

Investigating EFL Learners' Lacks in Writing

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Abstract

Writing plays a critical role in social, professional, and academic frames especially in Foreign Language Learning (FLL), which usually entails the learners' exposure to the language skills that are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, learning to write accurately is not an easy task in which it necessitates considerable practice and guidance. Although teachers often support their learners to enhance their productivity, they find it difficult to produce coherent wholes. This study attempts to investigate EFL learners' deficiencies in writing. The article opts for a mixed method of research whereby a questionnaire was architected to 50 second-year students from Badji Mokhtar Annaba University. For deepened outcomes, a group-focus interview was held with six (6) writing teachers from the same university. Results showed that the participants lack knowledge of appropriate vocabulary, grammar rules, syntax, tenses, and writing coherence.

Keywords: EFL; coherence; productivity; writing difficulties; writing skills.

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Résumé

L'écriture joue un rôle essentiel dans l'apprentissage des langues étrangères. Cela implique généralement l'exposition des élèves aux quatre compétences langagières. L'écriture n'est pas une tâche facile à maîtriser puisqu'elle nécessite beaucoup d'orientation. Généralement, les enseignants fournissent à leurs apprenants les outils et les stratégies fondamentales pour améliorer leur productivité, mais ils ne cessent d'avoir des difficultés de production. Cette étude a pour principal but de détecter les déficiences de l'écriture chez les apprenants. Elle adopte une méthode de recherche descriptive selon laquelle un questionnaire a été conçu pour 50 étudiants inscrits en deuxième année à l'Université Badji Mokhtar. Pour que ces résultats soient approfondis, un entretien a eu lieu avec six (6) enseignants d'expression écrite. Les résultats ont montré que les participants manquent de vocabulaire, ne maîtrisent ni les règles de la grammaire ni les temporalités amenant la cohérence de l'écriture.

Mots clés: Cohérence; productivité; les déficiences d'écriture.

ملخص

للكتابة دور مهم اجتماعيا ومهنيًا وأكاديميًا، خاصةً في تعلم اللغات الأجنبية الذي يوجب تعرض المتعلمين لمهارات اللغة المتمثلة في الاستماع والتحدث والقراءة والكتابة. ومع ذلك فتعلم الكتابة بدقة ليس بالمهمة السهلة لأنها تتطلب الكثير من الجهد والممارسة. غالبًا ما يزود المتعلمين بالاستراتيجيات وتقنيات الكتابة المناسبة من أجل تعزيز إنتاجيتهم إلا أنهم يواجهون صعوبات كبيرة في إنتاج كتابات متناسقة و منسجمة. تهدف هذه الدراسة لاستكشاف مواطن الصعوبات التي يجدها طلبة اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الكتابة حيث يتبنى هذا البحث المنهج الوصفي فقد وزع استبيان على 50 طالبًا في السنة الثانية من قسم اللغة الانجليزية بجامعة باجي مختار. وللحصول على نتائج أعمق، تم إجراء مقابلة مع 6 أساتذة من نفس الجامعة. وقد أوضحت النتائج أن الطلبة يفتقرون إلى المعرفة الدلالية والبنائية والقواعد النحوية اللغوية السليمة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ الاتساق؛ الإنتاجية؛ صعوبات الكتابة؛ مهارات الكتابة.

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I- Introduction:

In foreign language learning, writing plays an important role in EFL classes as it helps the learners gain proficiency in the target language. It can be a tool through which learners express their thoughts and attitudes into a concrete language allowing them to discover how the language functions in written contexts. When it comes to the teaching and learning of language skills, writing comes at the end, but this does not make writing skills less important.

From a pedagogical viewpoint, learners' accomplishments are regularly evaluated through written tests wherein students need to apply this skill as the main tool to pass. Therefore, learners considerably depend on writing to learning in which their achievements in listening, speaking, and reading skills mainly depend on their writing competence (Fageeh, 2011). Although writing teachers provide their learners with the necessary properties, writing is still challenging and they have serious deficiencies when tackling various tasks.

Writing as a separate skill is almost overlooked, the reason why EFL learners frequently face problems when writing. These difficulties are due to the complexity of writing and the very different intertwined aspects which shape it, the learner, the teacher, the teaching methods, the content being delivered or other psychological features such as motivation and self-esteem. This article, then, aims at investigating what hinders EFL learners' writing. To achieve the main aim, this study aims to identify the major constraints that hamper second year EFL students' writing and how can students of English overcome their lacks.

Accordingly, if second-year students at the English department face crucial problems in grammar, vocabulary, mechanics and essay conventions when tackling written tasks, this may be due to deficiencies in mastering the language properties appropriately and lack willingness to write.

I.1. Aspects of Writing:

Writing represents the physical and intellectual activity that requires the writers to collect ideas and arrange them into comprehensible wholes (Nunan, *Practical English Language Teaching*, 2003). Additionally, he states that writing depicts the writers' point of view when dealing with a given topic. In accordance, the act of writing is considered as the creative creation that includes transcription skills and thinking processes in which considering the aspects of writing is a necessity to express a clear content (Birninger, et al., 2002).

Hedge (2005) defines writing as being a helpful pedagogical tool that sustains the learners' progress in mastering a language. She further argues that students need opportunities to practice a range of forms and functions of writing which would enable them to develop different skills involved for production. These aspects include correct grammar, knowledge about vocabulary, significant use of mechanics, using a variety of sentence structures and arranging the ideas to develop the topic clearly (Hedge, 2005).

Foreign Language Teachers are supposed to make a clear distinction between teaching writing for learning or writing for the sake of writing (Harmer, *How to Teach Writing*, 2004). Accordingly, he claims that writing for learning is used as a cognitive strategy to help learners practice and reinforce what is being studied as a subject matter in the target language whereas writing for writing is mainly directed for becoming better at writing. Teaching writing then depends on what kind of writing learners are involved in and how do they tackle the writing task (Harmer, 2004).

I. 2. The Importance of Writing:

Mastering writing skills gives the learners a sense of command towards the language being taught in which they would think critically to produce an appropriate account. Through writing, learners get knowledge about how to share their ideas, beliefs, and emotions effectively. Accordingly, Harmer (2004) states that:

- a. Learning to write is highly important in which time allocated to choose the appropriate vocabulary or grammatical structure is generally longer which encourages students to tend for accuracy.
- b. Writing is a means of reinforcement of language being taught.
- c. Writing can be also integrated into other activities leading to language development.

In a general manner, writing is the means through which learners' accomplishments are measured. Hence, possessing good writing standards would highly boost students' academic success (Hosseini, Taghizadeh, ZainolAbedin, & Nasri, 2013). Teaching writing skills would engage the learners in the learning process and increase their productivity in writing as well as other subjects.

I. 3. Teaching Writing:

It is commonly agreed that writing is the most complex and difficult skill to be mastered, however, Brookes & Grundy (1998), Hedge (2005) and Harmer, (2007) argued that much focus was seized to the oral-aural skills at the expense of writing ones. During the last two decades, teaching writing to EFL students underwent critical pedagogical changes in which the way writing is taught was the focal point.

Many approaches were emerged to teach writing skills in the EFL classroom from the controlled-to-free- approach, the free writing approach, paragraph pattern approach, grammar syntax approach to the communicative approach which did not last for long as they merely focused on specified features of the language, not on the process through which a composition was established (Nemouchi, 2014). Hence, the product approach, wherein students were required to imitate a given model, highlighted the importance of the final product which should be grammatically correct and conventionally organized (Nunan, 1989). It attempts to promote language learning rather than encouraging creativity. Trying to identify the steps encompassing students' productions led to the appearance of the process approach.

Process writing refers to the different stages a writer undergoes to produce a written whole in its final form which is planning, drafting, revising and editing (Harmer, 2004). Hence, the process approach is a tool for learning, development, and communication which heartens originality and creativity (Hairston, 1982). He also stated that it is recursive wherein the writer may plan, draft then re-plan and re-draft for several times. For successful writing, however, more focus should be paid to given genres that learners are required to master. This view paved the way to the appearance of the genre-based approach.

The genre approach to teaching writing is mainly concerned, as the name indicates, on teaching particular genres that students need control to succeed in particular situations. This might include an emphasis on the content of the text as well as the context in which the text is produced Nemouchi (2014).

Although this approach relies on both knowledge about the language and its contextuality, it undervalues the required skills to achieve the final productional level. According to Badger & White (2000), a successful methodology to teach writing should include insights from the product, process and genre approaches. Hence, the process-genre approach is based on the view that writing involves the correct language properties in a purposeful context through different stages wherein learners are provided with a structured input to make them produce (Badger & White, 2000). Even though different theories sought to provide EFL teachers with guidance to improve the learners' writing, the process-genre approach provided significant contribution enabling the learners to make use of their writing processes to produce a written whole for a familiar purpose.

I. 4. Teachers' Role:

Teaching has always been described as a challenging task that requires huge efforts at different levels. Harmer (2004, 41) suggested that teachers have different crucial roles when teaching writing. Hence, the teacher is the planner who designs tasks and acts as a demonstrator to raise the learners' awareness of the language features tackled during writing. He may also play the role of a motivator and supporter to provoke the learners' creativity to write and hearten their productivity. The writing teacher should respond and react to the students' written work and supply them with ongoing feedback. As to evaluate, the teachers should not only take into account the learner's final achievements and progress, but rather the aim of the activity, the selected material, and the usefulness of the approach.

Writing teachers need to consider their learners' cultural differences and linguistics backgrounds, which may affect the way they write and how to adjust these differences into their teaching (Richards, 2004). In accordance, teachers should carefully design manageable and comprehensible tasks to support the learners (Hedge, 2005). She further claims that teachers can also play the model role for which it encourages them to write.

I. 5. Failure in Writing:

One major question in the field of teaching and learning is the reason behind learners' failure in writing. Coe, Rycroft & Ernest (1992) highlighted the main points leading to poor writing productions:

- a. Many learners find it difficult to use the mechanics appropriately wherein excessive use of punctuations or misuse of capitalization cause misunderstanding of the piece of writing;
- b. Besides, grammatical and lexical inconvenience affects the writers' achievements;
- c. Ideas are not frequently arranged logically through distinct paragraphs or even staffed with irrelevant expressions;
- d. Overlooking the importance of the introduction and/or the conclusion which guides the reader to the right direction leads to failure;
- e. The writers' attitude is vague in which the reader would not understand whether it is a descriptive or argumentative piece of writing.

Consequently, producing an appropriate whole does not seem an enjoyable task for many learners who lack the motivation to write in which EFL students are generally assessed through a reproduction of what has been already presented, therefore, creativity as being the essential key for writing is missing (Shukri, 2014). However, learners should perform a variety of tasks and work on the different aspects of writing according to their specific weaknesses and interests to enhance their writing (Coe, Rycroft, & Ernest, 1992).

II– Methods and Materials:

As mentioned previously, this research is meant to investigate the weaknesses that EFL students have in writing. Therefore, a sequential mixed method of research was designed due to its flexibility in addressing different research questions using qualitative and quantitative techniques in collecting data simultaneously (Creemers, Kyriakides, & Sammons, 2010). Starting with the collection and analysis of quantitative data paved the way to the qualitative method which was based on the grounds of the quantitative results (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The quantitative data of the study was designed under the survey method and distributed online. The survey is a method of collecting data through interviews or surveys (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012) and aiming to investigate the learners' perceptions about their weaknesses in writing. The quantitative data were collected

from a group focus interview which intends to understand people's attitudes and interactions (Leavy, 2014). The interview targeted writing teachers' views towards EFL learners' deficiencies in writing and suggested solutions through non-numerical data using a video-conferencing.

II. 1. The Procedures:

A two-section online questionnaire was delivered to students. The first section comprised 5 questions related to the participants' experiences using the target language, the problems they face during the act of writing, and their teachers' role. The second part constituted of 15 multiple choice questions dealing with the aspects of writing that students may encounter.

Following the analysis of the quantitative data, a focus group interview was held with the teachers through a video-conferencing on Messenger, aimed to investigate the teachers' perspectives towards their students' lacks in writing, their role as teachers of writing, and how do they encourage their learners to write. The time allocated for communication ranged between 50 and 60 minutes. The recorded answers are depicted numerically by creating themes within the framework of the research problems.

II. 2. The Sample Population:

The study sample consisted of 50 second-year students from the English Department at Badji Mokhtar University. It included two groups of second-year students who were appointed according to a simple random sampling that provides appropriate data for the overall purpose of the investigation (Singh, 2006). The students filled out an online questionnaire that was distributed through a Facebook community of practice. Additionally, six (6) Written Expression teachers, who taught second-year, were invited to a group-focus interview. All the participants showed consent to participate in the study.

III- Results and discussion :

III.1. Students Questionnaire

III.1.1. Personal Information

According to the quantitative results, all the participants (100%) showed their approval to participate in the study willingly. Concerning the participants' experience in practicing the English language, the majority of them (44%) used the target language between 8 and 10 years. Another group of students (26%) practiced English for between 11 and 13 years. Nevertheless, another group of learners (20%) experienced the use of English between 14 and 16 years whereas the minority of them (10%) dealt with the language for more than 16 years.

The great majority (70%) of respondents indicated that writing was the most ambiguous skill to be mastered, followed by (18%) of students who claimed that speaking was very challenging for them. However, few of the participants (08%) pinpointed that listening was too complex. The minority (4%) pointed out that reading is the most difficult one. Accordingly, almost all participants (90%) assumed that they have serious problems when writing, whereas (10%) of them believed that they were good at writing. Writing is considered as difficult due to its complexity and interrelated factors that shape the writing and affect the learners as well (Brookes & Grundy, 1998).

As reported by the participants, the difficulties they had in writing were due to different aspects. The majority of them (80%) referred to their lack of linguistic background knowledge such as grammar, knowledge about vocabulary, mechanics and essay forms. The other portion of respondents (60%) related their deficiencies as not being motivated to write because they were not aware of the importance of writing.

However, (42%) of them indicated that they needed continuous practice to overcome their failure and enhance their achievements wherein the teacher plays a significant role encouraging them to write, provoking their motivation, and sustaining their development with appropriate feedback. The minority of students (25%) highlighted that the content being delivered in the classroom was not suitable to develop their writing abilities that is strictly related to the choice of method and approach to teaching writing that fits the learners' needs.

Concerning the teachers' role in the writing classroom, students (80%) stated that their writing teachers ask them to write continuously outside the formal settings wherein only (32%) claimed that teachers provide them with corrective feedback. However, (06%) of the participants declared that teachers design interesting and motivating tasks in which they do not generally consider their linguistic background to sustain them.

III.1.2. Writing in English

In this section, students were required to fill in multiple choice questions which were divided into five major aspects that are grammar, mechanics, word choice, coherence and motivation.

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Writing different sentence structures.	76%	10%	14%
Using articles and prepositions correctly.	76%	0%	24%
Making transitions through linking words.	86%	08%	06%
Using tenses and time markers correctly.	88%	02%	10%
Subject-verb agreement and word order.	74%	0%	26%

Table N°01: Learners' problems in grammar

Table N°01 shows that the majority of participants (80%) cannot write different sentence structures, use articles, prepositions, and linking words appropriately to make smooth transitions between ideas. They also stated that they do not know how to use correct tenses along with the time markers. Besides, most of the students do not respect the word order and make a subject-verb agreement when writing. Hence, these results depict learners' deficiencies in grammatical knowledge, which would significantly affect their writing abilities.

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Using the correct spelling.	70%	00%	30%
Using the punctuation and capitalization.	73%	1%	26%

Table N°02: Learners' problems in mechanics

As table N°02 displays, the majority of the participants (70%) commit mistakes when spelling words and are not able to apply the correct punctuation and capitalization. Knowledge about mechanics helps convey clear messages to the reader as it creates comprehensible situations.

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Using the appropriate words.	70%	06%	24%
Using idiomatic expressions properly.	64%	0%	36%
Making use of phrasal verbs.	64%	0%	36%

Table N° 03: Learners' problems in vocabulary

According to the results in table N° 03, almost the majority of the respondents (66%) face problems in choosing proper words when writing as well as phrasal verbs and idiomatic expressions which help describing the exact situations in the target language. Failure in using adequate vocabulary often weakens the pupils' productivity by giving misinterpretations of the written piece.

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Referring to the thesis statement.	80%	02%	18%
Organizing the ideas in a logical order.	75%	5%	20%
Referring to the introduction, body and conclusion.	75%	1%	24%

Table N° 04: Learners' problems in writing coherence

Results revealed that the majority of learners (75%) do neither refer to the thesis statement nor arrange their ideas logically, which makes their writings denser. Organizing an essay, however, should respect the constant flow of ideas. Most of the students, then, find themselves unable to produce a coherent account.

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Finding writing an enjoyable task.	60%	16%	24%
Sharing writings and giving feedback to others.	61%	19%	20%

Table N° 05: Learner's problems in motivation

From table N°05, it is clear that the students (60%) perceive writing as an unenjoyable activity to perform. They also do not like exchanging what they write, support others with feedback, or even receive one. Therefore, they lack motivation to express their ideas, which prevents enhancing their writing skills.

III.2. Teachers' Interview

After the analysis of the learner's questionnaire, teachers of writing welcomed the initiative and took part in the investigation. Accordingly, their experience in teaching writing varied; in which some of them (17%) taught written expression for 5 years, others (50%) taught writing from 6 to 10 years, and the rest (33%) worked in the field for up to 15 years.

Although some students make the exception, all teachers (100%) were not quite satisfied with their learners' achievements in writing, which reflected severe problems they encounter when teaching. The reasons differed, therefore, grouped in the following points:

- ✓ Students lack motivation and interest to write.
- ✓ They are still dependent on the teacher as being the center of the teaching-learning situation and ask for a tailor-made essay forms to model.
- ✓ They do not consider the teacher's corrective feedback.
- ✓ They have serious deficiencies at the linguistic level in which they lack knowledge about grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, and essay conventions.
- ✓ Most of the students still commit mistakes at the sentence level because they do not reflect on what they already learned.
- ✓ Teachers also complained from the short time allocated to teaching writing despite its importance.
- ✓ Overcrowded classrooms hinder the teachers from working with all students during the session and considering their needs.

All the participants (100%) stated that second-year students are required to produce different genres of essays (descriptive, narrative, argumentative, and opinion). They also highlighted the significance of the steps when they write. However, students are generally assessed on their final productions. Besides, most of the teachers rely on ready-made lectures ignoring the learning differences within their classes.

Because they all agreed that the time designated to teaching writing is not enough to train the students on having good writing standards, all teachers (100%) claimed that they ask their learners' for extensive writing activities for practice.

However, not all teachers provide their learners with consistent feedback for what they wrote due to the time limitations and the overloaded program.

III.3. Pedagogical Recommendations

EFL students face alarming problems in writing. They dispossess the relevant language properties and lack motivation to produce. As it is known, writing is not an easy task to acquire. Hence, it strongly requires excessive practice and full guidance. To overcome these deficiencies, learners need to consider developing their grammatical knowledge. Raising their awareness of the usefulness of grammar to achieve proficiency in writing is highly demanded (Nemouchi, 2007). They should also make use of the positive efficacy of reading which introduces a variety of writing styles and helps the learners to gain fruitful knowledge about vocabulary (Habibi, Salleh, & Sarjit Singh, 2015).

Teachers play a decisive role in the teaching-learning context. When it comes to teaching writing, they have a complicated responsibility due to the importance and complexity of writing and the nature of learners. Consequently, writing teachers need to:

- ✓ Foster the students' awareness towards the significance of writing that strengthens the learners' use of the target language (Harmer, 2004).
- ✓ Choose a suitable approach which is the teacher's principal role. He should emphasize the writing process to permit the learners revising and editing their writings as much as it necessitates for improvements (Nemouchi, 2014)
- ✓ Promote autonomous learners who are creative, responsible, and independent by engaging them in the process and pondering their needs and interests (Chia, Keng, & Ryan, 2016).
- ✓ Create a proper classroom realm to motivate the learners such as setting a classroom conference and building a community through collaborative writing activities (Williams, 2003).
- ✓ Encourage students to write and support them with positive corrective feedback, which showed evidence in improving students' attainments (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012).
- ✓ Due to insufficient time for practice, teachers may create digital platforms for their students to guide them and stimulate their creativity, or even organize correspondence pairing programs for more extensive writing tasks using Computer-Mediated-Communication (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004).

IV- Conclusion:

The research aimed to identify some of the reasons behind second-year EFL students' failure in writing. The linguistic properties are essential for good writing, but learners generally experience deficiencies using them appropriately. They are also unmotivated to produce that the content of the lessons seems uninteresting. Teachers complained about the large-sized groups of students who do not work seriously and the short amount of time allotted to writing. Accordingly, both teachers and learners are responsible to overcome these lacks in which learners need to improve their style through extensive practice, and teachers should sustain their development with thoughtful supervision.

- Appendices:

Students' Questionnaire:

I. Personal Information

1. How long have you been practicing English? years.
2. Indicate which of the following skills is the most difficult for you.
Listening Speaking Reading Writing
3. Do you have problems when writing? Yes
4. According to you, these problems are due to:
 - a. The content
 - b. Lack of motivation
 - c. Lack of practice
 - d. Lack of background knowledge
5. What do you think your writing teacher's role is?
 - a. Encourage you to write
 - b. Ask for extensive writing tasks
 - c. Provide corrective feedback
 - d. Design suitable tasks

II. Writing in English

Choose the best answer

1	2	3
Disagree	Neutral	Agree

- | | | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| 1. I can write different sentence structures..... | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 2. I can use articles and prepositions correctly..... | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 3. I can make transitions through linking words..... | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 4. I can use tenses and time markers correctly..... | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 5. I make subject-verb agreement and respect word order. | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 6. I can use the correct spelling form of words..... | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 7. I can use punctuation and capitalization correctly..... | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 8. I can use the appropriate vocabulary..... | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 9. I make use of idiomatic expressions properly..... | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 10. I make use of phrasal verbs..... | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 11. I can refer to the thesis statement..... | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 12. I can organize the ideas in a logical order..... | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 13. I can refer to the introduction, body and conclusion..... | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 14. I find writing an enjoyable task..... | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 15. I can share writings and giving feedback to others..... | 1 | 2 | 3 |

Teachers' Interview

1. How long have you been teaching writing?
2. Do your learners achieve satisfactory results? If no justify.
3. What approach do you follow? Why?
4. What does 'good writing' mean for you?
5. Do you encourage your learners for extensive writing activities?

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