Improving Academic Writing among Iraqi Students at the University of Baghdad: Challenges and Solutions

Asst. Lect. Sajida Razzaq Ali[1], Asst. Prof. Sura Muttlak Nasser[2]

[1]Ministry of Education, Al -Rusafa, 2 Al -Amaal high school for girls, Baghdad, Iraq
sura.muttlak@coeduw.uobaghdad.edu.iq
[2]Department of English, College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad, Baghdad, Iraq.

Abstract

Iraqi EFL students have problems with writing skills, particularly in academic writing, which strongly influences their examination performance. This research was performed at the Department of English at the College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad, to ascertain the writing deficiencies of third-year EFL students. This could potentially enhance their performance through a series of weekly writing exercises. This study tackles the challenges Iraqi EFL students encounter when writing various types of paragraphs. The research seeks to identify these challenges and propose appropriate solutions. The researchers believe that it is essential to improve students' writing skills, since it is a crucial instrument in their educational advancement. The research demonstrates the significance of this distinction. Nevertheless, the researchers conducted a group assessment using pre- and post-tests to evaluate the outcomes of students' findings by using SPSS program.

Keywords:
academic writing, Iraqi students' difficulties, writing skill

تطوير الكتابة الاكاديمية للطلبة العراقيين في جامعة بغداد: تحديات وحلول

م. م ساجدة رزاق علي١، أ. م سرى مطلك ناصر٢

١وزارة التربية، الرصافة الثانية، ثانوية الامال للبنات، بغداد، العراق

٢جامعة بغداد، كلية التربية للبنات، قسم اللغة الإنكليزية، بغداد العراق

المستخلص

يعاني طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية العراقيين من مشاكل عديدة في كتابة المقالات، وخاصة في الكتابة الأكاديمية، مما يؤثر بشدة على أدائهم في الامتحانات. تم إجراء هذا البحث في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية في كلية التربية للبنات، جامعة بغداد، لتحديد أوجه القصور في الكتابة لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المرحلة الثالثة. حيث بالامكان أن يعزز هذا من أدائهم من خلال سلسلة من تمارين الكتابة الأسبوعية. تعالج هذه الدراسة التحديات التي يواجهها طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية العراقيين كلغة أجنبية عند كتابة أنواع مختلفة من الفقرات. يسعى البحث إلى تحديد هذه التحديات واقتراح الحلول المناسبة. يعتقد الباحثون أنه من الضروري تحسين مهارات الكتابة لدى الطلاب، لأنها أداة حاسمة في تقدمهم التعليمي. أجرى الباحثون تقييماً جماعياً باستخدام اختبارات قبلية وبعدية لتقييم نتائج الطلاب باستخدام برنامج احصائي SPSS .

1. Introduction

Writing skill is one of the essential skills in mastering the English language. It is a means to discuss the author's thoughts and perspectives with the readers. Writing, according to Sari (2017), is a connection medium that employs a graphical system to communicate messages to readers that they must learn. According to McDonough et al. (2013), writing is "A process of encoding (putting your message into words) carried out with a reader in mind." According to Siahaan (2008), writing is the writer's ability to effectively convey messages to readers, and readers can recognize the writer's skill when they apply the rules of language in their writing. According to Setiawan & Dody (2021), writing presents the author's thoughts, opinions, and feelings. Therefore, writing cannot be considered an innate talent, but it can improve this skill by training.

There are various formal and informal ways to write. Formal writing follows norms and is appropriate for formal or significant situations or occasions. Conversely, informal writing adopts a casual, approachable, or unofficial tone (Winda et al., 2019). The writer must express his thoughts or ideas in a clear way because there is no connection between the writer and the reader (Nasser, 2019). Nguyen & Phan (2023) also state that writing is a means of communication between human beings that uses symbols to represent a language. According to Nguyen & Phan (2023), writing skill refers to the ability to express ideas, emotions, and thoughts in written form using strict grammar, appropriate word choice, and logical idea arrangement.

1.1.   Statement of the problem

The researchers have observed that many students struggle with self-assurance when tasked with composing a paragraph, which involves identifying individuals, locations, expressing opinions, and other tasks. The students' inability to express their thoughts in writing limits their creative expression. Writing requires the ability to use correct vocabulary in a grammatically appropriate structure to create meaningful sentences of various types, the capacity to select suitable conjunctions to connect phrases, and the ability to choose accurate punctuation marks. As the Department of English is responsible for supplying schools with efficient English teachers, the researchers accounted for the critical need to improve students' writing skills. It is crucial for graduates to possess advanced writing abilities. In order to effectively teach the fundamentals of writing, graduates must possess advanced writing abilities.

1.2.   Objective of the study

This study aims to investigate the difficulties that Iraqi EFL students face at the Department of English Language, College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad. It also identifies the style in which the students can write correctly without making errors, including punctuation, spelling, and word order.

2. Literature review
2.1. Definition of Academic Writing

Academic writing evaluates students' ability to utilize others' ideas and articulate them in their own words. Turmudi (2017) states that academic settings such as colleges and universities use this kind of writing. Rastri et al. (2023) define academic writing as a kind of written expression with certain intellectual bounds of knowledge. Bailey (2011: 4) mentions that, although there is no established standard of academic writing, it is clearly different from the written style of journalese or novels. Similarly, the general consensus is that academic writing strives for accuracy and objectivity. Saladino (2009) notes that numerous researchers concur that writing represents one of the most advanced forms of academic skills, as it showcases an individual's proficiency in language, concept development, and abstraction. According to Oshima & Hogue (2007), academic writing is different from creative writing, such as novels and short stories, and it is different from personal writing, such as writing letters or e-mails.

Creative and personal writing are categorized as informal writing. According to Al Fadda (2012), academic writing is "the mental and cognitive activity, since it is a product of the mind." Oshima & Hogue (1998) confirm that "writing is a process, not a product, both for native speakers and new learners of English." Writing, according to Brown (2000: 347), is a composing process that typically necessitates multiple drafts before producing an effective product.

2.2. Importance of Academic writing

Writing is essential for improving students' academic success and helping them develop their social and emotional growth. Moreover, one of the abilities required to succeed in this society is writing (Moses & Mohamad, 2019). According to Brown (2000: 339), writing "is a way of life. Without some ability to express yourself in writing, you don't pass the course." Nguyen & Phan (2023) describe writing as "a life skill, a work-related skill, since it is often the idea that others value your learning, values, ideas, and contributions to society." Huy (2015) highlights the benefits of writing for students. Firstly, it aids in the development of their foreign language vocabulary and grammar. Secondly, writing enhances students' proficiency in other skills, such as speaking and reading. Thirdly, writing is a process that enables students to gain knowledge about modern technology and human knowledge. Similarly, Zulfani (2001) asserts that writing can strengthen students by incorporating more grammatical structures, idioms, and vocabulary, which are crucial elements in language learning.

Even in English-speaking nations, higher education establishments are concerned with improving their students' academic writing abilities (AlMarwani, 2020). The capacity to write has become a necessity in our global literate community. It is essential for work in many fields of life, at least at the most basic levels (Brown, 2004: 218). Huy (2015) states that one of the

most crucial abilities in learning English is writing, as it is not only a useful academic ability but also a skill that is applicable to all professional domains.

2.3 Difficulties in writing skills

Numerous studies have explored the challenges associated with writing skills. Pablo & Lasaten (2018) found that students face various challenges when dealing with writing skills. These issues include a lack of variety in ideas for both content and organization, a lack of connectives for word organization, improper word or idiom usage for vocabulary and word choice, poor language usage in sentence structures, the use of first-person pronouns for objectivity and formality, and a lack of citations for referencing. Notably, the academic essays written by the students range in quality from fair to terrible. Winda et al. (2019) have demonstrated that students struggled with grammar, vocabulary, coherence, and syntax. According to Nenotek et al. (2022), there are four factors that cause difficulties in academic writing, namely, discourse, content, organization, and mechanics. Nenotek et al. (2022) found the highest challenges (97%) in the thesis statement, related ideas, development of ideas, use of description, cause and effect, comparison/contrast, practical introduction, topic sentence, and reference.

Rastri et al. (2023) state that there are three aspects causing students' difficulties in writing research proposals, such as linguistic factors, psychological factors, and socio-cultural factors. The linguistic factors received the highest score, accounting for 75% of the total. Nguyen & Phan (2023) found that students' problems in academic writing were in grammar, vocabulary, and background knowledge. Hasnawati et al. (2023) found that students struggled with coherence and evidence integration when writing opinion essays, despite demonstrating competence in structuring their essays and presenting arguments.

2.4 . Iraqi Students Difficulties in Writing Skills

Iraqi students have challenges when composing paragraphs. To enhance writing abilities, one must first identify issues related to sentence structure to compose well-formed phrases. Numerous studies have examined the writing challenges faced by Iraqi learners. Ahmed (2019) argues that the challenges that Iraqi EFL learners face at the university level in writing skills include limited vocabulary, punctuation, language use, interference with the first language, and word order. Al-Shujain & Tan (2017) concentrate on the grammatical errors that Iraqi high school students make in their writing. Al-Shujain & Tan (2017) assume that Iraqi EFL students commit errors in their writing because they focus on vocabularies rather than grammar rules. Additionally, Iraqi high school students struggle with the use of verb tenses, prepositions, articles, as well as omission and addition. Reishaan (2013) posits that Iraqi EFL learners often make errors in their writing, particularly in verb form and tense usage, which he primarily attributes to first language interference. Reishaan (2013) asserts that even at advanced learning levels, Iraqi EFL learners struggle to master the use of tenses.

Abdul-Kareem (2014) decides to lessen the difficulties that face EFL students in writing skills. Abdul-Kareem (2014) believes that students of the scientific branch are stronger than those of the literary branch in writing skills. Nasser (2019) confirms that the errors made by

Iraqi students related to interference with their mother tongue. And students commit errors in vocabularies, sentence structure, word order, and subject-verb agreement (Nasser, 2019). Fenjan (2024) demonstrates that while Iraqi students possess a strong theoretical understanding of essays, their various types, and essay writing, as well as coherence and conjunction devices, they lack practical experience in implementing these devices in their writing.

Writing is a challenging skill that requires both native and non-native speakers to balance many factors. These factors include vocabulary, structure, purpose, organization, content, and mechanics, which encompass capitalization, punctuation, and spelling (Abu Rass, 2015). According to Brown and Baily (1984), the analytic scale for rating composition tasks specified five main categories:

a. Organization

Writing skills must be organized to produce good writing. An introduction, body, and conclusion should be included, along with a suitable title, a compelling introductory paragraph, and clearly defined topics that lead to the body and the use of transitional terms. The arrangement of the materials demonstrates the strategy, provides evidence to support generalizations, and culminates in a logical and comprehensive conclusion (Brown, 2004, p. 244).

b. Content

Writing conveys concepts or meaning, commonly known as content. The researchers evaluate it based on the development, articulation, logic, engagement, and relevance of those ideas to the task specifications. More creative, original, and excellent interpretation distinguishes higher levels of content, conveying a depth of understanding (Bae et al., 2016). According to Brown (2001, p. 357), content consists of a thesis statement, related ideas, the development of the ideas through personal experience, the use of description, comparison/contrast, and cause/effect, and a consistent focus.

c. Grammar

Grammar plays a crucial role in the English language, enabling students to communicate effectively. Matthew (2023) states that the study of the structures and rules governing the usage of the English language is known as English grammar. English grammar encompasses the various combinations of words and phrases that form sentences and convey meaning. Also, he adds that "English grammar enables speakers and writers to convey their ideas and thoughts with clarity and precision, and it helps listeners and readers to understand those ideas and thoughts accurately." To become proficient in English grammar, one must utilize appropriate relative clauses, articles, verb forms, and tense sequences (Brown, 2004, p. 245).

d. Mechanics

Writing contains mechanical parts. These include handwriting, spelling, punctuation, and the creation of coherently constructed texts, paragraphs, and phrases. These are the fundamentals of writing, and at various points in the English writing process, they must be the center of attention (Harmer, 2004, p. 44). Brown (2004, p. 357) asserts that mechanics, which encompass spelling, punctuation, reference citation, and neatness and appearance, play a crucial role in writing.

e. Vocabulary

Vocabulary plays a vital role in foreign language learning. According to Neuman & Dwyer (2009), vocabulary refers to the words we must know to communicate effectively: words in speaking (expressive vocabulary) and words in listening (receptive vocabulary). Vocabulary is often considered an essential tool for those learning a second language, as inadequate vocabulary in the target language can hinder communication (Alqhtani, 2015). According to Nasser (2022), vocabulary is considered an essential tool for EFL students, and it is a main aspect in English language learning.

The aforementioned investigation reveals that Iraqi students encounter numerous writing challenges due to a variety of factors. Therefore, the researchers decided to conduct a study to tackle these challenges.

3. Methodology

The researchers aim to implement various activities and strategies to enhance the proficiency of the target participants, such as organizing students into small groups to discuss a specific topic and provide feedback. The researchers will ask one participant to read the responses aloud and then write the correct answers on the board. The researchers initiated a competition among the groups, asking them to generate and document several ideas. Afterwards, they were asked to present their solutions orally and select the most suitable one for the board. Furthermore, the researchers encourage participants to put the answers on paper and exchange them, offering corrective comments, practical writing exercises, and capturing their attention.

4. Experiment

The purpose of the experiment of the current study is to identify and categorize the challenges faced by Iraqi students at level of university in writing. The researchers use a pretest-posttest experimental design to evaluate the experiment. The researchers believe that the proposed design is suitable for the objectives of the present study. To carry out the aim of this study, the researchers follow the following:

1. Researchers randomly selected thirty five paragraphs to gather data.

2. The students first performed a pre-test to assess their proficiency in fundamental writing skills.

3. The researchers spend ten minutes at the beginning of every lecture exploring themes covered in the preceding lesson and ask students to provide examples.

4. Students have been divided into five groups, each group includes seven students.

5. These groups will use considerable efforts to compete against other groups.

6. Regarding the practical part, the researchers attempt to explore the following items: the correct organization of paragraphs, punctuation rules, sentence- structure, how to use correct vocabulary. All of these items described by applying visual aids with some examples and exercises as well as train students on selecting appropriate phrases and titles for the paragraphs.

7. The results of the pre- and post-tests were subsequently quantitatively analyzed with the statistical program SPSS.

The following phases indicate the procedures regarding the efficacy of competition, repetition and feedback in enhancing the ability of students in writing skills.

4.1. Instruments and procedures

The researchers choose a written test as the study instrument and developed a pre-test and a post-test to assess the performance of the students.

4.2. Pre-test

The test tried to evaluate how proficient students are in fundamental writing skills and to ascertain the challenges encountered by the students of the Department of English, College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad, when writing coherent English paragraphs. The researchers obtained a score of 35 marks in the pre-test. Students had challenges in writing and made several spelling errors. The ratings demonstrated that students did not use proper rules of grammar and punctuation marks. Moreover, they indicated that the students were unable to systematically arrange their thoughts to effectively express themselves and persuade the reader.

4.3. Post-test

Four weeks have been devoted to explaining the fundamentals of writing. Throughout this period, the researchers concentrated on grammatical structures, punctuation, and fundamental writing techniques. Throughout this session, the students collaborated in groups and had asked to provide examples and engage in discussions. The researchers presented the students with images and requested that they describe them. During the testing stage, they achieved the same task   independently.
The post-test findings demonstrated significant improvement in the students' writing skills. They demonstrated proficiency in writing without orthographic errors and with correct punctuation. They proved the ability to present and arrange their ideas with clarity.

The following table shows pre and posttests results. To save space marks will not present. In both tests SPSS program was used in analyzing data.

Table (1) presents the differences between pre-test and post-test

Paired Samples Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 pretest	35	9.13	2.74	0.50
posttest	35	12.6	2.70	0.49

T-Test
Value (t)

	t	df	Sig.	Mean differences	95% Confidence Interval (Lower)	95% Confidence Interval (Upper)
Pair 1 pretest	17.27	4.8	0.000	52.4	7.61	9.66
posttest	24.56	5.2	0.000	65.8	11.09	13.11

Note: If the differences between the two tests are less than 0.5, the study is regarded as invalid; if the differences are above 0.5, the study is considered valid.

Table 1 indicates the number of samples (35), and the average in the pretest (9.13), and the average in the posttest (12.6). The students make progress (12.6 of 9.13= 3, 47). Hence the differences between the two means of pre and posttests were above than 0.5, so the study is valid.

The scores from both tests revealed that the students faced challenges in writing, and the experiment showed effectiveness at overcoming these challenges.
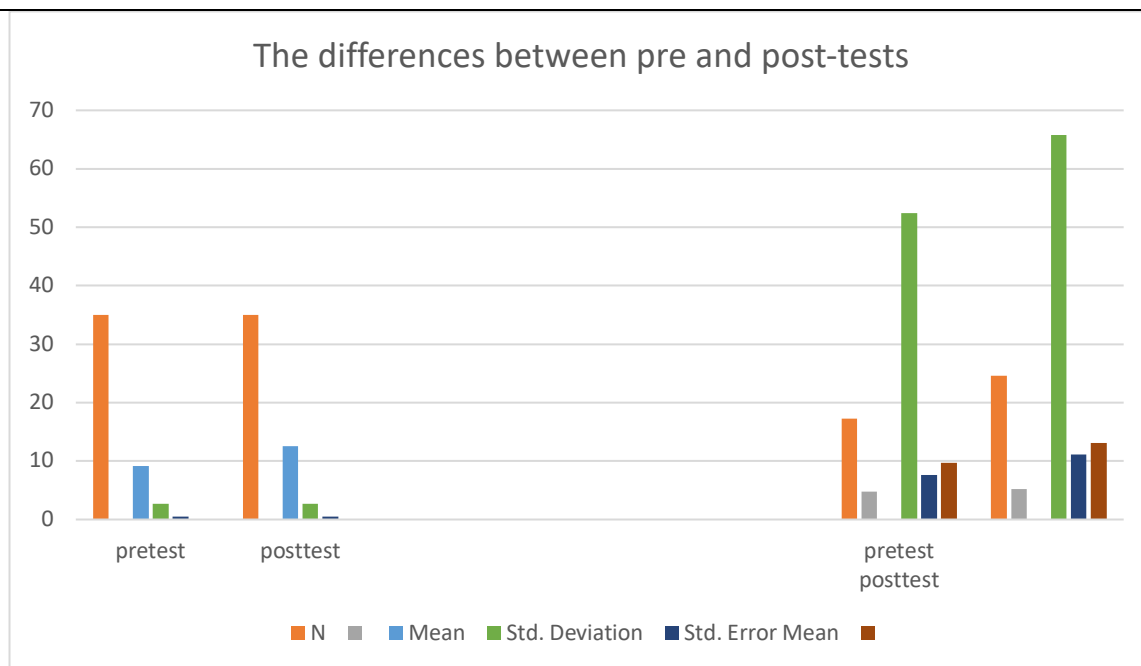
Figure (1) shows the differences between pre-test and post-test

5. Findings and Results

This study aimed to identify specific challenges Iraqi students encounter when learning English as a second language, particularly in the area of writing. It indicates that third-year students in the Department of English at the College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad, face several writing problems. The researchers categorize students' errors into grammatical, punctuation, spelling, and handwriting errors based on their analysis of the data.

All learners made 7-9 grammatical errors in the pre-test, but they reduced the number in the post-test. Furthermore, the pre-test showed a lack of attention to capitalization, periods, and commas, but the post-test demonstrated a notable improvement in students' understanding of the importance of punctuation marks. In the pre-test, over four letters were incorrectly typed; this issue was resolved in the post-test responses.

Each sample group made 5-6 spelling errors in the pre-test, but the post-test showed a reduction in spelling errors. The post-test findings indicated proficient utilization of articles in students' compositions.
The test results demonstrated effective outcomes due to the utilization of visual aids and a repeated explanation for each item, followed by activities that helped students in enhancing their writing skills.

6. Conclusion

The study concludes that

1. Repetitions, competitions, visual aids, collaborative effort, and constructive criticism enhance students' writing skills.
2. Teachers and instructors must work hard to improve students' writing abilities and lessen the stress associated with this task.
3. Understanding and study of effective word structures and appropriate conjunctions are essential for organizing paragraphs.
4. Many students make errors in sentence structure, vocabulary, verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, articles, and word order.

7. Recommendations

To produce skilled written text in English, students must possess a fundamental comprehension of grammatical principles and frequently practice grammar to prevent repeated errors in writing tasks.

To improve writing skills, students need to include typical writing tasks into the course of study, follow through with focused feedback and guidance on writing, integrate collaborative and communicative writing tasks, and provide students with opportunities to explore a variety of topics in their writing.

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