



An Investigation of Academic Writing Errors among Tertiary Level Students at Hadhramout University: A Perception Study

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Abstract

This paper investigated the perception of Yemeni students towards the types of errors of academic writing experienced by them at Hadhramout University- College of Education. A total of 60 respondents completed the questionnaire based on their perceptions towards the academic writing errors made by them in writing tasks. Other four staff members of the department of English were asked to give the most major academic writing errors made by the students in their writing tasks. Data were collected through using a questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The study was conducted in Hadhramout University. The findings of the study showed that students made many errors in academic writing in relation to sentence structure, vocabulary, and expressing ideas, punctuation, prepositions, spelling, use of articles and use of irregular verbs. The errors were ranged from the most frequent ones to the lowest in relation to the aspects of academic writing problems. Finally, it is hoped that this piece of work will add something to the existing knowledge, and might motivate further research into other important areas in the academic writing.

Keywords: academic writing, errors, perception, tertiary level

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the most important skills that foreign language learners should master at school and after (Mukulu et al. 2006). It is a thinking tool through it people as addressers can transmit their ideas to addressees through a text. Students who are able to achieve communicative competence in writing can develop their language and succeed in their academic life at all levels of education (Adams & Keene, 2000; Dudley-Evans, 2001).

However, writing is a difficult skill for nonnative learners of English because they have to take into account other issues in their writing such as content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary and using correct punctuation, spelling and capitalization. Their writing should be accurate in grammar, acceptable in meaning and appropriate to culture. For these requirements, writing in a second language is complex and demanding. Therefore, students encounter many problems such as the ability to write well- developed paragraphs and essays in English. Since English and Arabic linguistic and orthographic systems differ, Yemeni learners of English encounter difficulties in

learning English as a foreign language (Alsamadani, 2010). They usually think in Arabic and apply the rules of their first language at the time they write in English. Consequently, they make errors in word order, subject-verb agreement, use of articles, mechanics etc. They also often beat about the topic and repeat phrases before stating the main points (Dweik cited in Alsamadani, 2010). According to Ellis (1996), identifying errors of writing made by students helps in determining the remedies for these errors faced students. Therefore, the aim of the current study is to investigate students' errors in academic writing through the use of English courses given to the student at the university level.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Given the increasing need for high literacy skills in order to function in the 21st century, it is, therefore, crucial for students to achieve adequate competence in writing skills, because being a skilled writer is very important at all levels of education and for the literacy demands outside the schools.

However, Yemeni EFL students are still false beginners in their ability to write in English. Writing is the particular skill among other skills that causes many difficulties for Yemeni university students. Much research has identified that Arab university students lack the required demands for writing simple paragraphs in English, and Yemeni students are no exception (Jackson, 2005; Spack, 1997). Further studies also confirmed the weaknesses of EFL students in writing and they strongly state that learners face difficulties which affect their academic life (Tahaine, 2010; Al-Samdani, 2010; Grami, 2010; Ezza, 2010; Al-Hazmi, 2006; Rababah, 2003; Bacha, 2002; Khuweileh, & Al-Shoumali, 2000; Kharma & Hajjaj, 1997). Although some research has been carried out on academic writing errors, there have been few studies conducted on this area in Yemeni context, particularly in Hadhramout district. Therefore, the current study might be the first attempt to deal with the investigation of academic writing errors among Yemeni university students.

Efficient writing is an essential prerequisite for success in today's world and creating an ability of writing skills is therefore, among the most useful contribution that teachers can make to their students' future. Thus, based on the importance of writing and according to the results of this study, all Yemeni teachers, students and policy-makers might get some benefits in teaching and learning academic writing based on the results of the current study.

Objective of the Study

This research aims at identifying the academic writing errors that Yemeni university students make.

Question of the Study

The academic writing problem was investigated on the basis of the following research question:

- What are the types of errors that students made in academic writing?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this section is to explore how the writing approaches have been applied to the study of writing, and to familiarise the reader with the state of the field. In an attempt to explain what occurs during writing, different approaches have been posited. To give a review of the earlier approaches of writing, it would be useful to examine the concept of approach. Richards and Rodgers (1986, p. 16) state that approach refers to “theories about the nature of language and language learning that serve as the source of practices and principles in language teaching”. The complex process of writing has been the subject of theoretical inquiry from various angles. Based on this concept, a number of writing approaches have postulated a theoretical framework for writing. Theorists classify writing theories into product; process and genre. These theories are considered essential for understanding the L2 writing process for academic purposes and accordingly they are discussed in the following pages.

Product Approach

The use of product approach in teaching writing emphasises form and syntax of the language (Sliva, 1990). It also puts emphasis on the rhetorical drills. The teacher who adopts this approach is mainly concerned with the written product. That is, the teacher's role is to provide students with the knowledge about the structure of language (Badger & White, 2000). The traditional concept of the product approach with regard to writing is criticized due to its negligence of the writing process and the little attention given to the audience and the writing purposes because learners and instructor over-emphasise the importance of grammar, syntax, the use of vocabulary and mechanics and neglect the process skills such as pre-writing, drafting, evaluating and revising (Pincas, 1982; Badger & White, 2000). Accordingly, students may feel bored in doing the task because of the focus on accuracy of the language structures by teachers. Due to the shortcomings of the product approach such as its emphasis on the language structure and mechanics to name only a few, researchers have discovered that writing is not merely a product as it was viewed in the product approach. They have noticed that, although grammar, use of appropriate vocabulary and mechanics are important for producing a good piece of writing, the steps the writers follow before producing their final drafts seem to play an important role in writing (Tribble, 1996). Such dissatisfaction with the product approach and a growing interest in the study of the constructive role of the students and the instructor in writing have led to a significant shift in writing research from the product approach to the process approach.

Process Approach

The other opposite approach consists of those who perceive writing as a process. This approach emphasises the process of writing rather than the grammatical rules. This process deals with a typical model consisting of four stages: prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing (Tribble, 1996). Writers are encouraged to spend significant time performing tasks within each step and make necessary changes in the previous steps. This means that multiple revisions and feedback sessions with teachers and peers take

place before submitting the final draft. The task in this regard would be of great benefit to students if teachers offer some comments and feedback at the time of doing the task.

The process approach of writing has also been subjected to criticism. It is criticised for its emphasis on the process of writing at the expense of lexical and grammatical forms (Reid, 2001). This approach has promised a lot to explain the writing process with its emphasis on the process. Nevertheless, it only explains the situation of skilful and fluent L2 writers for whom language structures have become automatic. It does not give a true picture of the situation of less proficient language writers. Freeman and Freeman (2004) argue that the process approach is time consuming when dealing with large classes. This is true because teachers may not have enough time to schedule individual writing conferences in large classes. In order to alleviate the weaknesses associated with this approach, Badger and White (2000) suggest that teachers should provide learners with some examples of the text type that they have to write so as to allow them to have a clear understanding about the aim and framework of a particular writing type. In addition, teachers should not spend too much time on one piece of writing in the class and should train students to develop a concept of audience by taking turns giving comments on their classmates' writing. Therefore, it is important that language teachers should adopt this method to improve students' writing abilities.

Genre Approach

Since neither the product approach nor the process approach of the writing process totally accounts for what occurs during writing, theorists of writing have proposed genre approach. In this approach, writers draw upon both the product approach and the process approach information before they arrive at an eventual draft of the text. Genre is a style used by a writer to express his/her self in writing. According to Badger and White (2000, p. 153), genre approach is similar to the product approach and it is "an extension of the product approaches." However, the genre approach differs in the way writing "varies with the social context in which it produced" (ibid).

Genre approach advocates the use of explicit way in teaching writing. This way as it recommended by Vygotsky (1978) illustrates the transition of the responsibility for the learning process from teacher to student. In the early stages of lessons, the teacher is in control. Teachers should provide students with help and assistance to make them responsible for their own learning. During guided practice, the responsibility gradually shifts from teacher to student. During the individual practice, the student is responsible for his learning (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). The role of the teacher is to monitor practice to identify problem areas.

The drawbacks of genre approach are that students find it difficult to use vocabulary in appropriate place. Furthermore, Byram (2004, p. 236) states that genre approach underestimates the skills required in order to produce content and neglects learners' self-sufficiency.

Based on the idea that writing is a skill and therefore teachable through training and scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1962), many researchers have supported the use of explicit teaching of writing processes for improving students' skills in writing. From this

perspective, the researcher believes that teaching writing processes to Yemeni secondary school and university students is very important. Therefore, building-up greater awareness of the steps of writing in students will enable them to be aware of what they are doing, if they are alert to the processes underlying the learning that they are involved in, then learning will be more effective. Hence, explicit teaching of writing should be adopted to instruct students in how to write in an effective way following the principles of genre approach.

Integrated Approach

For those writing theorists who recognise the importance of the product, the process and the genre approaches of writing, an amalgamation of the three approaches (product, process and genre) has given birth to the integrated approach. This approach to writing appears to be a compromise between the product, process and genres approaches. It is an eclectic approach taking the practical side and effective elements of each approach in teaching writing skill. The implication of understanding this process leads to the development of alternative teaching practices for teaching writing skill.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Ghabool et al. (2012) investigated the challenges faced students in writing in three aspects, particularly conventions, punctuation and use of grammar. The sample of the study consists of 30 ESL students from the upper and lower secondary school Form 1 to Form 5 and ten teachers with different teaching experiences. The data were collected through two instruments, a questionnaire and an essay test. The results indicated that Malaysian ESL students have challenges in using grammar and punctuation at the time of writing task. The interference of the mother tongue has clear influences on students' writings. The study comes up with some recommendations and practical methods to solve students' difficulties in writing skills.

The aim of Abdulkareem's study (2013) was to find out the problems that faced Arab students in the academic writing. Eighty five postgraduate students who studied at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) participated in the study. They are from different countries in the Arab world like Iraq, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Algeria, Libya, Palestine and Syria. Selection of students was performed through using snowballing technique. The data of the study were collected by using a questionnaire and writing task. The writing task was given only to five students. They are asked to write two short paragraphs about topics related to their fields of works. The papers of the writing task were corrected by an expert teacher to identify the errors made by the respondents. The findings of the current study revealed that most of the errors made by the Arab students were related to sentence structure and vocabulary. Fewer errors were made in expressing ideas among students from different countries. The study concluded with some recommendations for future research.

Al-Khairy (2013) investigated the types of academic writing problems and the reasons behind these problems among Saudi English-major undergraduate students at Taif University. The study also aims to find out the solutions to overcome these writing problems. Seventy five English major students participated in the study from different

levels (sophomores, juniors & seniors). Data were collected through using an interview and a 32-item structured Likert-scale questionnaire. Descriptive statistics such as mean score and standard deviation were used to analyse the data of the study. The results of this study indicated that the university students who are specialized in English made many errors in academic writing tasks. They made silly errors at the simple sentence level of essays. The study came up with some recommendations for the sake of developing students' English language skills in general and academic writing skills in particular.

The aim of Huwari and Al-Khasawneh's study (2013) was to explore the reasons behind the weakness of writing in pre-year students at Taibah University in Saudi Arabia. 10 male students participated in the study from Yanbu Branch for the academic year 2012-2013. The design of the study is qualitative and the data were collected through using semi-structured interview. The results of this study indicated that students were so weak in writing because of the grammatical errors made by them at the time of writing their tasks. Additionally, they have no enough knowledge of the writing processes and have less practice of writing in English. All these reasons and the weak educational background, that most of the students have, lead to this low level of ability in writing skills. The results of this study may help the teachers and policy-makers to find a solution to this problem. It is hoped that this study might provide contribution to students in Arab world and beyond.

Overall, this section has attempted to provide a brief summary of the literature relating to academic writing. The previous studies discussed above highlight the most common errors made by EFL students in writing skills both in secondary and university levels. Therefore, based on the previous studies and the ideas and concepts of this theoretical model, the current study investigated students' academic writing errors in English language at a university level in Hadhramout University, Yemen.

METHOD

The current section gives an account of the methodology and procedures adopted to investigate the students' academic writing errors.

Design of the study

Combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches makes the design of the study robust. Therefore, the design of the current study is mainly exploratory-mixed methods (Creswell & Clark, 2007). This design was applied to investigate the common academic writing errors among undergraduate students. According to Kothari (2004), the main purpose of exploratory studies is that of formulating a problem for more precise investigation or of developing the working hypotheses from an operational point of view. The major emphasis in such studies is on the discovery of ideas and insights. Consequently, the design of this study is appropriate as the aim is to explore the academic writing errors of university students.

Sample of the Study

Sixty undergraduate students who have learned English as their major for two years participated in this study. The sample was homogeneous with respect to gender, mother tongue, culture and religion. Their ages ranged from 20-22 years at the time of conducting the current study. Furthermore, four staff members of the department of English involved giving additional information about the writing errors encountered by their students. Their teaching experiences are diverse, which helped in giving accurate and valuable information.

Research Instruments

This study used different research instruments and procedures. According to Gay and Airasian (2003), employing a variety of research instruments and procedures would add to the reliability and validity of the conclusions that are drawn out from any particular research. Also, the employment of numerous methods in a research study will give an explicit conclusion and will treat different aspects of the phenomenon comprehensively by increasing the internal validity and providing cross validation (Jackson, 2006). The research instruments used in the current study were a questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The questionnaire was adapted from Al-Khairi (2013) to check students' probable academic writing errors and also to compare these committed errors through semi-structured interview with the department professors on students' writing errors.

Methods of Analysis

All analyses were carried out using SPSS, version 16. Descriptive statistics such as mean value and standard deviation were used to analyze the data of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section addresses the answers and results found in this study through the questionnaire and semi-structured interview according to the research objective. Grami (2010, p. 67) reported that the studies that were conducted to investigate the beliefs of ESL/EFL learners regarding the writing usually focused on "...students' conception of writing, attitudes about themselves as writers, the need for personal expression in writing, and eventually the relationship between students' beliefs and their learning outcome". The present study encompasses rather broader areas and attempts to find out the Yemeni EFL learners perceptions about the errors that are made by them in academic writing tasks at Hadhramout University -College of Education- Seiyun.

Results and Discussion of the Questionnaire

Analyzing students' errors is a valuable source of information concerning the transitional state of the learners' competence and weaknesses. The analysis of the data of this study involved the separation and classification of errors to identify their type. The common errors made by the students are classified according to the responses of students and teachers into grammatical errors, vocabulary, uses of preposition, spelling, use of articles, and use of irregular verbs. The results are divided into two types. The first type is the findings of a questionnaire given to students and the other one is the results of the semi-structured interview with the English department professors.

Table 1. Students' Common Errors

No.	Item	Number	Min	Max	Mean	SD
1	Grammar	60	1.00	5.00	3.8000	1.0527
2	Vocabulary	60	1.00	5.00	3.6000	1.1740
3	Use of Preposition	60	1.00	5.00	3.4533	1.1425
4	punctuation	60	1.00	5.00	3.2667	1.0946
5	spelling	60	1.00	5.00	3.1867	1.0742
6	Use of articles	60	1.00	5.00	3.1467	1.1113
7	Use of irregular verbs	60	1.00	5.00	3.0933	1.0420

As shown in Table 1, the most frequent errors in English academic writing are presented and discussed below.

Grammar Errors

The participants assigned the highest mean value of 3.80 to the first item indicating that the use of grammar is the major problem that students face in their academic writing. This result is consistent with the findings of Al-Khasawneh (2010) who stated that Arab learners face difficulties in grammar. He further explained that grammar is extremely significant to convey a correct message. Hutchinson & Waters (1987) also strongly suggested that it is important to identify the grammatical forms needed for academic programmes and they should be included in the syllabus to acquaint the learners with them for smooth progression.

Vocabulary

The mean value of vocabulary is 3.60. This result indicates that vocabulary is the second major problem facing students in writing. This finding is also in line with the work of Rabab'ah (2003) who informed that the students are unable to express themselves appropriately in their writings due to their limited vocabulary. The results indicate that students cannot find appropriate and necessary vocabulary to express themselves in writing.

Use of Preposition

Use of preposition has been pointed out as the third most important problematic area, with a mean value of 3.45. The findings of using preposition in the current study support the findings made by Al-Khasawneh (2010) who stated that the findings of his study revealed that the students face difficulties in the use of preposition. In addition, numerous studies which reported that the use of inappropriate prepositions is a major kind of error found in the academic writings of the Arab EFL students (Hashim, 1996; Mourtaga, 2004; Zahid, 2006). Furthermore, the findings of Kharma & Hajjaj (1997) also offered valuable insights into the fact that Arab EFL learners' majority errors are in the use of prepositions.

Punctuation, Spelling, Use of Articles and Irregular Verbs

The mean values of punctuation, spelling, use of articles and irregular verbs errors are 3.36; 3.18; 3.14; 3.09 respectively. The findings of the current study broadly support the

work of other studies conducted by Khan, (2011); Kambal, (1980); and Hashim, (1996). Another interesting thing is that all the seven items in this list showed major differences in the responses of the participants of this study as indicated by high standard deviation values calculated for all the items.

Results and Discussion of the Semi-structured Interview

Four professors of English have given some similar and diverse answers to the errors of academic writing made by students. The major errors are listed below:

Grammar

According to the interview with the staff members of the department of English in the College of Education – Seiyun, the results concerned students' errors in grammar showed the misuse of verb tenses, voices, modals, nominalization, logical connectors and aspects in English. Most of the professors confirm that their students faced difficulties in choosing the appropriate form of the verb. This difficulty is due to the negative transfer from Arabic into English. This is because the linguistic principles of Arabic are completely different from that of English. Therefore, students find difficulties in applying the rules of the target language and they apply the rules of their mother tongue instead (Selinker 1969; Mukattash, 1978; Al-Buainain, 1992).

Vocabulary

The vocabulary problem is found to be the second problem faced students in their writing skills. The interview with staff members of the department of English indicates that students are poor in building up enough vocabulary of English. The results are in line with Coxhead & Nation (2001) and Rabab`ah (2003) who confirm that students lack the necessary vocabulary for engaging with others either in speaking or writing tasks. Consequently, this low number of words hinders the effective function in their study particularly in writing skill.

Use of preposition

The problem of using appropriate prepositions in the current study is considered as the third major problem among Yemeni university students. This result is in line with the results of Tahaine (2010), who states that the wrong use of prepositions is common among EFL Arab learners even at advanced levels of their learning. In the discussion of writing errors in this study 'overgeneralization' is applied by all students of this study. According to, Zahid, (2006); Mahmoud, (2002) Brown, (2000) Hamdallah, (1988); overgeneralization errors are considered as 'any error which can be attributed to the application of a rule of English in an inappropriate situation'. The results of this study indicate that Yemeni students in general face difficulty in using English prepositions. The reasons behind this difficulty are that students usually apply their own mother tongue prepositional system. Furthermore, the prepositions in Arabic are different in number, meaning and usage.

Punctuation, Spelling, Use of Articles and Use of Irregular Verbs

Punctuation

According to the responses of the teaching staff of English, students usually have problems or confusion in using question marks, colons or semicolons, apostrophes, and commas while writing essays. It is necessary for teachers to take punctuation problems of students into account, especially when they are correcting students' essays.

Spelling

Professors of the department of English have agreed on the importance of spelling and how students are weak at it. Moreover, the answers of the staff clarified the causes that these spelling errors in writing made by the students. Some of the words in English have some letters which are not pronounced. Additionally, other reasons for this phenomenon are inadequate knowledge of the English spelling rules, influence of the Arabic spelling system, and interference between English words, and unfamiliarity with the English pronunciation. The finding is also in agreement with what Al-Jarf (2007, p. 11) concluded her research with. She states that "English spelling is more complex than that of Arabic; this is expected to pose several spelling difficulties for Arab students particularly in the early stages of spelling development".

Use of Articles

Based on the results obtained by the interview with the staff members of the department, the use of articles in English is a difficult task for foreign students. They cannot control the use of definite and indefinite articles. They mix up the correct use of such articles. Students are not good at writing the appropriate article in the right place. That means they use definite article when there is no place for it and they do not use it when there is a need for it. This difficulty is due to the different use of articles in both Arabic and English.

Use of Irregular Verbs

Errors made by students related to irregular verbs indicate that students apply the normal rule of changing a regular verb from present to past by adding (ed) form to the irregular verb, e.g. Sami comed yesterday. This finding is in agreement with the findings of Hashim (1996) who reviewed many studies related to the syntactic errors of Arab EFL learners and reported that their problematic areas include the use of prepositions, verbs, articles, conjunctions, sentence structure etc.

Pedagogical implication

Since writing is a productive skill, it is one of the most difficult and therefore frustrating subjects to teach particularly in an EFL programme. The research findings of the current study reveal that EFL Yemeni students at university level experience serious difficulties in academic writing. Teachers in this case should handle the students' problems of writing with care. In case of scoring, teachers of writing should correct students' compositions and remedying the common errors in the following classes. Remedying can be done in the following class concentrating on all the common errors in the composition or over a period of time tackling each of the common errors in a period along with other activities. Whatever be the strategy, it is essential that the teacher brings to the students' attention their errors and correct them as tactfully as possible.

Remedial teaching is teaching again the language elements such as spelling or grammar item or punctuation, which the students have wrongly used in their composition, with more examples or using other situations and this teaching should be more interesting to the students so that they may understand the elements better. The current study eventually comes up with the following conclusions:

- 1- Writing is an important skill for EFL learners and it should be taught from the beginning classes with more attention.
- 2- In preparatory stages of learning, writing can be fully controlled by the teacher. Then it can be guided by the teacher. In this case, the control of the teacher is gradually released from the teacher to the students. Finally, students are responsible for their own learning.
- 3- Writing will be realistic only if it is purposeful. That is, what the students write should be read by someone. The teacher can display the best compositions on the class or school notice board as an incentive for the best performers.
- 4- One of the reasons for learners' errors is the interference of his/her mother tongue, which is described as the negative transfer. This error happens when the forms of the target language and those of the learner's mother tongue are different from each other. The teacher has to be observant, identify the errors and correct them tactfully.
- 5- Another reason for learners' errors is overgeneralization, which means that a learner overgeneralizes the target language rule. For example, a learner learns that the past tense form of 'call' is 'called' in English and applies this rule to all verbs and makes errors such as 'comed', 'goed' and so on. Similarly, he/she learns that the plural forms of 'book', 'pen' and 'boy' are 'books', 'pens' and 'boys' and he overgeneralizes this rule and produces words like 'mans', 'womans', which are errors.
- 6- Most of the learners make errors in spelling due to wrong learning of words and lack of practice in spelling. Consequently, teachers should use the number of syllables in each word as a way to remember the spelling of the word.
- 7- The common errors among the learners of English are in the use of tenses, subject verb agreement, use of prepositions, and use of articles. The best way to remedy these errors is to reteach the grammar items because the errors in grammar are due to wrong learning or lack of understanding of the items. To remedy these types of errors, teachers can explain the item with more examples and give more practice.
- 8- A teacher can plan remedial teaching after he corrects the written composition of his learners and collects their common errors in a notebook.

CONCLUSION

The primary aim of this paper was to explore the perception of students towards the types of errors in academic writing experienced by them at Hadhramout University. The

findings showed that Yemeni students made many errors in academic writing in relation to sentence structure, vocabulary, and expressing ideas, punctuation, prepositions, spelling, use of articles and use of irregular verbs. In case of prospective researchers, there would therefore seem to be a definite need for another research instruments in the future studies to reflect the real writing errors made by students. Therefore, a writing test should be used as a research instrument. Also a cross-sectional design should be adopted by future studies to include all levels of students in order to have a deep understanding about all writing errors made by students in different stages of education.

Finally, the present the study is worth replicating in different EFL college writing contexts to investigate if the results obtained in the current study can be obtained at other institutions of higher education in Yemen. Therefore, a study with a large sample drawn from different Yemeni universities is needed to replicate the current one by investigating the academic writing errors of Yemeni EFL college students. This may seem a very ambitious project, but it is possible if a number of writing instructors and researchers in different Yemeni universities cooperate to realize this ambitious project.

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