

THE EFFECTS OF PROFICIENCY ON THE WRITING PROCESS OF JORDANIAN EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Up to date, very few studies have explored writing processes in the context of EFL. The purpose of the study was to investigate how writing proficiency affects the writing process of a selected group of English language and literature students at Yarmouk University in Jordan. (60) English language and literature students at Yarmouk University in Jordan were asked to complete a questionnaire of writing strategies. Significant results were found in this study. First, writing processes were seldom used among students at Yarmouk University in Jordan. Second, English proficiency affected the writing processes used among students at Yarmouk University in Jordan. The respondents, like most Jordanian university students, usually fail to express complex ideas in their writing as they lack the appropriate vocabulary, both general and technical, as is evident in the respondents' answers. The lack of appropriate vocabulary on the part of the respondents in turn affects their writing process itself as the findings reveal that these low proficiency respondents did not plan, edit or revised their written essays.

Keywords: Writing processes, writing proficiency, EFL, Jordanian Students, Writing, and Yarmouk University.

INTRODUCTION

For the past few decades, the focus in language learning and acquisition has been learner-centered rather than teacher-centered (Reiss, 1985; Wenden, 1991). The learners themselves must take the initiative to work on their own with the teachers facilitating their study. In this regard, Tamada (1996) maintains that research in language learning has started to emphasize on teaching methodology and the kind of strategies being implemented to achieve the objectives. The emphasis is influenced by the notion that success in academic studies is dependent on language skills. Consequently, this has led to more studies focusing on the acquisition of academic language skills, especially that of ESL/EFL graduate students (Block & Cameron, 2002; Alfes & Dison, 2000). The focus on ESL/EFL is expected since many of these students would become teachers or instructors in English related fields in the near future.

Where ESL/EFL language acquisition is concerned, the four basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are subsets of 'Academic Literacy' skills and all undergraduate students must master them while the graduates would still need them after they have graduated and embarked on their careers. With a sufficient degree of proficiency in academic literacy skills, all the graduates and undergraduates would definitely be able to meet all the needs and demands of their academic life and their working life later on (Lea & Strierer, 2000). According to Neeley (2001), academic literacy is the specific language demands of reading, writing and oral participation which are vitally needed by students in certain disciplines as related to the field of study. Normally all students need language skills to prepare and produce satisfactory solutions or responses to tasks and assignments in their study and eventually be able to meet the needs of their future careers (Neeley, 2001).

In all learning institutions academic writing is of utmost importance in the curriculum at any time of the learning or assessment period. In a research on student writing at university level, Fukao & Fujii (2001) discovered that writing is very important in determining the success of mastering the curriculum since writing can display the extent of a student's learning progress. As for language instructors, a student's writing will help to determine how much comprehension of the course content has occurred upon completion of a particular course. Maclellan, (2004), Jones (1999) share a similar

view where they acknowledge that written products are utilized to gauge the level of academic achievements in many learning institutions.

In universities, students need to prepare and submit written assignments, critical reviews, term papers, essays, and theses as part of their academic assignments to fulfill their course requirements. Apart from the course requirements in learning institutions, Zamel (1998) has a different view and belongs to another school of thought that believes that writing has the ability to enhance learning in a particular discipline. He explains that writing helps students to acquire content knowledge and in the course of analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating and making inferences, students are actually developing their cognitive skills. Bacha (2002) shares the same belief when he includes cohesion, summarizing and text organizing skills as well into the definition of writing skills. Furthermore, Manchón & Roca de Larios (2007) profess that writing requires the ability to solve linguistic problems and this helps students in the development of their second language proficiency. Unfortunately, some students are ignorant of the significance and importance of writing towards academic achievement in university and in their careers. Thus it is imperative to inform students of the need to learn writing and the benefits that come with the writing process (Marton and Booth, 1997).

According to Petric & Czár (2003), there are three stages in writing involving pre-writing, while-writing and post-writing. These three stages of the writing process are interconnected and they are non-linear in that they may overlap and may occur repeatedly without any fixed sequence or order (Manchón & Roca de Larios, 2007). Hence, L2 students need to use various techniques and strategies as required at each stage of the writing process (Cohen, 1998). In this respect, Petric and Czár (2003) consider the writing process as actions or behaviors intentionally carried out by writers using their own strategies to produce good writing.

Even though it may seem easy to adapt the suitable strategies to produce writing, the actual process of writing is still difficult especially among L2 students who may face problems of selecting the right strategy for the corresponding stage of writing. Basturkmen & Lewis (2002) reiterate that L2 students usually face problems with writing, especially academic writing. This is because it is not easy for L2 writers to express themselves clearly; write according to the flow of ideas, and enjoy the process of writing itself. There are also other factors like expectations from readers and their self-confidence. As it is all these factors need to be mentally accomplished before L2 writers can produce a good piece of writing. Other than that, they also need to think of suitable ideas; maintaining relevancy to the main idea of the topic; discard irrelevant ideas, and to organize these ideas to bring out the theme of the topic. Ideally, a writer may connect all the ideas thematically; writing the first draft and then fine-tuning it into the final draft. According to Raimes (1984), the components of writing include choice of writing strategies, subject, organization, mechanics of writing, vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and the targeted audience.

Due to all the obstacles and challenges in writing, many L2 students may feel strained or discouraged and this will eventually cause them to stop trying due to all the level of proficiency. Thus given that researchers as well as practitioners in the area of English writing instruction and learning have highlighted the problem of proficiency as crucial determinants of students success in learning to write effectively in English, this study proposes to undertake a case study in the context of Jordanian university students to investigate firstly, the veracity of such a claim and secondly, to investigate the extent of the problem.

As other EFL context which has witness development in teaching of EFL which has undergone much developments and improvements in terms of content, pedagogy, assessments, and achieved learning outcomes (Lee, 2002a). The teaching of EFL in Jordan is also undergoing transformation just like in other similar countries that considered the teaching of EFL as an educational and instrumental language (Al-Khotaba, 2010). Apart from its academic role, the teaching of EFL has transcended into Jordan's foreign policy by enhancing the educational, social, political and economic relationship between Jordan other countries. All these relationships are very important for the development of the economy, educational sectors and growth of the country ((Tahaine, 2009). Therefore, in line with its desire to enhance its global participation and in the process stimulate national growth and development, the Jordanian authorities should take the relevant steps to promote the acquisition of

English language literacy skills amongst its people, especially the younger generation.

With specific reference to the Department of English Language and Literature at Yarmouk University in Jordan, Al-Khotaba (2010) reported that many third-year English Department students are incompetent writers and lack the proficiency to write fluently in English. Al-Khotaba (2010), added that EFL Jordanian university students spend several years pursuing basic writing courses at the university but still encounter many problems when attempting to produce a piece of writing and many of them ask their high school teachers or more competent friends to help them complete the assignment.

Similarly, according to (Tahaine, 2009), the overwhelming majority of Jordanian students come to the university with varying proficiency in English and they are reluctant to write since writing in English is an extremely difficult task by itself. The difficulties are usually linked to the mechanics of writing, grammar, organization of ideas, starting to write, writing a strong conclusion, generating the right ideas, expanding the ideas and using the appropriate vocabulary and they graduate from the English Departments from Jordanian universities with approximately the same range variation in English proficiency.

Since the 80s, many studies on the teaching of EFL in Jordan have revealed that most of the EFL students had difficulty writing in English (e.g. Zughoul, 1985, 1991; Al-Khataybeh, 1992; Al-Khuwaili & Al-Shoumali, 2000; Rababah, 2003). In fact all these studies have shown a common weakness suffered by Jordanian EFL students, pointing to problems in all language skills, especially in writing among the Jordanian university students. These studies in this area have mostly focused on identifying the reasons why Jordanian EFL students face problems where writing is concerned and recommended further research for explaining the sources and causes of the weakness of writing by Jordanian EFL students. The present study was look beyond the previous studies to gain more understanding and attempts to investigate the reasons behind the weakness of Jordanian EFL students in writing. In this regards, the objective of this study is to investigate how writing proficiency affects the writing process of a selected group of English language and literature students at Yarmouk University in Jordan.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions are formulated to achieve the objectives of this study:

1. What writing processes do English language and literature students at Yarmouk University use in their academic work?
2. How proficiency effect writing process of English language and literature students at Yarmouk University?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Proficiency is defined variously in the literature. Stern (1992) regarded proficiency as a goal and can thus be defined in terms of objectives or standards. Thus, the criteria to assess proficiency can be based on the standards which come in the form of the linguistic performance of an individual learner. To Stern (1992), the criteria for assessing proficiency would range from zero to native-like proficiency and insisted that complete competence is hardly achievable by L2 learners (Stern, 1992). Alternatively, Bachman (1990) defined language proficiency as language ability or ability in language use. In contrast Oller (1983) considered language proficiency to be more than a single unitary ability where it has several separate but related constructs linked to a general construct. As for Farhady (1983), proficiency is to assess ability in a specific area of competency so as to determine the degree an individual can operate in a real language use situation.

However, there are many researchers, for example, Granger & Tyson (1996), Narita, Sato & Sugiura (2004) and Tang & Ng (1995) who are of the opinion that it is difficult to define the concept of "proficiency" in writing in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) although writing in EFL has long been a subject of discussion and research. Thus some researchers link writing proficiency to elements of linguistic proficiency in the form of vocabulary (Read, 2000), while others to the influence

of L1 in EFL (Uzawa, 2002), or syntax (Kuiken & Vedder, 2008), or grammar (Purpura, 2004). In general though, proficiency is an individual's general level of ability to understand and write in the target language while remaining conscious of the relations and combination of numerous sets of language elements such as grammar, vocabulary and sociolinguistic and communicative skills with the objective of achieving accurate communication (Cummins, 1980).

Students with low English proficiency always find it difficult to communicate comfortably in English. Evans & Green's (2007) research on student writing process revealed that limited English language proficiency can be an obstacle to the ability of students to communicate appropriately and accurately. In some English language classes, in particular, an EFL class in a university where many students have a low proficiency in English writing skills, the problem of not being able to write effectively becomes even more serious since success at university is often judged by the undergraduates' display of competence in the writing skills (Hyland, 2000).

As it is, students who are not proficient in English may find it hard to express complex ideas in their writing due to a lack of the necessary general and technical vocabulary. (Fukao & Fujii, 2001). In addition, the students' different L1 writing styles will also impact significantly on their L2 writing as students with different L1 backgrounds are likely to write differently (Kubota, 1998). Indeed some studies, for example, Kobayashi and Rinnert, (2008), Petric & Czarl, (2003) have found that the L1 writing ability of L2 students is the main determinant of their L2 writing performance. Such views are based on the assumption that writers transfer their writing-skills from their L1 to the target L2 writing (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2008). In such a situation, L2 writing difficulties are the result of and influenced by L1 writing difficulties. In contrast, others argue that L1 and L2 writing are essentially dissimilar from each other even though they share some common writing strategies (Petric & Czarl, 2003). Hence, the development of L2 writing is not entirely influenced by the transfer of culturally preferred rhetorical patterns from L1 but could be a combination of exposures and experiences in L2.

In many studies on L2 writing, proficiency has always been the main issue to contend with (Leki & Carson, 1994). This is because L2 proficiency is almost always a variable within a research. Consequently, in research on L2 writing, the writing process method is the most widely researched area that has produced the most information on the role of L2 proficiency in L2 writing (Fukao & Fujii, 2001). The effect of proficiency on EFL and ESL students' writing has been the focus of much research (Hall, 1990; Stevenson, Schoonen & de Gloppe, 2006). The findings from these researches can be categorized into two types. The first type deals with the use and influence of L1 in L2 writing and the second type deals with the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 writing process. In the latter, L2 writing the findings reveal that there is no clear link between proficiency and L2 writing proficiency as some researchers have argued that students with a generally lower level of language proficiency were not inhibited in their writing (Jones, 1982; Raimes, 1985; Zamel, 1982). Others, though have reported that language proficiency in L2 is somehow linked to writing competence (or ability) in the foreign language (Cumming, 1989; Hirose & Sasaki, 1994; Pennington & So, 1993).

In general, the findings of L2 writing process studies have revealed significant differences between proficient and non-proficient language users in terms of the writing process (Evans & Green, 2007; Ching, 2002; Hyland, 2000). Firstly, proficient and non-proficient language users differ in prewriting activities. Non-proficient ones spend only a short time on planning before beginning to write, and tend to follow the original plan without making any changes. In contrast, proficient ones spend more time on planning, and change and revise the original plan flexibly and freely whenever they have come up with a new idea in the writing process (Evans & Green, 2007).

Other than the planning process, L2 proficiency may also significantly affect the L2 revising process (Yasuda, 2005). As Kellogg (1996) note, writers with lower L2 proficiency often make more grammatical and lexical errors when they are creating text. This is because text creation requires a large amount of working memory and this makes it rather difficult for lower L2 proficient writers to draw upon their specific knowledge in order to monitor their output as they begin to generate the text.

In summation, the studies reviewed above have suggested that proficient and non-proficient L2 writers display a number of distinct characteristics during the writing process. The distinct characteristics that differentiate proficient writers from less proficient writers can be summed up as follows: (a) risk

taking, perceiving a sense of audience, and reasoning higher level processing such as discourse organization (Zamel, 1983); (b) facilitating global planning including setting goals, organizing ideas, and expressing them coherently (Cumming, 1989; Raimes, 1987); and (c) constantly engaging in all recursive writing processes including planning, executing, monitoring, and revising written products (Zamel, 1983).

Participants

The corpus was generated by third year English Language and Literature major students at Yarmouk University in Jordan. The selection of the third year students is motivated by the fact that they have completed their English language compulsory writing course. The total sample of this study were 60 (33 females and 27 males) randomly selected third year students who were studying B.A English Language and Literature at Yarmouk University in Jordan for the academic year 2010/ 2011.

Research Instruments

This research study use different research instruments and procedures. According to Gay and Airasian (2003), employing a variety of research instruments and procedures would add to the reliability and validity of the conclusions that are drawn out from any particular research. Also, the employment of numerous methods in a research study will give an explicit conclusion and will treat different aspects of the phenomenon comprehensively by increasing the internal validity and providing cross validation (Jackson, 2006). The two instruments that were used in this study were the adapted Writing Strategy Questionnaire by (Petric & Czár, 2003) to investigate the writing processes used by English language and literature students at Yarmouk University in their academic work and the relationship between English language and literature students' writing processes and their writing proficiency.

The questionnaire consisted of four parts. The first part of the questionnaire aimed to collect personal information of the participants, such as age and gender. The second, third and fourth parts covered three different sections. The first section examines the writing process, namely, pre-writing, writing, and revising stages. The items of the questionnaires cover the planning stages (8 items), while-writing stages (12 items), and revising stages (13 items). A five-point Likert Rating Scale ranging from 1 – 'never true' to 5 – 'always true' were employed. Some items of the questionnaire were modified and deleted to suit different cultural orientations of this study. The adapted questionnaire was reviewed and revised by two experts to ensure the validity of questionnaire.

The second instrument that was used in this study in order to gain some insight into students writing proficiency was the students' written essays. The reasons for the choice of written essays in this study is because the academic essay is singled out as the most common writing task assigned to students, especially in social sciences and humanities (Bacha, 2002). Besides that, written essays have traditionally been one of the most important instruments used to evaluate students' understanding of their subject areas (Campbell, Smith & Brooker, 1998, Al-Makhzoomi, 2011). The respondents were given forty five minutes to accomplish the writing task which is the normal time for their usual writing classes at the department of English Language and Literature Yarmouk University to write on the following topic: what is after graduation?

The rating of the students' essays was guided by the validated ESL Composition Profile of Jacob (1981). It has five component scales, namely content, organization, vocabulary, languages and mechanics. A total of 60 essays were scored holistically and analytically by three raters. The students' total scores in written essays were used as a measure of their proficiency. Students' total scores were divided into three groups (A- high proficiency students, B- mid proficiency students and C low proficiency students). Table (1) shows the descriptive statistics of the three levels of English writing proficiency.

The results in Table (1) illustrate the categorizations of the respondent into three groups according to their proficiency level. The findings reveal that respondents with a low level of proficiency make up the largest group at 71.7% or a total of 43 respondents. This is followed by respondents with a high level of proficiency at 25% or 15 respondents.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Students of Differing English Writing Proficiency

Writing Proficiency Levels	Frequency	Percent
High level of proficiency	15	25.0
Mid level of proficiency	2	3.3
low level of proficiency	43	71.7
Total	60	100.0

The respondents with a mid-level proficiency are the smallest group at 3.3% or only 2 respondents. Based on these findings, the researcher then used descriptive statistics and one way ANOVA to find out if there is any significant difference among high, mid and low proficiency respondents in terms of frequency of writing strategy use, more specifically, in the frequency of strategy use across the three writing stages of planning, writing and revising. Tables (2) and (3) show the summary of using writing process stage by proficiency level of students and ANOVA on writing process use in three stages by proficiency level.

Table 2. Summary of writing process by proficiency level

English Proficiency	Planning Stage		Writing Stage		Revising Stage	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
High	1.62	.000	1.416	.000	1.6718	.0614
Mid	3.93	.088	3.500	.117	4.230	.000
Low	3.91	.483	3.825	.726	3.941	.484
Total	3.34	1.081	3.212	1.2133	3.3833	1.0786

Table 3. ANOVA on Writing Process use in three stages by proficiency level

Stages		SS	Df	MS	F	Sig
Planning Stage	Between groups	59.226	2	29.613	171.946	.000
	Within groups	9.817	57	.172		
	Total	69.043	59			
Writing Stage	Between groups	64.703	2	32.351	83.199	.000
	Within groups	22.164	57	.389		
	Total	86.867	59			
Revising Stage	Between groups	58.748	2	29.374	169.172	.000
	Within groups	9.897	57	.174		
	Total	68.645	59			

As Table 2 and 3 indicate, there were significant differences among high, mid, low in the frequency use across the three writing stages namely, planning ($F=171.94, p=.000<.05$) writing ($F=83.199, p=.000<.05$), revising ($F=169.172, P=.000<.05$). These statistics suggested writing proficiency had affected the frequency of strategy use and type of strategy use. English Language and Literature

students at Yarmouk University in Jordan of different writing proficiency had preference over different and frequency of strategy use.

The finding of this study supports other findings in ESL/EFL context. Researchers such as (Feng,1995) and contrast with the results of a study conducted by Baker & Boonkit (2004) who found that there was no significant difference in the frequency of using writing strategies between high and low proficiency students.

The quantitative findings of the study revealed that Jordanian EFL students do not exhibit a satisfactory level of awareness of the mechanics of the writing process when writing in English. As the findings reveal, the respondents were selective and not consistent in terms of which writing stage is utilized. This is reflected in the score for the mean of writing processes as a whole construct which were 3.31. To be more specific, the mean for the planning stage was 3.34, the writing stage 3.21 and the revising stage (3.38). These mean scores illustrate the inconsistency and lack of awareness of the equal importance of each stage in the writing process. For example, the mean of strategy use in the stage of revising (3.38) appears to be higher than that of the stage of planning (3.34) and writing (3.21).

Thus when these mean scores together with the mean score for overall strategy use are taken into consideration, it can be concluded that the scores indicate a very average and uncoordinated utilization and awareness of the need to follow the sequential process of writing since the scores were close to the value 3 which was used as the test value. The questionnaire on writing strategies used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“Always”) to 5 (“Never”) to answer the items of the questionnaire.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The findings of the quantitative findings highlight how the respondents generally fail to employ a satisfactory level of writing process in their writing and they attributed their failure to do so. Therefore, they tend to avoid not only the three main stages of the writing process, but also the more refined sections of the mechanics of writing including linking and organizing ideas, use of appropriate vocabulary, logical sentences, and correct grammar. In addition, while the findings suggest that there a consensus regarding the importance of revising the first draft, nevertheless there is a failure to realize that the last stage of the writing process, which is revision of the final draft, is even more crucial.

In light of the above views it appears that process writing has the potential to assist Jordanian students in learning to write in English in a holistic way. Apart from introducing them to the various stages and activities of producing a good piece of writing, the process itself has the potential to increase the Jordanian EFL student’s enjoyment of the writing process. This is because Jordanian students usually do not know where or how to start when they are given a writing task. Besides, due to their low exposure to English language materials, Jordanian EFL learners often feel inadequate and this may result in frustration when they face difficulties while trying to organize their ideas to write English compositions. Consequently they also face difficulty when they try to express themselves meaningfully in their writing resulting in many more problems as they attempt to produce a piece of writing.

In the face of these cumulative difficulties it is not surprising that many of these learners are not motivated by the writing process itself. In addition, many of their teachers complain that the objectives of teaching English writing are very prescriptive and restrictive since the curriculum for EFL in Jordan does not actually take into consideration the situation and problems experienced by students as well as teachers in pre-university as well as university. There is very little attention paid to the actual processes that are required for the production of good writing. In this regard, the process approach to writing has the potential to address some of the significant problems faced by the students and teachers. The Jordanian EFL students will be introduced to a different approach to writing that hopefully will not frustrate and eventually discourage them from continuing to learn to write in English. For instance, the first component of process writing in the form of pre-writing activities can help them overcome writer’s block. The emphasis on expressing themselves at the drafting stage also helps them concentrate on the development of their ideas. As such the activities built into process

writing serve to help the students gain necessary the cognitive skills and hence become successful writers. This idea is consistent with what Victori (1999) suggests, where EFL writing learners should be taught strategies such as planning ideas, organizing ideas, and evaluating to write successfully. So, if the Jordanian students are engaged in similar activities but in a local context, then they will have the opportunity as well as option to learn to write more effectively.

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