

# Poor Writing in English: A Case of the Iraqi EFL learners in Misan Province

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## Abstract

This article aims to determine why Iraqi EFL learners are weak writers. Specifically, it tests the following two hypotheses:

١. Iraqi EFL instructors misunderstand the writing process.
٢. Iraqi EFL learners lack the linguistic competence in general, and practice of writing in particular. After collecting data from a teacher questionnaire, and using the Chi Square Test, results revealed that while EFL instructors misunderstand the nature of the writing process, their learners do not practice enough writing in English. Finally, some pedagogical suggestions are stated to develop EFL writing in Misan such as using innovative classroom techniques within the process approach and dealing with learners in a human fashion.

## Introduction

“It is disappointing; it is terrible; it is ugly; I wish I could find one single grammatically correct sentence in their writing; they know nothing; who is to blame? How to overcome this; I don’t know!” This is what instructors of English talk about in a school meeting. Some suggest giving more grammar and writing courses to the learners; while others suggest giving an entrance exam to

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admit only highly qualified learners. Yes, it is true that writing is difficult as it requires intense, active thinking throughout a continuous productive process in which thoughts and ideas are transferred into written communication, but not just words and letters on paper. However, more often than not, students "believe that writing is a natural gift rather than a learned skill" (Langan, ٢٠٠٠:١٢). They may add that they do not have the talent of writing. As a result, these students do not write and do not try their best. to do so. Nevertheless, the good news is that writing can be mastered through practice, and all what it needs is special attention from both instructors and students.

### **The problem of the study**

In the age of Internet, information technology and globalization, writing in English has become so important. However, it seems that many EFL instructors and supervisors still misunderstand the essence of the writing process. Many of them use traditional approaches based on memorizations and drilling. In his M.A. thesis, Abu Gazala (٢٠١٠) stated that the curricula English for Iraq are full of such activities. He added that such activities are important, but they do not help as most learners are unable to produce short sentences, paragraphs and letters to friends. Therefore, this study aims at finding out the possible causes of our learners' poor writing. In other words, the researcher hypothesizes that Iraqi EFL learners are weak writers because of the following two causes (hypotheses):

١. Iraqi EFL instructors misunderstand the writing process.
٢. Iraqi EFL learners lack the linguistic competence in general, and practice of writing in particular.

### **Need for the study**

Unfortunately, most of those who studied the EFL writing of Arab learners such as Kharmah, ١٩٨٧; Atari, ١٩٨٤; Dushaq, ١٩٨٦; El-Sayed, ١٩٨٢; El-Shafie, ١٩٩٠ and Kamel, ١٩٨٩ focused on grammatical errors at the sentence level and

always attributed these errors to L<sub>1</sub> interference. It is clear that these EFL writing scholars neglected more serious causes that are responsible for EFL learners' weakness in writing such as poor instructors and insufficient practice of writing. Therefore, this study focuses on these two cases and that makes it a distinctive one. Finally, it is hoped that this study will benefit EFL instructors, EFL supervisors, and EFL learners.

### **Purpose of the study**

This study aims at achieving the following objectives:

١. Investigate whether EFL instructors in Misan view writing as a process or a product.
٢. Investigate whether Misan EFL instructors understand what writing is about.
٣. Investigate whether Misan EFL learners possess an adequate linguistic competence in general and practice enough writing .

To achieve these purposes, the present researcher distributed a questionnaire among

٣٠ male and female EFL instructors from Misan in the academic year ٢٠١٠/٢٠١١.

### **Validity and reliability of the questionnaire**

As for the validity, the researcher asked his colleagues at the department of English, Misan University, to suggest, modify and give opinions about the questionnaire items and how far they reflect the importance and purpose of the study. These colleagues, who are experienced teacher educators gave valuable feedback and made slight, but important modifications on two of the items.

As for the reliability of the questionnaire, reliability coefficient above ٠.٧ is considered satisfactory. Measuring the reliability can be achieved by using Kronpakh Alph coefficient and Half Split Method as in the following table:



### Split-Half Coefficient

section	Person-correlation	Spearman-Brown Coefficient	p-value	Cronbach's Alpha
Technical skills	.7870	.8148	.000	.8397

The normal range of corrected correlation coefficient  $\sqrt{r/(r+1)}$  is between  $-.1$  and  $+ .1$ . As shown in the table, the general reliability for all items is equal  $.8130$ , and the significant ( $\alpha$ ) is less than  $.05$ . So, all the corrected correlation coefficients are significant at  $\alpha = .05$ . It can be said that according to the Half Split method, the dispute causes group are reliable. The normal range of Cronbach's coefficient alpha value is between  $-.1$  and  $+ .1$ , and the higher values reflect a higher degree of internal consistency. As shown in the table, the general reliability for all items is  $.8397$ . This range is considered high; the result ensures the reliability of the questionnaire.

### Definition of terms

1. Poor writing: insufficient word storage to express genuine ideas on paper, and inability to produce correct spelling, grammatically and semantically correct sentences, paragraphs and other short pieces of writing.
2. EFL: English as a Foreign Language
3. Linguistic competence: learners' knowledge of English
4. Traditional approaches to teaching writing: Approaches that focus on weekly routine of memorization, repeated drills and spelling( Marten and Graves, 2003:30).
5. The process approach: It views writing as an interactive, recursive process consisting of many steps where learners interact together and make peer correction, while instructors give feedback between drafts.

### **Limitations of the study**

This study is limited to a sample of ۳۰ male and female EFL instructors from Misan Province. The study is also limited to EFL instructors in governmental junior and senior high schools. The study, furthermore, limits itself by investigating the possible writing problems of EFL learners from the point of view of their instructors only.

### **Literature Review**

Actually, there are many approaches to teaching English composition from which instructors can choose: ۱) the Controlled-to-Free Approach emphasizes grammar, syntax, and mechanics, and gives preference to accuracy over fluency; ۲) the Free- Writing Approach emphasizes quantity of writing rather than quality, and therefore, focuses on fluency rather than accuracy; ۳) the Paragraph-Pattern Approach focuses on paragraph organization and development; ۴) the Grammar-Syntax-Organization Approach focuses on writing as composed of non-separated skills that should be learned sequentially; ۵) the Communicative Approach emphasizes the writing and the audience, where student writers should think of themselves as real writers writing to a particular audience; and ۶) the Process Approach states that writing is a process of discovering and generating ideas through multiple drafts. However, understanding the nature of the writing process first, and then knowing how to teach it are of great importance. Zamel, who has a remarkable achievement in ESL writing research, states that the composing process is seen as a “non-linear, exploratory, and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning” (۱۹۸۳a: ۱۶۵). Accordingly, both ‘process” and “ideas/meaning” are always emphasized in ESL writing. Based on this definition, EFL writing instructors need to select the most effective approach from a variety of approaches to emphasize this sense.



Brender (١٩٩٨), for instance, talked about “conferencing” as an effective technique in teaching and improving learners’ English composition. He mentioned six types of conferences: collaborative conferencing, small conferencing, third-person conferencing, journaling, emailing, and journaling cum emailing. He stated that this technique is “the most advantageous method for ESL students” and that “students who have three or more conferences in a term not only improve their writing ability, but also significantly improve their listening and speaking skills” (p. ٢). The reading writing approach is another one in which both reading and writing are integrated. Abu Rass (٢٠٠١) tried out this approach with her freshman EFL students and reported that her students enjoyed it and improved their writing though they complained about the amount of reading.

To conclude, the previous approaches/techniques are undoubtedly useful; however, the present researcher believes that every teaching situation is unique. In other words, writing instructors should select the writing approaches/techniques that work well with their students. In addition, they can integrate some techniques with the process approach as the present researcher suggested in the last chapter.

Using the most effective approach to teaching EFL writing is not enough if learners do not practice enough writing. Writing is a skill acquired only through practice. It is, like dance and sport, an activity that could be improved only through practice (Andrews, ١٩٩٩), and through “the exposure to written texts in a natural process of communication rather than grammatical and rhetorical rules on writing” (Leki, ١٩٩٢: ١٧). Therefore, EFL learners do not need more work with language but rather with writing. However, this practice requires that EFL learners have at least some linguistic competence because competence in the organization of written discourse develops late (El-Shafie, ١٩٩٠). This is why



many EFL student writers spend a long time looking for the words they need to express already existing ideas in mind.

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## **Methodology**

### **Sample and Data collection**

The researcher obtained much support for the claims on the causes of learners' weaknesses in EFL writing from a questionnaire distributed among ۳۰ male and female teachers of English whom he randomly selected from many schools in Misan Province (see appendix I). The schoolteachers hold a bachelor degree in English, with ۷- ۱۵ year teaching experience at both junior and senior high schools.

### **Procedure**

At the beginning of the school year ۲۰۱۰/۲۰۱۱, the researcher distributed a short questionnaire among ۳۰ EFL schoolteachers in Misan, eliciting their response concerning their learners' weaknesses in EFL writing. The researcher used the Chi Square Test to analyze the teachers' responses on the yes/no questions in the questionnaire.



## Results and Discussions

The first two questions in the teacher questionnaire test the first hypothesis stated above. Here is the Chi Square product for question 1:

Response	Observed N	Expected N	X <sup>2</sup>
Yes	24	Yes	Q.1
No	6	No	
Total	30		

Twenty-four out of the 30 schoolteachers answered, “yes” to the first question. This difference, according to the result above is statistically significant since the Chi Square coefficient yields p value of .001. So, in this case,  $p < .05$ . This means that the proportion of teachers who said ‘yes’ to the first question was much larger than the proportion of teachers who said ‘no’. In other words, schoolteachers give their learners enough time to write many drafts, and they also give them enough feedback between drafts. Accordingly, they seem to follow the process approach in their teaching of EFL writing which is highly recommended by scholars.

Unfortunately, their simple definitions stated in the second question show that their view of writing does not exceed correct grammar and mechanics. In other words, while they view writing as a process, as shown above, they still emphasize the form over the content in their learners’ writing. This emphasis was clear in their definitions, where they frequently used items such as, writing is a skill, a way to, a mechanism of, a reflection of, a system of, correct punctuations, good sentences, good spelling, suitable words, etc. Only five of them mentioned that writing is a process, two mentioned words such as “thoughts” and “ideas”, while most of the definitions did not reflect how writing is carried out. Therefore, it is clear that Misan schoolteachers misunderstand the nature of the writing process.





Misan EFL instructors' narrow view of the writing process might have its roots in their mother tongue (Arabic). It is well known that Arabs in general are in love with Arabic, and when they write in Arabic, they are interested in composing a flowery language of a complicated style, even when this is at the expense of the meaning intended. Therefore, when Arab EFL instructors look for errors not for ideas, they in fact give their students the impression that writing is grammatically correct sentences; and when they give feedback at the final (only) draft, they provide their learners with a wrong definition of writing as if it were a one-way process. What I would like to conclude here is that although there are other factors that contribute in the problem of writing, most often, those teachers are responsible, and the problem begins from them not from the learners. To clarify more, let us look at the following figure:

Teachers' definition of writing,

Instructional approaches teachers use,

Student writers' definition of writing,

Student writers' writing strategies,

Student writers' success/failure at writing.

According to this figure, any writing approach teachers use will depend on how they view writing. If they view it as a product, then the product approach will be their way of teaching writing. Consequently, their students will view writing as a product, and their writing strategies will be formed accordingly. This might determine the success or failure of these learners. Here are some examples of their definitions quoted as they are stated by these teachers:

--Having a good idea of the topic, arrange the ideas mentally, then write about each idea using good English.

--Writing is a system that helps students to use their vocabulary and information to write sentences good at structure and command.

--In writing, we focus on writing short paragraphs.



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--Sometimes students are asked to use the mini-dictionary to find out the meaning of the same words in English.

--Writing is a skill that learn students how to write correctly.

--Writing is a mechanism in which students use it for improving their language, spelling, reading, and letter sound matching.

Question three and four in the questionnaire test the second hypothesis. Here is the product of Chi Square Test for question ٣:

Response	Observed N	Expected N	X <sup>٢</sup>	p
Q.٣	٥			Yes
		١٥.١		٢٥
No				
...***	١٣.٣	١٥.١		

In the above table, the difference between the observed frequencies of 'yes' and 'no' (column ٢) and the frequencies that would be expected (column ٣) were statistically significant because the Chi Square coefficient yielded p values  $< .٠٥$ . This means that the proportion of teachers who said 'no' to the item was much larger than the proportion of teachers who said 'yes'. Consequently, EFL learners in Misan do not have the sufficient competence in and practice of EFL writing. Therefore, the second hypothesis was confirmed.

The insufficient competence in and practice of EFL writing of our learners is supported by the results of the fourth question in the questionnaire. The average page number given by these teachers was ٢.١٥ page a week, which is nothing for a foreign learner who is seeking to develop his/her competence in EFL writing. Accordingly, teachers believe that their students do not practice enough writing in English, and therefore, the above assumption was confirmed. What is left in the following section is the BIG question: how should writing be taught in



order to solve the problem? This section includes some ideas and techniques proposed by some contemporary scholars in the field.

### Summary and Suggestions

Before starting teaching, writing instructors are to be reminded that teaching is a humanistic career, and that about 50% of learners, according to many studies, fail to learn because their human needs (love, power, freedom, etc) are not met, and therefore, they refrain from working hard (Maden, 1988). They also need to remember that they are not error hunters but that their job is to create non-threatening classrooms by convincing learners that they can write, that writing could be learned, and that nobody's writing is perfect.

Writing is a skill acquired only through practice. It is, like dance and sport, an activity that could be improved through practice (Andrews, 1999), and through “the exposure to written texts in a natural process of communication rather than grammatical and rhetorical rules on writing” (Leki, 1992: 17). Therefore, our EFL learners do not need more work with language but rather with writing.

To ask learners to start practicing writing, “the first lesson in teaching composition is that the writer must find his or her own subject” (Graves, 1999: 115) Graves adds that the “creative energy” which is the discovery experience is not found in English textbooks, but it is in our writers' minds. Through giving choices to our student writers, we, in fact, teach them to take responsibility for their own learning, which is the only way to let them deeply engaged to their education (Rief, 1999). One choice that students might and should be encouraged to choose is “stories”. The importance of stories in the teaching of writing lies in the fact that writing itself is personal (Graves, 1999). Murphy (1999) writes, The stories we tell will be deeply valuable to us, that in telling them we will define



ourselves and that we know, that in learning them we will remember who we are and what teaching and learning have come to mean to us. (٤١)

To proceed in their teaching of writing, Misan EFL instructors need to update their knowledge by getting acquainted with the current trends in the field. The process approach to writing, for instance, has a long time been used in many parts of the world with innovative classroom techniques such as writing in silence, journal writing, free writing, reflection to generate creativity, meditation, concentration, relaxation, deep breathing, etc. Therefore, the recent research in EFL/ESL writing is very important to these teachers in order to make a shift in their definition of writing and errors. Sometimes mere reading of the recent research is not enough because in most cases, “these teachers would be less likely to abandon more traditional views of teaching writing and more likely to resist the de-emphasis on grammar characteristics of process methodologies (Leki, ١٩٩٢: ٧). Therefore, it is important that these teachers get some training in using the process approach in teaching writing.

When using the process approach, writing teachers can follow steps with their student writers such as topic listing, pre-writing, drafting, revision, editing, proofreading, and reflection. However, these steps are not linear because the process approach is recursive in nature. This means learners can do any of these things at any time during the process of producing their text. When writing instructors follow the process approach, learners will enjoy the interactive recursive characteristics of the approach. They will benefit from each other through peer response or peer editing groups with guidance from their instructors. In addition, they will benefit from the in between draft feedback because they will incorporate it into their writing.



Following the process approach does not mean focusing on rules of correction when evaluating student writers' composition. First of all, research show that formal grammar instructions and error correction have little effect on learners' writing quality and on their ability to reduce the number of errors in their writing (Leki, ۱۹۹۲, Hartwell, ۱۹۹۹). In addition, it is believed that as learners are exposed to more of the L۲ and practice more EFL writing, many of the errors they commit will naturally disappear. Therefore, it is important that teachers look for ideas and make feedback on content first.

Finally, EFL writing instructors should not forget that learners should be treated with sensitivity and consideration. Thus, criticizing their learners' composition should be avoided while praising it is essential. Such praise will create trust through which we, as EFL writing instructors, will learn from our learners who have a lot to say and write. It is through trust that our learners will write and write and write, and it is writing that makes them feel brave, enhances self-esteem and confidence, increases positive feelings, and makes them think of themselves as writers.



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## Appendix I

Questionnaire on writing problems of Iraqi EFL learners

Dear Colleagues,

I would greatly appreciate your response to the following questions, which don't take much time, and are easy to answer. It is only for research purposes and has nothing to do with the evaluation of the course or the teacher. Do not write your name, teacher's name or the course section number.

١. Do you allow your learners to write in English the same topic again and again (writing drafts) with some feedback in between? Yes No

٢. In the space bellow, define briefly what writing is.....

٣. Do you think your learners have a sufficient competence in and practice of writing in English?

Yes No

٤. Roughly, how many pages of English do your learners write a week? -----

