Examining and Assessing the Students' Academic writing: an Analysis of the Students' Research papers at English Department - Faculty of Arts& Science/ Alabyar Campus.

By Hidob I. G. Mohammed

Assistant Professor in the Department of English Language - College of Arts and Sciences - Al-Abyar - University of Benghazi

Abstract

Writing in general is a complex skill, that students need to go successfully through college or university. Students whose major subject is English and who study in the final semester are believed to have challenges in producing an academic research paper. This paper attempts to analyze and evaluate the students' term papers concerning academic writing skills. Considering academic writing characteristics, the researcher examined five term papers written by undergraduate students. The study used descriptive analysis as the method of the study. The analysis of the student's corpus showed that the students' writing included different types of errors. However, the lack of academic skills was the most serious and prominent one. The most obvious weakness, noticed in students' writing, was the lack of cohesion and coherence. The study also confirms that poor writing correlates with a deficiency in writing skills. Thus, it seems that the students have low proficiency when they enrolled in the English department. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that pre-sessional courses should be provided for the new students who joined their study in the English department. As well as, the study recommends adopting an admission policy for enrollment in the English department and increasing language programs in academic writing.

1. Introduction

Teaching and learning English speaking skills at the university level has always been an exacting task for both teachers and Arab EFL learners. However, from my own experience as an EFL teacher, Libyan students still encounter several challenges in learning some English tasks, particularly academic writing. This is because writing in an academic context is not an easy task even in the first language, let alone writing in the second language. Many researchers have found that EFL students suffer from problems in writing skills, which may hinder their academic progress (Tahaineh, 2010; Rababh, 2003; Bach, 2002; Kharm & Hajjaj, 1997).

Writing is defined as "... the logical organization and arrangements of the written sentences within a paragraph and paragraphs within the units of discourse...and the expression of the ideas" (Abu - Ghararah, 1998, p87). Hence, Writing involves more than constructing sentences. To be able to write a piece of prose, for example, a student must be able to write a connected series of sentences, which are linked coherently and cohesively. In other words, they are cjoined logically and grammatically. The student must consider the purpose of writing and the mind reader (White, 1980). It is said that students may not be aware

of academic writing features which connect language use with academic contexts (ibid, 1989). These features of academic writing can be grouped into three areas:

Firstly, High lexical density. A proportion of lexical words about grammatical words such as prepositions, articles and pronouns, makes academic writing more tightly, packed with information. For example, Halliday (1989:61) compares a written sentence of three grammatical words with a conversational version of thirteen grammatical words:

(a) Investment in a rail facility implies a long-term commitment.

(b) If you invest in a rail facility this implies that you are going to be committed for the long term.
Secondly, Nominal style, which means verbs are replaced by nouns to form a single unit of a clause, such as 'The train leaves at 5.00 p.m.' can be rewritten as 'The train's 5.00 p.m. departure'. Turning processes into objects in this way expresses scientific perspectives that seek to show relationships between entities (ibid).

Thirdly, Impersonal constructions. Students are often advised to keep their academic prose as impersonal as possible, avoiding the use of 'I' and

expressions of feeling. Raising students' awareness of such features helps them to see how academic fields are broadly linked and how language is constructed according to these features (ibid). Krashen and Brown (2007) propose two types of academic language proficiency: the first type is the academic language, which includes complex syntax, academic vocabulary, and complex discourse style. The second type is the Academic content where the content of subjects such as history, algebra, and literature are involved in the process. Each component has specific techniques that can help learners to understand new ideas or facts.

When talking about writing in the EFL context, students are required to demonstrate their understanding of very complex ideas. They need to use a cautious or hedging style and provide evidence to explain any ideas or claims. For this reason, academic writing is always a complex task, especially for university students whose major subject is English, as they have to write at advanced levels.

Students are believed to have weaknesses in their academic writing performance because of language difficulties and awareness of their

academic writing skills. Therefore, the main aim of the study is to examine and assess the students' research papers and explore the problems of academic writing that the students of the English department encounter.

2. Background of the Study

Many of the studies, which have been conducted in various EFL contexts strongly, suggest that students face several problems with writing skills (e.g. Keong, Y& Mussa, I.2015, Tahaineh, 2010; Rababh, 2003; Bach, 2002; Kharm & Hajjaj, 1997).

One of the recent studies carried out by Javid and Umer (2014) to explore Saudi EFL learners' writing problems has investigated difficulties in academic writing and stressed the importance of writing tasks. This study found that Saudi EFL learners have problems in their academic writing because of "the weakness of using the appropriate lexical items, and organized of ideas and grammar".

In their study about 'Writing Error', Khuwaileh and Al Shoumali (2000: 36) claim, 'Poor writing' in English correlates with a similar deficiency in the mother tongue and found many similarities in the participants' performance in Arabic and English. The main problems of writing were related to

cohesion, coherence, and lack of paragraph unity. However, Doushaq (1986) investigates the stylistic errors of Arab students, claiming that the performance of the participants in both languages was different and, he stated that students performed better in Arabic compositions than in English. "Although most of the students' compositions were marked as having only a fair academic quality from the content point of view, students performed better on Arabic compositions than on English ones (ibid,1986:36)". Hence, understanding the characteristics of academic writing to improve writing skills might help students to make academic writing easier. This paper will attempt to investigate the academic writing difficulties and the student's capability to write research papers. To achieve its aim, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Why do the students of the English department in the final semester encounter challenges to write well-written papers?

2. What are the difficulties that English department students encounter in writing academic research papers?

3. Research Method

The main aim of the study is to investigate and assess the writing problems in the student's work in the final semester of the English department by analyzing specific extracts that can reveal the strengths and weak features of academic skills. In this project, the researcher will use descriptive analysis as a method of study. The researcher will select randomly five introductions and conclusions from the students' research papers, and analyze these materials to find out the challenges the students encounter in establishing a well-written paper.

The reason for selecting only introductions and conclusions of the term papers as the main parts for analysis is that they are considered the main appropriate area for using academic writing skills.

Therefore, five research papers written by groups of students from semester eight at Alabyar English department will be examined and assessed. The term papers were written by the students as group work. The total number of students is 19 students and divided into five groups. Each group consists of four or five students. It is presumed that the student's writing followed the academic writing conventions as they have already studied different courses on writing skills. Hence, the researcher will

investigate some samples of the students' work taking into consideration the features of academic writing.

4. Data Analysis

Most academic disciplines employ their unique stylistic conventions. However, all academic writing shares specific conventions. The main characteristics of academic writing are first, the clarity of the thesis statement, Logical structure which includes an introduction, body paragraphs and conclusion. Thirdly, academic writing requires well-formed arguments. Each statement must be supported by evidence.

Based on these features, the researcher will investigate different extracts and texts from the introductions and conclusions of the student's papers. Therefore, a drawing table consisting of the academic writing characteristics will be established to see whether the students can write their work in an appropriate academic context as required by their teachers.

The study will be conducted in the English department at the Faculty of Arts and Science, Alabyar Campus. The department follows the semester system and awards Bachelor of English. All the students from the 8th semester of the English department have already studied several courses in writing, for example, Writing A, Writing B, and Essay Writing, in addition to a course in research methodology, which is a prerequisite before writing the research paper. The students of the 8th semester are divided into different groups and one of the instructors of the English department supervises each group. By the end of the semester, the students are asked to submit their research papers to the department to be examined and given the results by one or two teaching staff members.

The main aim of this research is to evaluate the student's research papers in terms of academic writing and if they preserve academic writing skills in their work. Therefore, in the following sections, we will examine and assess the students' corpus of each group according to the characteristics of academic writing. In the table below, we see a list of academic writing features in the right column.

Conventions of Academic writing	G	G2	G3	G4	G5
The logical flow of ideas	?	X	√	?	?
• selection of relevant ideas	?	?	√	√	?
appropriate use of analysis and evaluation (critical thinking)	X	X	X	X	X
Overall structure:					
• Introduction	X	X	√	?	√
• Thesis statement			√	√	√
• Overall paragraph structure	?	X	√	√	?
• Topic sentence	X	√	√	√	√
• supporting ideas - examples, theory	X	X	?	X	?
• Relation of paragraph ideas to a thesis statement	X	X	√	X	X
• Conclusion	?	?	?	√	?
Language use & Overall Presentation:					
• Vocabulary: appropriate range and use	√	?	√ •	√	√
• Sentence structure: appropriate range and use	X	?	√	√	√
• Overall accuracy	?	?	? •	X	X
• Overall cohesion	X	?	? •	X	X

	G1	G2	G3	G4	G5
• Appropriate use of discourse markers	X	X	√	X	?
• Smooth links between ideas	X	?	?	X	X
• Appropriate academic style	√	X	• ?	X	X
• punctuation & spelling	X	X	√	?	X
• presentation & Layout		?	√	?	?

On the other columns are the results of the analysis of the research papers for each group (RPG). G1, G2, G3, G3, G4 and G5 indicate the students' groups that prepared the reach papers.

Table 0ne: Writing assessment sheet (quoted from the University of Bath, pre-sessional courses

Notice: G= GROUP, √ = the feature is included, X= not included, ?= incomplete/ not clear

The table above shows that almost the work of the five groups lacks academic writing features, in particular, the use of analysis and critical thinking. For example, the most mistakes made by the participants in-group one were sentence structure, vocabulary, cohesion, punctuation and spelling. The other groups also encountered difficulties in academic writing such as the appropriate use of discourse markers, smooth linking between ideas, and relation of paragraph ideas to a thesis statement. The most mistakes they committed were in sentence structure and spelling. In general, nearly all the papers underperformed and were below the standard of term papers.

5. Research and Discussion

Although the analysis of the student's corpus showed that the students' writing included different types of errors, the lack of academic skills was the most serious and prominent one. The most obvious weakness, which was noticed in students' writing, was the lack of cohesion and coherence. For example, in the research paper of the students' group two (G2) which was about 'Nouns in English', the following two sentences written by the students illustrate this point:

"Proper nouns are those which are used to refer to a particular people, for example, Hala, Youssef, Days of the months. Proper nouns are spelt with a capital letter even when they are used in the middle or final position of the sentence."

In the second sentence, we notice the lack of substitution; the writers start the sentence with 'proper nouns' rather than the pronoun 'it'. The writers also misuse the preposition and the definite article in the first sentence.

Considering the aspect of tense and punctuation in the students' writing, it has been noticed that they committed mistakes such as selecting the inappropriate tense and punctuation as in the extract below:

"The purpose of this Research is Introduce nouns in English this Research will divided to three chapters."

The extract above contains two sentences, but the students do not insert periods or commas to separate them. In addition, the first sentence starts with a small letter and is not capitalized. Other mistakes the students have committed are the words '**Reseach**, '**Introduce'**, which are capitalized in the middle of the sentence.   Therefore, it is clear that there is more than one mistake committed by the students. This consequently makes the meaning unclear and the ideas are not connected.

In the research paper of group three (G3) titled An over View of English Syntax', although it has organized paragraphs, no source citation is mentioned. Consider this paragraph:

"Linguistics is the science of language. It is a descriptive rather than a perspective one, which means that linguistics does not lay down hard and fast rules about how to use a certain language. Rather, it concentrates on describing the rules which native speakers seem to have internalized."   (No citing to the source)

The students of G1 wrote their research paper about 'The importance of Adjectives in English' as a partial requirement for a BA degree. In their writing, some of their body paragraphs lack elaborations and do not support the thesis statement in the first paragraph of the introduction. In other words, the paragraphs that follow the introduction are not connected to the previous ones. Consider the following example:

"Demonstrative adjectives

The forms like this, these, that, and those may be used either as adjectives or as pronouns. To function as adjectives, they have to be followed by nouns."

In the above, two sentences which were supposed to be written as a paragraph showed that there is no connection to the former paragraph. It is an incomplete paragraph because it ended without supporting sentences and a conclusion, which is important to refer back to the topic sentence.

In analyzing students' corpus of group four (G 4 titled ' the translation of Idioms'. The students of this group neglected one of the characteristics of academic writing in organizing the paragraph structure or essay (introduction- body paragraph - conclusion). As can be noticed (see the appendix) in the first paragraph of the 'introduction' is that there is only one short paragraph. This considers insufficient in writing an academic research paper. It is because, in academic writing convention, the 'introduction' of the research paper contains at least three paragraphs: an introductory paragraph that includes the thesis sentences or what the easy is about, 'The body paragraph', which includes supporting sentences with more discussion and the concluding paragraph that summarizes the main points that relate to the thesis sentence. The

extracts below from the first paragraph indicate the lack of academic writing characteristics:

"The study tries to shed light on the notion of idioms and their Impact on language users.

The study includes the following:

Chapter 1 speaks about translation and types.

Chapter two speaks about what are idioms and the translation of idioms and finally conclusion "

The text above contains four unconnected sentences without cohesive devices. We also notice a lack of substitution in the second sentence. The writers start with the word *'the study'* rather than using the pronoun 'it'. The paragraph starts without a clear introductory sentence and ends abruptly without a conclusion. Sentences are written as a list. Also, the students used the word *'speak'* which is an inappropriate choice. Another mistake that can be seen in the example above is the punctuation: the word '*impact*' is capitalized in the middle of the sentence, and there is no period at the end of the last sentence.

Through the analysis of some extracts from the conclusions in the students' research papers, most of them were very short and not written well. Most of the conclusions in the students' papers did not

refer back to the thesis statements. Some of them are like a list, as in the conclusion of G2 and G5.

The conclusion of G4 for example, which is about 'Translation of Idioms', is very short and discounted abruptly (see the extract below).

"Idioms are an important part of the language. They form an essential part of the general vocabulary of English a description of how the vocabulary of a language is growing and changing will help to place idiom in perspective growth and change in the English vocabulary."

As can be seen from the extract above, no punctuation is used. The sentences are unconnected and the idea is unclear. Therefore, the lack of concluding sentences or summaries is one of the students' weaknesses that can be spotted in their writings.

A conclusion in any research paper should summarize the main point and highlight the implications of the paper's findings.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study was conducted to investigate the types of mistakes and problems with academic writing experienced by Libyan students of the English department when writing their research papers at the faculty of arts and science- Alabyar. In addition, this chapter proposes recommendations for further research.

The findings of the study indicate that in terms of academic writing, the students of the English department at the Faculty of Arts and Science appeared to have problems constructing an academic research paper. The areas of cohesion and lack of appropriate use of discourse markers were great challenges to the students' writing. It has been found that the writers of these research papers need basic writing skills to paragraph level before start writing research papers. Based on the analysis of the students' corpus, it is clear that the students have serious problems in their academic writing due to their lack of ability in organizing the ideas in the paragraphs and using the appropriate choice of words.

The other area of weakness is punctuation and spelling. It has been noticed that students who were in the final semester and supposed to have command of English, committed serious errors even at the sentence level (see the appendices). Thus, some research papers were not conducted well and needed to be rewritten. The researcher believes that one of the causes behind the weakness in academic writing skills is that it seems

the students did not have appropriate English language proficiency when they joined the English department. As well as teaching academic writing is not given the attention it deserves.

The study also suggested that extra classes in writing practice and reading in the classrooms should be given to the students before assigning to write a research paper. In addition, the curriculum should include more than one course in academic writing. Importantly, teachers and education decision-makers should take into consideration this weakness in academic writing. Students should be provided with detailed feedback when having writing practices. However, the study dealt with limited aspects involving academic writing problems due to limitations of space and time. There is a great deal of work to be done in this in the future. Researchers may examine the feedback about the students' errors in writing and how can help them to improve their academic writing.

7. References

1.Abu_Ghararah., & Hamzah, A. (1998). Teaching English as a Foreign Language: Procedures, Techniques and Activities. Riyadh: Tawbah Library.
2.Bacha, N.N. (2002).Developing Learners' Academic Writing Skills in Higher Education: A Study for Educational Reform. Language & Education, 16(3), 161- 177.
3.Doushaq (1986). An Investigation into Stylistic Errors of Arab Students Learning English for Academic Purposes. English for Specific Purposes, Vol.5.No.1, pp.27 - 39: Pergamon Journals Ltd.
4.Hayland, K. (2006) English for Academic Purposes: An Advanced Resource Book. Routledge.
5.Hyland, K. (2009) *Academic Discourse: English in a Global Context.* London: Continuum International Publishing.
6.Javid and Umer (2014). Saudi EFL Learners' Writing Problems: A Move towards Solution. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: WorldConferences.net
7.Kharma, N., & Hajjaj, A. (1997). Errors in English among Arabic speakers. Beirut: Librairie du Liban.
8.Krashen, S., & Brown, C. L. (2007). What is academic language proficiency? STETS Language & Communication Review, 6(1), 1 - 5.
9.Khuwaileh, A. and Al Shoumali, A. (2000). A Study of the Writing Ability of Arab Learners and Arabic at University, Language, Culture and Curriculum, 13:2, 174 - 183, DDI:10. 1080/07908310008665979
10.Rababah, G. (2003). Communication Problems facing Arab learners of English: A personal perspective. TEFL Web Journal 2(1), 15 - 30.
11.Shen, F. (1989). The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English

Composition Author(s). College Composition and Communication, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Dec. 1989), pp. 459 - 466: National Council of Teachers of English Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/358245

12.Tahaineh, Y.S. (2010). Arab EFL university students' errors in the use of prepositions. MJAL, 2(1), 76112.

White, R. (1980).Practical Language Teaching. London: Unwin Ltd.