

An Investigation of Paragraph Writing Problems Encountered by Level 3 GFP Students: A Case of A'sharqiyah University, Sultanate of Oman

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Abstract: This study aimed to identify the writing problems that are faced by level 3 General Foundation Programme (GFP) students and to find suitable strategies to deal with those problems. The study was conducted in A 'Sharqiyah University, Ibra, Sultanate of Oman, in September 2021. The rationale behind choosing level 3 was that teachers at the college level noticed that college students struggle with paragraph writing. The researcher used a descriptive research method (content analysis). Thirty-six level 3 students had been randomly selected and they had been informed to write a paragraph of 100-120 words on a given subject. The students' paragraphs had been marked twice by six GFP teachers. The purpose was to pick out students' mistakes and errors. The findings revealed that students encounter different writing problems: word choice, punctuation, spelling, capitalization, tenses, and sentence structure. In the light of those findings, some guidelines had been offered. For instance, students should read a lot; reading develops students' vocabulary, grammatical structures, and knowledge of the world as well. In addition, the writing teacher should focus more on positive points of students' writing and not the negative points. Moreover, teachers must praise students for their good attempts. Furthermore, teachers should, regularly, assign in-class writing activities. Finally, the writing teachers should share ideas and strategies on how to cope with paragraph writing problems.

Key words: writing problems, GFP, content analysis, errors, mistakes, writing teacher, positive, negative

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the most essential language skills. Moreover, it's essential for expressing ideas, thoughts, and attitudes. People may want to write for different aims: writing e-mails, reports, blogs, letters, notes. Therefore, considering the audience is an important stage whilst writing. For instance, writing can be directed to an individual or a group of audience or it can be directed to a male or female. The target reader may be known or unknown.

Writing styles are formal and informal; formal writing is characterized by using standard English, greater complicated sentence structures, infrequent use of personal pronouns, and absence of colloquial or slang phrases. Informal patterns are characterized by using nonstandard English forms, colloquial words and commonly shorter sentence structures.

The motives for including writing in a second or foreign language syllabus are many. For example, writing encourages

learning. Raimes (1983) believes that writing offers learners an opportunity to adventure with the language and to move beyond what they've discovered. In addition, Hedge (1988) states that the more students write in the English language classroom, the more their learning improves; for example, to consolidate the learning of new structures or vocabulary or to assist learners gain new language items. In this context, learners receive feedback from their teachers and improve their writing. Similarly, writing helps teachers manage their students and identify their writing problems. This shows that writing is important for mastering the language. However, Hedge (1988) argues that, as compared to speaking, writing calls for some skills: being able to arrange thoughts and data; being able to write accurately and clearly; being able to apply correct grammatical devices; and being able to, carefully, select appropriate vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structures to produce writing that is suitable to the topic and the ultimate readers.

This study tries to identify the problems that level 3 GFP students face. The end goal is to perceive those problems and suggest ways to manage them.

Many complaints have, regularly, been heard among Omani students at faculties/universities, that writing is hard and that they find it difficult to express themselves in a clear, accurate and comprehensible way. A'Sharqiyah University is no exception, and students consistently raise the same concerns. Moreover, the teaching staff at the college level noticed that students' writing is full of distortions, that must be addressed. Students' paragraph writing problems might also occur because of many factors. One of the reasons is probably the complicated nature of the writing skill itself. Byrne (1988) attributes the causes to psychological, linguistic, and cognitive elements while Raimes (1983) writes:

"When students complain about how difficult it is to write in a second language, they are talking not only about the difficulty of finding the right words and using the correct grammar but also about the difficulty of finding and expressing ideas in a new language. (p. 13)".

The researcher, in this study, tries to investigate the writing problems encountered by level 3GFP students at A'Sharqiyah University and find the best ways to overcome them.

II. THE AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to identify paragraph writing problems that level 3 students at A'Sharqiya University face and suggest good strategies to overcome them.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study focuses on three research questions:

1. What are the writing problems that GFP students at A'Sharqiyah University face?
2. How do English language instructors at GFP perceive the causes of paragraph writing problems?
3. How can students' paragraph writing skills be improved?

IV. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

1. Paragraph writing problems for GFP students at A'Sharqiyah University may include: word choice problems, sentence structure, mechanical problems, content, and organization.
2. English language instructors at the GFP attribute the causes of paragraph writing problems to: interference of L1, students' beliefs about English language, poor vocabulary, poor grammar, and poor spelling.
3. Some ways to improve students writing include: students should read a lot; teachers should encourage and reward students; teachers should give a lot of in-class writing and teachers should focus on positive points when writing.

V. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, the researcher will review important writing approaches, previous research on teaching writing, writing problems and causes of writing problems.

5.1 Approaches to Writing

There are two main writing approaches: product approach and process approach.

5.1.1 The Product Writing Approach

According to Nunan (1989), the product approach gives attention to students' final work, that is, the textual content that they may be instructed to write. Unlike process writing approach, students in the product writing approach concentrate more on analyzing and practicing the text type they're instructed to write. Getnet (1994) argues that the product approach is an orientation whose first aim is the result of what students write. The utmost priority is given to formal accuracy and correctness in grammar, spelling, use of vocabulary and conference of layout. In addition, the writing teacher who uses the product technique could be involved to see that the produced writing is readable and free from any discourse distortions. According to Byrne (1988), the product approach of writing is an accuracy-orientated technique that specializes in the control of errors so that they can be eliminated from written works. Raimes (1983) writes:

"In the control approach of teaching writing, students are given sentences to copy and manipulate grammatically and correctly with very limited opportunity of making mistakes."

Hedge (1988) indicates some factors which students must take into consideration in the product approach of writing. These encompass:

1. Accurate grammar
2. Correct spelling
3. Variety of sentence structures
4. Range of vocabulary
5. Meaningful punctuation
6. Cohesive devices
7. Organization and format

5.1.2 The Process Writing Approach

The nineteen sixties, nineteen seventies, and eighties witnessed an influential movement in L1 composition pedagogy and research. Raimes (1985) and Zamel (1982) were among those who strongly supported the approach to process writing. Zamel (1982) believes that the composing strategies of L1 writers can also match ESL writers, but teacher-guided revision is the primary challenge in ESL classes. Process approaches, as they are, now, labeled, consider the individual writer as a writer of authentic thoughts. It was thought that written discourse encoded those thoughts, assisting as a vehicle for conveying one's ideas, and claiming one's individual voice, or authorial character, as a writer. Process writing method centered on strategies for solving problems, finding new thoughts, expressing them in writing and revising emergent texts—typically, in isolation from any cultural, instructional, or sociopolitical contexts in which writing may arise. In addition, Zamel (1982) describes the writing technique as recursive, nonlinear, and convoluted. He adds: It's a technique of discovering and making meaning.

5.2 Learners' Writing problems

Byrne (1988) and Hedge (1988) think that the writer must keep the channel of communication open by choosing suitable structures and by using suitable transitions in order that the textual content is interpreted on its own. The writer must, carefully, organize his/her writing, carefully choose his/her vocabulary and grammatical devices. Byrne (1988) and Hedge (1988) add that learners' writing problems may appear as grammatical problems, mechanical problems, problems of sentence structure and problems of diction.

5.2.1 Grammatical problems

Second language learners face some grammatical difficulties when they write. Tyner (1987) and Kharma (1987) argue that second language learners more likely create problems with tenses, subject verb agreements, pronoun references, and linking words.

5.2.2 Problems of Sentence Structure

Reid (1983) argues that sentences have various syntactic structures. However, Tsegaye (2006) argues that run-on, incorrect, and fragmented sentences are used by some learners. Kharma (1986) believes that a few learners are unable to write longer sentences. In addition, Zamel (1983) states that connectors were determined to be problematic for second language learners.

5.2.3 Problems of Word Choice

Norish (1983) explains that an excellent writing ought to include appropriate and varied vocabularies, proper grammar, and different sentence structures. According to Reid (1983), the text written by the student might emerge as sensible to the reader when the writer makes use of suitable vocabulary that reflect the aim of writing. However, word choice remains a problem for second language learners as many of them tend to use long words and phrases in their writing to attract the reader's attention, White (1980). This will eventually result in diction problems.

5.2.4 Cognitive Problems

Punctuation, capitalization, spelling, content, and organization are some of the cognitive problems that learners face. According to Byrne (1988), Carrol and Wilson (1995), compared to spelling, punctuation has never been regarded as main writing problems; *"students' writings encounter punctuation problems as there are no universal rules of punctuation."*

5.2.5 Capitalization problems

Kroll (1991) states that capital letters are utilized in sentence beginnings, the beginning of important words, topics' headings etc. However, students' problems with capitalization are, likely, because of the truth that the rules of capitalization aren't global and classifying nouns into proper and common nouns is a difficult task for students (Gowere et al. 1995).

5.2.6 Spelling Problems

Gowere et al, (1995) explain that the English spelling system is hard for students because of the impact of other languages, variant pronunciations, and other historic motives.

5.2.7 Content Problems

Second language learners encounter difficulties in exploring thoughts to communicate with others (Clifford, 1987). In addition, Leki (1991) attributes this to the traditional teaching methods. Furthermore, Clifford (1987) thinks that instructors must help learners focus on the message and ideas they want to communicate rather than focusing on grammar, spelling and punctuation.

5.2.8 Organization Problems

Kharma (1986), explains that students face problems of topic development and paragraph development. According to West (1966), the most common problem that students face in

writing is, either the paragraph doesn't discuss a single topic, or the single topic isn't developed accurately. Raimes (1983), shows that some learners could not differentiate between topic sentences and supporting ideas. Additionally, Pincas (1982), believes that students can't write united paragraphs due to their poor knowledge of linking words.

VI. CAUSES OF LEARNERS' WRITING PROBLEMS

There are many causes for students' writing problems: the nature of writing process, lack of motivation, insufficient time, lack of practice, instructor's comments.

6.1 The Nature of Writing Process

Many researchers explain that writing is a complicated process as it calls for utilization of various elements of the language. According to Byrne (1988), writing problems can be seen as psychological, linguistic, and cognitive. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) state that writing is a complex skill since it's gained through non-stop effort and a lot of practice.

Additionally, Bell and Burnaby (1984) believe that writing is a complicated cognitive activity that requires demonstration of several variables on the sentence level and beyond the sentence level. On the sentence level, the writer needs to manage content, format, sentence structure, vocabulary, and punctuation. Beyond the sentence level, the writer needs to have the ability to show cohesion and coherence of paragraphs.

Moreover, Abu (2001) explains that writing is a tough undertaking for both native and non-native due to the fact that writers ought to balance different elements which encompass content, layout, aim, end readers, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, and mechanics. Ur (1996: 163) writes:

"Much higher standard of language are normally demanded in writing than in speech: more careful construction, more precise and varied vocabulary, and more correctness of expressions in general."

Ur, further, states that:

"Writing is a mess business which requires passing through a number of untidy drafts before reaching a final version."

6.2 Lack of Motivation

According to Zamel (1997), writing must have an aim and learners need to be offered the opportunities to practice writing on topics of their interests. Similarly, Davies (1998) believes that learners should be motivated to write about what they are interested in. According to Leki (1991), it's far less complicated for the learners to write about topics of their interests. In addition, Silva (1997) explains that students can write well if they're allowed the freedom to select their own topics. Similarly, Hudelson (1989) discovered that learners produced good writing when they were given freedom to choose their own topics. Furthermore, Pincas (1982) thinks that motivation is crucial for every age and level, and that motivation is enhanced if teachers introduce writing in a

practical context. According to Byrne (1988), most students write less if they're obliged to write on topics which are not their choice.

6.3 Inadequate Time

Hedge (1988) states that writing activities have distinctive stages which need adequate time. Students need time to brainstorm and organize their ideas, write drafts, edit, and write final versions. Colions and Gethen (1980) explain that much of writing stems from several requirements that should be met at different levels such as textual content, paragraph structure, sentence structure and word choice. They added that it's a tough job and that an amount of time is needed to coordinate all these requirements. In line with this, White and Arndt (1991) state that time is crucial for shaping thoughts. Similarly, Raimes (1983) believes that time is an important element in the writing technique and a detail that distinguishes it from speaking. Time can, also, be an important factor in producing an effective writing with complete manage over cohesion and coherence. In addition, many students and instructors consider writing under time constrain is unnatural and cannot produce proper compositions (Kroll, 1990).

6.4 Lack of Practice

Davies (1998) thinks that writing is a creative process and that writers should prepare their ideas clearly to draw the reader's attention. This calls for lots of practice. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) state that learners gain writing through continuous attempt and much practice. Additionally, for good learning to take place, learners must be responsible for their learning. He, additionally, emphasizes that the best way to study any skill is to practice it. Similarly, the best way to become an excellent writer is to write a lot.

6.5 Teachers' Feedback

According to Zamel (1985), teachers should not make harmful remarks when correcting students' writing and that they must act as involved readers as opposed to as judges and evaluators. Similarly, Byrne (1988) states that teachers must look at the positive aspects of writing and not at the negative aspects. This would possibly help student writers to benefit from teachers' remarks and utilize them when revising their work. Similarly, Edge (1989) thinks that instructors need to use correction positively to assist learners. Ferris (1995) believes that instructors should never stop positive criticism but should use it along with comments of encouragement. Ellis (1994) says that language acquisition necessitates learners' motivation. To encourage students, the teacher must write comments of encouragement once they give feedback. However, the comments given does not help students increase their writing talent if the instructor's remarks are doubtful and unbalanced (Cohen and Cavalcanatic, 1990: 155).

VII. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research method for this study consists of subjects, instrument, data analysis and the research paradigm.

7.1 Subjects

The subjects of the study are 36 level 3 GFP students at A' Sharqiyah university. These students are expected to move to year one, university level, upon completing level 3. The students were randomly selected. All the subjects speak Arabic language as their L1, and they all share the same cultural and social background. Six English language instructors were selected to mark students' paragraphs and to answer the interview questions.

7.2 Tool

The tool for data analysis is content analysis (analyzing students' work), and interviews to get responses from teachers on research questions two and three. Content analysis is a qualitative technique that is used to analyze the content and its features. The research paradigm is the positivist research paradigm.

7.3 Procedure

The subjects were asked to write a paragraph of about 100 - 120 words on the topic: *Studying abroad is better than studying in your own country. Do you agree or disagree?* The writing was completed inside the classroom. It took approximately forty-five minutes. The students' paragraphs were checked twice by two different teachers. This is to obtain objectivity.

VIII. RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The data includes students' paragraphs and responses to the interviews with teachers. For students' writing work, 36 paragraphs of students were given to the selected English language instructors. These were double-checked by the instructors. The instructors diagnosed the errors and supplied feedback on the overall work. The following examples show some erroneous sentences spotted in students' paragraphs, along with the instructor's comments.

1. **Study** is very important in our **live**. (Parts of speech: studying/ spelling: life)
2. So, everyone **have** to study. (Subject verb agreement: has)
3. **On other hand**, when we study..... (Article missing: the)
4. **In our country** we don't care about money. (Missing punctuation: comma)
5. Students learn a lot of grammar and vocablery. (Spelling: vocabulary)
6. There are different **study** in each **countries**. (Countable noun: studies/ singular instead of plural: country)
7. In my opinion, I agree that **study** abroad will provide you a better knowledge. (Parts of speech: studying)
8. Studying **in new country** gives students chance to communicate with different people. (Article missing: a)
9. For example, when the students communicate with **this** people.) (Countable noun: these)

10. They will have **many** information about that country. (Quantifiers: much)
11. Secondly, the language becomes **strong more** by living abroad. (Word order and wrong comparative adjective: stronger)
12. For instance, communicate with friends, teachers, students, and people who live with me. (Cognitive problem)
13. First of all, studying abroad **learn** the students a lot of lessons. (Word choice: teaches)
14. We should study abroad to **now** about new experience in that country. (Spelling: know)
15. Firstly, when **you studying** in your country, you know what your country needs. (Tense: study)
16. **In the conclusion**, I agree that studying in our own country will provide us better knowledge and experience than studying abroad. (Wrong use of the article: In conclusion)
17. **I was mentioned** before and I hope all high school students will do so. (Tense: I mentioned)
18. I think studying **abroad better** than studying in your own country. (Tense: abroad is better).
19. **also** we can see and learn...(Capitalization: Also).
20. There are **sevelar** universities and schools abroad. (Spelling: several).
21. It is very important to improve **their self** (Pronouns: themselves).
22. I **belived** the study abroad is a good idea. (Spelling and tense: I believe).
23. **can** study with new friends. (Subject missing).

In addition, the interview with level 3 writing teachers revealed the following:

Teacher 1 said:

“ I think that the main cause of students’ paragraph writing problems is the interference of L1. Many students tend to use their smart phones to do their writing activity. In other words, they write in their mother tongue and send their texts to a translating machine”

Teacher 2 added:

“Many students feel that writing is a lengthy task. For some, writing is a totally hard assignment because there are such a lot of sub-components which need to be put together. For others, the cause lies in some processing problems, including dyslexia or dysgraphia”

Teacher 3 said:

“I believe that lack of practice is one of the major causes of students’ writing problems.”

Teacher 4 commented:

“Writing involves many sub-skills. Teachers should not assume that students are able to write well without breaking down these sub-skills and practicing them separately.”

Teacher 5 added:

“Some beliefs are considered as causes to students’ paragraph writing problems. For example, many students regard English language as a difficult language to learn. Hence, they are more likely to make mistakes as long as they have this belief in mind”.

Teacher 6 said:

“In my opinion, digital devices have added a decline in the quality of students’ writing skills. For instance, students have a tendency to use text messaging in place of writing an electronic mail or a letter. Text messaging is a smooth and fast way of expressing thoughts. However, it’s characterized by using its own informal language which impacts students’ writing skill, in the long run. Furthermore, due to the smooth access to a lot of written work and sources on the internet, most students feel lazy to do their writing tasks. Students feel all they need to do is to, simply, reproduce an already published work in place of using their own words.”

IX. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study strives to investigate the writing problems encountered by level 3 GFP students at A’ Sharqiya University, Oman. The intention is to identify these problems and recommend remedial processes. The sample includes 36 students. They had been asked to write a paragraph on:

Studying abroad is better than studying in your own country. Do you agree or disagree?

Their answers had been analyzed by six English language teachers. The findings revealed that students encountered different writing problems such as mechanical, linguistic, cognitive, and psychomotor problems. Hence, the findings of this study support the researcher’s hypotheses and the previous studies on the field.

Based on these findings, some recommendations are given:

1. Students should read a lot. Reading helps students develop their vocabulary, grammatical structures, and knowledge of the world as well.
2. Students should practice writing on regular basis. Writing is a skill which is learned by means of practice.
3. The writing teacher should praise students’ writing attempts rather than focusing on negative points.
4. Writing teachers should, frequently, assign in-class writing activities.
5. Writing teachers should provide guidance throughout the writing process.
6. Teachers should ask students to peer check their work. This will help expand their critical thinking.
7. The writing teachers should share ideas and techniques on how to deal with paragraph writing problems.

It is hoped that the findings of this study will be of great significance to teachers of English language, syllabus designers and EFL students.

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