

***AN ATTEMPT TO UNDERSTAND THE CAUSES
OF EFL STUDENTS' WRITING MISTAKES
THE CASE OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH
AT KASDI MERBAH UNIVERSITY- OUARGLA***



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Abstract

Teachers and students admit that in any EFL classroom there might be some of the students' writing mistakes. The present paper comes to shed light on the main causes or that lead EFL learners to commit the same writing mistakes. What is more is that the students' mistakes are sometimes the same previously corrected by their teachers. Hence, this study aims at detecting whether the teacher's method is the main reason behind these mistakes. Moreover, this study tries to suggest a more effective strategy to deal with them. The study is carried out with first-year students of English at Kasdi Merbah University of Ouargla. To figure out the main causes behind committing of these mistakes, the selected sample is interviewed for forty-five minutes. The interview's findings reveal that first-year students of English keep committing the same writing mistakes because of anxiety, language complexity, L1 interference and the teacher's feedback practices.

Key Words: writing mistakes, EFL classroom students, teaching, anxiety, L1 interference.

المخلص

المعلمون والطلاب يعترفون بأن في الفصول الدراسية للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية قد تكون هناك بعض أخطاء الكتابة لدى الطلاب. وتأتي هذه الورقة لتسليط الضوء على الأسباب الرئيسية التي تؤدي إلى ارتكاب نفس أخطاء الكتابة. ما هو أكثر من ذلك هو أن أخطاء الطلاب في بعض الأحيان نفسها المصححة من قبل معلمهم. وتهدف هذه الدراسة إلى الكشف عن ما إذا كانت طريقة المعلم هي السبب الرئيسي وراء هذه الأخطاء. وعلاوة على ذلك، تحاول هذه الدراسة إيجاد إستراتيجية أكثر فعالية للتعامل مع أخطاء الكتابة. وأجريت الدراسة مع طلاب السنة الأولى قسم اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة قاصدي مرباح ورقلة.

لمعرفة الأسباب الرئيسية لارتكاب هذه الأخطاء، أجريت مقابلات مع عينة مختارة لخمسة وأربعين دقيقة. وتكشف نتائج المقابلة أن طلاب السنة الأولى في اللغة الإنجليزية يواصلون ارتكاب نفس أخطاء الكتابة بسبب القلق، تعقيد اللغة، تدخل IL، ردود فعل المعلم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أخطاء الكتابة، وطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، الفصول الدراسية والتدريس، والقلق، وتدخل اللغة الأم.

Writing is regarded as the most important skill language learners have to master. Therefore, EFL students need to enhance their writing skills by overcoming the challenges they encounter and correcting their mistakes. However, it is not easy for them to get rid of such mistakes. Although the correction of students' mistakes is important to improve their writing skills, it is always the last step the teacher does in his/her teaching process. The present paper is based on the findings of the conducted students' interview at University of Ouargla and it aims at investigating the causes of making writing mistakes.

1. Presenting the Interview

On the basis of the first exam commonly-made mistakes, the two researchers interviewed thirty first-year students of English at Kasdi Merbah University for forty-five minutes. These students were randomly selected. The interview questions are as follows:

1. Why do you make spelling mistakes?
2. Why do you make grammatical mistakes?
3. Why do you make coherence mistakes?
5. Why do you make mistakes related to mechanics of writing?
6. Do you feel anxious when you write?
7. Do you feel self-confident when you write?
8. Why do you repeat writing mistakes already corrected by the teacher?
9. What do you suggest to avoid such mistakes?

2. Results and Data Analysis

This section aims at discussing and analyzing students' answers during the interview after transcribing them. First year students of English at Kasdi Merbah University face a number of difficulties in writing. However, they have the willing to understand and to avoid their mistakes. There are some common types of writing mistakes most the subjects said that they usually make. Some of these mistakes are the following:

Students' Spelling Mistakes

The majority of students admitted that they have spelling mistakes when writing in English. For example, Student (1) stated the following: "I have some spelling mistakes because I do not have the words to express my ideas. I cannot find the suitable words to write what I have in mind."

For Student (1), the main reason that leads him to make such mistakes is that he lacks vocabulary in the target language. For this subject and for others involved in the interview, lack of vocabulary is due to the fact that they do not read in English. Reading for EFL students is a necessary element to develop their writing skills because it gives them the means to write correctly (**Hinkel, E., 2009**). Consequently, students can improve their writing skills in this case. However, some other subjects stated that they cannot memorize words in English since they are pronounced differently from the way they are spelled. They sometimes write them in French; other times they write French words instead.

Nevertheless, a few of the subjects maintained that they do not find it difficult to spell words correctly. They believe that spelling mistakes may create a negative impression and may often prevent the reader from understanding what they want to convey in their writings. As a result, they do not write enough words and do not express their ideas appropriately. Student (10), for example, said, "I

have some spelling mistakes because I do not have the words to express my ideas [...] I cannot find the suitable words to write what I have in mind.”

Students' Grammar Mistakes

Most students admitted that they ignore grammar in their writings and thus they make a lot of grammatical mistakes. Nevertheless, students (1), (11) and (12) maintained that grammar is not a problem for them since they have just to follow the grammar rules they know and they have learned by heart. For them, grammar is regarded as the basic framework of any language.

The reasons behind making grammar mistakes are many as the subjects stated. The main cause according to them is the fact that they used to practice grammar rules in short sentences, i.e., they often use grammar out of context (**Truscott, J., 1991: pp. 327-369**).

Subject (13), for example, said, “I know the rules of grammar when I write short sentences, but when I start writing a paragraph I totally forget these rules and I focus on how to express my ideas in English.” Another reason mentioned by most of the thirty subjects is that they often believe that they have to use their grammar correctly just in their grammar sessions, and they neglect it in the other modules. These are some common reasons behind students' grammar mistakes.

Coherence in Students' Writings

For some students, it is hard to write taking into account that they have to consider coherence. For them, finding out ways to link sentences together is often difficult. Giving details on a particular topic and focusing on one central idea are not easy for some others. To illustrate, Student (15) maintained that “knowing that I have to write about a certain topic is not that easy for me. The cause is

...well it is that gathering ideas on one subject is really a hard task that I cannot do. By the end of any activity, I find that I've written different things which I cannot know if they are related to the controlling idea I have to focus on."

A few students admitted that they do not have any problems with coherence. Student (21) said, "Coherence for me is a mental issue. When we organize our ideas and structure them in our mind in a logical way, we facilitate our job while writing; that is why we need to think clearly and logically before starting writing paragraphs."

Capitalisation in Students' Writings

For question four, most students maintained that they do not get used to pay attention to capitalization. Subject (12), for instance, stated that "I capitalise just the beginnings of sentences and sometimes I capitalise some letters by habit, and I don't capitalise the pronoun 'I' because I am not convinced although the teacher keeps asking us to capitalise it. This rule does not exist either in Arabic or in French." Accordingly, the problem of capitalisation is due to the effect of students' mother tongue and sometimes their second language (Truscott, J., 1991: pp. 327-369). Some students think that capitalisation does not add anything to the whole meaning. Student (14) claimed that "Capitalisation is meaningless; it is a way of writing; that's all."

Punctuation in Students' Writings

Punctuation, on the other hand, seems to be the hardest issue to be mastered by students. Most of the students ignore the role of punctuation in clarifying ideas (Harmer, J., 2004). Subject (20) admitted that "I don't see why we should focus on punctuation when we should express our ideas. If I focus on the decoration of my paragraph, I forget all my ideas."

Subject (23) also said, "Sentences that I write are clear to me with or without punctuation. We should not be tested on punctuation!"

A few students claimed that they know how important punctuation is. Nevertheless, they admitted that they ignore the rules of punctuation. Student (22) stated that "I do know all the rules of punctuation, but I forget about most of them when writing in English."

When asked about indentation, most students admitted that they have been taught to indent paragraphs, but most of the time they forget to do so. "It's a matter of habit," said Subject (15).

Students' Anxiety

For question five, most of the students feel anxious when asked to write about topics they do not like. Student (24) said, "Yes! I feel very anxious and bored, especially when I am asked to write about a subject I don't like, but I am obliged to write about." Subject (14) added, "I feel anxious before writing when the topic is not easy to handle, i.e., I am not familiar with; or I consider it a heavy topic; when I start writing, I am always concerned with the reaction of my reader". Anxiety for most of the students is the result of the teacher's selection of topics they are asked to write about (**Ferris, D: 2001: pp. 161-184**).

Anxiety may thus disappear if the topic is selected by students. Some students are reluctant to write because they rarely write even in their L1 and they sometimes feel that they have not got anything interesting to mention and they cannot invest much time and effort in doing any writing task.

Students' Self-confidence

When subjects asked about their self-confidence when writing, the majority of them seemed to be less self-confident when writing for their teacher than when writing for their peers or for themselves. Subject (11) claimed that "I feel that the teacher is always judging me and looking for the smallest mistake to criticize me. Thus, I lose my self-confidence. But, when I write for myself some stories and poems, I feel self-confident." Nevertheless, some other students do not have this problem, because as Student (16) said, "Mostly no, because I like writing and I like to be corrected by my teacher."

Factors behind Repeating the Same Writing Mistakes

For question seven, most of the students repeat the same writing mistakes which are already corrected by their teachers because they do not care about any oral correction provided in the classroom (Ferris, D., 2001: pp. 161-184). They remember only the written correction. Subject (13), for instance, said, "I repeat the same mistakes because I don't take the remarks of the teacher seriously"; whereas, Subject (16) maintained, "I repeat the mistakes already corrected by the teacher because I don't care about what has been said." However, Subject (3) admitted, "Yes! It is true that the teacher corrects our mistakes, but most of the time the teacher corrects them orally. When I revise my lessons, I forget the oral correction."

Nevertheless, a few subjects are with the oral correction. Subject (8), for instance, said, "When the teacher corrects our mistakes on the board, I cannot get her. This way doesn't work for me. I need the teacher to talk to me about what I have done."

Students' Suggestions

For question eight, when students were asked what they suggest to avoid repeating the same mistakes, most of them suggested that the teacher may give them some assignments to do each week. They asked for much time in sessions to correct writing mistakes. Subject (10) said, "I suggest that the teacher devotes much time in each session for spelling mistakes."

A great number of the subjects proposed a reading session inside the classroom because as Subject (19) maintained, "Our problem comes from reading. We do not read in English. If the teacher asks us to read a story, we go to the net and download its summary which we do not read as well. We read when we feel obliged, and that is only in the classroom." This highlights the importance of intensive reading in the EFL classroom.

3. Findings

The interview revealed the main reasons that lay behind students' writing mistakes. Most students find it challenging to get rid of the influence of their mother tongue at the levels of meaning and grammar. L1 interference is usually inevitable in EFL classes. Therefore, EFL teachers need to think about designing a number of activities which can reduce the effects of L1 and help students to overcome this difficulty.

In addition, grammar mistakes are common among the chosen students though they know about the various grammatical rules in English. The main reason behind this is that when writing, students often think of meaning rather than structure. Furthermore, writing as a skill has its mechanical features which are spelling, punctuation and the construction of well-formed sentences and texts (Harmer, 2004). The majority of the interview subjects maintained that the difference between their L1 and

English in some of these mechanical characteristics makes writing a challenging task for them and even for their teachers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A number of activities need to be designed by EFL teachers in order to help their students to overcome their difficulties in following the mechanics of writing in English. To illustrate, teachers of writing ought to encourage their learners to read: extensive reading is beneficial for EFL learners to remember English spelling conventions and exceptions. Moreover, some dictionary activities and dictation are good for students to notice and absorb spelling rules. Also, EFL students need to be trained to use punctuation correctly since the quality of what is written is as important as the content.

Teachers of writing should look for some ideas to get their learners recognise aspects of punctuation and be able to use them in a correct way. For example, students can be given an extract and then asked to punctuate it. After that, they will identify the causes of their choices.

EFL learners also need to be trained on putting words in well-structured sentences and paragraphs. One of the strategies followed by some teachers of writing is parallel writing in which students write following a model paragraph or text. Teachers of writing should look for ways to get their learners feel comfortable with writing and motivated to go forward in writing in English.

EFL teachers ought to work on building the writing habit in their classes so that students will get enthusiastic about writing. They should guide their classes in any writing activity by giving motivating comments and suggestions since students always expect any kind of feedback on their writings. In this case, the teacher will be the examiner, the reader, the resource of any information or guidance EFL learner may need and the editor.

Though learners often see their teacher as an examiner whose job is putting grades, they should be given an opportunity to assess themselves and each other as well so that they will be autonomous learners. Peer feedback is so important in EFL classes of writing (**Harmer, 2004**). It is considered as a golden opportunity for students to have their own say in the classroom.

Finally, it seems that the problem of repeating the same mistakes besides being related to the L1 and L2 interference, it is related to the way we, as teachers, correct it. All the above-stated recommendations can be very useful to create a healthy learning atmosphere in EFL classes.

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