

CHALLENGES FACED BY FORTH LEVEL STUDENTS AT FACULTY OF EDUCATION, ALBAYDHA UNIVERSITY, RAD'A IN ESSAY WRITING

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Abstract

It is observed that though Yemeni students study English for six years at school stage and for four years at university in case of those who join Department of English, however, they still commit many mistakes in writing. Such mistakes are committed at the level of spelling, writing mechanisms, grammar, coherence and cohesion. The present study aims to explore the challenges faced by forth level students at Faculty of Education, Albaydha University in essay writing, to identify the mistakes committed, to account for the causes of such mistakes and to examine the related challenges. The sample of the study consists of fourth level students at the Department of English, Faculty of Education and Science, Rada'a during the academic year 2024/2025. To achieve the objectives of the study, the selected students were asked to write a three-paragraph-essay on a specific topic. In addition, the syllabus and courses used in teaching writing as well as the teachers of writing profiles were analysed. The findings reveal several mistakes at the different levels due to L1 transfer, overgeneralization, presence of homophonous words, etc. In addition, there is a notable inadequacy regarding coherence and cohesion in essay writing. Furthermore, it is found that the main related challenges are represented in the lack of correspondence between the syllabus/courses taught and the textbooks provided by the teachers on one hand and teachers' qualification/specialization on the other.

Keywords: challenges, essay writing, spelling, grammar, L1 interference, overgeneralization, writing mechanisms

Introduction

With the growing of globalization and technology, people need to resort to a 'lingua franca' to communicate with each other. English is believed to be a typical language to use as a communicative tool across the globe. Therefore, cultivating students' ability to use English in communication should be the major goal of English teaching. It is known that a language can be communicated either orally or in writing. In language learning, writing is of a crucial importance because students cannot recall all what has been learnt, they need to revise and prepare for exam. In addition, their performance and progress in language learning are mostly assessed in writing.

Yemen is a monolingual country in which Arabic is the medium of study and communication. People in Yemen look at English language from different perspectives. The overwhelming part of society looks at English as a foreign language that should be learnt just for

specific purposes (ESP). As a result, it should be used only in the contexts of those purposes. Some people have a hostile attitude towards languages of the West in general and English language in particular as a reflection of their political and religious beliefs. For them, such languages should be neither learnt nor spoken. It could be assumed that a few number of Yemeni people learn English for its sake, i.e. for advancement or to know the culture of people who speak it (Al-Anisi, 2012). In such a situation, learning English becomes challenging and learners face several difficulties in all areas of the English language in general and in writing and speaking in particular.

Statement of the Problem

It is an agreed up on fact that writing in English is one of the most difficult skills. Yemeni students commit many mistakes in spelling, writing mechanisms, grammar, etc. due to several causes. Academic essay writing is even more challenging as it requires knowledge of components, clarity, precision, organization, coherence and cohesion. It is observed that forth level students enrolled at English Department, Albaydha University lack competency while writing academic essays in English. They commit mistakes in spelling, grammar, writing mechanisms, coherence and cohesion, organization, etc. This indicates that there are challenges encountered by the students which led to the prevalence of such phenomena. The courses and syllabus used in teaching writing at the English Department could be another effective challenge. The qualification/specialization of teachers who teach writing may attribute to the low proficiency of students in essay writing. As a result, there is an immense need to account for such challenges and identify their causes.

Objectives of the study

1. To account for the challenges faced by the students in essay writing fourth level students at the English Department, Faculty of Education and Science, Albaydha University.
2. To identify the types of mistakes committed and their causes.
3. To examine the effect of the related challenges on the proficiency of students in essay writing.

Questions of the study

1. What are the challenges faced by the fourth level students at the English Department, Faculty of Education and Science, Albaydha University in essay writing?
2. What are the types and causes of the mistakes committed?
4. Do related challenges have an effect on the proficiency of students in essay writing?

Hypotheses of the Study

1. There are challenges faced by the fourth level students in essay writing.
2. Students commit different mistakes due to several causes.
3. Among the related challenges that affect students proficiency in essay writing are courses/syllabus used and qualification/specialization of the teachers.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study lies in shedding light on a serious issue represented in the observed deficiency of the fourth level students at the English Department, Faculty of Education and

Science, Rada'a, Albaydha University in academic essay writing. The findings and recommendations of this study has implications for the students, teaching staff and policy makers that might lead to improvement of the students' performance in essay writing not only at the Department of English, Albaydha University but across all English departments in the other universities.

Literature Review

The importance of academic writing its characteristics, structure, process, language, and scope has been the concern of many researcher and other stakeholders (Swales &Feak, 2012;Hyland, 2009;Jenkins, 2006;Abdulkareem, 2013; Albadi,2015;Reshmi, 2017; Al-Badwawi, 2011;Al Siyabi, 2019;Starkey, 2004;Godwin, 2016; Davis and Ellis, 2007). As a result, academic writing is a skill that students must develop throughout their academic careers, as it forms the foundation for academic success and professional achievement. Whether in the form of essays, research papers, or dissertations, academic writing provides students with the ability to organize, articulate, and defend their ideas in a manner that is coherent, persuasive, and rigorous. It is a skill that not only facilitates success in academic settings but also serves as a gateway to professional and intellectual opportunities beyond the university environment (Swales &Feak, 2012).

An essay is a type of academic writing used to express ideas, provide information, or analyze a particular issue. It follows an organized structure that includes an introduction, a main body, and a conclusion. Essays are widely utilized for educational, informational, or creative purposes (Swales &Feak, 2012). There are different types of essay such as Descriptive Essay, Narrative Essay, Argumentative Essay, Analytical Essay, Comparative Essay, Expository Essay,Persuasive Essay and Critical Essay(Savage, 2007;Ibnian, 2011;Kane, 2000). Two of the most components of an essay are cohesion and coherence. Cohesion can be divided into grammatical and lexical cohesion. Grammatical cohesion includes devices such as reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction, while lexical cohesion is divided into reiteration (repetition, synonymy etc.) and collocation (co-occurrence of lexical items (Crystal, 2008).Coherence has the elements of organization, progression, development, unity and language use (Stirling, 2009).According to Cruse (2006), cohesion and coherence are types of connectedness which distinguish texts from random collections of words. Cohesion is a matter of form and concerns (mainly grammatical) ways of connecting one piece of language to another, such as agreement and anaphora. Coherence is a matter of meaning compatibility and relevance.

Several recent studies have investigated the challenges faced by EFL students in academic writing, revealing common issues and proposing strategies for improvement. The most notable include Smith and Johnson (2023),Ezzaldin, 2023,Davis and Turner (2022),Green (2021), Miller and Walker (2020),Chen and Zhang (2021), Roberts (2022), Williams and Taylor (2020). Together, these studies underscore a shared understanding that EFL students face persistent and interrelated challenges in academic writing, particularly in grammar, cohesion, and coherence. The current study shares some similarities with the aforementioned studies, however, it differs from them in that it accounts for challenges other than mistakes, social factors and methods of teaching.

Methodology

Study Design

This is a qualitative descriptive study. Qualitative approach is used as the objective is to explore challenges and causes behind them. In addition, the analysis focuses on themes and patterns rather than frequencies and comparisons. It is descriptive because it provides a detailed account of the challenges encountered without manipulating variables or testing a hypothesis.

Population and Sample

The population of the study includes all students registered at the English Department, Faculty of Education and Science, Rada'a, Albaydha University, Yemen. The sample of the study consists of all fourth level students as their number is limited, i.e. 12. They have already studied 5 writing courses at university stage, i.e. Writing I, Writing II, Writing III, Writing IV and Advanced Writing Skills. The study took place just one week before the end of the second semester of the academic year 2024/2025.

Data Collection Instruments

Two instruments were used to account for the challenges faced by the forth level students in essay writing, i.e. a writing test and document analysis. The participants were asked to write a three-paragraph-essay on a special day in their lives. They were given enough time and the written essays were collected and analyzed. Besides, the courses and syllabus used in teaching writing at the English Department, Faculty of Education and Science, Rada'a were analyzed. In addition, the profiles of the three writing teachers were referred to get the required data.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The data collected revealed three types that represent sources of difficulty in enhancing students' academic essay writing skills. The first one relates to students themselves and reflects their mistakes due to linguistic causes. The second relates to the syllabus and courses of writing used. The third one relates to the teachers who teach writing courses. The mistakes committed by the participants were categorized into four categories: spelling errors/mistakes, grammatical mistakes, mechanism of writing mistakes and coherence/ cohesion related issues. The findings obtained from the writing test are presented and discussed as follows:

Spelling Mistakes/Errors

A sample of the mistakes/errors in spelling committed by the participants is presented in the following table:

Table 1. A Sample of Spelling Errors

Wrong spelling	Correct spelling	Wrong spelling	Correct spelling	Wrong spelling	Correct spelling
frind	friend	Famly	family	minent	moment
nic	nice	Favorit	favorite	you tub	you tube
beatuful	beautiful	Weak	week	ever day	every day
becaus	because	Hustory	history	sceared	scared
meating	meeting	husband	husband	want back	went back

feavert	favorite	Realy	really	creaful	careful
vrayday	Friday	ramember	remember	fiand	find
hous	house	Larg	large	desart	desert
beater	better	Moth	mouth	befor	before
shuting	shouting	norvousness	nervousness	mom	mum

The errors shown in the table did not occur frequently by many students so they can be considered either as lapses or lack of ability to distinguish between homophonous words or idiosyncratic errors (unique errors).

From the researcher's experience as a teacher of English for more than 25 years, it is observed that many students commit errors in spelling due to the following:

- existence of letters in English that are not found in Arabic such as /p/, /v/ and /tʃ/;
- lack of ability to distinguish between long and short sounds;
- existence of words that have silent letters;
- existence of homophonous words;
- existence of words that are pronounced in a way but written in another.

Grammatical Mistakes

Having analyzed the essays written by the participants, it is found that none of them is free from grammatical mistakes with variations that reflect individual differences among them. For a proper understanding, it is not enough to identify such mistakes but to account for their causes as well. By examining the essays written by the participants, it is found that grammatical mistakes are as follows:

Disagreement between Subject and Verb

The following are examples of this type:

- *Everyone* has a special day. It could be a birthday or a day where *they* received a gift
- My mood change.
- Our life have many favorite things.
- Many days is famous.
- My mother help me in the first day in school.

Such mistakes could be attributed to ignorance of rule restrictions.

Use of the Wrong Tense

The following examples reflect use of the wrong tense as well as some other mistakes:

- My special day its very nice and beautiful because I am meating (meeting) my favorite people and eating the lunch with her.
- vriday (Friday) is the best day in the week, I am meating (meeting) my grandmother and aunt.
- Do you see the desert before?
- I will never forget the day when we traveled. When I open my sleep eyes. I see my children and husband. They are very tired and they hope to change their day. My children go to the school and my husband go to the company.
- I thought you can got a little about my special day.
- She gave me several rings and I choose a big one.
- The best day is when my mother gave me that ring.

L1 Transfer

L1 transfer or the influence of mother tongue is found to have a notable significance and could attribute to several mistakes as shown below.

- I spent the days with my best friend.
- I am so happy in the day.
- I am go in the fraday (Friday) to house.
- I am was happy with my family.
- In the all year ...
- Eyd is the special day. In eyd people are happy. In eyd the children wear the new cloths. The eye day makes the people very happy.
- In 14/1/2024 was everything very nice because it was the day who know in it my husband. The hustory (history) is day great in my life. I was feel that I am free in the sky.
- What does it mean for you special day.
- My passion for learning the Russian language one of the reasons behind this passion is considered as a dream.
- The last thing that I do it in my special day which is review all the new sentence, idiom and phrases at night.
- Reviewing is crucial thing that help me to keep all the information in my mind without forget them.
- The mother gives her children love and safe.
- My mother help me in the first day in the school.
- I made the lunch and put the clothes in the suitcase.
- We must to travel now.
- We stopped to eat the lunch in the road.
- My mother felt with my sad feelings.

By examining the above examples, it is clear that the mistakes are due to L1 interference and literal translation from Arabic to English.

Wrong Use of Writing Mechanisms

This includes capitalization, commas, full stops, etc. The following are examples:

- we decided to have a fun day in the park.
- one of the most special days of my life was
- it was a great feeling to be with her.
- also my mother help me make food.
- we started to carry all things.
- on this day, I feel surrounded by love and kindness.
- one day I passed with hardship.
- then we sat under a tree and talked about our dreams.
- vrayday (Friday) is the best day in the week, I am meating (meeting) my grandmother.
- In the end. My special day is vrayday.
- In eyd I have many work. I clean the house. I help my mother. I pray the eyd pray. I go to my grandmother house. I talk about family.
- what does it mean for you special day.

- Everything In this language is totally different.
- When I open my sleep eyes. I see my children and husband.
- Everyone has a special day, it could be a birthday or a day when they received a gift.
- Many days is famous. People have a different special day. I have a lot of favorite day in my life.

Idiosyncratic (Unique) Mistakes

These mistakes which do not reflect the structure of L1 or that of L2 are termed as 'idiosyncratic' or 'unique'. Examples of such mistakes are as follows:

- I am like the day and I am was happy with my family.
- Many people have different favorite thing.
- My favorite day in the all year is the most famous day in Arab people.
- I pray the Eyd pray.
- I wear a new clothes.
- To each person time be of it that you feeling of happy, maybe day in the weak, day in the year, or day in the hustory (history), and my special day is in the hustory not forget in 14/1/2024.
- The hustory is day great in my life, really was from my smallest life days that can I am than remember it.
- I not forget who was the smily very large of my moth, I was feel I am free in the sky.
- Sometimes may come you in your life and take you some menent (moment) not you forget what you leave.
- Every day special beside with my mother.
- She helps ours a lot things.
- I preparation all things.

Other Findings

It is found that only three participants were able to write a three-paragraph-essay in a right way including introduction, body and conclusion. The others committed mistakes regarding coherence elements, i.e. organization, progression, development, unity and language use as well as cohesion elements, i.e. reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, reiteration, and collocation. Six participants write only one paragraph and two write irrelevant ideas. The other essays also lack smooth transitions between ideas, fail to follow a clear logical sequence and rely on two basic conjunctions, i.e. 'and or but'.

The Findings Obtained from the Courses and Syllabus Analysis

By analyzing the courses and syllabus of writing used at the English Department, Faculty of Education, Albaydha University, it is found that there is no course specification that demonstrate what topics are to be taught. The program specification just gives short description of the writing courses as follows:

Writing I is intended to develop in the students the basic skills of writing correctly. The emphasis in the course is on correctness and not on stylistic features of acceptability. Developing correct sentences in form and content is the key objective.

Writing II concentrates on the features of cohesiveness and coherence in writing. Students are required to be familiar with paragraph formation through reading, outlining, and then practicing.

Writing III includes the ability to summarize paragraphs and short texts and also the ability to expand the ideas contained in pithy and epigrammatic sentences.

Writing IV focuses on the production of different types of genres through correct paragraph construction for both general scientific and literary topics. Students are expected to move from guided writing to free expression within the bounds of specific topic areas.

Advanced Writing Skills aims at enriching and augmenting the writing skills acquired during the earlier courses in writing, particularly the skills acquired during the previous levels. The main emphasis of the course is to enable students to write argumentative long essays in a cohesive and coherent manner.

Consequently, it is left to the teachers of these courses to decide what topics are to be taught. Having looked at the textbooks used to teach the aforementioned courses, it is found that there is a little or no correspondence between their contents and what is specified in the program specification. The following table summarizes the contents of each course as follows:

Table 2. Contents of the writing courses

Courses	Contents
Writing I	The sentence and paragraph, descriptive paragraph, example paragraphs, process paragraphs, opinion paragraphs, narrative paragraphs.
Writing II	Paragraph to short essay, descriptive essays, narrative essays, opinion essays,.
Writing III	comparison and contrast essays, cause and effect essays, process analysis essays.
Writing IV	The five-paragraph essay, cause and effect essays, argumentative essays, classification essays, reaction essays.
Advanced Writing Skills	Describing grammar, expanding your knowledge of grammar, polishing up your punctuation, paragraphing your work, checking your spelling, looking at apostrophes and abbreviations, improving your style, writing an essay and a short story, summarizing and reporting, filling in forms, writing letters, making applications.

Having a close look at the contents, each topic represents a whole unit that cannot be taught in one or two lectures. In addition, it can be concluded that most of the topics taught in Advanced Writing Skills, which is taught for the fourth level students, deal with the basics that should be taught for the first level students. In addition, some topics are repeated and taught in different courses. This indicates that the teachers do not have idea of the program specification on one hand and of what other teachers teach on the other. However, it was surprising that the selected sample were unable to write well-formed essays and have committed many mistakes in spite of the existence of many topics that have been taught repeatedly in the courses related to essay writing. Thus, it was decided to examine the assumption that there is something wrong with the teachers who teach these courses.

The Findings Obtained from Teachers of Writing's Profiles

Through the profiles of the three teachers who taught the writing courses, it is found that two of them hold bachelor degree from the same faculty. They have graduated recently and have no in-service training. This implies that they are not well-qualified to teach on one hand and they tend to use the methods that their teachers previously used. One of them used to teach Writing I and Writing II (taught at the first level) and the second used to teach Writing III and Writing IV (taught the second level). The third teacher holds Ph. D degree in literature from the Faculty of Arts and used to teach Advanced Writing Skills (taught at the fourth level). Here it can be assumed that specialization may play a role because as a literature Ph. D holder less interest is paid to teach writing. The lack of correspondence between the program specifications and the content of the course, as discussed in the previous section, it can be inferred that the teachers either did not have an idea of the program specifications or used the textbooks of previous teachers without bothering themselves to refer to the program specifications. In addition, each teacher does not know what has been taught by the other. This is evident from the repetition of the same topics in different courses and the existence of basic topic that should be taught in the first level in Advanced Writing Skills which is taught in the fourth level.

Being familiar with the situation in Yemen under the siege by Saudi regime and its allies since 2016 that led to an economic crisis which has resulted in suspension of the salaries, the number of lectures has been reduced. Instead of teaching 15 lectures each semester, each course has to be taught only within 6-8 lectures. As stated earlier, each topic in each course represents a whole unit that includes many sub-topics so that it cannot be taught in one or two lectures. Consequently, only two or three topics are actually taught. In addition, teachers sometimes face a difficulty coming to college due a specific reason so the number of lectures and the topics taught get fewer. Even the regular attendant teachers come with a bad attitude and less motivation so that instead of teaching a lecture for two hours only one hour or less is taught. This could justify the weakness of the students and disability to write well-formed essays in spite of the existence of many topics related to essay writing as shown in Table 2.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study the researcher come up with the following recommendations:

1. There should be courses specification that aligns with the program specification and states topics, methods of teaching and assessment and books to be used in teaching each course.
2. Teachers of writing courses should be well-qualified and provided with in-service training to update their knowledge with the recent developments in the field.
3. Officials should find a solution that enables teachers overcome financial hardship and come regularly to teach so that a total of at least twelve lectures is attained.
4. Student should be encouraged to practice essay writing regardless of the mistakes they commit and given positive feedback that motivates them to proceed. However, the mistakes should be highlighted along with correction.
5. Students should be instructed to improve writing utilizing technology such as educational websites and blogs.

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