

Opinion of Second Language Learners about Writing Difficulties in English Language

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ABSTRACT

English language enjoys a prominent role in Pakistan as an effective communication medium at local and international circles. It is used as a medium of instruction not only in schools but also in colleges and universities. The aim of this study was to explore writing difficulties in the English language faced by second language learners. A survey was conducted for this purpose. Data were collected from four boys and girls public sector colleges. Two hundred and forty five 12th graders studying English as a compulsory subject were randomly selected out of five hundred and twenty. Results of the study indicated that students were facing a lot of difficulties in writing English language due to lack of vocabulary, poor spelling, L1 interference and a poor understanding of grammatical structure. The girls face more writing difficulties than the male students in English language. The method based on identification, investigation, and solutions to language related real life problems should be used for teaching of English from primary school level to higher levels of education.

KEYWORD: English language, writing difficulties, process writing, genre approach, writing modes

The Importance of Language

Today, communication across the cultures and nations is more important than ever before. Language is the best medium of communication and is therefore essential for human interaction. In this globalized world, many people speak more than one language. Besides many other languages being taught in Pakistan, the English language is widely recognised for personal and professional use. It is considered as

a *lingua franca* in all types of communication. The acquisition and use of a second language is essential to the everyday lives of people around the world. The trend for acquisition of second language affects the careers and life styles of people (Cook, 2001). English enjoys a status of second language in Pakistan as it is used extensively for many purposes in society. For acquiring and using any language effectively and efficiently, it is essential to master four basic skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. Writing is not a natural activity, so explicit instructions are required for learning this skill (Aronoff & Rees- Miller, 2007). "Writing is a system of more or less permanent marks used to represent an utterance in such a way that it can be recovered exactly without intervention of the utterer" (Daniels & Bright, 1996). Audio lingual approach to language teaching ranks writing at an inferior level. It is a cognitive as well as a social process (MacArthur, 2006). Written expression is more effective in social cognitive instances of communication than oral expression. Unlike speaking, writing enables human beings to convey a message independent of time and space (Hughes, 1996). It is considered man's best academic achievement based on skills or components like mechanics, production, conventions, linguistics and cognition. The act of writing is independent of time and place; the writer has to depend upon formal features to convey the intended meanings. Failure to take advantage of these features correctly causes frustration for the writer (Leisak, 1989). English is the second and official language in Pakistan as well as an easy language to work with and learn science and technology at higher levels. It is taught as a compulsory subject in Urdu (L1) as well as English (L2) medium schools, however the majority of students with rural and urban backgrounds cannot communicate properly in English and perceive it as a very difficult subject. At secondary (grade 9-10), intermediary (grade 11-12) and bachelor levels (grade 13-14), many of the students from the Arts and Humanities areas cannot meet the requirements of the examination in English. The purpose of the study was to explore the difficulties in writing English language. It specifically aimed to know difficulties in writing English language related to grammar, punctuation, L1 interference, vocabulary, and spellings for students with English as a second language.

Review of Literature

It is a well known fact that writing involves a number of complex rhetorical and linguistic capabilities. It also requires the writer's full attention and concentration. Effective writing involves conveying a message in such a way as it affects the audience as the writer intends. An effective writer is always aware of the readers' competence level. He/she gives a sense of thoroughness and wholeness to his/her writing, and knows the conventions of every genre. As writing involves lower order skills, such as forming letters, as well as higher order cognitive skills like cohesion and coherence which makes writing a complex process to teach. The lack of research in ESL (English as a Second Language) writing increases the

difficulties as the instructor has to depend upon trial and error methods to find out which approach should be adopted. Moreover, the approaches of writing suffer from a drawback of either total control or total freedom. Dysfunctional writing styles can create obstacles throughout one's life (Hansel, 2008).

In the history of pedagogic reforms, one of the most successful approaches of teaching writing is the process approach which considers writing as a complex, cognitive, recursive and evolving process. There are six stages of the writing process: Determining the topic; taking account of readers; editing; proof reading; and revising (Edwin & Grundy, 1996). But this approach has drawbacks as it ignores the variety and differentiation of the process of writing, particularly social context and the fact that certain texts are produced for specific purposes (Gao, 2007). Another approach which is prominent in the history of teaching writing is the genre approach. A genre is a text either spoken or written that serves a particular purpose in a particular context and is composed of a series of conventions. The idea behind this approach is that writers write not only for their own enjoyment, but also in different contexts, for different purposes and in different ways. However this approach has its own drawbacks. Paltridge (2004) says that fusion of textual and socio-cultural knowledge makes the identification of the exact knowledge a difficult task. Another limitation is that of over-focus on the reader while paying less attention to learner expression (Gao, 2007).

The ideal approach which is now considered as the most effective and successful in the teaching of writing is the eclectic approach. The eclectic or process genre approach combines process theories with genre knowledge. This concept not only draws ideas from genre approach, such as knowledge of context, the purpose of writing, and certain text features but retains part of process philosophy such as writing skill development and learner response (Badger & White, 2000). In other words, this approach provides the learner with opportunities for developing their individual creativity as well as helping them fully understand the features of target genres (Y. Kim, & J. Kim, 2005). Giving the knowledge of form and language at the same time helps the students to understand how a particular form functions in a particular context; in this way, learners' writing proficiency can be enhanced. However, the overall picture shows that there is some disagreement as to what will be the most appropriate approach towards the teaching of writing. A problem lies in the assumption that one standard approach can be developed which will be appropriate for all students in all settings.

In addition to difficulties created because of a wrong pedagogic approach selected by teachers, students face difficulties in writing English language, due to a number of factors involved in the act of communication. The English language itself has a lot of irregularities and idiosyncrasies which create a myriad of difficulties in writing especially for second language learners. An example is English spellings. A word that is incorrectly spelled is not only a deviation from the standard, but adversely affects the intended meaning. Spelling is a skill of identifying a word in spoken or written mode. Spelling and decoding skills are closely linked; students who suffer from spelling problems need to memorize the

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spellings of heavily used, irregular words, such as “right”, “government”, etc. Due to irregularities in English spelling, students have to memorize each word as a separate entity; hence there is no logical connection between sound and symbol. To convey the message properly it is necessary that learners correctly use punctuation marks. Students usually commit mistakes in using commas, full stops, semicolons and colons which affects communication process. The misuse of the capital letters is the most common writing problem, which is not derived from L1 interference. Capitalization problems are part of the punctuation problem which may be the result of inadequate learning or inefficient teaching. Punctuation helps others to understand what you intend to say (Davidson, 2005).

Grammar is the most difficult area for L2 writers. Students face difficulties in the use of correct sentence structure and paragraph development, and in creating a coherent form. Grammar skills include run-on sentences, fragments and verbiage, inclusion of necessary information, use of different type of sentences, subject-verb agreement, and placement of modifiers, tense agreement and parallel construction (Leisak, 1989). Grammar is more than just a set of rules; it is an ever evolving structure of a language (Kleisar, 2005). On the other hand, learning grammar can be pretty dull, as no one likes rules; and the memorization of rules is worst than applying them. Students usually know how to build tenses, but when use them in written expression they are confused. Students face difficulty in combining two complete sentences. Parallelism is also one of the problems.

The basis of all these problems is the traditional style of teaching grammar on the part of the teachers and lack of practice on the part of the learners. Lack of vocabulary is another cause of difficulty which makes writing colourless, boring and ineffective. Vocabulary is divided in two parts: active vocabulary and passive vocabulary. Active vocabulary is learned for production and passive vocabulary is used only for recognition. Students usually face difficulties in the production area which is associated with meaning (specific/general), form (pronunciation/spelling), possible word combinations and structures (Miller, 1984).

L1 interference has important implications in the learning of written expression. L1 learning is different from L2 learning, as the person already knows about meaning and use of one language. First language helps learners when it has elements in common with L2, but hinders the learning process when both language systems differ (Cook, 2001). A person who speaks two languages has gone through the acquisition process twice, but second language learning takes many forms and occurs in many situations other than natural circumstances which cause problems (Cook, 1993).

Another problem which learners of English face is that of a well-knit and well-organised presentation. The information which is well organized is easier to remember and understand. Rhetoric includes the study of cohesion and coherence, macro structure of text, logical arrangement of information and story structure (Grab & Kaplan, 1996). Coherence is an implicit feature of text which describes

the logical relationship between the ideas and information embodied in discourse. Coherence is helped by cohesion which is the process of cohering one sentence to the next sentence (Bex, 1996).

Pakistan, being the 6th most populous, and the 9th largest (with respect to the size of its labour force) country of the world, (with a population of 177 million in 2011) is comprised of many different cultures, civilizations and numerous languages. Urdu (L1), the national language is used, along with many regional/local languages, numerous dialects and English for day to day purposes. With the attainment of its independence in 1947, Pakistan determined to select Urdu (L1) as its national language and English (L2) as a second language. However, the necessity to use English overshadowed Urdu due to the common medium of instruction at the higher levels of education. Because the federal and the provincial authorities have promoted the use of English, the majority of educators teach English in a way that the learners are not at ease communicating in English (Warsi, 2004). Especially the teachers at primary, elementary and secondary school levels are not aware of the science of applied linguistics. They teach English in traditional ways (translation and cramming) which do not fulfill the need for developing communicative competence. Lack of vocabulary, a poor grasp of grammatical structures, the incorrect use of punctuation marks, incorrect spelling, poor paragraph and sentence structure, and illogical sequence are some of the writing difficulties faced by the students. These difficulties not only affect learners' academic success, but also hinder their professional progress. In the Pakistani milieu, writing is not usually given a separate status as a useful skill but, instead is treated as a poor relative of reading and speaking. Instead of teaching writing through any approach, students are encouraged to cram summaries and specific questions to pass examinations. To improve written expression, those factors are needed to be identified which affect learners' performance adversely and this identification may lead to remedial measures. It was decided to gather information from the sufferer (*i.e.* the students who can rightly point out the difficulties they face in writing English language).

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were to:

- a. identify the most frequent writing difficulties in English language faced by higher secondary school students .
- b. compare the most frequent problems in writing English faced by male and female higher secondary school students.
- c. study the relationship among different types of writing difficulties in writing English.

Method and Procedure

This study was based on a survey to document the opinion of 12th grade students (Higher secondary school students) regarding difficulties in writing in the English language. These students were from different public sector colleges existing in the city of Lahore, Pakistan (known as *the city of colleges*). Out of nine towns of Lahore, two towns were selected randomly. In these two towns there were eleven public sector colleges (where 12th graders were studying), out of which four colleges were selected randomly. Among these colleges, two colleges were for male and two were for female students. In these selected colleges, eight sections of 12th graders were selected randomly, two from each college. All students from the selected eight sections were taken as sample for this study which comprised of 121 male and 124 female 12th grade students. Data were collected from the students through a questionnaire based on the five point Likert scale. This questionnaire consisted of 24 items related to vocabulary, first language interference, spelling, grammar, punctuation and rhetorical problems. Reliability of the questionnaire was $\alpha=.8877$. The instrument was also validated by the five field experts. Reading and writing are wide concepts and this study could not address all the aspects and issues related to these areas. There were many variables associated with the writing difficulties, such as poor teaching; however, this study focused only on writing difficulties and problems due to vocabulary, L1 interference, spellings, grammar, rhetorical and punctuation. Furthermore, the respondents in this study were selected from only one city Lahore of a province. This study was conducted on this scale due to its academic nature, time and other constraints.

Data Analysis and Interpretations

The data were analyzed by using descriptive and inferential statistics through SPSS 16. The factors of difficulties in writing were arranged according to their mean value in descending order by using descriptive statistics.

Table 1
Analysis of opinion of 12th graders related to difficulties in writing English language

Sr.	Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.
1	I use some simple words to replace the difficult ones.	3.75	1.31
2	I sometimes use Romanized Urdu e.g. (mubarak ho) when I can't find the exact English expression.	3.72	1.18
3	I usually lengthen the sentences as I don't find the exact words	3.71	1.06
4	I face difficulty while using passive voice in my writing	3.71	1.19
5	I take time to recall what exact spelling is.	3.67	1.20

6	I use different words to express the similar meanings.	3.65	1.14
7	Writing is difficult for me because I have lack of vocabulary	3.64	1.15
8	I write English essays in the way I do in Urdu.	3.62	1.22
9	The frequent problem which I face while writing is the correct use of tenses.	3.62	1.17
10	I think of a sentence in Urdu first and then translate it into English.	3.61	1.24
11	I face problem to write spellings of the word that is new to me.	3.58	1.22
12	I am often confused in the use of punctuation marks.	3.55	1.25
13	I get poor grades because of poor spellings.	3.54	1.39
14	My sentences are not well organized that's why I can't communicate well.	3.54	1.32
15	I feel confused while referring to the things which I have already mentioned in my writing.	3.53	1.29
16	My written expression is not good in describing the past events.	3.51	1.15
17	I feel problems in the use of conditional sentences.	3.49	1.21
18	I face problems in connecting one paragraph with the other.	3.48	1.30
19	The reason of poor performance in writing is the incorrect use of punctuation marks.	3.47	1.18
20	Grammatical mistakes affect my expression in writing.	3.45	1.26
21	I usually find difficult to understand sentence structure in English.	3.45	1.25
22	My written expression is not good in describing the sequence of events.	3.43	1.24
23	While writing I often face the problems of connecting ideas.	3.42	1.20
24	My sentences don't convey complete sense as I am not good at marking commas in sentences.	3.41	1.25

(Strongly agree=5, Agree=4, Undecided=3, Disagree=2, Strongly disagree=1)

Table 1 shows that the most frequent problems which students faced are that of vocabulary (mean=3.75) while the least faced difficulty is the use of commas (mean=3.41) in their writing. It is also evident that students were facing a lot of difficulties due to L1 interference, rules of grammar and irregular spellings.

Table 2

Analysis of difficulties on the basis of gender

Domains	Gender	N	Mean	df	t-value
Vocabulary	Male	121	13.48	243	-6.144*
	Female	124	15.99		
L1 Interference	Male	121	9.91	243	-6.329*
	Female	124	11.98		
Spelling	Male	121	9.98	243	-4.592*
	Female	124	11.58		
Grammar	Male	121	19.80	243	-5.011*

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Rhetorical	Female	124	22.65	243	-.3049*
	Male	121	16.55		
Punctuation	Female	124	18.23	243	-3.209*
	Male	121	9.85		
	Female	124	11.00		

*Significant at .05 level

Table 2 indicates the comparison of opinion of male and female students regarding the difficulties faced in writing English. It shows that *t*-values are significant at .05 level of significance. Further it is obvious that mean value for the opinion of female students (15.99) is greater than mean value for the opinion of male students (13.48) on the difficulties relating to vocabulary. It shows that there is significant difference in the difficulties of vocabulary faced by male and female students. It is therefore concluded that female students are facing more difficulties in vocabulary than male students. It is also clear that mean value for female students (11.98) is greater than mean value for male students (9.91) in case of problems faced due to first language interference. It is therefore concluded that female students face more problems than their male counterparts in L1 interference. The analysis of spellings difficulties shows that the female (11.58) students are facing more problems in spellings than the male students (9.98). The difference in mean values for male and female students in case of grammar, rhetorical and punctuation problems indicate that female face more problems than male students of higher secondary school level. It is conclude from this analysis that female students are facing more difficulties in writing English as compared to the male students.

Table 3
Relationship among factors of writing difficulties

		Vocabulary	L 1 Interference	Spellings	Grammar	Punctuation	Rhetorical
Vocabulary	Pearson	1.000	.544*	.398**	.527**	.365**	.437**
	Correlation						
	Sig. (2 tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	245	245	245	245	245	245
L1 Interference	Pearson	.544*	1.000	.435**	.310**	.310**	.414**
	Correlation						
	Sig. (2 tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	245	245	245	245	245	245
Spellings	Pearson	.398**	.435**	1.000	.400**	.188**	.292**
	Correlation						

	Sig. (2 tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	245	245	245	245	245	245
Grammar	Pearson	.527**	.435**	.400**	1.00	.605**	.602**
	Correlation						
	Sig. (2 tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	245	245	245	245	245	245
Punctuation	Pearson	.365**	.310**	.188**	.605**	1.000	.594**
	Correlation						
	Sig. (2 tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	245	245	245	245	245	245
Rhetorical	Pearson	.437**	.414**	.292**	.602**	.594**	1.000
	Correlation						
	Sig. (2 tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	245	245	245	245	245	245

There is strong relationship between vocabulary and difficulties due to first language interface as ($r = .544$, $p = .000$). Table 3 also shows that students who faced difficulties in appropriate use of vocabulary also faced problem of L1 interference while writing English language. There is a strong relationship between spelling difficulties and grammar difficulties ($r = .400$, $P = .000$). In other words students who faced spelling difficulties also faced grammar problems in writing English grammar problems in writing English. There is a strong relationship between punctuation difficulties and problems in rhetoric's. Students faced both of these problems equally while writing in English as a second language.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Writing is a literacy skill and a complex form of self expression. It is an exhibition of cognitive, visual, conceptual and motor potentials (C. Mercer, & A. Mercer, 2004). English writing is a difficult task for the Pakistani students due to the lingual and cultural differences. Eastern and Western cultures differ in many of the aspects that affect the acquisition of language (Ya Wen, 2007). These differences may cause the grammatical errors, composition problems and inappropriateness of presentation of ideas in English (Cai, 2004). English is a common language being understood and used for communication in the world. It is considered as a key to success. The college students in Pakistan have taken twelve years coaching for English language but do not have mastery in English writings. Commonly, they take it just to pass the examination instead to have hands on practice (Kannan, 2009). In all languages some students face severe

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reading problems (developmental dyslexia) besides all other supporting factors that grow in the form of writing difficulties (Commeyras & Inyega, 2007). The data analysis favoured the purpose of the study that students were facing a lot of difficulties in writing English language. The most frequent problem which Pakistani students face is that they first think in Urdu and then translate it in English which is different from Urdu in syntax, idiom and imagery. Although some international level researches indicated that the most occurring difficulty in writing English language was that of rhetoric and grammar whereas Pakistani students faced problems of rhetoric significantly but they are not highly ranked as compared with other factors of writing English language (Davies, 2003). The most serious problems were that of vocabulary deficiency, L1 interference and confusion in grammatical rules. The students feel difficulties in writing when they face difficulties in reading. Reading and writing are two complementary skills and develop simultaneously (Mubagna, 2010; Rummel, 2005). Writing is much difficult than listening, speaking and reading (Dixon & Nessel, 1983). The female students face more difficulties than the male students in English writing due to the factors taken in this study. The difficulties in English writing are also interrelated with each other. Teachers should adopt eclectic approach in teaching composition and innovative methods of teaching vocabulary and should train students in appropriate word selection. Students should be taught to handle L1 interference especially interference of L1 syntax while writing English language. Teachers should adopt eclectic approach to inculcate knowledge of both genre and process of writing. Students should be taught to handle the first language interference especially how to avoid the mistakes created due to L1 syntax. They should be trained to remember the irregular spellings and rules of making spellings. Grammar rule should be focused and applied linguistics be employed during teaching English. More emphasis should be on written work than the oral one. This study leads to the need of an extended study in terms of geographical area, sample size and the factors causing difficulties in writing English. The future study should also focus on difficulties in writing English faced at elementary, secondary and the higher secondary level learners.

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