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CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING ESL LEARNERS' WRITING SKILLS

Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that writing is a crucial skill in language production. Still, it is also considered to be quite challenging, particularly for English as a Second Language (ESL) students. These students encounter numerous difficulties in writing, and as a result, this study seeks to investigate the issues ESL learners face in their writing and the factors that impede their writing skills. The aim is to raise awareness among students about these challenges and explore alternative improvement methods. Undoubtedly, students encounter a myriad of problems when it comes to writing. Apart from grammatical issues, there are challenges related to organising information, common translation problems, spelling errors, and improper use of vocabulary. To conduct this study, a survey was administered to twenty-seven students for data collection and analysis. The outcomes of this study aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the difficulties faced by students and the level of challenge they experience in writing. Finally, this study discusses the limitations of the research and suggests areas for future investigation.

Keywords: *writing, writing skills, difficulties, ESL learners, grammatical errors, spelling errors, vocabulary.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is truly a gift that not everyone possesses. While some are naturally talented, others strive to convey their thoughts and emotions on paper, and some simply write words. This paper will highlight the challenges students, especially ESL learners, encounter in writing and the knowledge and aesthetic value conveyed through writing. Tirumalesh points out that students face difficulties due to a lack of language proficiency, large class sizes, unqualified teachers, and demotivated learners. These issues can be addressed by providing better resources and enhancing the use of existing materials. Overcoming these challenges in our country may take considerable time, potentially spanning generations, and, in some cases, may seem insurmountable. Achieving language proficiency is hindered by teachers primarily using Albanian instead of English during classes due to insufficient qualifications. Dealing with large class sizes is unavoidable, especially in prestigious and urban schools. In these circumstances, it is crucial to improve the quality of teaching, particularly in writing, using available methods. Technological advancements have made learning and teaching more accessible now than in the past. The key lies in the willingness to improve (Tirumalesh, 1991).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

"Writing, because it allows us to represent to ourselves, our learning, our ways of making meaning, teaches us the most profound lesson about how we read, write, and use language, about what it means to know" (Zamel, 1992).

Writing is a means of visually presenting language. Mastering a language involves not only the ability to speak and articulate well but also the skill of writing effectively without errors. As such, it is a complex process that encompasses all language structures. According to Linse (2005, p. 535), writing is considered a productive skill as it involves creating information to be transmitted. One of the advantages of writing, compared to speaking, is that it provides more time to carefully consider the information to be conveyed, making errors in both sentence structure and spelling unacceptable. Even Sulasti acknowledged that students often encounter difficulties in selecting and

organising information, as well as finding the right words to express themselves eloquently in writing, issues which are also prevalent in their native language (Sulasti, 2003, p. 20).

2.1. Writing skills and its importance

Writing is often regarded as one of the most challenging skills to acquire, as students generally find it more enjoyable and easier to listen or read rather than to organise their thoughts and put them down on paper. Since writing is a productive skill, it requires a significant amount of time, effort, patience, and dedication to master. However, it can be argued that teaching writing has become easier for educators due to the various strategies and activities extensively utilised in the classroom today. Unlike in the past, when the process of learning to write in a second language was of less significance, modern technological advancements have elevated its importance. Nowadays, people predominantly communicate through written messages, making proficiency in writing essential (Griffiths, 2016). Harmer underscores the importance of teaching writing, noting that the reasons for teaching writing to English as a foreign language students include providing reinforcement, fostering language development, catering to individual learning preferences, and most notably, cultivating writing as a distinct skill. Consequently, writing is a complex process that encompasses all facets of language learning. As discussed earlier in this study, language structures are interrelated and play a role in enhancement (Harmer, 1998, p.169).

Graham and Perin suggest that writing serves two important roles: 1. It supports the use of different strategies to accomplish goals, such as planning or writing a text. 2. It is very valuable as a tool that helps students deepen their learning process (Graham & Perin, 2007). To conclude this part, it would be worth mentioning (Pack, 2003, p. 17) when he says: "Learning to write well is learning to think, learning to become an educated person. Writing is essentially the vehicle by which our ideas and feelings are expressed and articulated in the first place. Writing at once defines and constitutes our identity." This is the importance of writing that everyone should know.

2.2. Elements of writing

Writing serves as a means of communication and a platform for expressing thoughts, emotions, ideas, and everyday experiences. It not only facilitates learning but also provides a gratifying outlet for self-reflection. In addition to cognitive development, it is important to encourage students to articulate their emotional state and share their thoughts on the learning process, an approach also endorsed by Finocchiaro (Finocchiaro, 1985, p. 43). Writing can also serve as a method to bridge the gaps encountered in speaking. When students write not only to fulfil assignments but also for their enjoyment, they learn to construct grammatically correct sentences and choose their words thoughtfully. This, in turn, can enhance their speech fluency and expand their vocabulary (Pratiwi, 2016). Heaton mentions several essential components that students should possess to excel in writing:

Language use: Students must comprehend and use language accurately to facilitate effective communication with others and articulate their emotions and ideas clearly. Language usage is fundamental to students' language development and successful communication. The use of standard language is of the utmost importance.

Mechanical skills: Students must possess important personal language skills and adhere to standard writing rules. These rules include punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Despite the seeming simplicity of these rules to some students, others may still make errors. It's important to remember that misuse of punctuation, such as commas, can alter the meaning of a sentence. Mechanical skills encompass rules that should be committed to memory.

Treatment of content: Well-crafted content is essential to ensure high-quality writing. The included information should be accurate and directly pertinent to the topic. This approach encourages students to think creatively and develop independent thoughts. Any irrelevant details should be omitted, as they only inflate the word count and offer no value if unrelated to the topic.

Stylistic skills: Refinement of stylistic abilities is crucial, particularly for students aiming to attain a high level of language proficiency. Enhancing vocabulary by incorporating literary devices such as alliterations, metaphors, and symbols is essential for achieving effective writing and eloquent speech. These techniques not only prevent repetition but also elevate the quality of both written and spoken communication.

Judgment skills: Students should feel empowered to write freely without fear of judgment. They need to realize that making mistakes is a natural part of the learning process. Recognizing and acknowledging their mistakes can create a supportive environment for growth and improvement. Encouraging students to express their thoughts and feelings without judgment is crucial for their development (Heaton, 1977).

Other scholars who have explored the components of writing have also noted:

Grammar: Perhaps the most important element to write about, as mentioned by Widdowson; according to linguistic theory, grammar involves combining linguistic forms to produce a coherent text. Writing is not effective if it contains grammatical mistakes. In writing and any other form of language, adherence to grammar rules is paramount (Widowson, 1996, p.128).

Organization of ideas: For Bowen and Cali, organization encompasses the progression, relatedness, and completeness of ideas. Writing a coherent text requires gathering and organizing thoughts. Logical development of the ideas is necessary for the text to make sense (Bowen & Cali, 2003, p. 2).

2.3. Difficulties students face while writing in English

The challenges of writing in a foreign language are similar to those encountered when writing in one's native language. Both require the organisation and logical development of ideas. Unfortunately, if a student struggles with the writing process, it can present a barrier to learning a second language and have a negative impact on motivation. This is supported by a study conducted by (Hedge 2001, p.180). The research findings indicate

that adult ESL learners spend 45% of their time listening, 30% speaking, 16% reading, and only 9% writing. Students' challenges while writing in English can be categorised into three groups: linguistic, psychological, and cognitive (Byrne, 1988, p. 267).

2.3.1. Psychological problems

The answer to developing improvement and self-confidence is motivation, and this applies not only to children but also to adults. This theory is supported by (Davis, 1998, p. 44), who states that to achieve good results with students and to push them to do their best, it is very important to be motivated. Since writing is one of the most difficult skills to be acquired by students, the dose of motivation should be higher, starting from the tasks set to be assigned to students. Students may become frustrated when they are assigned a topic they don't like. The lack of information on the topic can make it challenging for them to write about. Searching for information may leave them feeling fatigued and disinterested. When students lose interest in learning, they may give up trying altogether. Additionally, messy, noisy, and overcrowded classrooms can be very disruptive for students. These conditions can make it difficult for students to concentrate and easily distract them. Lack of focus may lead to mechanical writing without retaining any valuable information.

> **Lack of self-confidence**: Students' characteristics in a classroom are diverse. Some have already built up their confidence, but others are insecure and question everything. This may be because of their parents or even sometimes because of their teacher, who tries to point out students' mistakes to motivate them (Al-Khasawneh, 2010).

> **Teacher-centred classes**: Traditional classes make students depend on their teachers, always waiting for them to dictate what to do, which makes them lose the will to write as long as they can't think independently (Holliday, 1996).

2.3.2. Linguistic problems

Writing can be challenging, even in one's native language, as it is a skill not everyone possesses. To produce well-written and engaging content in a particular language, it is

crucial to have a solid understanding of the language. However, linguistic obstacles often arise for students when it comes to writing, such as: Mastering the content and concepts in English. As mentioned before, it takes time to learn things by heart, especially in those cases when they don't make sense and are not logically acceptable and similar to the mother tongue. Writing in a language with a different cultural concept of their own (Heaton, 1979. Sometimes it can be challenging to adjust from writing in the mother tongue to writing in a second language. The topics assigned are difficult. Without an extensive vocabulary, students are often limited to using simple words and writing only about things or sentences they are confident about.

According to (Afrin 2016), students' most common mistake is subject-verb agreement.

2.3.3. Cognitive problems

Since embarking on this topic, it has been underscored that many factors significantly influence the learning process. The absence of these factors can lead to challenges for students. Some of the pertinent issues include a lack of extensive reading. According to Zamel (1992), reading and writing complement each other, helping students improve vocabulary, visualise correct sentence structure, etc. Previous knowledge of the target language: It plays a role in comprehension and composition (Hinkel, 2004). Prior knowledge will aid students in writing by providing them with accumulated information in advance. Students lack training and practice. Kerswill & Williams state that students need time to adopt a new language and writing skills, in particular, have their own rules and conventions, making it difficult to learn quickly. Even though they may master some structures still their learning process is endless (Kerswill & Williams, 2005).

2.4. Aspects and characteristics of writing

The challenge in different fields, particularly in writing, arises from a lack of understanding of the significance of certain key elements in this process. To address these challenges, educating and acquainting students with important aspects of writing is crucial.

Punctuation: Richards and Schmidt define punctuation as using symbols such as commas, parentheses, semicolons, dashes, and periods to enhance the clarity of

sentences. Many students struggle with punctuation accurately, often because they do not give it the attention it deserves, overlooking its significant impact on both the sentence's structure and intended meaning (Richards and Schmidt, 2013, p. 434).

Vocabulary: According to Herbst, a student's vocabulary is the number of words in a foreign language that they know. The smaller the number of words, the more difficult it is for students to write or express the messages, ideas, and thoughts they want to convey. This aspect should be emphasised because it is one of the main obstacles that hinders the writing process, but it is not the only one (Herbst, 1996).

Spelling: Correct writing or orthography, defined by Sàrosdy & Bencze, is the knowledge of the proper form of writing a word. The word is the fundamental unit of creating a text, and when a word is misspelt, it detracts from the readability and diminishes its aesthetic appeal. It's important to note that in English, many similar words are spelt almost identically but have opposite meanings. Mixing these up can significantly alter the intended meaning of a sentence (Sàrosdy & Bencze, 2006, p.70).
Students should be aware of the characteristics of good writing to produce high-quality work and minimize mistakes:

Unity: Unity gives meaning and creates the logical connection of sentences with each other to create a text. If the sentences are not related to each other, this would destroy the meaning of the whole text and lose its comprehensible (James D. Lester, 1994, p. 56).

Support: As for Richard and Schmidt, sentences in a paragraph are used to support the main topic, so the sentences need to be complete and correct to provide the reader with the additional information needed (Richard and Schmidt, 2002, p. 350).

Coherence: According to Harmer, the phrases and sentences in a paragraph should be related to each other. To achieve coherence, every sentence should be

linked to the topic, and ideas should be clear and arranged correctly and logically (Harmer, 2004, p. 24). If students can memorise, pay close attention, and make good use of these aspects and characteristics, they will definitely improve their writing skills and also ease the process of learning writing.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this study, twenty-seven students from a secondary school took part. The study employs a mixed methodology, including questionnaires with students. The participants were 12th-grade students from three selected classes in the secondary school. The students completed a questionnaire with both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was designed to gather information about the students' English writing difficulties. It consisted of three parts: the first part gathered general information about the students, the second part included six closed-ended questions, and the third consisted of four open-ended questions.

4. RESULTS

This study encompasses the findings derived from the methodologies employed to gather the necessary data. It will initially showcase the outcomes gleaned from student questionnaires using applicable and essential data.

This study aims to highlight students' writing challenges and identify the most common mistakes they make during this process. To achieve this, a questionnaire was developed and administered to students to gather direct feedback. Twenty-seven (27) students participated in the survey and responded to 10 questions. The first part of the survey included two questions requesting information about the student's gender and grade level. Of the participants, 15 were female (55.5%) and 12 were male (44.4%).

The first question in this section is whether writing is the preferred method for expressing thoughts, opinions, ideas, or feelings. Of the respondents, 26 students (96.30%) answered yes, while only 1 student (3.70%) answered no.

In the second question, students were asked if they often feel they have nothing to write about when the teacher assigns a written task. 18 of them answered "no" (66.6%), while 9 of them answered "yes" (33.3%).

In the third question, students were asked if they find it difficult to find the right words when writing in English. Twenty-two of them answered "no" (81.5%), and only five of them answered "yes" (18.5%).

In the 4th question, students were asked to specify the writing structures in which they make the most mistakes. They were permitted to provide multiple answers. The findings

reveal that 20 students (60.61%) identified making grammar mistakes as their primary challenge, while 7 students (21.21%) mentioned difficulties with vocabulary. Moreover, 4 students (12.12%) reported making spelling errors, and only 2 (6.06%) admitted struggling with punctuation.

The 5th question in this section asked students if they sought assistance from teachers to solve writing problems. Once again, 26 answered yes (96.30%), and only 1 answered no (3.70%).

In the 6th question, students were asked whether they write in English because they enjoy expressing themselves in that language or if they only do so when required for assignments. Twenty students (74.1%) indicated writing for pleasure, while seven students (25.9%) stated writing only when completing teacher-assigned tasks.

The rest of the questionnaire includes four open-ended questions to obtain more detailed information from the students.

The 7th question in this section aims to understand students' writing challenges, without prescribing specific areas. Although the intention was to elicit comprehensive responses, students did not interpret it as such. Nonetheless, their responses focused on elements of writing. Notably, 3 students (15%) identified spelling as a difficulty, though their responses were structurally and grammatically flawed. 4 students (20%) claimed they encountered no challenges when writing in English, but one of these statements was also structurally and grammatically flawed. Furthermore, the majority of students reported struggling with grammar (10 students, 50%), followed by spelling (8 students, 40%), vocabulary (6 students, 30%), and lastly punctuation (2 students, 10%).

In question 8, students were asked about their pre-writing steps in English. Most of the students provided insufficient responses, possibly indicating a lack of understanding of the question's requirements. Some mentioned considering the structure and content before beginning to write, but it's important to note that the importance of structure can vary depending on the type of writing activity. While some emphasised the importance of content, they did not elaborate on their approach. Other common responses included first attempting to understand the requirements and then formulating a solution. Additionally, one student mentioned taking notes and conducting online research before writing. Three students selected "It depends", two seemed to misunderstand the question, and one simply answered "I don't know".

In the 9th question, students were asked whether they find it more challenging to write independently or when prompted by their teacher and to explain why. The results showed

that most students struggle when required to write about a topic that doesn't interest them, finding it difficult to express their thoughts in such situations. A small percentage of students said they face no challenges in either scenario and generally enjoy writing in English. Interestingly, only one student admitted to encountering difficulties in both situations.

In the final part of the survey, students were asked to outline circumstances where they struggled to find the motivation to write in English. Many students cited a lack of interest in the topic and pressure to meet assignment deadlines as factors that led to their lack of motivation. On the other hand, five students consistently felt motivated and enjoyed writing. However, three students indicated feeling demotivated when they felt they were falling behind compared to their peers.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This section is crucial for developing the topic. It presents findings and compares them with existing literature. The findings indicate that writing is an effective means of self-expression.

 Furthermore, the findings reveal that some students struggle with writing when asked to complete written assignments, feeling inadequate in generating content (Coulmas, 2003, p.1); they describe writing as the process of documenting knowledge acquired during the learning process. For students facing challenges in finding the right words or content to write, the issue may not be limited to the act of writing itself but could also indicate gaps in their general knowledge. In summary, students with limited knowledge in a particular area, whether writing or speaking, may struggle to express themselves effectively. Students were also asked if they had difficulty finding the right words to write in English. Building a strong vocabulary can be challenging for English Language (EFL) learners, especially when English is not their native language. Not all students naturally have a way with words, so, understandably, they find it difficult. However, most students have mentioned that they don't struggle to find the right words. According to Richards and Renandya (2002, p. 255), having a good vocabulary is crucial for effectively learning a foreign language and using it for speaking, listening, reading, and writing. They also point out that a limited vocabulary can discourage students from using the language. Students must acknowledge that learning is an ongoing process, and this realisation marks the beginning of their improvement journey.

The most commonly identified issue in grammar for students was the language category or writing element they found most challenging, followed by vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation. Grammar, being a complex and comprehensive field, poses significant challenges. (Abdulmajeed & Hameed 2017) note that achieving desirable results in grammar requires long and tireless work. As McCarthy (2001) states, vocabulary is fundamental in communication and central to language acquisition. Without a wide variety of words, communication can lose its meaning. Bancha (2013) observes that spelling mistakes often result from a lack of focus, while Betham (2011, p. 34) highlights that punctuation, although less frequently mentioned, can significantly alter a sentence's meaning.

The students discussed their writing challenges, such as a lack of information on a particular topic, difficulty expressing themselves in the target language, and external factors like motivation and environment. Their responses closely resembled those from an earlier question about writing difficulties, with many students highlighting problems with grammar and vocabulary.

The students outlined the steps they took before beginning to write. Most considered content and structure in advance, but their responses were brief. Galko (2001, pp. 54-55) describes important pre-writing steps, such as selecting a topic, practising pre-writing, summarising the main point, and critically reviewing the draft. When asked whether they prefer writing about self-selected or teacher-assigned topics, most students preferred choosing their topics, citing that it motivates them and makes the learning process more engaging. However, they also noted that strict deadlines and a lack of information on assigned topics can be demoralising. They highlighted the significance of motivation and positive feedback from teachers for success in writing.

Furthermore, the students acknowledged that the challenges they face while writing in their mother tongue also extend to writing in English. They attributed these challenges to the traditional, teacher-focused approach to learning and teaching in Albanian schools, which has led to a lack of emphasis on certain aspects, including writing. Many students enjoy expressing their thoughts, ideas, and feelings in English on paper but struggle when tasked with writing about specific topics, presenting a significant challenge for them.

Recommendations

- To enhance their grasp of various language structures, students should increase their involvement in writing activities.

- Encouraging students to develop and apply critical and independent thinking skills is important for their growth and success.

- Writing and visualisation can be effective tools for overcoming students' challenges.

- They should learn not to consider writing as a challenge but turn it in their favour and use it as a tool for improvement.

- Motivating and encouraging students are key strategies for teachers to help them achieve excellent results.

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