

Iraqi EFL Learners' Academic Writing: Challenges and Pedagogical Suggestions

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Abstract. Writing is one of major skill for production of any language. However, it is considered as a difficult skill, particular for English as a Foreign Learners. The EFL learners face multiple challenges and problems in this skill. Keeping same in view, the current study was conducted with the aim to explore and investigate the challenges faced by IRAQI EFL learners in writing skills. Further, this study also planned to obtain suggestions from students on how to develop IRAQI EFL learners writing skill. So, focus groups of IRAQI EFL learners were interviewed. Writing sample was collected from 15 EFL learners and scrutiny of sample were conducted in light of thematic analysis techniques. The findings of interviews and analysis of writing sample revealed that main challenges in IRAQI EFL learners are due to insufficient linguistics proficiency, lack of command over grammar, semantic, syntax, vocabulary, lack of ideas and writing anxiety. These challenges are due to various factors including, standard of teaching, traditional teaching methodology, memory based examination system, less motivation, lack of interest in reading and writing. This study also provided short and long term remedial measures for the development of writing skills among IRAQI EFL learners.

Key words: Writing Practices; Iraqi EFL learners: Writing Skills; Writing Problems.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The rising trend of seeking English language globally makes its learning more significant. Iraq is a multilingual country where English language enjoys an important status. Moreover, it is considered the language of educational and economics fields. Writing is an important skill in production of any language of the world. The significant of writing skill increases when it comes under the umbrella of English writing as use of its writing for worldwide mediation of knowledge (Mahboob, 2014; Marlina & Giri, 2014). According to Hyland (2003), the progress of any language is associated with improvement in writing skill. Jacobs & L (1981) stated that writing text of a good EFL writer should be concise, compact, comprehensive and clear. Further, it must be organized, structured and interesting containing an ample range of excellent vocabulary. However, in non native countries writing is considered as a part of academic teaching and learning part of speech, grammar, semantics, pragmatics and syntax as a result it affects the development of English writing. Therefore, progress of writing skill provides massive attention for its teaching and learning from basic stage of English language education. Nunan (1989) states that writing is very difficult activity and it demands to command over multiple factors.

In Iraq, it is an alarming situation that writing skill of all grades student is very low and substandard. The researcher observed that writing is becoming a huge challenge for non-native students especially to EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students of Iraq (Nasser, 2018). The enhancement of writing

skill need practice, structure understanding and comprehension of vocabulary (Aajami, 2018). The problems occur from lack of knowledge of syntax, spellings, selection of content, conversion of thoughts, deficiencies in vocabulary (Hyland, 2003). However, more research is required to investigate the problems in students and it will highlight the all factors into consideration and appropriate suggestions.

1.2 The Problem Statement

The main problem faced by the Iraqi EFL learners is interfering of their mother tongue (Arabic Language). In past numerous studies have been conducted to sort out the problem related to English writing. They often use Arabic Langue in spelling and structure in their targeted language (Kareem, 2013). It has been observed that lack of motivation, confidence; cognitive and psychological factors are key hurdles for Iraqi EFL learners. There is massive lack of creativity among learners in writing of paragraph, composition and essays. Moreover, sufficient adequate English teacher, quality of learning material is badly needed for enhancing of writing skill among EFL learners.

1.3 Research Questions

The researcher was strived to acquire the answers of the following questions:

- a) What are the main challenges faced by Iraqi EFL learners in writing practices at undergraduate Level?
- b) What are the key factors that affect the EFL learners to improve their writing skill?
- c) What are the Suggestions for Iraqi EFL learners writing skill be developed?

1.4 The Significant of the Study

- a) The suggestions/ findings of this study are beneficial for enhancement of writing skill of Iraqi EFL learners.
- b) The research provide an insight for dealing and catering of challenges and factors of Iraqi EFL learners.

1.5 Limitations of the study

This study is limited to Iraqi EFL learners; however, it is need of hour to conduct these types of studies in other cities/ institutions of Iraq. Further, it is restricted to undergraduate level so; it is recommended that other study may be conducted on all levels. Furthermore, small sample size is also one of the limitations of this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing is one of the most difficult and challenging area in EFL learning. The same needs appropriate use of language with accurate vocabulary and right syntactical structure. Hyland (2003) opines that it is a psychological and cognitive process that examine memory, creative thinking ability and massive command over expressing of thoughts. The learning of writing skill has gained enormous importance during last two decades due to language of global communication, technology and dominant countries of the world (Crystal, 2003). Hyland (2003) argues that EFL learners face may write challenges al all stages of their academic and learning levels. Generally, these challenges can be divided into cognitive, psychological and linguistics categories. According to (Quintero 2008), the struggle with the syntactical structure of the English is because of its complication and comprehension of the writing text, which an audience interprets with the help of cognitive process. On the other hand an incoherent and incomplete text is unable to communicate thoughts and ideas in a befitting manners. Which is main cause of lack of confidence and doesn't confirm learning style of student from various backgrounds (Ahmed, 2013).

It is stated that bad writing skill evaluate from two main factors in EFL learning i.e teacher and learner. Lack of pedagogic approach adopt by the teacher in teaching writing skill. Including insufficient feedback to student and inability to motivate learners. Similarly, on EFL learner's part,

there are multiple challenges: effect of L1 (Arabic language), lack of reading, inadequate writing practice and motivation.

In non-native countries like Iraq, EFL learners writers deals with cognitive, psychological, social, mother tongue and linguistics problems while expressing thoughts on paper (Bilal, 2008). There are a number of challenges/ factors that influence Iraqi EFL learner have been recognized in previous studies and literature. These challenges and problems are correlated with learner's motivation as they are uncertain about the significance and purpose of writing in English. Further, discourse and structure of chatting on social media, teacher's feedback, lack of evaluation approach and large number of EFL learning classes also left discouraging affect in improvement of writing skill (Pineteh, 2013).

Iraqi EFL learners face many difficulties and challenges while writing a piece of text. According to (Alfaki, 2015) views, development of writing practices it is mandatory to find out the problems regarding vulnerable area of EFL learners writing. Further, he stated that there are various challenges faced by the student during process of writing i.e syntax, grammar and diction. A very common writing challenge faced by the EFL Learners is that they consider that once to make sentences in L1 and transfer it to targeted language.

Olivas and Li (2006) state that university and college levels students in USA from non-native English countries portrayed poor academic performance and proficiency. Although some of the EFL students have common understanding of grammar rules but most of them cannot compete with the required academic standard of the university level. Furthermore, to expect the excellent academic writing from tertiary is impracticable demand. Proficiency in academic can only be achievable through formal instructional programs even LI students who are rich in grammatically and in vocabulary traits but still fail to achieve the desire results in the absence of proper guidelines (Hinkel 2004). Writing includes the process of combining, developing, evaluating the thoughts, and capability to reshape the ideas in the form of narratives, or renovating information into new scripts as in belligerent writing (Myles, 2002). According to Kelley (2008) research studies reveals that in EFL pretext academic triumph at post-secondary level can only be achieved through proficiency in academic writing. The key factor in the failure of EFL students is poor academic writing (Bacha, 2002; Zhu, 2004).

In non-English leading countries, importance of academic writing cannot be denied in the fields of educational curricula and professional writing (Leki, 2001). Academic writing is desperately needed in EFL countries however; it is considered boring and more demanding task to achieve due to lacking of grammatical and vocabulary competence. Another problem is that in most of the EFL countries academic writing is severely neglected at primary or secondary level it is introduced at University level therefore, it becomes very much hard to acquire the desired proficiency. Moreover, EFL students perceived the impact of inability to write up to the acceptable standard (Horner& Min-Zhan, 1999; Rose, 1989). Peet (1997) suggests that in order to evaluate the standard of academic writing in EFL students, approaches toward academic writing tasks, development, writing passages and essays, and evaluating their own writing is mandatory. Simic (1994) recommends that proficiency level in EFL students can only be upgraded by exercising the appropriate framework, students are encouraged to investigate the different writing traits by correlating each other's simultaneously. EFL learners can achieve the writing goals by focusing the cognitive approach before developing a piece of writing. Resultantly, in this way, students can develop one's own point of view and become more determined (Matsuda, 2003). In the pursuance of student's academic writing proficiency, standard and quality of responses play a perilous role. Continuous monitoring and feedback from the instructors play an important role in the consequences of achieving proficiency in academic writing (Hedge, 2000).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach to find out the challenges that affects the writing practices and provide suggestions to improve Iraqi EFL learners writing practices. The research carried out to provide answers of following questions:

- a) What are the main challenges faced by Iraqi EFL learners in writing practices at undergraduate Level?

- b) What are the key factors that affects the EFL learners to improve their writing skill?
- c) What are the Suggestions for Iraqi EFL learner writing skill be developed?

To answer above-mentioned questions, data were collected through five focus group interview with EFL learners. Focus groups were consisting of five Iraqi EFL learners. Thirty students were selected as sample of the focus group interviews. The groups comprised of 53 % female and 47 % male participant. The consent of respondents was obtained before start of interview and complete confidentiality was assured to the participants. The questions for the interview were vigilantly designed and thoroughly checked for self and expert validity. Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2013) states that validity is key requirement and foundation for any kind of research. The ambiguous language was removed from the questions. Additionally to focus group interview, writing sample (narrative essay) from 15 students was also collected. To identify the vulnerable area in writing sample, thematic analysis technique was used.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study have been divided into three main categories: analysis of writing sample, problems of EFL learners' writing problems and suggestions to develop EFL learners' writing practices.

Analysis of Writing Sample

The analysis of EFL learners writing sample found a total 140 problems, errors and mistakes in syntax, spelling, grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, word form, and spoken expression, repetition of ideas and influence of mother tongue. (See Table 1)

The most numbers of problems and errors was found in grammar including word classes, singular and plural forms, subject and verb agreement.

Spelling and punctuation mistakes found very often. Few spelling errors were 'indivisual' (individual), 'facility' (facility), 'sentense' (sentence), while, punctuations errors was capitalization of letter, use of full stop, question mark, comma and apostrophe.

Writing Error	Occurrence found
Grammar	50
Syntax	19
Spelling	32
Vocabulary	11
Verb form and order	9
Punctuation	7
Others	12
Total	140

Table 1: Thematic analysis of writing sample

EFL learners also used wrong forms of the word and inappropriate order of the words, like, energetic drinks, this is probably his unforgettable day of his life, etc. Furthermore, they used contracted form in negative sentences, using can't, don't, won't instead of can not, do not, and would not. The influence of mother tongue Arabic was also found in using, mather instead of mother, it reflects that thinking process of student in Arabic.

Problems of EFL Learners' Writing Practices

The study discovered that there are multiple factors hampering the development of EFL learners writing practices. Firstly, teaching of writing skill is not gaining any importance at all educational levels and speaking is considered an important skill at all levels. Resultantly, culture of writing is not flourishing and this skill remained ignored. The writing skill is linked with creativity, however, examination system of the country does not encourage the creativity and to be analytical. The examination system suits those students rely on memorization and plagiarism. During the exam

student is to write the 2000 to 3000 words in 2 to 3 hours, same encourage the memorization. Writing anxiety is another factor hampering the progress and development in writing skill. Moreover, reliance on Arabic for converting and processing the thoughts results the problems in writing. EFL learners think in Arabic and then try to translate in English. Inexperienced teachers and old-fashioned teaching method are also hindering the development of writing skill. Lack of concentration and ideas is also a factor causing the problems in writing practices.

Suggestions to Develop EFL learners' writing practices

The respondents of the study suggested several measure for improvement in EFL learners writing practices. Reading was suggested more in order to develop writing practice and enhance vocabulary. It was suggested that presence of a writing culture assist the learners to enhance writing practices and provide opportunities for writing. The respondents further suggested that writing practice should be given to equal of speaking skills.

Importance of well-trained teachers can not be overlook, therefore, it is suggested that skillful teachers are very necessary for enhancing the writing practice of EFL learners. An effective teacher can provide surface feedback to learners that ultimately help in development of writing practices. Change in writing course, writing competition, and extra writing course are also suggested by the respondents.

Discussion

The study revealed multiple motives such as, culture, society, learning context, teaching methodology and learners themselves influencing the Iraq EFL learners writing practices. The repeated topics, questions and essay encouraging the learners to memorize the patterned material. Kareem (2013), also observed similar factors affecting EFL learners writing practices. These challenges and problems can be overcome by enforcing several corrective measures at all levels by all stakeholders. The participant of the study suggested that teachers should raise student exposure to reading and writing. It was suggested too that modification in writing syllabus should be implemented at primary and secondary educational levels.

Conclusion

The study conducted with the aim of exploring the challenges faced by Iraqi EFL learners in writing practices and providing the suggestions and remedial measures. Therefore, considering the challenges factors and problems, it may be concluded that Iraqi EFL learners face multiple challenges in writing practices. However, writing practice can be improved by adopting suggested measures. The findings of the study can be generalized to Iraqi EFL learners at tertiary level of Baghdad, further small sample size is a limitation of the study.

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