

Identifying EFL Learners Essay Writing Difficulties and Sources: A Move towards Solution The Case of Second Year EFL Learners at Tlemcen University

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Abstract. It is commonly known that EFL learners need to be skillful enough at the four language skills namely: listening, speaking, reading and writing to have a good command in the target language. Typically, teaching/learning how to write in a foreign language is not an easy task for EFL teachers and learners alike. Though countless research and efforts have been done by researchers and teachers to develop the writing skill among these learners, many EFL students still face a number of serious difficulties that prohibit them from constructing satisfactory essay writing. Actually, the present article aims primarily to identify EFL learners essay writing difficulties together with the sources associated with their difficulties in an attempt to find out the possible remedies for the achievement of better productions. Data as regards the topic in question were collected by means of questionnaire, interviews and some students' finale essay writing drafts. The attained data reveal that students meet difficulties in both coherence and cohesion due to the lack of reading, first language transfer and low writing practice. In hope to decrease students' essay writing difficulties, attention to these sources is required.

Keywords: coherence; cohesion; essay writing; difficulties; sources.

1. Introduction

Countless of research works have been written about the teaching-learning process. It is commonly known that to master the language, EFL learners need to be skillful enough at the four language skills namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing. This latter appears to be the most difficult language skill to be acquired by EFL learners and even by native speakers since it requires much time and effort.. In this vein, teaching/ learning how to write plays a crucial role in language teaching/ learning classrooms. Though it is important, many EFL students face a serious number of difficulties that prohibit them from constructing satisfactory essay writing. In this respect, the following research questions are designed:

- 1- Which difficulties do EFL learners often encounter in essay writing?
- 2- What are the main sources behind their difficulties in essay writing?
- 3- How can EFL learners improve their essay writing?

With these questions in mind, the following hypotheses must be considered:

- a) The difficulties that EFL learners often encounter in essay writing could be in coherence and cohesion.
- b) The lack of reading is perhaps the main source behind EFL learners essay writing.
- c) EFL learners may improve their essay writing by building their reading and writing habits.

Therefore, the present paper attempts to account for which difficulties EFL learners encounter the most in essay writing, and to which sources are these difficulties related to, along with finding out possible solutions to unveil difficulties in essay writing. To inform these research questions, the investigator selects three research instruments; students' questionnaire, teachers' semi structured interview, and students' essay writing analysis to verify the research hypotheses.

2. The Writing Skill Defined

The study of writing, along with the other modes of language, has received attention from various scholars. It is approached by Harmer (2007), as a process that should be undergone over different stages including, the drafting stage, the editing stage, the planning stage and the final draft. Similarly, Damiani *et al.* (2011) regards the writing skill as the process that calls planning, reflection and the organization of ideas, in addition to the required effort and attention that EFL students are invited to respect. Indeed, the definition that suites the objectives of this paper is the one put forward by Bell and Burnaby (1997,p. 148) .They regard the writing skill as a cognitive skill that writers are required to master with attention to sentence structure, appropriate selection of vocabulary items, a careful attention towards spelling and punctuation. They add that learners need to master the linguistic knowledge and also the ability to integrate information coherently and cohesively in a written discourse. With respect to the above mentioned, some EFL learners achieve low proficiency level in writing essays. Therefore the following section is intended to highlight the most prevalent essay writing difficulties that these learners encounter along with some potential sources of these difficulties.

3. Essay Writing Difficulties

According to Koch (2004), coherence denotes the ability of the writer to combine the arrangement of sentences altogether in the text so that the reader decodes and understands it. Such a notion calls attention towards the consideration of coherence in any piece of writing as a cognitive process in which the writer is invited to mind the language they are using, the vocabulary they are selecting and the bound arrangement of sentences to form unity which enables the reader to appreciate the piece of writing (Favero,2010; Lee 2002). Put simply, coherence

is the ability to produce meaningful correct sentences with the appropriate use of vocabulary items and obeying certain rules of words arrangement. In this light, an undertaken study done by Qaddumi (1995) shows that EFL students face difficulties in finding ways to employ the different types of sentences and the ill use of some cohesive devices.

In the eyes of Halliday and Hasan (1976) "the concept of cohesion is a semantic one; it refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as a text" (p. 4). Put simply, cohesion is the relation that exists between lexis and grammar, i.e., Endophoric relation, as well as how grammar and vocabulary facilitate the understanding of sentence sequences within a text, that is, Exospheric relation.

It was emphasized by Bailey (2003) that text cohesion refers to the clarity and readability in which the writer needs to establish a link through the use of various cohesive devices including: reference, ellipsis, substitution, conjunctions and lexical cohesion. In this respect, Cox et.al (1990) found that good readers tend to use the aforesaid cohesive devices more wisely and appropriately than poor readers do. Such a result indicates that reading plays a significant role in acquiring the art of writing.

Vocabulary serves a key the requirement for ideas to flow in the right ground. In this regard, many researchers in the field attempt to identify the reason behind such a difficulty. Hemmati (2002), interviewed thirty (30) Iranian EFL student writers concerning vocabulary difficulties in their writing. He finds that these learners have difficulties in both linguistic and performance. That is to say, these writers lack the linguistic knowledge of the target language along with the inability to perform this knowledge into appropriate contexts. He concludes that the lack reading and the writing practice into the English language are the main reasons behind such a difficulty. It is safe to add that EFL learners encounter various writing difficulties in terms of grammar, spelling and punctuation. The following section is devoted to discuss the sources that affect these learners from achieving appropriate essay writing.

4. Sources Affecting Poor EFL Writing

This heading covers the sources behind EFL learners essay writing difficulties that are said to be the lack of motivation, lack of reading and the impact of students' first language into the target language writing.

4.1. Lack of Motivation

Actually, motivation is essential in every needed success. As far as language learning is concerned, two (02) essential questions are raised; why do students show low motivation to write in the foreign language? And how to raise their motivation to write? .In hope to answer these two questions, Harmer (2006a) claims that there are various factors that prevent them from writing. First, fear of failure, that is, fear of not being able to achieve their goals especially in contexts where they are asked to reflect their knowledge about the language and their abilities in putting this knowledge in different frameworks. Second, the fear from committing mistakes is another factor that prohibits them from writing. In this sense, EFL students feel uncomfortable over the structure of the essay or any piece of writing that they are intended to follow. Therefore, failure comes to

play. Thirdly, there are some learners who are uncertain to show their productions; they shadow their weaknesses and convince themselves not to carry on writing as they feel a beforehand failure. In order to decrease this, EFL teachers are invited to bring relaxed topics to make their learners feel at ease to voice their thought, Dornyei (2005). Anxiety is another issues among these learners as it most of the time engenders to negative attitudes towards the writing into the target language. Hence, instructors need to establish what is called "writing habit" among these students.

4.2. Lack of Reading

In fact, evidences has shown that better readers are better writers and better writers are more likely to language exposure than poorer readers. In this ground, Raimes (1994, p. 42) stresses the importance of reading into the foreign language by saying that "the more our students read, the more they become familiar with the vocabulary, idiom, sentence patterns, organizational flow, and cultural assumptions of native speakers of the language" . In the same vein, Kroll (1997) claims that "it is reading that gives the writer the feel for the look and texture of reader based prose" (p. 48). In addition to the efforts EFL teachers do to raise their competence to write, reading is approached to be the fruitful strategy that dictates implicitly the safe ground to be followed and it becomes the sample for students to appreciate. All in all, lack of reading is among the sources that can cause dissatisfaction in EFL essay writing.

4.3. Influence of the First Language on Target Language Writing

In addition to the lack of reading among EFL students, they still encounter another obstacle that hinders them from writing. In this respect, almost all students mention in the construction phase, Arabic is activated in their minds instead of thinking in the target language. Such a fact has inspired some researchers to investigate this dilemma. Thought EFL teachers do insist the need for EFL students to think and write in English, their students sometimes deviate from such a call. In this regard, an investigation done by Frieddlander's (1997, p. 109) shows that "writers will transfer writing abilities and strategies, whether good or deficient, from their first language to their second, or third language". Another view has been voiced by Carson, Carell, Silberstein, Kroll and Kuehan (1990) who point out that it is not necessary for EFL learners to be good in the first language to be so in the second or the foreign language. However, as mentioned by Blanchard and Root (2004, p. 204) "writing remains a difficult skill to acquire and each language has its own writing conventions that the writer needs to learn them without interfering with other language or languages". The section that follows attempts to provide overtly the sample selected for the study, with the identification of the research instruments to see what results are to be obtained.

5. Research Participants

The selected participants taking part in this research work are second year LMD (Licence.Master. Doctorate) students with their C.W.E (Comprehension of Written Expression) teachers. The former are thirty (30) informants; 14 males

and 16 chosen at random and are enrolled in the academic year of 2015-2016. The latter are five teachers of C.W.E course; 3 males and 2 females, who have taught this course for at least four years period of time.

6. Research Instruments

The investigator has used three research tools to cross check the research hypotheses that are the questionnaire; being administered to students, the semi-structured interview for C.W.E. teachers and students essay writing analysis. The researcher has designed the questionnaire wisely in terms of form and content to make each enquiry clearly understood in students mind. For C.W.E. teachers, the researcher used the semi-structured interview to bring variety in terms of research instruments from one hand; and from the other hand to collect rapid answers and the researcher can ask for clarifications and further interpretations. The third research tool employed in this study is used to record evidences about students' drafts.

7. Data Analysis

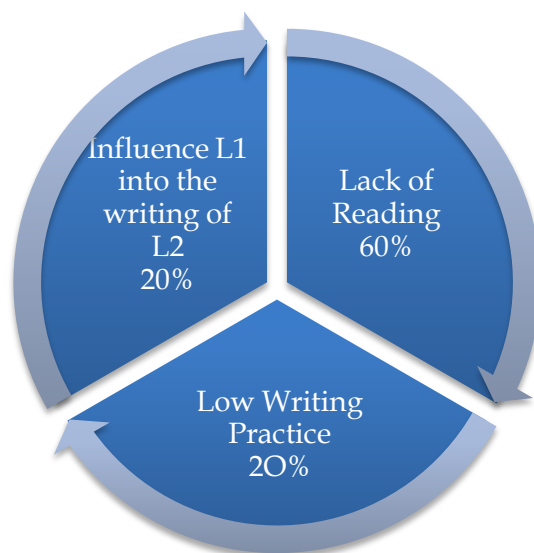
The current investigation, the questionnaire is employed purposefully to answer the first research question which reads 'what are the difficulties that EFL learners often encounter when writing an essay?' The researcher has designed two questions; the first one was intended to account for which difficulties they encounter in essay writing. Students were given some suggested difficulties to select from them and they were free to choose whatever difficulty they meet. The gathered data reveals that (17), that is, 57% meet difficulties in cohesion and 43% face coherence difficulties. Similar results are also found by Pelcovà (2015) who notes that cohesion and coherence are other important issues that need to be mastered and attained by EFL students.

During the second phase of research, students were given the same instruction but for this time they were asked to select only one difficulty they still meet after their remedial work. The findings show that 33% face difficulty in coherence, 27% in lexis and 23% in cohesion. Therefore the first research hypothesis is valid since students essay writing analysis and interviewing C.W.E teachers regarding the above question reflects the same findings. In hope to answer the second research hypothesis the investigator has interviewed C.W.E teachers who can provide valid data as they have acquired experience in the field of essay writing. When interviewing them about the source behind students coherence and cohesion difficulties, three, i.e., 60% regard the lack of reading as the main source while the remaining approach low writing practice 20% and the influence of the first language into the writing of the target language (English) 20%. Hence, it comes clear to record that the second research hypothesis is valid. As far as the third research hypothesis is concerned, the revealed data from teachers' semi-structured interview shows that in order for these learners to achieve satisfaction and construct a sound essay writing they are urgently invited to build their reading and writing habits since reading and writing are seen interrelated and are two sides of the same coin. Teachers insist that reading is regarded as an

input for EFL learners in which this input is for one reason or another can be retrieved for fulfilling different purposes. The same instruction was asked to students in students' questionnaire and the same idea was said. All what have been discussed above is going to be summarized in table and bare graph.

Table1. Students Essay Writing Difficulties Essay Writing Difficulties Absolute Relative Frequency

Essay Writing Difficulties	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
Coherence	13	33%
Cohesion	7	23%
Lexis	8	27%



Pie-chart 1. Sources Affecting Essay Writing

It is wiser to mention that EFL learners and C.W.E teachers are called to combine their efforts to make the teaching and the learning process goes in the right way. In this light, the following section covers some practical suggestions and recommendation the remedy coherence and cohesion difficulties and to promote the teaching of C.W.E.

8. Suggestions and Recommendations

The first thing need to be done is to create an environment that boosts learners to disclose thoughts, attitudes, of course, with the present of the instructor. The latter needs to control students' ideas and their relatedness regarding the topic discussed. Such an activity is best taught by engaging them in group and pair works in order to encourage them to work cooperatively. In this vein, Storch (2007) suggests that arranging students in pairs and groups permit them to combine the necessary linguistic resources to come up with new constructed knowledge. It is further important for the teacher to assign extension activities or homework assignments (Bishop & Verleger, 2013; Hughes, 2012) to promote

their students' autonomy and responsibility, especially when dealing with advanced students. In this learning environment, the teacher may use the Process Learning Approach (PLA, henceforth) which focuses on the way ideas are formulated and organized in writing regardless grammar and spelling mistakes that they commit. In order to achieve a sense of creativeness, relatedness and effectiveness of ideas, teachers need to bring topics that help students to generate sufficient ideas (Tribble, 1997). At this level, the instructor's role is to supply language support, if needed, so that the flow of ideas cannot be inhibited. When the task is finished, the teacher designs a spider map on the board and invites them to voice their thought.

The next step is to open debate to calculate which ideas need to be expended and are relevant to the topic. Afterward, the construction of the essay is required and needs to be done within group members. Within the Process Approach, the teacher's emphasis is to make them express their ideas at the same time developing implicitly coherence in their writing. The continuous use of this approach in groups gives positive results in terms of clarity and unity. With respect to the above mentioned approach, it is wiser to call for Genre- Based Pedagogy. The latter is an approach to language teaching which aims to help learners understand the grammatical and the lexical features of different rhetoric contexts. In this concern, EFL students are subject to explore some principles about how meaningful passages are constructed. In this vein, Joyce & Feez, 2012; Droga & Humphey, 2003; Derewianka & Jones, 2012; Rose & Martin, 2012 put forward three basic principles. The first principle is that language is functional. That is to say, the purpose of the text dictates the genre and register that should be used. The second principle is covers the fact that learning is a social activity in which a sound collaboration needs to occur between the student and and the teacher (Joyce & Feez, 2012). Pedagogy makes knowledge visible is the last principle that explicit language teaching of how language works to make meaning, the text organization and linguistic forms need to be reflected clearly in students' mind. Therefore, the triangulation between the aforesaid principles in addition to the PLA appear to crucial to foster good quality in writing.

When the teacher realizes that students are competent enough in making their essay writing coherent, he/she needs to integrate the Product Approach which focuses on grammar and spelling. Therefore, the execution of these two approaches to essay writing develop unity and lessen, intuitively, mistakes in grammar and spelling. The following activities are suggested to improve students' essay writing in terms of coherence. Teachers may design some activities where students are exposed to an essay in which some sentences are redundant and have nothing to do with the core of the essay. Such an activity builds on learners the sense of awareness and their critical thinking in terms of coherence. In hope to make these learners recognize the different types of cohesive ties, it is preferable to provide a lesson on then and invite then to read a particular paragraph or essays first to see whether they store them in their minds and second to let them know how they are used.

9. Conclusion

To sum up, constructing essay writing in the target language is not a trouble-free task to do and an easy activity to handle. It requires much time and effort. EFL learners are subject to meet different essay writing difficulties that hinder them from building effective essays. In this concern, the researcher has conducted an empirical study which takes place at Tlemcen University with second year L.M.D students of the English Language Department. To collect data, the investigator has used the questionnaire, semi-structured interview and students essay writing analysis as research instruments that help the researcher to gather and record data both quantitatively and qualitatively. It was reflected that these learners meet difficulties in coherence and cohesion, and the source of such difficulties are due to the lack of reading. It was recommended that in hope to unveil and remedy these difficulties, EFL students are called to build their reading and writing habits and the above suggestions are of great importance for these learners to construct effective essays.

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