

Difficulties and Challenges Faced by Students while Writing Essays in English

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the barriers faced by third-year Libyan university students when writing English essays. A mixed-methods approach was used, combining qualitative and quantitative data to analyze student essays and gather insights through semi-structured interviews with both students and their professor. The results showed that mechanical errors (39%) and grammatical errors (35%) were the most common problems, followed by poor organization (16%), and other writing difficulties (10%). The main problems included errors in subject-verb agreement, problems with word order, spelling errors, punctuation errors, poor logical sequencing, and weak topic sentence. The study identified several underlying causes, such as the influence of the mother tongue on students' writing, a lack of writing practice, and a lack of familiarity with academic writing standards. Interviews with students and lecturers confirmed these findings, emphasizing the need for guided teaching, structured feedback, and improved revision strategies. Based on these insights, the study offers recommendations for improving students' writing skills and enhancing their academic success.

Keywords: essay writing, writing difficulties & Challenges, EFL students, academic writing.

Background of the study

Writing is an important skill for EFL students to master. It is a thought-provoking activity that involves generating ideas, considering how to express them, and organizing them into clear sentences and paragraphs that people can understand. This means that writers must present and organize ideas in a clear text. From ancient times, people have recorded their experiences and knowledge to preserve them for future generations, demonstrating the profound significance of writing in human civilization. Similarly,

mastering writing skills is crucial in learning and teaching foreign or second languages, as it enables learners to articulate and document their thoughts effectively. Before beginning to write, students should understand the stages of writing. Most writers go through the same basic stages when writing any type of texts. There are four common steps in the writing process: Prewriting step, drafting, revising, and editing.

An essay is a short text written by a student as part of a coursework assignment. It is a concise piece of writing that covers a specific topic, especially if the students write it themselves. Writing itself is a skill or activity that requires the superficial formulation of words. To write a good essay, students must read extensively. Reading helps them structure their essays around a topic they enjoy.

One of the types of writing that third-year English Department students carry out is essay writing. Students who carried out the essay writing course faced a lot of difficulties in accomplishing it. For this reason, improving English learning has become mandatory so that students become more interested and engaged in essay writing activities. Although writing essays enables students to contribute positively in expressing the problems and phenomena that exist in their society, many students find writing difficult and confusing.

Based on previous studies, several problems and obstacles have been identified that hinder students' ability to master essay writing. Among the reasons cited by students were fear of making mistakes, difficulty identifying ideas, difficulty choosing words, and difficulty linking them. Some studies have been conducted to examine the essay writing difficulties faced by EFL and ESL students. Rahmatunisa (2014) investigated the argumentative essay writing difficulties encountered by EFL students in Indonesia. This study revealed that EFL students faced linguistic, cognitive, and psychological difficulties. Ahmed (2010) reported that Egyptian students faced difficulties with coherence and cohesion when writing essays.

Al-Badi (2015) conducted a study to investigate the writing challenges for learners of English as a second language. The study included 20 graduate students of four different nationalities studying at an Australian university. The results indicated that the participants often faced similar difficulties in academic writing, regardless of their previous educational contexts. The most common difficulties related to language use, as well as coherence and cohesion. Several factors may contribute to these difficulties. The main factor is a lack of prior experience and knowledge of academic writing norms and the

expectations of the institution at which they study. In addition, Humairoh (2021) carried out a study to investigate the difficulties students faced in writing an essay due to linguistic problems. The study included 32 male and female students (6 males and 26 females) using a purposive sample. This study used non-test instruments: close-ended questionnaire, document, and semi-structured interview. The overall assessment revealed the difficulties students encountered in writing essays. Based on the results of the documentary questionnaire and triangulation interviews, students encountered difficulties in using grammar as a linguistic problem when writing essays. Students experienced difficulty using grammar rules, which included the use of subject-verb agreement, tenses, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure.

Statement of the problem

As categorized, writing is one of the most complex second language skills to master. This is because it has been said that writing is a matter of talent. However, unlike speaking, which is often informal and easy to acquire, writing requires a higher level of linguistic proficiency, especially in vocabulary and grammar.

Writing essays is a demanding task because students need to take their time and organize their paragraphs carefully with regard to sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation. Students face difficulties in writing like all learning problems. This is because the writing skill is a complex activity and sometimes difficult to teach. Students are expected to learn and master certain basic skills. If they fail, they will be unable to write with the speed and proficiency required. If this happens students will struggle. The demands will actually increase leaving students confused and unable to master the skill. Concerning these issues, EFL students also face difficulty in writing in general, as they may get confused in identifying the main idea of each paragraph, using grammatical rules correctly, and choosing appropriate vocabulary. This causes students to fail the course and repeat it more than once

Research Questions

This study seeks the answer to the following questions:

1. What are the common difficulties Libyan EFL students at the Faculty of Arts, University of Elmergib face when learning to write essays in English?
2. What are the underlying causes and challenges students face in learning to write essays?

Objectives of the study

According to the research questions, the objectives of this research are:

- 1- to identify the challenges university students studying English as a foreign language face in writing well-organized essays.
- 2- to identify the reasons for students' weaknesses in essay writing and determine whether this is due to problems students may face in writing in general.
- 3- to identifying the problems that hinder students' ability to write essays to inspire and motivate them to practice writing effectively.

The Scope of the Study

For non-native English speakers, learning to write an essay in English is a very challenging task. This study examines the difficulties students face in writing essays. The study is limited to third-year students in the English Department at the Faculty of Arts at Elmergib University. The study aims to identify the factors that hinder students from writing an essay.

The Significance of the Study

Theoretically, the results of this study are expected to benefit both teachers and students. For teachers, this study will help them identify the problems students face in writing English essays and, based on these problems, choose the appropriate method for teaching writing. For students, this study will help them understand the difficulties they face when writing essays, enabling them to overcome them and improve the quality of their writing. It can also be used as a reference for researchers interested in understanding and developing students' writing skills by studying the challenges they face when writing essays.

Methodology

Research Design

In the current study, the researchers used a mixed-method approach to identify the difficulties faced by third-year students when writing essays and to propose appropriate solutions to improve the writing skills of third-year university students majoring in English as a foreign language at the Faculty of Arts, El-Mergib University. Mixed method is an approach of combining qualitative and quantitative research forms. Mixed methods

research or mixed research (MM) is defined as "the class of research designs where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study for the purpose of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration." (Creswell, 2010) This study used a case study that can help explore the challenges students face while writing an essay in English. Cases are limited by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a continuous period. Therefore, this study used two in-depth research tools to collect data: an essay writing assignment for students and semi-structured interviews with students and the lecturer.

Participants

Thirty third-year students in the English Department at the Faculty of Arts at, Elmergib University participated in this study. The researchers selected third-year students to participate in this study because essay writing is a mandatory subject at this academic year.

Research Instruments

In this study, the researchers employed two research tools to collect the data. The instruments were students' essays and semi-structured interview with students and the lecturer. The instruments aimed to identify the problems facing third-year students in writing essays and search for appropriate solutions to overcome them.

Students' Essays

The first tool was student assignments. With the instructor's approval, students were asked to freely choose any topic based on their interests and to write a three paragraph essay about it. The essay served as a homework test that had to be submitted within a week.

Students' Interview

The second tool was a semi-structured interview. The researchers used a semi-structured interview with third-year students. By answering the prepared questions, the researchers were able to gain a deeper understanding of the writing difficulties students faced.

Lecturer's Interview

After completing the students' interviews, and based on their responses, the researchers conducted an interview with the course instructor. The interview aimed to identify any difficulties the instructor might encounter while teaching the course. The interview also aimed to express the students' problems and hopes for mastering essay writing. This was accomplished by uncovering the obstacles students faced, presenting them to their instructor, and suggesting alternative approaches.

Data Collection Procedures

After the researchers had determined the tools needed to collect data, the procedures for conducting this study followed the following sequence: first, the researchers collected the necessary data through students' assignments. At the request of the researchers, the instructor asked the students to choose any topic they liked, which must be three paragraphs in length. . In this current research, the researchers obtained the students' essays by taking them from their teacher after receiving and correcting them. This assignment was requested for the purpose of study rather than as an assessment for students. Then the researchers analyzed the data according to the research indicators that will be examined through four categories of writing problems, which are grammar, mechanical, poor organization, and others. Second, in light of the students' mistakes, the researchers prepared a semi-structured interview with both the students and the lecturer to identify the reasons and suggest solutions.

N	Category	Criteria
1	Grammar	- Subject-verb agreement - Tenses
2	Mechanical	- Misspelling - Punctuation
3	Poor organization (illogical order)	- Lack of Cohesion - No Clear Topic Sentence
4	Others	- Lack of Clarity - Redundant Phrases - Incorrect Word Choice

Data Analysis

Introduction

Writing in a second language is a complex skill that requires mastery of grammar, vocabulary, organization, and coherence. For Libyan EFL students at Elmergib University, Faculty of Arts, learning to write essays in English presents several challenges. This study examines the common difficulties these students encounter when composing essays, focusing on linguistic, structural, and cognitive barriers. Additionally, it explores the underlying reasons behind these difficulties, considering factors such as language proficiency, educational background, and exposure to English writing.

Research Questions.

The analysis of the collected data revolves around two main research questions, each addressing different aspects of the issue. The first question is examined by analyzing students' essays and identifying the most common obstacles they face, such as problems with grammar, coherence, idea development, and argumentation. The second question is explored through interviews with students and teachers, which provide insights into the underlying reasons for these difficulties, including gaps in prior education, limited practice opportunities, and potential influences from students' first language.

Q1-What are the common difficulties Libyan EFL students at the Faculty of Arts, University of Elmergib face when learning to write essays in English?

Q2- What are the underlying causes and challenges students face in learning to write essays?

Data Analysis

Analysis of Third-Year Students' Writing Problems

Table (1): Findings of students' essays

N	Writing problems	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Grammar		
a	Subject – verb agreement	21	18%
b	word order	19	17%
	Subtotal		35%
2	Mechanics		
a	Misspelling	23	20%
b	Punctuation	22	19%
	Subtotal		39%
3	Poor organization (illogical order)	18	16%
4	Others	11	10%
	Total	122	100%

Analysis of the students' essay samples revealed 122 errors in various categories, including grammar, mechanics, poor organization, and others. As shown in Table 1, the most common errors were related to mechanics, accounting for 39% of the total. Grammar

errors came in second at 35%, followed by poor organization errors at 16%, while the remaining 10% fell into various other categories. The following is a breakdown of the results, with examples and explanations for each type of error.

Grammar Errors

Grammar errors pose a significant challenge to students, accounting for 35% of all errors. The most common errors include subject-verb agreement and incorrect word order.

- Subject-Verb Agreement

One of the most common grammatical errors is subject-verb agreement. Many students find it difficult to ensure that the subject and verb agree in number. This error is particularly common when dealing with singular and plural subjects.

Example:

Hot chocolate are nice to enjoy.

The diet are very healthy.

Smartphones, social media, and emails has a very strong effect on our lives.

Furthermore, students often make mistakes when there is a phrase between the subject and the verb. For example:

The quality of my products are improving.

The diet, including all its details, have improved....

These mistakes suggest that students may not fully understand how intervening phrases affect subject-verb agreement. Therefore, reinforcing this rule through targeted practice could help them improve.

These errors indicate that students may not fully understand how intervening clauses affect subject-verb agreement. Therefore, reinforcing this rule through focused practice may help them improve.

- Word Order

Incorrect word order negatively affects sentence clarity, especially in questions and complex structures.

Examples:

What you are afraid of? → What are you afraid of?

What you did in your diet last week? → What did you do in your diet last week?

Where you went yesterday? → Where did you go yesterday?

In addition, word order errors occur when adjectives are placed incorrectly or when students do not follow English word formation rules. This problem often arises as a result of the influence of the students' native language grammar or direct translation.

Examples:

Which was a red, big one. → Which was a big, red one.

Is very enjoy. → It is very enjoyable.

He had a long discussment about the problem. → He had a long discussion about the problem.

He is incapable of doing this. → He is incapable of doing this.

To overcome this challenge, students should practice sentence construction exercises that help them construct correct sentences and form words.

Mechanics

Mechanical errors make up the highest percentage (39%) of errors, which includes spelling errors and punctuation problems.

Misspelling

Misspellings often occur due to carelessness, phonetic spelling, or confusion between similar words.

Spelling errors often occur due to neglect to master word differences, phonetic spelling, or confusion between similar words.

Examples:

percpective → perspective

budy → body

may → many

deceise → disease

heleth → health

refres → refresh

Many spelling errors arise from the use of silent letters (e.g., psychology), double letters (e.g., embarrassment), or homophones (e.g., write vs. right). Therefore, students should be encouraged to use spelling checkers and proofreading techniques to reduce these errors.

Punctuation Errors

Incorrect punctuation significantly impacts reading fluency and comprehension. The most common problems include missing commas, incorrectly using commas instead of semicolons, and capitalization errors.

Missing commas

After mixing the ingredients we put it in a pot. → After mixing the ingredients, we put it in a pot.

So never be afraid of facing your fears. → So, never be afraid of facing your fears.

Using a comma instead of a semicolon:

Some students have problems with punctuation rules. They often join independent clauses with a comma instead of a semicolon. This mistake, known as "comma splice," leads to structural and semantic errors.

Examples:

It's small and beautiful, it also has → It's small and beautiful; it also has....

It helps us in many ways, it keeps us connected with friends → It helps us in many ways; it keeps us connected with friends....

Eating healthy food is crucial for many reasons, it helps our bodies.... → Eating healthy food is crucial for many reasons; it helps our bodies....

Misuse of capitalization:

Some students have difficulty using capital letters correctly. This problem may arise from a lack of understanding of capitalization rules or from informal writing habits, such as those seen on social media and text messages.

In this study, failing to capitalize the first word of a sentence and failing to capitalize proper nouns are two common errors observed in students' essay writing. These errors are attributed to a number of factors, including a lack of familiarity with formal writing rules, influence by digital media, and poor proofreading.

Examples:

one of the things I love → One of the things I love....

overall, my hometown → Overall, my hometown....

the first ... the second ... → The first ... The second...

sundays → Sundays

february → February

These errors highlight the urgent need for more training in punctuation rules and familiarity with proofreading strategies.

Poor Organization

Logical flow is essential in writing. However, 16% of the errors relate to poor organization, which makes essays difficult to follow.

Lack of Cohesion

Some students write sentences consecutively without using linking words to enhance coherence, resulting in disconnected ideas.

Example:

"Many places get snow in winter. Snow falls from the sky and covers everything. We can play in the snow by making snowmen or having snowball fights. It's very enjoy".

To improve linguistic cohesion, students can add linking words that strengthen the logical connection between sentences and ideas. This makes the reading process easier and makes the text more coherent. Based on the study results, here is a revised version with better flow:

"Many places get snow in winter. When it snows, it falls from the sky and covers everything. As a result, we can play in the snow by making snowmen or having snowball fights. This is very enjoyable".

No Clear Topic Sentence

Topic sentences are essential for guiding the reader through an essay or paragraph. When students struggle to write a clear topic sentence, their writing may lack a clear sense of the essay's purpose, making it difficult for the reader to understand the main argument or purpose of the text.

The current study revealed that some students find it difficult to formulate a clear topic sentence, leading to cluttered and unfocused writing. A major reason for this problem is poor planning before writing, as students often begin their essays without clearly defining their main ideas. Additionally, some students struggle to understand their arguments, making it difficult to formulate a strong topic sentence that guides their writing. Another common problem is including too many ideas in a single essay, which leads to incoherence, distracts from focus, and makes it difficult for the reader to grasp the main idea. These factors contribute to essays lacking proper structure, making it difficult for students to communicate their arguments effectively.

Example:

"Eating healthy food is crucial for many reasons. It helps body to stay strong, provides energy, and keeps mind active. Also, choosing native food leads to be happier".

The student's topic sentence lacks clarity, focus, and proper grammar. This makes it ineffective and doesn't convey the intended meaning. A well-structured topic sentence should present only one main idea that aligns with the details of the paragraph. By improving the focus of meaning and coherence of ideas, students can build a stronger foundation for their writing. The key sentence should focus on one clear, specific main idea, and ensure that the supporting details match it. Here's a possible revision:

"Eating healthy food is essential for maintaining physical strength, boosting energy levels, and keeping the mind active".

Other Errors

This category includes various writing problems, such as ambiguous sentences, repetition, and incorrect word choice.

- Lack of Clarity

Students often write vague sentences that lack precision and clarity, making it difficult for readers to grasp the main idea. This is due to students' limited vocabulary related to the topic, making it difficult for them to express their ideas precisely. Some students also tend to overgeneralize rather than provide specific examples that convey the meaning. Furthermore, a lack of planning before writing leads to unclear and confusing ideas.

Example:

"Technology is changing everything in the world, and people use it in different ways. It has many benefits, but it also comes with problems. This is why we need to be careful."

Phrases like "change everything," "different ways," and "many benefits" are too vague and don't provide precise details that would convey the intended meaning.

The phrase "we need to be careful" doesn't clarify what the students mean—care about what, exactly? Does it mean privacy issues? People's overreliance on technology? Or what?

Redundant Phrases

"Eating a healthy diet is crucial, as it helps maintain health and prevent disease. The main reason to eat vegetables is due to the fact that they contain many vitamins and nutrients good to the body. Since vegetables contain many essential nutrients, they are beneficial to health and well-being. Therefore, it is essential to eat them regularly, as they support overall health and protect against disease."

Students often suffer from repetition in their writing, as illustrated in this paragraph, where ideas are repeated in slightly different forms without adding new information. For example, the phrase "The main reason to eat vegetables is that they contain many vitamins and nutrients that are good to the body" is too long and could be simplified to "The main reason to eat vegetables is that they contain essential nutrients."

Similarly, the sentence "Since vegetables contain many essential nutrients, they are beneficial to health and well-being" reiterates the same idea without adding any new details. The final sentence, ". Therefore, it is essential to eat them regularly, as they support overall health and protect against disease." reiterates that vegetables contribute to health without going into detail about how or why.

Example:

" The main reason to eat vegetables is due to the fact that they contain many vitamins and nutrients that are good for the body."

This can be revised to:

"The main reason people should eat vegetables is that they contain essential nutrients".

Incorrect Word Choice

Students may use informal or vague terms like "good for the body" instead of more precise terms like "beneficial to general health." Similarly, phrases like " due to the fact that" are unnecessarily long and can be replaced with "because" for brevity. Another problem is the misuse of prepositions or collocations, such as saying "good to the body" instead of "good for the body."

These errors can make arguments less convincing and undermine the quality of academic writing.

Analysis of Students' Interview Responses

An analysis of students' interview responses highlights several key challenges and difficulties they face in academic writing. These challenges align with the findings of the analysis of students' essays, particularly regarding grammar, style, organization, and clarity. The following is a breakdown of the most significant writing problems, supported by direct quotes from students' responses.

The Influence of Mother Tongue on Writing

Q1- How does your native language influence your English writing? Do you think translation affects the way you construct your sentences?

Many students admitted that they think in their native language before translating their thoughts into English. This often results in illogical or unnatural sentence construction, incorrect word order, and direct translations that do not conform to English grammar.

"I usually think in my native language first, then I try to translate it into English. But sometimes, the sentence sounds strange, and I don't know how to fix it".

The main result of this problem is incorrect word order, especially in the formulation of questions and the placement of adjectives.

"It is difficult for me to write questions correctly. I always say 'What you did yesterday?' instead of 'What did you do yesterday'?"

"I have difficulty writing questions correctly. I always say, " What you did yesterday?" instead of, "What did you do yesterday?"

Similarly, adjective order errors occur because students apply the grammatical rules of their native language rather than the conventional order in English.

"I wrote 'a red, big one,' but my teacher said it should be 'a big, red one.' I didn't know there was a rule for this---".

"I wrote 'a red, big one,' but my teacher said it should be 'a big, red one.' I didn't know there was a rule for that."

"I translate sentences from my native language, and that causes problems with word order. For example, I wrote 'What you did in your diet last week?' instead of 'What did you do in your diet last week?'"

I translate sentences from my native language to English, and this causes problems with word order. The two languages have different sentence structure. For example, I wrote "'What you did in your diet last week?' instead of 'What did you do in your diet last week?'"

Lack of Planning and Organization

Q2- How do you write an essay? Do you plan before writing, and how do you ensure your ideas flow?

Most students admitted that they do not plan their essays before writing them, which results in poor logical flow, weak topic sentence, and unclear and disorganized ideas.

"I just start writing without thinking too much about how to organize my ideas. When I finish, I realize that my ideas are mixed up, and I don't know how to fix them.

"I don't usually plan my articles before writing them. I just start writing whatever comes to mind, and sometimes my ideas don't cohere well".

Some students noted that their introductions and conclusions did not align well with the topic sentence, making their arguments unclear.

"Sometimes my introduction says one thing, but my conclusion says something entirely different. I don't know how to properly connect them to create the desired coherence and unity. "

The absence of an essay outline often leads to redundancy, with students repeating ideas over and over rather than developing them further.

" I feel like I repeat the same idea in different ways in different places in my essay because I don't plan my paragraphs before writing".

Grammar Challenges: Subject-Verb Agreement and Sentence Structure

Q3: Common grammatical errors in student writing, such as subject-verb agreement and word order. Do you find these rules difficult? How do you try to avoid them?

Students reported frequent difficulties with subject-verb agreement, especially when additional phrases intervened between the subject and verb.

" I always make mistakes when using singular and plural verbs. For example, I wrote, "The quality of my products are improving," but my teacher said it should be "is improving".

" I struggle with grammar, especially subject-verb agreement. Sometimes I forget that a singular subject requires a singular verb, so I make mistakes like, "The diet are very healthy.""

In addition, students have difficulty forming complex sentences and being able to maintain verb tense consistency.

"I often mix the present and past tenses. Sometimes I start a sentence in the past and then end it in the present without realizing it".

Mechanical Errors: Spelling and Punctuation

Q4: What do you think causes spelling and grammatical errors, and what strategies do you use to correct them?

Many students admitted that they frequently make spelling mistakes due to mismatched phonetic spellings, confusion between similar words, and silent letters.

"I have difficulty spelling because some words are not spelled the same way they are pronounced. For example, I wrote "deceise" instead of "disease" because they sound similar".

Punctuation problems, especially comma splices and missing capitalization, were also common concerns.

"I don't always know when to use commas correctly. That's why I sometimes put them everywhere, and sometimes I forget them altogether".

"I struggle with punctuation, especially commas and semicolons. I sometimes write long sentences without commas, or I use commas instead of semicolons."

"I have difficulty using punctuation properly, especially commas and semicolons. I sometimes write long sentences without commas, or I use commas instead of semicolons".

"I often forget to capitalize the first word of a sentence, and I don't always capitalize proper nouns. I think it's because I don't capitalize it in text messages, so I forget it in formal writing".

Incorrect Word Choice and Limited Vocabulary

Q5: What do you think of your vocabulary when writing essays? Do you find it difficult to choose the appropriate words for formal writing?

Many students expressed that their limited vocabulary affected their ability to write clearly and formally. They tended to use informal expressions rather than precise academic terms.

"I know I should use academic words, but sometimes I don't know which words to use, so I just write in a simple way".

"I know I have to use academic words, but sometimes I don't know which ones to use, so I write in a simple way."

Incorrect word choice often results from confusing similar words or overusing informal expressions.

"I wrote "good for the body" and not "good for health" because I didn't know the correct academic word in the context".

Lack of Cohesion and Transition Words

Q6- What challenges do you face when linking your ideas with linking words?

Students admitted that they find it difficult to use linking words correctly and effectively, resulting in disjointed and difficult-to-follow essays.

"My teacher told me that my essay looks like a list of separate sentences, not a single coherent idea. I forget to use linking words."

When students use linking words, they sometimes choose inappropriate ones, which affects the order of ideas and the flow of their writing.

"I wrote "because of this" many times in my essay instead of using different transition words instead".

Lack of Proofreading and Awareness of Errors

Q7- How do you review your essays before submitting them, and what difficulties do you face in understanding the teacher's comments?

Some students admitted that they submitted their essays without carefully reviewing them, leading to avoidable errors.

"I usually don't review my work after I finish it because I get tired. But later, when I read it again, I find a lot of mistakes in it".

"I know I make mistakes, but I don't always proofread my essays before submitting them to my teacher. I usually finish writing them and submit them immediately without checking for errors".

Others reported receiving feedback from their teachers but not fully understanding the corrections.

"Even when my teacher corrects my mistakes in my essays, I don't always understand why. I think I need more explanation".

"I receive feedback from my teachers, but I often don't understand how to correct it. I see the corrections, but I don't always know why they are wrong."

Teacher's interview analysis

The English teacher's responses closely align with the study's findings, which identified the main challenges students face in essay writing. Below is an analysis of how these responses address the most significant writing problems in third-year students' essays.

Q1- What are the most common grammatical and mechanical errors you see in students' writing, and how do you deal with them?

The most common mistakes I encounter relate to subject-verb agreement and punctuation. Students often struggle to ensure that the subject and verb agree in number, especially when phrases overlap. For example, "The quality of my products are improving" should be "The quality of my products is improving." To address this problem, I use specific exercises in which students practice correcting these errors. Punctuation is another problem, particularly comma splices and missing commas. I strongly emphasize the importance of proofreading and providing exercises that highlight punctuation rules.

The teacher highlights subject-verb agreement and punctuation as the most common grammatical and linguistic errors. Students often struggle to ensure that subjects and verbs agree in number, especially when other words are involved. Punctuation errors also cause difficulties.

The study found that grammatical errors accounted for 35% of all errors, 18% of which involved subject-verb agreement. The teacher's response confirms that this is an ongoing problem, explaining that students struggle with singular and plural forms, especially when additional phrases separate the subject from the verb.

Similarly, mechanics errors accounted for 39% of students' errors, while punctuation problems accounted for 19%. The teacher's focus on comma splices and missing commas is consistent with the study's findings, emphasizing the importance of direct instruction and

practice. This suggests that teaching punctuation rules more explicitly, along with proofreading strategies, may be an effective intervention.

Q2- How do you help your students improve their essays, including the use of topic sentences, and linking words?

"To help students organize their essays, I emphasize the importance of having a clear topic sentence. I also encourage students to use connecting words, such as "therefore," "for example," and "as a result," to ensure a logical flow. For example, instead of writing, "Snow is fun. We can make snowmen," I instruct them to edit it to, "Snow is fun because we can make snowmen, which unites people." This simple change makes a big difference in readability".

The instructor emphasizes the need for clear thesis statements, topic sentences, and linking words to improve organization and coherence. He guides students by demonstrating how simple changes in sentence structure can enhance logical flow.

The study identified poor organization (16%) as a major problem, with many students having difficulty connecting ideas logically. The teacher's strategy of teaching students to improve their thesis statements and use appropriate linking words directly addresses this problem. The example above—changing “Snow falls from the sky and covers everything. We can play in the snow by making snowmen” to “When snow falls, it falls from the sky and covers everything. As a result, we can play in the snow by making snowmen”—illustrates how simple adjustments can improve cohesion.

Q3- How do you help students overcome ambiguous or repetitive sentences and encourage them to write more accurately and clearly?

I often see students use vague or repetitive phrases, such as "Technology changes everything" or "Eating vegetables is important because they contain vitamins." I encourage students to be more precise and concise. For example, instead of saying "Technology changes everything," they could write "Technology is revolutionizing communication by enabling instant global connections." This helps focus their argument and makes it more impactful.

The study found that 10% of errors fell into the " Other Errors " category, including vague sentences and repetition. The teacher's observation that students struggled to express their ideas clearly due to a lack of specificity is consistent with this finding.

Q4- What strategies do you use to guide students in choosing more formal and academic language and avoiding informal or ambiguous expressions?

In academic writing, accuracy is important. Many students use informal language, such as "good for the body," which I encourage them to modify to a more formal form, such as "beneficial for overall health." I also focus on avoiding verbosity, such as changing “due to

the fact that" to "because." This helps them develop a more polished and professional writing style.

The teacher notes that students often use informal language. They also tend to use unnecessarily wordy phrases, such as "due to the fact that," which should be replaced with "because."

The teacher notices that students often use informal language. They also tend to use unnecessarily long phrases, such as "due to the fact that" which should be replaced with "because."

Incorrect word choice was one of the major problems identified in the study, contributing to weak arguments and poor writing structure. The teacher emphasized replacing informal language with more precise academic vocabulary, which contributes to developing a better understanding of formal writing conventions.

Q5- What are the most pressing writing challenges faced by third-year students, and how do you design your lessons to address them?

"Third-year students often face challenges constructing complex sentences and maintaining focus throughout their essay writing. I provide exercises that focus on sentence variety and the correct use of conjunctions to help students organize their ideas logically. Additionally, I provide support by breaking large tasks down into manageable steps, such as brainstorming before drafting, to avoid overwhelming students".

The teacher reported that third-year students often struggle with sentence construction and maintaining focus. The study indicated that poor organization and lack of focus pose challenges that impact students' writing. The teacher's response supports the idea that students struggle to maintain a logical structure throughout their essays.

Q6- How do you provide feedback on essays written by students, and what areas do you focus on to help students improve their writing?

When giving feedback, I focus on structure, topic sentences, grammar, and punctuation. I often provide concrete examples of how to improve, such as rephrasing an ambiguous sentence or correcting a subject-verb agreement error. I also invite students to revise their drafts based on feedback and reflect on their progress, rather than focusing solely on errors.

The teacher provides and encourages revision and self-reflection rather than just pointing out mistakes. The teacher encourages review and self-reflection rather than simply pointing out mistakes. The study highlights the importance of feedback in improving students' writing. Teachers also encourage students to review their mistakes and make valuable adjustments.

Q7- Do you recommend tools (such as a grammar checker) to help students reduce writing errors, and how do you integrate these tools into your teaching?

"advise students to use spelling and grammar checkers, such as Grammarly, to correct simple errors. However, I emphasize that these tools should not replace careful proofreading. I also recommend that students read their essays aloud to catch errors they might miss while silently reading. These tools help students become more independent in identifying and correcting their own errors".

The study indicates that technology helps students reduce grammatical and linguistic errors, but overreliance on grammar checkers can lead to inaccurate writing. Teachers adopt a balanced approach, using tools as support while focusing on proofreading. Reading essays aloud is an effective and efficient strategy for reviewing texts, as it helps students identify inappropriate phrases and missing words.

Q8- How do you encourage students to take responsibility for developing their writing and receiving feedback effectively?

"I motivate students by guiding them on how to improve their writing over time. I encourage them to set small goals at each stage. I also give them the opportunity to review their previous writing, which helps them see their progress and reinforces the idea that writing is a continuous process of development".

The study emphasizes the importance of student engagement in writing. The teacher's approach of setting small goals is consistent with the fact that breaking writing tasks down into manageable objectives helps students maintain their motivation.

Encouraging students to review their work and track their progress over time is a demanding and ongoing process. By reinforcing the idea that writing is a skill that can be developed through practice and training, students are more likely to take ownership of their own learning.

Conclusion

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the writing challenges faced by third-year students. An analysis of their essays revealed that mechanical errors (39%) were the most common, followed by grammatical errors (35%), poor organization (16%), and other problems (10%). These difficulties significantly impact students' ability to express their ideas clearly and effectively in academic writing. The most common grammatical errors were subject-verb agreement errors (18%) and word order problems (17%), many of which stem from unfamiliarity with English sentence structures, direct translation from students' native language, and insufficient revision. Spelling errors (20%) were caused by phonetic spelling, confusion between similar words, and carelessness, while punctuation errors (19%), including missing commas, commas, and incorrect capitalization, reduced the clarity and readability of students' writing. Additionally, some essays lacked logical coherence due to the absence of connecting words and poor paragraph structure. Many students struggled to write clear thesis statements and topic sentences, resulting in a lack of coherence in their essays. Ambiguous sentences and redundancy weakened the impact of

students' arguments, while incorrect word choices and informal expressions weakened the academic quality of their writing.

Students' interview responses provide a deeper understanding of the underlying causes of their writing difficulties. Prominent among these challenges are the influence of their native language, poor planning, grammatical and linguistic errors, limited vocabulary, and poor organization. Many of these challenges stem from a lack of practice, a lack of familiarity with academic writing principles, and a lack of effective revision strategies. Similarly, the teacher's responses closely aligned with the study's main findings. She addressed the major writing problems identified in her teaching approach: grammatical and technical errors, poor organization, ambiguous or repetitive sentences, informal language, lack of focus, and weak revision strategies.

In conclusion, this study highlights the urgent need to improve writing instruction to address recurring problems in students' essays. Addressing these problems comprehensively will enable students to become more competent and independent writers, ultimately enhancing their academic success and mastery of academic writing.

Recommendations

The results indicate that students need more focused instructions and training in core writing areas. To improve their academic writing skills, the following strategies are recommended:

1. Provide spelling and punctuation exercises to reinforce correct usage.
2. Encourage students to plan before writing to enhance coherence and logical flow.
3. Train students to identify common writing errors through self-editing and peer review exercises.
4. Provide clear and explanatory feedback, ensuring students understand their mistakes and how to correct them.
5. Encourage proofreading and self-correction, whether through peer editing or digital writing tools.

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