two Independent Samples

Branch	Sample	Mean	SD	Calculated t – value	Tabulated t – value	
Scientific	142	76.57	5.3	61.53	1.96	Significant
Literary	117	93.37	7.4			

Another glance at Table – 2 – reveals that the mean of the scientific branch is (76.57) and the SD is (5.3) . Whereas the mean of the literary branch is (93.37) and the SD is (7.4) . When the t – value test for two independent samples is used , it is found that the calculated t – value is bigger than the tabulated t – value . Thus , it is obviously seen that there are

differences in the difficulties the students face in writing a composition . A glance at the means of the two samples reveals the difficulty for the favour of the literary branch .

In the researcher's opinion , this is a logical result because good students usually join the scientific branch and the weak usually join the literary branch .

But most students in the literary branch have another opinion (personal communication) . They say that experienced teachers usually teach in the scientific branch , whereas novices always teach in the literary branch and this is largely true according to the researcher's best knowledge .

Table (3)
Statistics of the Items

Rank	Item (s)	Mean	Percentile Weight
1	27	3.15	78.76
2	11	3.10	77.5
3	20	3.03	75.75
4	1	3	75
5	22	2.98	74.5
6	4,29	2.97	74.42
7	26,30	2.91	72.97
8	28	2.90	72.58
9	14	2.87	71.75
10	6	2.86	71.5
11	8,19	2.85	71.25
12	3	2.81	70
13	15	2.75	68.75
14	17,24	2.73	68.25
15	22	2.72	68
16	18	2.69	67.25
17	16	2.68	67
18	7	2.52	63.7

19	10	2.46	61.5
20	21	2.44	61
21	9,25	2.42	60.02
22	2	2.37	59
23	5	2.26	56.56
24	12	2.18	54.5
25	13	1.77	44.2

Table (3) shows the descending order of the thirty items of the questionnaire according to their mean and percentile weight .

The results displayed in the table shows that item No (27) which reads , "I face a difficulty in writing a composition when certain information is not given in the question" occupies the first rank in the difficulties faced by EFL students at the Iraqi preparatory stage .

This result reveals that students used to write controlled or guided compositions in the primary and intermediate stages and they do not have enough practice in writing free compositions at the preparatory stage . Consequently , they should be exposed to more practice in writing free composition from the beginning of the preparatory education stage .

There is a need for systematic teaching of written English . It is supposed that students mastered writing guided compositions at the intermediate stage . Guided compositions can be practised through :

- parallel sentences or passages (substitution) .
- pictures .
- visual situations seen by them .
- questions and answers on one theme , and .
- supply – type .

At the preparatory stage , they should be able to write free compositions , but not before having the necessary instructions and enough training . They should be informed of the following important points :

1. They have to think deeply of the title in order to collect their thoughts before starting .
2. They have to differentiate between writing a paragraph and writing a composition . This should be made clear to them . Because their background knowledge of writing a composition is not sufficient , the following should be mentioned to them :

A composition consists of a number of paragraphs . Every new paragraph should start on a new line and every paragraph deals with a certain theme.

3. They have to be informed to use formal style writing , use deconstructed forms and avoid constructed forms (e.g I am instead I'm) , use linkers such as but , and , therefore , etc ., use punctuation marks correctly , avoid repetition and pay attention to the layout .

Item No (11) which reads , "I face difficulties especially in using the correct tenses" occupies the second rank .

This is a problematic aspect Arab students face because in Arabic we have three tenses which are present , past and future , while in English we have many . There is a need for extra effort from the teachers to remedy this problem . They can do their best to reduce this to a tolerable level , for instance , they can use the native language widely in this field .

Item No (20) which reads , "Imposing a certain number of words in writing a composition scatters my thoughts" occupies the third rank .

In exams , students are usually tense ; therefore , they need psychological therapy . As remedial work , we can use another instruction which is "In no less than 20 lines , write a composition on" .

Item No (1) which reads ,"My vocabulary which helps me write a composition is limited" occupies the fourth rank .

This points to a pressing need for more emphasis on vocabulary, their meanings , spelling , pronunciation and their usage . To write a free composition , students need a large bank of words and phrases to be able to do that .

Item No (5) which reads ,"I do not have sufficient practice in writing composition occupies the fifth rank .

Writing a composition is only one activity among many other activities which should be covered during each period . The problem is that each period is usually 40 minutes and writing a free composition takes a lot of time . It requires deep thinking of the title given , collecting thoughts , drafting and revision . As a result , teachers assign this activity as homework. At home , when they are out of their teachers' sight , most of them copy a read – made answer found in the hand – outs available in every bookshop or from their classmates' copybooks.

Students can be convinced of the positive role of homework in learning . The teachers can also turn a blind eye of some of their mistakes to encourage them . They can also encourage them to work in pairs or in groups outside the classrooms .

Items (4) and (29) occupy the sixth rank . Item (4) reads "I do not have sufficient practice in using vocabulary in sentences".

It is necessary for students not only know the meaning of the new words in their native language , but they should also know which parts of speech they are in order to use them in useful sentences . (cook : 2008 :61) and (Shahbazi : 2009 :203) .

Using the new words in useful sentences should be covered in exams because building a sentence is the first step of building a paragraph or composition .

Item No (29) reads , "I face less difficulties in writing a composition about real situations than imaginary situations" .

This draws teachers and course – writers' attention to a very important point . They ought to choose or select not only meaningful titles to their students , but also useful to them in their real life situations or their daily lives .

Items 9 , 21 , 25 , 2 , 5 , 24 and 25 occupy the lowest ranks.

Item No (21) which reads , "I feel happy when my teacher doesn't diagnose my mistakes in monthly exams" occupies rank 20 .

This indicates that students are eager to know their mistakes in order to avoid them in future ; therefore , teachers have to underline or circle the mistakes in order to be discussed or explained later .

Items No (9) and (25) occupy the 21st rank . Item (9) reads , "I lose a lot of marks because of my ignorance of using the punctuation marks in the correct places" .

This shows that students nearly master the usage of punctuation marks .

Item No (25) reads , "I face a difficulty in writing the title given correctly , or I may forget writing it" .

This reveals that most students write the title given with correct spelling and in the correct place .

Item No (2) which reads , "I am not certain of the usage of the words in their appropriate positions" occupies the 22nd rank .

This tells us that most students are convinced of their progress towards solving all the problems they face . This is a good psychological feature which should be positively invested by language teachers .

Item No (5) which reads , "writing a composition is something which disturbs me" occupies the 23rd rank .

This result reveals that most students look at this activity with a sense of satisfaction although they face a lot of difficulties in doing it because , as we have said , writing is a medium of conveying language .

Item No (12) which reads , "I do not differentiate between the usage of the dots and commas" occupies the 24th rank , and Item No (13) which reads , "I am not skilled enough in the usage of the capital letters in their correct places " occupies the last rank , i.e, 25th .

We can conclude from their responses to the above – mentioned items : 12 and 13 that most students do not face many difficulties in using punctuation marks because they have had good practice .

6. Conclusions

The following points have been made on the basis of the findings :

1. The present teaching situation at our schools goes in the same direction drawn by the traditional methods of teaching .
2. Most students lack the ability of self – expression in English .

3. Students at the literary branch is weaker in writing a composition than students at the scientific branch .

7. Recommendations

1. Language teachers ought to devote more time to writing a composition .
2. It is preferable that language teachers devote , for instance, two periods at the beginning of each school year for explaining the main points about writing a good piece of writing (paragraph , composition , letter and e – mail) .
3. It is felt necessary to draw a distinction to our students between the English spelling and American spelling , formal expressions and informal expressions , writing a paragraph and writing a composition , and text which is just a collection of sentences and a text which is cohesive⁽³⁾ and coherent⁽⁴⁾ .
4. There should be a considerable balance in teaching between practices on activities which concentrate on fluency and those which concentrate on accuracy . Students need both oral and written practices .
5. Language teachers should be patient and tolerant with their students . They should always bear in their minds that a good and successful teacher is like a candle which consumes itself to light the way for others .
6. It is better to change the instruction of the question of writing a composition from (write a composition of about 100 – 120 words on) into (In no less than (15) lines , write a composition on) or write only one page on " " .

7. Students need support and encouragement to promote motivations and build self – confidence as a psychological therapy to get rid of the "phobia" of writing.
8. The educational authorities have to encourage good students to join the literary branch to enhance teaching and learning process . The country needs good teachers of English , translators , interpreters , officials at the Iraqi embassies in foreign countries , etc .
9. Good and experienced teachers of English should be nominated by the school administration to teach for the literary branch .

Endnotes :-

((1)) The name of the Jury are arranged according to the academic ranks .

1. Prof. Khalil I. Al – Hadidi (Ph.D) College of Education (U.D.).
2. Asst Prof. Ayad H. Mahmood (Ph.D) College of Education (U.D.).
3. Asst Prof. Muslim Mehdi Jassim . (M.A) College of Basic Education (U.D.) .
4. Inst. Dalia H. Yahyaa (M.A) College of Basic Education (U.D.) .
5. Adil Fataah Faraj (Specialist Supervisor , D.G.E. in Diyala) .
6. Ali Mahmood (Teacher , D.G.E. in Diyala) .
7. Ahmed Sabri (Teacher , D.G.E. in Diyala) .
8. Anwar F. Darweesh (Teacher , D.G.E. in Diyala) .
9. Hamid A. Sultan (Teacher , D.G.E. in Diyala) .
10. Nahla Gh. Rasheed (Teacher , D.G.E. in Diyala) .

11. Nim'a Ahmed (Teacher , D.G.E. in Diyala) .

12. Mahmood Jalal (Teacher , D.G.E. in Diyala) .

((2)) The Four Schools are :

1. Al – Sharif Al – Radhi Preparatory School For Boys .

2. Al – Markaziyah Preparatory School For Boys .

3. Al – Ma'arif Preparatory School For Boys .

4. Tho – Wayba Al – Aslamiyah Preparatory School For Girls .

((3)) The grammatical and / or lexical relationships between different elements of text . This may be the relationship between different sentences or between different parts of a sentence . For example :

If you are going to London , I can give you the address of a good hotel there .

The link is between London and there . (Richards , Jack C. and etal 1992 : 62) .

((4)) The relationships which link the meanings of utterances in a discourse or of the sentences in a text . A paragraph has coherence if it is a series of sentences that develop a main idea , i.e, with a topic sentence and supporting sentences which related to it . (Ibid : 61)

Appendix :

Questionnaire For EFL Students

(Preparatory Schools)

1- My vocabulary which helps me write a composition is limited.

always often rarely never

2- I am not certain of the usage of the words in their appropriate positions .

always often rarely never

3- I feel worried when I choose the words to express an idea .

always often rarely never

4- I do not have sufficient practice in using vocabulary in sentences .

always often rarely never

- 5-** Writing a composition is something which disturbs me .
 always often rarely never
- 6-** I face difficulties when I want to convey an idea from Arabic into English .
 always often rarely never
- 7-** The difficulty I face is in joining two sentences .
 always often rarely never
- 8-** My problem is in the logical order of events I want to express.
 always often rarely never
- 9-** I lose a lot of marks because of my ignorance of using the punctuation marks in the correct places .
 always often rarely never
- 10-** My insufficient experience of using the punctuation marks confuses me .
 always often rarely never
- 11-** I face difficulties especially in using the correct tenses .
 always often rarely never
- 12-** I do not differentiate between the usage of the dots and commas .
 always often rarely never
- 13-** I am not skilled enough in the usage of the capital letters in their correct places .
 always often rarely never
- 14-** I am fearful of writing a composition because of the misspelt words I do .
 always often rarely never
- 15-** Thinking of correct spelling scatters my thoughts when I write a composition .
 always often rarely never
- 16-** My poor knowledge of building the linguistic structures makes me lose confidence .
 always often rarely never
- 17-** I face difficulties in using pronouns instead of nouns to avoid repetitions .
 always often rarely never

18- Writing a composition makes me forget paying attention to the layout .

always often rarely never

19- It is difficult for me to divide a composition into paragraphs.

always often rarely never

20- Imposing a certain number of words in writing a composition scatters my thoughts .

always often rarely never

21- I feel happy when my teacher does not diagnose my mistakes in monthly exams .

always often rarely never

22- I do not have sufficient practice in writing a composition .

always often rarely never

23- The ready – made compositions in the hand – outs weaken my ability in writing .

always often rarely never

24- I prefer having the examination in writing a composition separately .

always often rarely never

25- I face a difficulty in writing the title given correctly , or I may forget writing it .

always often rarely never

26- I think deeply in the given title before starting writing it .

always often rarely never

27- I face a difficulty in writing a composition when certain information is not given in the question .

always often rarely never

28- I face more difficulties in writing a composition about scientific topics than humanistic topics .

always often rarely never

29- I face less difficulties in writing a composition about a real situation than imaginary situation .

always often rarely never

30- I have less difficulties in writing guided compositions than free compositions .

always often rarely never

Thank you for your cooperation

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