



Navbahor ABRAMOVA,
O'zbekiston davlat jahon tillari universiteti tayanch doktranti
E-mail: navbahor.abramova@mail.ru

Pedagogika fanlari doktori, dotsent I.Abdullayev taqrizi asosida

ESL LEARNERS' WRITING SKILLS: PROBLEMS, FACTORS AND SUGGESTIONS

Annotation

Writing is an important skill for language production. However, it is considered a difficult skill, particularly in English as a second language (ESL) contexts where students face many challenges in writing. Therefore, the present study was conducted with an aim to investigate problems in Uzbekistan undergraduate ESL learners' writing and factors that hinder their writing skills. It also aimed at obtaining suggestions on how to improve Uzbek ESL learners' writing skills. For this purpose, focus groups of English language teachers' and undergraduate ESL learners were conducted. Writing samples were also collected from 20 ESL undergraduate learners to find the major problems in their writing.

Key words: Writing competence, ESL, academic writing, writing conventions, product approach, process approach, genre approach, L1 interference.

НАВЫКИ ПИСЬМА УЧАЩИХСЯ ESL: ПРОБЛЕМЫ, ФАКТОРЫ И РЕКОМЕНДАЦИИ

Аннотация

Письмо – важный навык для создания речи. Тем не менее, это считается трудным навыком, особенно в контексте английского как второго языка (ESL), где учащиеся сталкиваются со многими проблемами при письме. Таким образом, настоящее исследование было проведено с целью изучить проблемы письма учащихся бакалавриата ESL в Узбекистане и факторы, которые мешают их навыкам письма. Целью проекта также было получение предложений о том, как улучшить письменные навыки узбекских учащихся, изучающих английский как иностранный язык. С этой целью были проведены фокус-группы среди преподавателей английского языка и студентов, изучающих английский как иностранный язык. Образцы письма также были собраны у 20 студентов бакалавриата ESL, чтобы выявить основные проблемы в их письме.

Ключевые слова: Письмо, письменная речь, письменная компетентность, письменная компетентность, письменные навыки, письменный подход, прямой подход, косвенный подход.

INGLIZ TILINI O'RGANUVCHI TALABALARNING YOZUV QOBILİYATLARI: MUAMMOLAR, OMILLAR VA TAVSIYALAR

Annotatsiya

ESL o'quvchilarining yozish ko'nikmalari: muammolar, omillar va takliflar

Xulosa: Yozish til ishlab chiqarish uchun muhim mahoratdir. Biroq, bu qiyin ko'nikma hisoblanadi, ayniqsa ingliz tilida ikkinchi til (ESL) kontekstlarida talabalar yozishda ko'p qiyinchiliklarga duch kelishadi. Shu sababli, ushbu tadqiqot O'zbekiston bakalavriat talabalarining ESL o'quvchilarining yozishdagi muammolari va ularning yozish ko'nikmalariga to'sqinlik qiluvchi omillarni o'rganish maqsadida o'tkazildi. Shuningdek, u o'zbek tilini o'rganuvchilarning yozish ko'nikmalarini oshirish bo'yicha takliflarni olishga qaratilgan. Shu maqsadda ingliz tili o'qituvchilari va bakalavriat talabalaridan iborat fokus-guruhlar o'tkazildi. Yozishdagi asosiy muammolarni topish uchun 20 nafar ESL bakalavriat talabalaridan yozish namunalarini ham to'plangan.

Kalit so'zlar: Yondashuv, lingvomadaniy yondashuv, o'rganish darajalari, lingvokulturologiya, integrallashgan model,

Introduction. Writing is a productive skill, a form of literacy, a communicative activity, and sometimes a means through which learners can be assessed. Writing is the most complex method of expression. It is the final skill to be achieved in the order of acquisition. It can be used to explore and refine ideas, organise thoughts, and record information. Writing is originating and creating a unique verbal construct that is graphically recorded. Studies reveal that while writing, the whole part of the brain and cells are activated. When a person writes, he tries to bring out all that he knows about it by tracing his knowledge related to that memory, incidents, success, failures, current situation, future possibilities etc. These result in increase of awareness, improvement of memory, sharpness, creativity and imagination. Among the four basic skills, writing demands great effort and hence it is considered a herculean task.

Literature review. Writing could be a difficult skill to be learnt or taught due to the fact that it is not a simple cognitive activity; rather it is believed to be a complex mental production which requires "careful thought, discipline and concentration" [1] found out that the main challenges ESL students encounter are differentiating between written and spoken words and phrases, reviewing grammar including subject-verb agreement and joining sentences together to make a coherent paragraph. Generating ideas about their topics could be also a barrier that hinders students to move on in their writing [2]. Another concern is to

read and then to write in their own words. This could lead to grammar mistakes which may make students reluctant to paraphrase and summarize other's work [3].

Academic writing has been a crucial area of research at tertiary education. The underlying rationale could be the manifest increase of academic writing significance as students move to a higher level of education. Academic writing can be defined as "a mental and cognitive activity since it is a product of the mind"[4]. Abu-Ghararah and Hamzah [5] describes academic writing as "the logical organization and arrangement of the written sentences within a paragraph and paragraphs within the units of discourse and the expression of the ideas". Another aspect of academic writing is that it "can be understood only from the perspective of a society rather than a single individual" [6]. From these three definitions, it can be concluded that academic writing could be a complex process. It involves a variety of aspects that are believed to be the base of successful academic writing. Al Fadda indicates that one of the basics of academic writing is the ability of the learners to access the relevant references and evaluate them in order to put the different ideas and opinions together so that they can develop their own voice [2]. That is a writer student should have the ability to exploit others' ideas and write them in his/her own words and then index from where those ideas have been taken [7]. As noted by Al-Khasawneh and Maher, other fundamental writing conventions include making an outline,

summarizing and paraphrasing without which students might struggle when writing their tasks. Other basic elements are forming, developing, and organizing ideas [4]. Furthermore, in order to have a free-error piece of writing, learners should carefully consider how to form a thesis statement, to write convincing supporting sentences, and finally edit them [8] points out that learners have to be familiar with punctuation marks such as the period, comma, semicolon, colon, dash, hyphen, and capitalization.

Chou has listed a number of reasons why international students studying in an English-speaking country encounter a lot of stress and obstacles when writing their assignments [9]. Firstly, students might come from different cultural backgrounds where they are fully dependent on teachers. They also have not been trained to be critical thinkers and they might have lower expectations than those of their teachers as they consider themselves second language learners. Writing teachers with high expectations might suppose that students are qualified enough to produce accurate pieces of writing and they might also assign demanding topics that learners might struggle when writing about [3]. Low language proficiency might also obstruct academic writing. As concluded by Al-Khairy, the participants of his study declared that their major problems comprise grammatical errors, the inappropriate choice of vocabulary, irregular verbs, and incorrect punctuation and spelling. Other causes that could lead to the difficulty in academic writing are L1 interference, inadequacy of ideas, and unclear instructions of the task [9]. Regarding ambiguous description of the task, Chou concludes the participants in his study admitted that they feel shy and unconfident to ask teachers for clarification. Finally, Can (2009) claims that conflicting feedback provided by instructors from different departments in an institution might lead to the lack of students' confidence in their writing skills.

Methodology. Academic writing can be considered as an integral part of learning English process. By recognizing the

learners' academic writing difficulties and needs, there will be a clear picture of the most effective and efficient course books to be adapted in their program. Needless to say, teachers do their best and exert a lot of time and effort to enhance their learners' writing. Unfortunately, in most cases the final writing production is not as good as expected to be. That is why the majority of instructors find writing the most difficult skill to teach [3]. The results of the present study yield fundamental insights that could contribute to more beneficial guidance for the teachers and course books designers. The findings can be also essential in terms of suggesting some possible solutions for the challenges that second language learners encounter in academic writing. They could also give some insights for English as foreign language teachers to equip their students with the required knowledge and skills before they start studying at a new academic discourse community especially in an English speaking country.

The subjects were 20 undergraduate ESL students who were studying at tertiary education. This education is basically meant to develop the skills of ESL undergraduate students. Moreover, all of them were specialized in education field except for two participants. They reported that they took the IELTS and the mean of their writing scores is 6. This indicates that they have a good base in English language in general.

Findings and discussion. This section gives answers to the research questions mentioned above. From the most challenging one to the least, four major problems reported by the respondents are listed and discussed preceded by a brief description of their attitudes towards academic writing.

Figure1 illustrates what the participants think about academic writing. It can be clearly seen that the majority of them find writing in English difficult and none of them said that it is easy. Only 16% of the respondents reported that it is neither difficult nor easy.

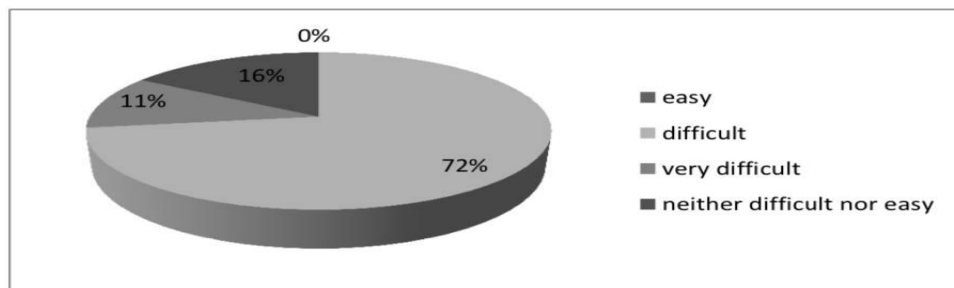


Figure 1: Attitudes of participants towards academic writing

One reason for this negative attitude could be the lack of background knowledge about the conventions of academic writing. A student answered to the open-ended question whether she finds academic writing difficult and why, "Yes, because I have not experienced it before and I am unfamiliar with the academic structure and vocabulary I should use." This goes in line with Yasuda's study (2004) who found that, in such cases, students struggle to accomplish their assignments. Despite of that, half of the participants mentioned that they still sometimes write

for pleasure in English. According to participants' responses, there are four basic difficulties shared by most of the participants taken Graduate Certificate in TEFL Course. As it is shown in figure 2, the most frequent difficulty is language use, coherence, and cohesion followed by both expressing their own voice as well as selecting a significant topic and relevant references. On the contrary, paraphrasing, referencing, and citations were reported to be the least problematic. In the following, those difficulties are presented and discussed separately.

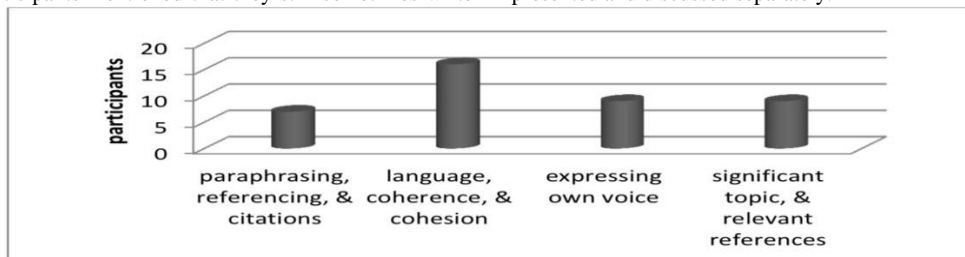


Figure 2: Major difficulties encountered by graduate certificate students when writing assignments Language, coherence, and cohesion.

Writers usually aim at producing a piece of writing where the vocabulary is carefully chosen, the sentences are logically related, the ideas are clearly expressed, and the paragraphs are

coherent. Based on students' responses, the data indicates that a considerable number of them (16) are aware of the importance of coherence and cohesion in academic writing, yet they find

achieving them quite difficult. About 88% of the graduate certificate students stated that they tend to make an outline before they begin writing their assignments, but they still have that problem. As one of the respondents stated, the reason of this difficulty could be ascribed to the fact that they do not have enough knowledge about cohesive devices, the academic words, and the structure and the organization of the academic writing. The majority of the respondents also claimed that they always proofread their work and about third of them ask other students to edit their writing.

Significant topics and relevant references.

Although about 72% to 77% of the respondents claimed that they tend to check carefully the assignment requirements as well as discuss their topics with classmates, half of them stated that they have to make a concerted effort to choose a topic and support it with appropriate literature. This difficulty could be attributed to, as 11 of the respondents declared, their reluctance to ask their teachers to clarify the assignment task.

Expressing their own voice.

Finding their own individual voice among other writers' voices is problematic for 9 of the graduate certificate students. Some of them said that making a balance between their own views and what they read is something hard to do. Another reason might be the lack of confidence. That is, students may feel they are not as experts as those writers who are both experienced and intelligent, as they think. Consequently, they might feel unconfident to include their ideas among those of other writers.

Paraphrasing, referencing and citations.

The previous challenge is mainly related to transferring students' own thoughts into words. In contrast, this section focuses

on the difficulty of incorporating the other writers' ideas into their own views. According to the participants' responses, this issue involves three aspects; paraphrasing, citations, and referencing. About 44% of the participants consider citations and referencing as a dilemma. To improve undergraduate learners' writing skills, the respondents suggested several remedies. To begin with, reading was suggested in order to develop better writing and to enrich vocabulary. Developing a writing culture and providing opportunities for writing practice were also suggested. Therefore, it is very important that they are trained not only in effective teaching practices but also in providing positive and constructive feedback. Universities should provide skillful teachers for the writing and should provide trainings, particularly for language teachers. If we are going to appreciate and motivate their efforts and encourage them to write more. To motivate learners towards writing, changes in writing courses and arrangement of writing competitions were also emphasized: "we can arrange some extra courses based on tenses, articles, and structure and some creative writing competition".

Conclusion. The research was conducted with an aim to explore undergraduate ESL learners' writing problems, factors hampering development of their writing skills and suggestions to improve their writing skills. Hence, considering the problems, factors and suggestions this study has explored, it can be concluded that Uzbekistan undergraduate ESL learners face various problems in their writing but their writing skills can be improved by taking into account the reasons of these problems. The findings of the study can be generalized to the ESL learners and English language teachers at tertiary level.

REFERENCES

1. Grami, G. M. A. (2010). The Effects of Integrating Peer Feedback into University-Level ESL Writing Curriculum: A Comparative Study in a Saudi Context (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Newcastle University, Retrieved from https://theses.ncl.ac.uk/dspace/bitstream/10443/933/1/grami_.
2. Al Fadda, H. (2012). Difficulties in academic writing: From the perspective of King Saud University postgraduate students. *English Language Teaching*, 5(3), 123-130.
3. Al Murshidi, G. (2014). UAE university male students' interests' impact on reading and writing performance and improvement. *English Language Teaching*, 7(9), 57-63.
4. Al-Khasawneh, F., & Maher, S. (2010). Writing for academic purposes: Problems faced by Arab postgraduate students of the College of Business, UUM. *ESP World*, 9, 1-23.
5. Abu-Ghararah, & Hamzah, A. (1998). *Teaching English as a foreign language: procedures, techniques and activities*. Riyadh: Tawbah Library.
6. Burke, S. (2010). The construction of writer identity in the academic writing of Korean students: A qualitative study of six Korean students in the U.S (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Indiana University of Pennsylvania.
7. Dehkordi, M., & Allami, H. (2012). Evidentiality in academic writing. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2(9), pp. 1895-1904.
8. Alsamdani, H. A. (2010). The relationship between Saudi EFL students' writing competence, L1 writing proficiency, and self-regulation. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 16(1), pp. 53-63.
9. Chou, L. (2011). An investigation of Taiwanese doctoral students' academic writing at a U.S. University. *Higher Education Studies*, 1(2), 47-60.