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Major Writing Difficulties Faced by Kurdish Learners of EFL in Academic Writing Classes

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Abstract

Writing in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts has been claimed to be one of the most challenging tasks required from EFL learners. Many Kurdish learners of EFL face difficulties producing well-developed paragraphs and essays in their courses of study in higher education. This study aims at investigating such difficulties that could hinder students' overall progress and success. A mixed-method research design was used to explore the issue under investigation fully. The data collection tools used are a (5-point Likert Scale) questionnaire and semi-structured in-depth interviews. Two hundred English major students from four public universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq answered the questionnaire. Also, ten EFL university instructors were interviewed. Analysis of the findings revealed that Kurdish learners of EFL faced various difficulties such as writing anxiety, mechanics of writing (grammar, punctuation, spelling), word choice, and negative language transfer in their writing courses. Discussions and implications of these findings are presented.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Kurdish Learners, English as a Foreign Language

Major Writing Difficulties Faced by Kurdish Learners of EFL in Academic Writing Classes Introduction

Writing is one of the major and essential skills for any EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learner (Harmer, 2007). It has also been claimed to be one of the hardest tasks required from EFL learners (Ansari, 2012; Cheng, 2002; Harmer, 2007). In my twenty years of experience either as an EFL learner or EFL teacher, I have noticed that many Kurdish EFL learners face difficulties in writing. Many of them lack the knowledge and confidence of writing well-developed paragraphs and essays to express their opinions and ideas. In some random discussions with my students, most of them talk about difficulties such as having the insufficient vocabulary, grammar incompetency, anxiety, little background and practice in writing from their K-12 (Kindergarten to grade 12) education, insufficient feedback from their college instructors, and so many other difficulties. However, in this study, the researcher tried to investigate this issue in an academic and structured way hoping that these difficulties are identified. To do so, the study explored the following research questions.

Q1. What difficulties do Kurdish learners of EFL face in academic writing classes?

Q2. What factors do cause facing such difficulties according to EFL instructors?

Literature Review

To most effectively explore the issues surrounding writing difficulties among EFL learners, a subset of literature has been selected based on its relevance to the following questions?

- 1) What is writing?
- 2) Is writing a challenging task for ESL/EFL learners?
- 3) What are the major classifications of writing difficulties?

What is writing?

Writing has been defined as a means for students to incorporate their opinions, thoughts, ideas, and life experiences (Pangaribuan and Manik, 2018). Moreover, Chakraverty and Gautum, (2000, p.3) defined writing as “a reflective activity that requires enough time to think about the specific topic and to analyze and classify any background knowledge.” Many researchers believe that writing is a complex process, Shokrpour and Fallahzadeh (2007, p.1) stated, “writing is a complex activity, a social act which reflects the writer's communicative skills which are difficult to develop and learn, especially in an EFL context.” To communicate their ideas effectively, students need to master this skill. Research shows that correct grammar, strong vocabulary, time management, correct punctuation and spelling impact the writing process (McDonough et.al, 2013). And if EFL/ESL students desire to become competent writers, they have to consider these factors. In the current study, the researcher investigated if Kurdish EFL learners' incompetency in these factors might cause writing difficulties for them.

Is writing a challenging task for ESL/EFL learners?

Being proficient in writing is an asset for becoming a successful student at the university level. This is especially true for EFL/ESL learners (Harmer, 2007). However, unproficiency in academic writing could hinder EFL learners' academic progress

(Ansari, 2012). Researchers believe that writing is often one of the most stressful and challenging tasks for many EFL/ESL learners worldwide (Alsamadani, 2010; Ansari, 2012; Cheng, 2002; Luchini, 2010). Cheng (2002) stated that learning writing skill seems to be more demanding and harder than learning other skills for EFL/ESL learners. By Cheng, Luchini (2010) also asserted that for most ESL/EFL students, composing a text is challenging since the writing process necessitates a wide range of cognitive and linguistic skills, many of which ESL/EFL students are ignorant of.

Classification of Writing Difficulties

Writing difficulties are classified into various categories and sub-categories by researchers. Kellog & Raulerson (2007) classified writing difficulties into four main categories linguistic, psychological, cognitive, and pedagogical. However, some of the most common difficulties that EFL/ESL students face in writing courses are incorrect grammar and punctuation, coherence and cohesion, lack of solid vocabulary, writing anxiety, and unawareness of cultural differences between their native and English language.

Grammar

Research shows that many EFL students make grammatical errors while writing in English. Incorrect grammar has been identified as one of the most common errors made by EFL learners. Muayad (2018) investigated such errors and found many grammatical errors such as subject-verb agreement, the utilization of determiners, and the exclusion of the third individual particular (s). In another study, Abdulmajeed & Hameed (2017) classified the most common grammatical errors made by EFL learners in writing

such as misuse of tenses, word order, articles, and subject-verb agreement.

Punctuation

Harmer (2007) believes that punctuation is one of the important prospects of language. Incorrect punctuation may cause misunderstanding or even change the meaning of words and sentences. Lahuerta (2018) indicated that making punctuation errors is common among EFL learners. Some of the punctuation mistakes that learners make include misuse of a comma, wrong capitalization, misuse of the semicolon, and misuse of a full stop (Nasser, 2018). In one rare study conducted about the mechanics of writing among Kurdish EFL learners by Abdullah (2020), the results showed that 88% of the participants made errors in punctuation.

Word Choice

Word choice is a difficulty that goes back to insufficient vocabulary knowledge of the EFL/ESL learners. Musa (2010) discussed that having a small vocabulary size on the part of learners causes redundancy and incoherence in the production of paragraphs and essays. Many EFL students admitted that they cannot express their feelings and ideas properly because they do not know the correct English words needed for a particular context (Cheng & Fox, 2008).

Anxiety

Zitouni (2015) declared that EFL learners' anxiety leads to under-developed and low-level writing. She argues that writing teachers have to create safe environments for their students in

which they can make mistakes and receive productive feedback from their peers and teachers. Hassan (2001) found that EFL learners who were less worried wrote higher-quality writings than those who were more stressed. According to Cheng (2002), more worried writers avoid taking writing classes and instead pursue majors that have little to do with writing.

First language Transfer

Many EFL learners try to think in their native language and then translate those native ideas into English. Such transferring strategies usually lead to culturally and semantically inappropriate writing in the target language. Abu Rass (2015) defined writing as a complex task for EFL learners in which they have to produce culturally appropriate writing. Moreover, Grossman (2009) stated that those students who use their native language resources to translate ideas into English are less successful than those who are aware of cultural and semantic features of the English language in producing well-developed writings. Various studies looked into L1 negative transfer in various cultures and contexts. In their study, Sasaki and Hirose (1996) looked into the aspects that can impact Japanese pupils when writing in English. The findings of the study revealed that poor and rookie authors translate from L1 to L2 more frequently than strong and proficient writers. In addition, Wolfersberger (2003) conducted another study on L2 learners' usage of writing skills while composing in L2. Some L1 writing strategies can be transferred to L2 writing, according to the findings. It was also demonstrated that students with lower abilities were unable to employ all of the tactics that could assist them in writing in L2. As a result, numerous compensating solutions for writing in L2 were offered.

The Present Study

About the previous studies conducted on this issue, this study aims at exploring the major writing difficulties faced by Kurdish EFL learners. This could probably fill the gap of this issue that has not been researched, to the best knowledge of the researcher, among Kurdish EFL learners at the university level.

Research Design

Nature of the study

A mixed-method research approach was employed in this study. This method helped the researcher to examine the problem from different perspectives and thus get a “holistic picture” of the issue under investigation (Creswell, 2013).

Participants

Two hundred EFL junior students from four public universities located in Kurdistan Region participated in answering the questionnaire. In addition, 10 EFL writing instructors from these four universities were interviewed.

Data Collection

The study employed a questionnaire and semi-instructed in-depth interviews as instruments for data collection. The researcher designed a questionnaire to investigate students' difficulties in writing. The questionnaire (5-point Likert Scale) consisted of twenty items, and each item prompted the participants to choose one of the options: (1=always, 2=very often, 3=sometimes, 4=rarely, 5=never) and five open-ended questions where the

participants could explain their feelings and opinions. In addition, semi-instructed interviews were designed in a way that the researcher had the freedom to ask more follow up questions.

Data analysis and Results

Questionnaire

In response to question 1, “Do you think you have writing anxiety?” Most of the participants (65%) selected always and very often, and only 10% selected rarely and never. The students’ responses are illustrated in Figure 1 below.

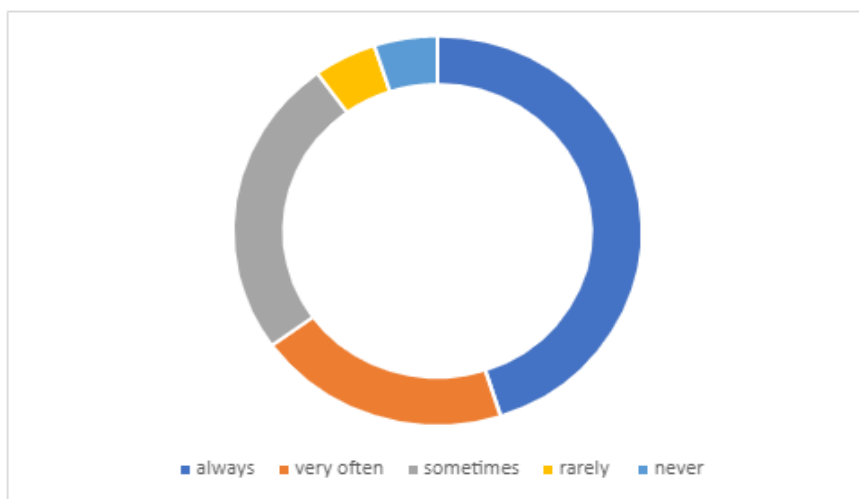


Figure 1. Writing anxiety among EFL learners

One of the items in the open-ended questions asked the participants about the possible reasons for their writing anxiety. Many of the participants wrote that they felt anxious because they did not know how to start writing. Few others felt anxious because they did not have a pleasant experience in their previous writing

classes. One of the participants stated, “in the writing class I took when I was a first-year student, our instructor did not give us clear instructions and I was always afraid of making mistakes.” Another participant complained that they did not receive much valuable and constructive feedback from their writing instructor. She said, “well, I think the problem was the number of students. We were 43 students and the instructor did not have enough time to give feedback to all of us.”

Mechanics of writing is a difficulty that many of the participants mentioned in their responses. Almost half of the participants (50%) responded that they always or very often had difficulties using writing mechanics correctly. Moreover, they claimed that grammar is a major writing difficulty. One of the open-ended questions asked about the impact of grammar on students’ writing. One of the learners wrote, “it’s true that we have taken few grammar classes, but when it comes to using that grammar in our writing, it is not easy.” Another student mentioned, “our grammar classes are isolated, I mean we do not use what we learn in our writing and speaking.”

Incorrect punctuation was a difficulty that most of the participants confirmed impacts their writing negatively. For the types of punctuation errors, the following results were obtained from the questionnaire. The responses revealed that 35% of the participants always have problems with the correct use of a comma. Another 25% said that they rarely had any difficulty with the correct use of a comma in their writings. Surprisingly, capitalization and spelling were two difficulties that many students faced in their writings. In response to items 10 and 11, “Do you have difficulty in spelling? And, “Do you have difficulty in

capitalization?” 26% and 32% of the participants selected (always and very often), respectively.

Item 15 asked, “do you think it’s challenging to find and use good vocabulary in your writing?” most of the participants responded negatively to this question. Most of the respondents always (38%) and very often (26%) found it challenging to use powerful vocabulary in their writings. In item 3 of the open-ended questions, the participants indicated some of the reasons behind their shortage of enough English vocabulary. One of the participants stated, “many times we do not know the correct usage of the words and expressions we know.” Another student said, “I think we do not read a lot in English, and when it comes to writing we do not have enough vocabulary to use in our writings.”

Semi-instructed Interviews

Ten EFL writing instructors from four universities in Kurdistan Region were interviewed about the difficulties facing EFL learners in writing good quality compositions and essays and more importantly the factors behind these difficulties. Most of the interviewees agreed that Kurdish learners of EFL have various kinds of difficulties such as anxiety, negative language transfer, stylistic, and mechanical problems.

Instructor 1 (I1) stated, “most of the students feel anxious when it comes to writing. They do not know how to start the writing process and are afraid of making mistakes.” (I8) agreed and approved that her students are worried that by making mistakes, they might get low grades in the writing class. She continued, “as writing instructors, we should create a safe environment in which

our students are free to make errors without being humiliated or punished.”

Most of the writing instructors agreed that students’ anxiety is the main reason for making errors in their writings. (I5) confirmed that his students cannot concentrate on their writings because they do not have enough self-confidence to write. He said, “my students have this pre-assumption that writing is a challenging task.” The instructors believed that part of this pre-assumption goes back to the students’ experience of their K-12 education in which they had received little attention in their writing classes, especially those students who graduated from public schools. The participants asserted that the factors contributing to students’ writing anxiety could be negative oral impressions received from the teachers and peers, receiving insufficient constructive feedback about their products, and working under time pressure.

Negative language transfer is another major difficulty that most of the instructors mentioned in their statements. Most of the instructors discussed that they can identify any errors in their students’ essays related to their low linguistic and cultural proficiency in the English language. For Instance, (I6) mentioned that many of her students frequently translate from their native language when they write in English. Therefore, they usually produce incompatible English sentences.

The interviewees exposed that students’ low linguistic proficiency in English could lead to the negative transfer of the structure of their native language into their English writings. And thus, this can further lead to producing unfamiliar and often meaningless sentences in English. (I7) stated, “many of my students make word order mistakes which is an outcome of

thinking in Kurdish and transferring that knowledge negatively into English.” This is simply because the grammar of the two languages of Kurdish and English do not operate in the same way.

The instructor participants believed that large class sizes and limited time are essential reasons they cannot provide enough constructive feedback to their students. (I9) stated that she usually has 40 students in her class and she teaches them 90 minutes (about 1 and a half hours) per week. Adding up instruction time and the time needed for lecturing, each student could get about a maximum of two minutes of feedback per week which is quite insufficient. Many of the students need more time to get the feedback they need to improve their writing.

Discussion

The results obtained from the data revealed that most EFL learners have writing difficulties such as anxiety, negative first language transfer, vocabulary size (insufficient number of English words they know), and mechanics of writing (grammar, punctuation, spelling). Writing anxiety was revealed to be common among the EFL students who participated in this study. The factors beneath this anxiety traced back to learners' fear of making mistakes, incompetency in English grammar and lexicon, poor feedback received from instructors, and time limitation. These findings are following the findings of Rezaei & Jafari (2014), which discovered that incompetency in English grammar and lexicon could lead to writing anxiety.

One factor that could be particularly true about Kurdish learners is that they have not taken enough writing classes in their K-12 education. It is not just about writing English lessons, there is

also little attention to writing in Kurdish which is their native language. Therefore, when they enter colleges and universities, they carry that incompetency with them and feel anxious in English writing classes.

Grammar and its correct use have always been a challenge for many EFL learners. Many EFL learners complain that they cannot write good paragraphs because of making many grammatical mistakes when it comes to writing. Many of the participants in this study faced the same problem. The same results are found in the study conducted by Muayad (2018).

Punctuation was revealed to be another challenging issue among Kurdish learners of EFL. Many of the participants admitted that they cannot use punctuation marks in their writings correctly. Lahuerta (2017) and Nasser (2018) reported the same difficulties among EFL students in their studies. Alharbi (2019) suggested that EFL students should take special writing classes focusing on the mechanics of writing to overcome such difficulties. This will help students produce better writing eventually.

The present study exposed that negative language transfer is one of the most common difficulties Kurdish learners of EFL face in their writing. The results revealed that EFL students frequently transfer the structure of the Kurdish language and incorporate it into their English writing. In addition, they usually do word-to-word translation from their native language to English and produce inappropriate English words for the context they are writing in.

Conclusions & Recommendations

This study concluded that:

1. Kurdish learners of EFL face various difficulties in their writing classes. These difficulties include writing anxiety, grammatical mistakes of diverse types, punctuation errors, cohesion and coherence, poor vocabulary, word choice, and negative language transfer.
2. Writing instructors need to create stress-free environments to reduce the writing anxiety of their students.
3. Writing instructors need to pay more attention to giving productive individual feedback to their students.
4. Department heads and others in charge should work on managing class size. A writing class should not have more than 20 students.
5. In Kurdistan Universities, EFL students usually take two writing classes. Research shows that EFL students need to take more writing classes to overcome their writing classes and become proficient writers. EFL students may take separate classes for writing mechanics, writing process, brainstorming, planning, and proofreading.

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پښتو

بانگه‌شهی ئه‌وه کراوه که نووسین به زمانی ئینگلیزی وهک زمانی بیانی یه‌کیک له قورسترین ئه‌رکه‌کان بیت که ږووبه‌ږووی قوتابیان ده‌بیت. زوریک له فیرخوانی کورد ږووبه‌ږووی ئاسته‌نگ ده‌بن له کاتی نووسینی پهره‌گراف و وتاریکی باش به زمانی ئینگلیزی. ئه‌م توپژینه‌وه‌یه ئامانجی لیکولینه‌وه‌یه له و جوړه گرفتانه‌ی که له‌وانه‌یه بیته ږیگر له‌برده‌م پیشکه‌وتنی گشتی قوتابیان. له دیزاینی توپژینه‌وه شیوازی تیکه‌ل به‌کاره‌ینراوه بو گه‌رانی ته‌واوی کیشه‌که له‌ژیر لیکولینه‌وه‌دا. ئامرازه‌کانی کوکړدنه‌وه‌ی زانیاری به‌کاره‌ینراو بریتی بوون له راپرسی (پیوه‌ری ۵ خالی لایکرت) و چاوپیکه‌وتنی نیمچه بونیاددار له قولاییدا. ۲۰۰ خویندکاری به‌شی ئینگلیزی چوار زانکوی گشتی هه‌ریمی کوردستانی عیراق وه‌لامی پرسپاره‌که‌یان دایه‌وه و له‌گه‌ل ده ماموستای زانکو چاوپیکه‌وتن کرا. شیکردنه‌وه‌ی دوزینه‌وه‌کان ده‌ریخت که فیرخوانی کورد تووشی کیشه جوړاو جوړه‌کان بوون وهک دله‌پاوکی، میکانیکی نووسین (پیزمان، خالبه‌ندی، حینجه)، هه‌لبژاردنی وشه و گواسته‌وه‌ی نه‌رینی له زمانی دایک له خوله‌کانی نووسینیاندا. لیږه گفتوگو و ده‌ره‌نجامه‌کانی ئه‌م دوزینه‌وه پیشکه‌ش ده‌کریت

وشه سه‌ره‌کیه‌کان: نووسینی ئه‌کادیمی، فیرخوانی کورد، ئینگلیزی وهک زمانیکی بیانی

المخلص

يُزعم أن الكتابة في سياقات اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية واحدة من أصعب المهام المطلوبة من متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. يواجه العديد من المتعلمين الأكراد للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية صعوبات في إنتاج فقرات ومقالات متطورة في دوراتهم الدراسية في التعليم العالي. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التحقق من الصعوبات التي قد تعوق تقدم الطلاب ونجاحهم بشكل عام. تم استخدام تصميم بحث متعدد الأساليب لاستكشاف المشكلة قيد التحقيق بشكل كامل. كانت أدوات جمع البيانات المستخدمة عبارة عن استبيان (مقياس ليكرت من ٥ نقاط) ومقابلات متعمقة شبه منظمة. أجاب مائتان من طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية الرئيسية من أربع جامعات حكومية في إقليم كردستان العراق على الاستبيان ، وتمت مقابلة عشرة مدربين جامعيين في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. كشف تحليل النتائج أن المتعلمين الأكراد للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية واجهوا صعوبات مختلفة مثل القلق في الكتابة ، وآليات الكتابة (القواعد ، وعلامات الترقيم ، والهجاء) ، واختيار الكلمات ، ونقل اللغة السلبية في دورات الكتابة الخاصة بهم. يتم عرض المناقشات والآثار المترتبة على هذه النتائج

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكتابة الأكاديمية ، المتعلمون الأكراد ، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية