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A Study of the Difficulties and Possible Remedies of the Writing Skill among the Students of Preparatory Year, Najran University: TEFL in the Context

Mohammad Owais Khan, Ph.D. and Irshad Ahmad Khan, M.A. (Linguistics)

ABSTRACT

Writing has always been a matter of concern for Arab students. There are several studies conducted by Arab and other scholars in the said field. Works done by scholars which focus on how writing skill can be developed; they suggested some of the models which are of high intensity and very few of them provide the root cause of the problem. The feeling and observation that have been set through years of teaching experience that students in this region are lacking of English writing opportunities i.e. students do not get adequate writing opportunities to write during their secondary classes. The assumption that this gap may be filled by giving them more practical exposure in writing so that the learners will be able to prove themselves as future proficient writers. This study aims to check/assess the present status in writing through different assessment tests and evaluations, then, enhance/develop the respective skill through different drills and teaching hours according to their need after first assessment phase.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition is always skill-oriented. It is not a natural gift like other biological functions, such as the five sense perceptions. When a child is born it does not have to be trained in the function of sensory perceptions. Though the child is born with human articulatory mechanism and can make noises, it cannot make the articulatory mechanism which trains the child to acquire any meaningful acquisition of the language skills. All experts of language have accepted four skills for the purposes of communication --- i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing. Language, in fact, is a system of signals, which operates, for communication and interaction in a particular speech community. It may be in the form of speech, and written communication, which can be called organized meaningful noises or sounds and written messages accepted as a code for interaction in a particular group of people. The important thing is that the set of signals or code whether written or oral should be recognized both by the sender and the recipient as the code signals. What is sent or received is the content. The mode of the signal may be different in different communities. The difference lies in the distinctive features of each language, or even gestural signals used by a particular community. Our purpose here is not to discuss any theory of language learning, but only to emphasize that the signals of communication are to be learnt, practised and mastered before it can be called an effective tool of Written Communication.

The four skills relate to two different domains of theoretical thinking. Listening and speaking belong to the field of oral communication and is studied under the phonology of a particular language. Reading and writing depend upon the orthographic or visual rendering of the speech act. Here we are trying to discuss the latter one. Language has been described as primarily speech and writing as only a secondary and quite often unsatisfactory representation of speech act in visual forms which are conventionally known as orthographies. Bloomfield has rightly remarked that:

"Writing is not language but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks."¹

In fact, until the time of printing all languages were spoken. Leech and Short (1981) have opined that:

"The pragmatic analysis of language can be broadly understood to be the investigation into that aspect of meaning which is derived not from the formal preparation of words and constructions but from the way in which utterances are uttered."²

¹ Leonard Bloomfield, *Language* (Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1963), p.21.

² G.N. Leech & M.H. Short, *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose* (Longman, Inc., New York, 1981), p.290.

See J.N. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, Oxford (Claredon Press, 1962), J.R. Searle, *Speech Act* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969) and "What is a Speech Act", in Giglioli, ed., *Language and Social Context* (Harmondsworth, Penguin 1975) for a discussion of the relation of utterance with meaning and context. Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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Before we embark upon a discussion of the main issue of our investigation an overview of the introduction, proliferation and diversification of English in Arab will be considerably helpful. We know that we need language for purposeful functions, like social interaction, communication of message at different levels with different classes of recipients. The simple diagrammatic representation of this idea can be: encoder \rightarrow message/Code) \rightarrow decoder. The first and the third components in the above diagram have to have mastered the code or signal system to be able to communicate or receive a message.

In the recent past, studies of foreign language acquisition have tended to focus on EFL learner's especially Arabic speaking learners of English. These researchers allow for prediction of the difficulties involved in acquiring a foreign language. In this way, teachers can be made aware of the difficult areas to be encountered by their students and devote special care and emphasis on them. One of the major and very problematic areas for the target learners is writing skills. The present study focuses on this particular area.

It is an immense delight for teachers of English as a foreign language to have a student who speaks and writes correct English. This has been the reverie of all EFL teachers, but especially those who teach Arabic speaking students of English who begin their foreign language studies after the age of eleven, as they are well aware of the difficulties these students encounter in learning English. The present study was conducted to investigate the writing problems of Arab students at the Department of English Language Skills, Preparatory Year, College of Arts and Sciences, Najran University, Najran, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The study designates the most important and very crucial problem faced by students in using English for written communication. This attempt specified the main sources of writing problems. It is proposed that these sources can be classified into five main categories:

- (i) **Problems at the level of structure**,
- (ii) Problems at the level of paragraph
- *(iii)* Spelling problems,
- (iv) Capitalization,
- (v) **Punctuation**

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

English has without doubt achieved some kind of global status as many countries adopt the language they consider to be synonymous with economic success and a cosmopolitan culture. However, factors such as the increasing numbers of speakers of other languages, including English-speaking countries, an increase in bi-lingualism and growing anti-American sentiment in some parts of the world, all indicate that English may not occupy an entirely stable position in the world. This essay explores some of the reasons why English has become so widespread and then argues that global domination of English, despite its current position as a medium of international communication, is unlikely to take place.

Ibrahim A. (2011) rightly states that "According to Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (Richard, 1992), a student makes mistakes and errors when writing. Mistakes are due to lack of attention, fatigue or carelessness. They can be self-corrected when attention is called. Errors are the use of linguistic items in a way that a learner of the language regards them as showing faulty or incomplete learning. They occur because the leaner does not know what is correct, and thus errors cannot be self-corrected. Richard (1985:95) described errors as follows:" the use of a linguistic item in a way which a fluent or native speaker of the language regards as showing faulty or incomplete action."Gass and Selinker (2001) claimed that errors are systematic. They occur repeatedly and are not recognized by the learner. Hence, only the teacher or researcher could locate them, the learner wouldn't.³

Arab learners of English encounter problems in both speaking and writing. This fact has been clearly stated by many researchers, e.g. Abdul Haq (1982), Harrison, Prator and Tucker (1975), Abbad (1988) and Wahba (1998). The students in Jordan, for example, learn English in their native country, where the native language is Arabic. The only way to learn English in Jordan is through formal instruction, i.e. inside the classroom where the language teachers at school are native speakers of Arabic. There is little opportunity to learn English through natural interaction in the target language. This is only possible when students encounter native speakers of English who come to the country as tourists, and this rarely happens.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research confirms that weakness in the writing skills in the foreign language is due to some extent to an original weakness in the mastery of Arabic writing skills. To achieve this objective, the study also aims to propose a questionnaire for evaluating writing problems, and to examine the significance of differences in the four levels. The corpus has been analyzed, classified, and discussed. Credible descriptions for the areas of difficulty are provided, conclusions are drawn, and implications are accordingly suggested.

3.1 Informants/Participants

10 students (Boys) in one intact of analogous class of Preparatory Year English Programme, Department of English Language Skills, Najran University, were randomly selected as informants/participants for practical classes of the present research. All the informants were from the same prior educational background and same culture.

³ Richards, J.C et al: "*Dictionary of Applied Linguistics*". Longman Group Limited, Essex, 1985.

Gass, S. and Selinker, L : "Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course" Mahwah, NJ: LEA, chapter 3.2, 2001, in Ibrahim, A, Ahdullah, H.O. & Mahmoud, T, An Analysis of Written Grammatical Errors of Arab Learners of English as a Foreign Language at Alzaytoonah Private University of Jordan, *European Journal of Social Sciences – Volume 20*, Number 4 (2011), p.545.

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One of the research associates held writing classes with the informants in the same times according to their schedule. Students were not informed about the research work keeping the non-seriousness in mind. They were told that these were special classes for their improvement, where new techniques of teaching were used. The emphasis of teaching was not on generating and assessing ideas, and discussing organisation deliberately because it might be difficult for the level two students. They were given lower levels of writing.

Data were collected from 10 informants (chosen randomly) who wrote about the topics given to them for the survey of the present research. Scripts were assessed and analysed thoroughly in the five weak areas i.e. (i) problems at the level of structure (ii) problems at the level of paragraph (iii) Writing out of context (iv) Capitalization / spelling problems and (v) Language use respectively. The study corroborates that the writing of the Arab students is weak because of the interference of mother tongue. Thus the common assumption in ELT, that all learners are fully competent in their first language skills, is display, as is much of the criticism of ELT programmes for speakers of Arabic, based on poor writing skills in English.

3.2 Limitations of the Research

- The study includes the following precincts:
- ✤ The study is limited to the students' performance in written English.
- ✤ 10 students' Writing Scripts were analyzed in the present research, which were randomly selected.
- Only five weak areas of the writing are taken into consideration in the research, problems at the echelon of structure, problems at the level of paragraph, writing out of context, Capitalization/spelling problems and Language use.
- The purpose of the study is to identify the common writing problems of the Arab learners, of the preparatory year English Language Program and find pedagogical implications to surmount such problems.

4. WRITING PROBLEMS OF ARAB LEARNERS

To shed light on the problems of Arab learners of English, the following are examples taken from different countries. In Jordan, for example, many studies have been conducted to investigate lexical, syntactical and phonological errors committed by Jordanian school learners of English (e.g., Abdul Haq, 1982; Zughoul and Taminian, 1984). Abdul Haq (1982: 1) states that "One of the linguistic areas in which students in the secondary cycle commit errors is in the writing skill". He adds "There are general outcries about the continuous deterioration of the standards of English proficiency of students among school teachers, university instructors and all who are concerned with English language teaching". In support of Abdul Haq's view, Zughoul (1984:4) found that "Jordanian EFL students commit serious lexical errors while communicating in English".

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It was found that the students face problems in writing because of their weak foundation, environment, mother tongue interference and poor system of teaching English in their countries. Weak foundation here means the status of English in schools and colleges, the students' motivation to learn English, and the teachers' lack of interest. Arab learners have a very few opportunities to use English in their daily life. Environmental reasons which include the use of the mother tongue, lack of practice in English writing, affect the learners in using the target language. On the other hand, methods of teaching English includes use of Arabic as a medium of instruction in English classes, writing is done in Arabic, teachers' low proficiency in English, and lack of writing practice in the college and universities. Teachers play an important role in improving the writing skills of Arab learners, according to the survey and questionnaire's responses from the teachers teaching writing skills in preparatory year English program, writing task solely depends on the practice and revision of the writing draft after necessary correction by the teachers, and some teachers suggested that a teacher ought to correct the students' mistakes and errors carefully and direct them to revise the same after correction.

Sentence structure is one of the most complicated areas which create a great impediment of arousing students in doing the writing tasks easy. Another problem of the Arab learners is 'spelling' almost all the Arab learners of ELT have been facing this problem because of the Arabic Language interference. They write the spelling of the words just as they pronounce them. Secondly, as we know that in Arabic language all the sounds are represented with the separate letters of alphabet (mentioned earlier) but that is not the case of English. In English there is no one to one correspondence between the letters of alphabet and the sounds they represent.

In addition to, the informants proposed in their questionnaire that teachers should develop multiple teaching techniques and writing exercises in order to improve students' writing. They should also explore some fun activities like grid exercises and jumbled sentences that would encourage the students' in learning English.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND PRACTICAL WORK

There were 75 Arab students who learn English as Second Language at Preparatory English Programme, Department of English language skills, Najran University who were chosen as the subjects for this study and 10 randomly selected from them for data analysis. They were admitted to Language Skills course. They were in the first semester at the academic year 1432-33. They were asked to write (essay of 150 - 200 words, conversation and yes/no questions). The data were examined by both the authors for recognizing and assorting the problems at the level of structure, problems at the level of paragraph, Punctuation, Capitalization and spelling problems. A total of 191 mistakes have been recorded. They were assorted into FIVE different categories of writing. Table I below shows a clear picture of the number of mistakes.

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Areas/Informants	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	Η	Ι	J
Structural problem	1	5	1	0	2	4	4	5	5	8
spelling problems	5	3	7	7	8	2	2	9	4	9
Capitalization	3	2	1	0	5	6	3	2	4	5
Punctuation	5	3	1	1	4	3	1	3	1	2
Language Use	3	4	7	8	3	1	4	3	5	9
Total	17	17	17	16	22	16	14	22	19	33

Table 1

Capital letters (A-J) refer to informants/ participants and number in figures (horizontally) shows the mistakes in the areas mentioned in the above table.

In the following G**raph 1** three scales are mentioned i.e. on the extreme left no. of mistakes done by the informants/ participants, below the graph different areas of data analysis have been mentioned and the extreme right side of the graph shows the informants taken into consideration.







Chart I displays the number of different categories of the mistakes committed by the EFL learners.

(i) Problems at the level of structure:

This area of writing is considered to be the most problematic for the Arab EFL learners. This area is further categorized in four levels and the total number of mistakes in all four categories are 103 which are asserted in table 2.

TABLE 2

Problems at the level of structure:

Areas	No. of Mistakes
Sentence Level	35
Word Level	22
Use of mother tongue	16
Inversion of words	30
Total	103

Graph 2 shows the common mistakes done by the informants in sentence structures. For example: <u>Najran from city is of the kingdom</u> (*Structural Problem*) written by participant 'C', see Appendix B.



(ii) Mistakes in Capitalization

Mistake in capitalization is a very important category of writing skills which is very common in Arab learners. This area is further divided into four subcategories and the total number of mistakes in all four categories are 54 which are asserted in table 3.

TABLE 3Mistakes in Capitalization

Areas	No. of Mistakes
At the beginning of the sentence	12
Personal pronoun (I)	9
Mixing of capital and small letters	14
Ignoring capitalization in proper	19
nouns	
Total	54

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Graph 3 sheds light on the frequent errors committed by the students in upper and lower cases. For example : <u>Yesterday i go to</u> <u>the zoo with my Family.</u> (*Capitalization*) written by participant 'J', see Appendix F.



(iii) Spelling problems:

The table 4 indicates the most complicated area for the Arab learners. It is very difficult for these students because in Arabic all sounds represent one letter of alphabet but in English that is no so. This area in classified into six subdivisions and the number of mistakes in this chart are 134 which are shown in the following table.

TABLE 4 Spelling problems

Areas	No. of Mistakes
Confusion in letters (b, p, d)	30
Inversion of letters	24
Misspell words as they pronounce (phonetics)	29
Confusion in British and American spellings	15
Confusion with tha and za	16
Homophones/homonyms	20
TOTAL	134

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The following graph highlights the most prevalent issue i.e. spelling mistakes done by almost all the informants especially in homophones and homonyms and letters p, b, d. For example :

- (i) In the comPutr you can see a mintor
- (ii) I saw a tiger, crocodail, a Beer and monkey.
- (iii) I have diner and go to sleeb (*Spelling mistakes*) stated by Student 'J', see Appendix C and F.



(iv)Punctuation

The following table signifies the most common problem encountered by the Arab learners. This area is categorized into four sub-divisions and the number of mistakes in this chart are 78 which are shown below.

TABLE 5 Punctuation mistakes

Areas	No. of Mistakes
Full Stop	19
Comma	17
Question Mark	12
Colon	30
TOTAL	78

Graph 5 highlights the most prevalent issue i.e. punctuation errors committed by some informants for example:

My father([,] comma) mother and I have diner and go to sleeb (fullstop [.]) committed by informant "J" (see Appendix F)



(v) Language Use

Correct grammar is a necessity for every proficient writer and is a must for every student undertaking English as a subject of study. The following table draws attention towards some very common grammatical mistakes encountered while evaluating the numerous writing samples of the participants. The field of language use has been divided into four segments and the mistakes in this chart are 109 as shown.

TABLE 6
Language Use

Areas	No. of Mistakes
Verb	30
Tense	32
Verb to Be	28
Preposition	19
TOTAL	109

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Graph 6 assorts the errors of wrong language used by the participants in the given tasks. For example:

(i) *It was for old people <u>but the people in the presint call for English language</u>, written by informant G.*

(ii) <u>I like play footbul but I don't like swim</u>. (*wrong language use*) written by participant 'I', (see Appendixes D & E).



6. FINDINGS

The findings of the present research can be extended to other learners of English who speak Arabic as a first language and English as a foreign or second language. The research has been confirmed that weakness in the writing skills in the foreign language is due to some extent to an original weakness in the mastery of Arabic writing skills.

Learning/teaching writing skill in EFL and ESL contexts is often described as challenging. In the case of Arab learners and teachers, the task is formidable in mainly because of students' lack of proficiency and insufficient motivation to write. This research describes a strategy that has proved useful in motivating EFL/ESL students of the Department of English Language Skills, Preparatory Year English program to write better.

The strategy is based on research findings carried out during the present project. Two teachers, from India were involved in doing this research. Students were given a writing task, afterwards, they wrote paragraphs and conversational dialogues that reflected their personalities, lives and culture or dealt with issues of international concern. This exercise proved to be motivating and useful to the EFL context in which it was tried. The research

project shows how this strategy has helped to effect improvement in the learning and teaching of writing skills as well as some changes in students' attitude to the target culture, perhaps as a result of increased audience awareness.

According to the present research, students are facing two main types of inconvenience in learning writing skills specially writing paragraph, small essays and other writing tasks such as dialogue writing, question/answer etc. that are sentence structure, spelling and their mother tongue and most importantly incomplete learning rules and techniques to complete these tasks. It would be very useful for the students to increase the number of assignments for the sake of which the students would have to do a lot of writing exercises during their free time, hence they would be able to read a lot of English material and think in English and obviously write effectively.

7. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The findings of the current study may help the curriculum developers to improve the current curriculum of the college and design English courses that could meet learners' needs and wants. This research will meet the general and specific needs of the learners as well as the teachers who are engaged in teaching English in preparatory English programme, Najran University, Najran. The course designers can utilize the findings of the study to design useful and effective exercises which would be helpful in solving the writing problems of the Arab learners. Ultimately, the findings of this study could also be used to improve the teaching methodologies that are used by English language teachers.

After the integration of several sources and techniques, which are mainly based on communicative activities, the teaching of English has gained a new insight. In order to make an English class effective, beneficial, and interesting a teacher should use some well-developed and fascinating techniques in the classroom such as

- CALL-- computer-assisted language learning
- CAI: computer-assisted instruction
- 3 P- a traditional classroom teaching procedure derived from the Situational Approach of presentation, practice and production.

Since teaching is a "developing art" (Penny Ur. 1987), which requires innovative and creative ideas to enrich its effectiveness, we must not hesitate to use such resources in our classroom. These resources can assist our teaching of English while providing a relaxed atmosphere and motivating students. Such activities are student centred, hence by using them we give a chance to our students to express themselves, enjoy themselves during writing classes, and "use the reserves of their minds" (Penny Ur 1987, p.29)

The great figure of incorrect utterances that Arab learners of English produce in their writing tasks (see appendixes) is a signal of how serious the problem is. It is also an indication that the objectives of the English departments in the Arab countries have not yet been achieved and that this situation requires a solution. A lot of studies and researches have been done to identify and indicate the problems of Arab learners whether it is about

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language skills or any other areas of education; very few suggest the solution of these problems. It is a high time to point out the problems of Arab learners and more importantly the solutions of these problems.

As a result, we have to prepare future generations in a way that will enable them to fight with the challenges they are facing in learning language skills especially writing. As teacher of English, we personally feel that it would be important to use different sources, new techniques of teaching writing, because our apprehension is to develop motivation in the students and draw their attention on the target. During our stay in Saudi Arabia, we appreciate that teaching writing productively creates interest towards learning among students. So that the learners can use the techniques of writing and also teachers facilitate them in using these techniques and advise them to apply techniques in context.

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APPENDIX (B)

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APPENDIX (D)

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APPENDIX (E)

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APPENDIX (F)

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<u>APPENDIX G</u> <u>QUESTIONNAIR FOR TEACHERS</u>

The following questionnaire is made by the authors to search out the teachers' opinion on the writing problems commonly faced by them in five particular areas among students in the Preparatory English Program, Department of English Language Skills, Najran University.

TH	IE LE	EMS VEL CTUR	OF	PROBLEMS AT THE LEVEL OF PARAGRAPH						G OƯ TEXI		CAPITALIZATION AND SPELLING				LANGUAGE USE				
diffic	ulties	nts fac in frai ructur	ning	Preparatory students face difficulties in paragraph writing?				They are able to understand the topic for writing.				Students are unable to use capitalization properly.				Do they use proper language in their writings?				
A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	
		nderst ns you		Do they write at home in addition to classroom teaching?				sente		rite the ot rele c?		They spell		veak ir	ı		hey us evisior	e chec 1?	klist	
A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	
		ıd in guio	ded	work	ney dis with t mates	heir	heir		to the	plain t em bej		writi havir	ng hoi 1g san lifferei	onfuse mopho ne sou nt	ones	Anto	they al nyms o nyms?		vrite	
A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	
find of probl	out sor	f writi			ney bri work			writi	ing pro	scuss oblem: mselve	5		s with	rite pro capit		to us lang	e corr	dents d ect after re		
A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	
		ormal Electr	onic		ney con n allot				ng pro	scuss oblems		miste		ts com 1 inver ?		disci		e peer for the ks?	eir	
A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	
	tures f	them or gui		their	hey ab own o ng Ass	pinio	n in	teaci	hing te	llow th echniq st then	ues	their		ts star nces w ter?		Can they write simple routine requests such as: 'Can I have please?'			Î	
A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	

Please tick ($$) where applicable. Scale: A. Always, B: Sometimes, C: Occas	ionally, D: Never
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writi		oblem.	e their s after s.					hey rel ious kr pic?			Do th mista endin "el"	kes in	ı word	~	Can they write correct tenses?				
A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D	A	B	С	D
You		dd yoi rvatio	ır own n	You		dd you rvatioi	ır own n		u can vn obs					add yo ervati		2			

Teacher's Name		
Nationality	•	_ Course
College Name	:	_Teaching experience:

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