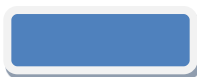


# **Some Writing Challenges Facing Iraqi Graduate Applicants**

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### **Abstract:**

The present study aims to investigate the writing challenges faced by Iraqi graduate applicants, from different disciplines, who needed to pass an English placement test so as to be able to apply to graduate programs. One of the main linguistic skills faced by learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and may be the hardest, is considered writing as it is related to the production of language (Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016). EFL learners face many linguistic challenges in writing. Samples were collected from 49 anonymous mixed-gender subjects who were asked to answer questions

of 80% multiple choices and 20% of writing essays. Essays were collected and manually annotated. In addition, seven students and three instructors were interviewed. The study was directed in order to identify miscellaneous challenges: causes will be revised and suggestions to overcome those challenges are to be advised. The study found that there are problems on the individual level and on the institutional level. These problems can be resolved if concentrating on the reasons behind each problem.

**Keywords:** Writing; EFL Writing; Iraqi EFL learners; Writing challenges.

## 1. Introduction

Writing is a substantial capability in language proficiency. Its significance increases when it comes to writing in English language which is considerably used for international mediation of learning. Nunan (1989) argues that writing is an enormously challenging cognitive activity which entails having control over various elements. These elements fluctuate from the writer's educational background and personal attentiveness to different psychological, linguistic, and cognitive capabilities. Mahboob (2014) believes that the overall achievement in language is prone to improvement in writing skills. Writing of a serious EFL learner must be consistent, rational, clearly organized, interesting, and appropriately prepared with varied vocabulary (Hall, 1988). However, it is often underrated that writing, a long side with syntax and grammar, is only viewed in terms of scholastic performance the thing that trivializes the impact of writing in EFL settings. Hence, a great deal of attention needs to be paid for the development of this skill and its learning and teaching from the

very early stages of language schooling.

Due to globalization and openness to the western world, in Iraq, after 2003, the use of English language has extremely increased, but on the other hand, the students' writing skills are obviously weak and below average; however, users of English language still face concerns, mainly in writing beside the other linguistic skills. These concerns arise generally from ineptitude in grammar, spelling, syntax, consistency, idea development, topic sentences, organization, poor vocabulary, and misuse of vocabulary. However, further research is needed to investigate the various factors that negatively affect students' writing skills because problems in writing can be more powerfully identified if the elements that engender them are examined (Hyland, 2003). This study aims to investigate challenges Iraqi EFL learners face in writing, the sources of these challenges, and suggestions on how to overcome those challenges will be recommended. Earlier studies have tried to classify the factors that would hinder the

foreign language learning into some wide-ranging fields; for instance, teachers' unskillfulness (Harmer, 2008), students' lack of attentiveness (Harmer, 2008) inappropriate methodologies (Javed, Juan, & Nazli, 2013). Other areas are required to be explored for further studies.

## **2. Literature Review**

The most perplexing part in learning any foreign language is writing. It relies on proper and deliberate use of language with structural precision and communicative capacity (Hyland, 2003). Kellogg (2001) believes that learning a foreign language requires mental capacity that involves cognition to process ideas, memory, thinking capacity, and linguistic command so as to actively express one's ideas. That command is directly required in writing because the latter requires successful learning (Nickerson, Perkins, & Smith, 2014). Therefore, considerable attention has been paid to the learning of writing as it is a means for effective transfer of ideas. Researchers tend to work arduously to investigate the different challenges foreign

language learners face in writing. During the different levels of learning, students encounter different challenges in writing that could be classified into linguistic, psychological, cognitive and pedagogical categories (Hyland, 2003). They have difficulties in dealing with the syntactic structure of English because an improper structure makes the content and understanding of the text unmatched, the thing that requires the reader to decode the association of conceptual processes (Quintero, 2008). Likewise, even though EFL learners lexically, grammatically, and syntactically master the language, an incoherent writing will fail to communicate thoughts which leads to lack of confidence in learners' overall linguistic capacity (Rico, 2014). Faulty teaching approaches would also cause students' poor self-confidence especially when they do not adhere to learners' cultures and styles (Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016). It is debated that there are at least two main elements behind the learners' weak writing abilities: the learner and the teacher. Teachers' absence of the right applicable

pedagogical approach to teach writing, and most crucially, teachers' lack of skill to stimulate or encourage students are present issues in teaching EFL writing. On the other hand, learners generally encounter various hardships: effects of first language (L1) transfer, lack of reading, motivation, and training. In Iraq, students face multiple psychological, scholastic, cognitive, and linguistic difficulties while translating ideas into writing (Haider, 2012).

Previous studies have recognized plentiful factors that influence learners' writing skills. These are correlated with the learners' incentive because they are generally uncertain about their drive and importance of their writing in their foreign language learning. Correspondingly, social media, erratic feedback from educators, students' poor critical thinking, and uncontrollable class size also adversely impact the quality and accuracy of the students' writing (Pineteh, 2013). Most of the students find it very perplexing to attain appropriate and related source information, summarize or

restate information, and adapt a proper academic writing style (Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016). It is initiated by deferred writing practice, outsized classes, learners' undesirable approach towards their educational English course, L1 transfer, and absence of interchange between students and educators about the productive steps that are required to be taken to deal with these problems. Generally, insufficient time dedicated for the teaching of writing, inappropriate audio-visual aids, overloaded classes, old-fashioned teaching, and students' poor motivation and/or educational background have been stated to be among the key factors influencing students' writing skills (Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016). By the same token, obsolete textbooks that fail to enhance the significance of writing skills or provide any opportunities or subsequently be unsuccessful to be of appeal to addressees (Haider, 2012). Other literature assesses inept instructors who rather than encouraging ingenious talents inciting students for invaluable approaches and test-oriented linguistic performance (Rahman,

2002).

Graham & Perin (2007) state that learners' writing skills can be enhanced by promoting their curiosity, impetus and amusement for writing, by the use of technology. Moreover, instructors can acclimate their academic methodologies and can reciprocally formulate such tasks that could stimulate and inspire students through granting them freedom of selecting topics students are interested in (Pineteh, 2013). It will restructure their writing patterns through prolonged exercises and by including corporeal and cognitive skills which offer the writer control over the form and the linguistic knowledge (Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007). Besides, it will be appropriate for language and contented educators to keep track of their students from wide-ranging perspectives (Nik, Sani, Kamaruzaman, Hasbollah, et al., 2010). Educators are required to adapt approaches for the elicitation of thoughts from students so as to be written down on paper to endorse their speaking skills. They need to keep their approaches in a

continuous state of change. Furthermore, lecturers are required to attain immediate and critical feedback to be given on their performance, the thing that could affect or sustain their self-confidence (Haider, 2012).

### **3. Methodology**

This study aims to look into the writing difficulties, elements that impede writing improvement, and suggestions to advance writing of Iraqi graduate EFL learners.

Data were compiled anonymously from 49 male and female applicants with different majors who had been required to pass a placement test in English language so that they might be qualified to apply for the graduate programs at the different disciplines in Kufa University. The placement test was composed of 80% of multiple-choices and 20% of writing essays (descriptive, narrative, and argumentative essays). Applicants were asked to write a composition of about 200 words on one of two different topics. Their writing essays were assessed by a committee of three referees who scale the quality, quantity, relevance, coherence, cohesion, and style. A selection of

essays was then annotated manually to specify the kind of errors learners tend to commit through their writing. A focus group of three instructors and seven students was interviewed in order to precisely introduce the different challenges Iraqi EFL learners encounter like the curricular and extracurricular challenges students might face during their years of schooling. Interviews were done after attaining the respondents consent and the data were collected under complete confidentiality.

#### **4. Findings**

Categorization of the findings of this study can be done into three main categories: difficulties in Iraqi EFL writing, factors behind these difficulties, and suggestions to improve EFL learners' writing skills.

The study outlined several challenges in the writing of graduate EFL learners. It exposed that Iraqi EFL learners would lack familiarity with the use of suitable vocabulary. They have immense problems in punctuation, spelling, and grammar. They usually make mistakes regarding subject-verb agreement, proper pronouns,

correct tenses, definite/indefinite articles, prepositions and sentential overall structure. Additionally, dearth of ideas and poor imagination that come from lack of reading, background knowledge, and/or interest also affect learners' writing. Well-ordered writing is another challenge to learners as their composition lacks coherence, transitional and cohesive devices.

A total of 1869 errors were made by our 49 anonymous subjects when required to write essays of about 200 words. Writing difficulties have been classified into punctuation, spelling, grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. These difficulties were faced by most of our subjects. The number of students who attempted such mistakes and the results of passing or failing in the exam are irrelevant to our research. (See Table 1)

Punctuation had the highest percentage regarding mistakes made by our subjects. They scored 27% of total mistakes. They have difficulties in using capitalization, use of apostrophe, comma, and period. They made mistakes like: "my name is sultan, Im eng.", and "i go with my best friend in a trip to



arpil in iraq”.

The second highest percentage was made in grammar where 26% was scored. Grammatical mistakes integrated subject-verb agreement, faulty negation and use of definite/indefinite articles, different word classes, and faulty conjugation and forms of singular and plural. For example, “I not imagine my life without technology”, “technology go with different uses in life”, “the linguists differentiates between competence and performance”, and “we must known the internet have many favorable information”.

Spelling errors were also found plenty: 22%. Some spelling errors were “pesines” (business), “telefon” (telephone), “pease” (peace), and “experans” (experience),

Syntactical errors scored 16% of all errors. They reflect learners’ deficiency over the use of syntactic structure and might produce non-understandable sentences. They also wrote long inconsistent sentences like, “I think it is important for people to their lives in an active manner enjoying all the happy moments because sometimes they do not come back again”.

The lowest number of errors was made in vocabulary (word-choice) where 7% was scored. For example, “the power will be used to help the poor layer and take them the hope in life”, “everybody should arise his children with best morals”, and “material of the exam is not related to the subject as in our competition exam”.

**Table 1**  
**Reliability Coefficient Values**

| Type of Writing Mistakes | Frequency of Occurrence | Percentage % |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| Punctuation              | 516                     | 27.60        |
| Spelling                 | 417                     | 22.31        |
| Grammar                  | 492                     | 26.32        |
| Syntax                   | 314                     | 16.80        |
| Vocabulary               | 130                     | 6.95         |
| Total                    | 1869                    | 100          |

Many instances of spoken and informal style have been found in the writing of our subjects. Spoken expressions like “let’s talk about the exam first” and “now if we talk about life without it” were also found in their writing. Likewise, EFL learners used the contracted forms mostly in negation as in don’t, won’t, and can’t.

Other instances of mistakes are related to stylistic devices of writing like consistency, repetition of ideas and influence of Arabic. Repetition designates shortage of ideas while poor consistency and infrequent use of transitional devices would result in lack of unity and coherence. The effect of Arabic was also marked in sentences like, “we should respect laws and general systems”, and “bad information must be avoided because it will lead to destroy my idea” which mirrors student’s thinking in Arabic and L1 transfer.

#### **4.1 Factors behind Writing Difficulties**

As shown in the data and elicited from the interviewed group, there are variant factors that would impede the improvement of writing

skills of the subjects; Iraqi EFL learners. First, writing is considered a secondary skill by EFL learners. They mainly focus on speaking and conversational skills. As such, EFL learners usually tend to forsake the skills of reading and writing, and pay plenty of attention to speaking.

The educational system does not encourage EFL learners’ critical thinking. They are given twenty minutes in order to write a 200 words essay. So, students are lead to merely memorize; not to be creative. Fear and anxiety are also other challenges face students’ capability to compose a well-organized text. Hence, they need to face fear and anxiety or at least learn to decrease them to the minimum. Correspondingly, dependence on Arabic in the handling thoughts also leads to poor writing. They use Arabic in thinking about their thoughts and then they translate their thinking into English.

Inexperienced, unskilled instructors and futile pedagogical methodologies have great influence on the development of students’

writing performance and could affect students' writing skills adversely. Also, EFL learners ignore practicing writing inside or outside the classroom. They lack knowledge about topics that they are required to write about, and they quickly lose concentration the thing that needs teachers' continuous follow-up and motivation to keep students focused. In addition, the unbalanced size of classrooms, unattractive learning environment that fail to stimulate or encourage critical thinking and the long poorly designed lessons maybe among the learning-impeding factors (Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016).

## **5. Discussion and Suggestions**

Among the main challenges EFL learners encounter in writing are grammar and syntax. These challenges comprised improper use of articles, prepositions, tenses, singular & plural, verbs, sentence structure, and the use of colloquial spoken expressions. Another problem comprises the improper use of vocabulary as EFL learners lack knowledge about the

collocations and connotational meanings of vocabulary (Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016). Conversely, students do not consider these mistakes as problematic ones since EFL learners spell words the same way as they sound which results in the erroneous spelling.

Likewise, EFL learners do not retain knowledge about the topic. When students do not have information about the topic, they may not be able to write as expected from them.

Many different reasons influence Iraqi EFL writing skills like the monolingual Arabic speaking community, culture, learning and teaching environment, and the learners' interest and motivation; however, those factors lie beyond the scope of this study. Writing courses are mostly planned to introduce repeated topics that require memorization rather than critical, analytical, or creative thinking. Ahmed (2010) found that the classroom atmosphere is not encouraging learning; crowded rooms jammed with students located at noisy areas, and absence of basic conveniences impede the

nurturing of writing skill. Besides, the educators fail to convey effective writing skills and strategies to students. On the other hand, as recognized by (Nik, Sani, et al., 2010), ESL learners lack interest and motivation to develop their writing. They attempt writing merely as it is part of tests. There can be different reasons behind that lack of motivation: load of assignment of other courses, financial obligations, nonexistence of uplifting advice, family education, and lack of interest. The students reserve a second plan that is to depend on their mother tongue and intentionally code-switch when they encounter difficulty in conveying their thoughts onto paper in English. They incline to translate word by word and copy syntax of Arabic which differs entirely from that in English. This ultimately leads to humble erroneous writing. Colleagues and instructors can have a significant role in providing productive feedback although the notion of feedback is not clearly identified. Its significance is restricted to specifying mistakes in written texts without paying attention to learners' level, needs,

and proficiency considered to be highlighting mistakes in writing without taking into consideration the level, needs, and proficiency of the learners the thing that requires experienced instructors who can deliver effective notes (Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016).

Suggestions to resolve these difficulties can be achieved through a number of counteractive procedures at personal and institutional levels through the extended exposure of all the four linguistic skills to EFL learners with concentration on reading and writing. Hence, the adverse culture of concentrating on all the linguistic skills –writing in particular– must be nourished, encouraged, and sustained by learners and educators rather than encouraging memorization and plagiarism.

There is also emphasis on the need of competent, accomplished, and inspired educators who are capable of delivering helpful feedback to students with decreased criticism. Competitions are suggested to be arranged in writing so as to encourage students to be creative and productive. These remedial procedures are suggested to be

employed at intermediate level in order to lessen challenges that learners may encounter at more advanced levels to the minimum (Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016).

The aim of this research was to investigate the challenges facing Iraqi EFL learners at the graduate level from different disciplines which impede the enhancement of writing skills. The study also recommended some solutions to overcome those challenges. After exposing the difficulties and factors behind these writing challenges, it can be inferred that there are problems on the individual level and on the institutional level. These problems can be resolved if concentrating on the reasons behind every problem. The findings of this study can be of significance to EFL learners who may encounter difficulties in English writing at intermediate and advanced levels. Based on the literature covered in this study and the revealed challenges and solutions in it, there are several points those can be taken into consideration in order to develop Iraqi EFL learners' writing. First, in order to enhance writing,

one needs to concentrate on reading which enriches imagination, the targeted culture, vocabulary, and background knowledge. Second, the emphasis should be on learning or teaching vocabulary and to show how they are essential material in good writing. Third, the culture of writing as a main linguistic skill needs to be sustained and be given attention that equals the attention paid to speaking through the daily practice of writing. Fourth, the testing system needs to be changed in a way that focuses on stimulating and encouraging critical thinking rather than memorization and rote learning. Likewise, the role of effective educators cannot be ignored. So, it is extremely essential that they are trained on adopting prolific teaching practices and up-to-date methods. Schools and institutes that offer writing courses should provide competent instructors who continually get training to keep their teaching skills sharpened. Fifth, teachers are required to encourage students to write as much as they could because writing skill is accumulative and needs to be continuously practiced. Sixth, the

spirits of competition and mutual motivation needs to be cultured among learners and educators. As students need encouragement and reward for successful accomplishment, educators also need to see the result of their efforts reflected in the achievement of students (Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016).

Still, there is a necessity for further research that could investigate the source of these factors and their consequent alteration into

permanent writing problems of EFL learners' writing. The current study, together with educators' and learners' remarks, tried to discover and inspect writing challenges and the factors that engender these concerns combined with suggestions from other mainstream researchers on the development of EFL writing skills. It also brings the underlying psychological and cognitive elements into light for further investigation and appropriate suggestions.

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