"Difficulties Facing EFL University Students in Writing Academic Essay"

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Abstract:

The study examines and investigates the problems confronting EFL university students in producing a well-organized and accurate academic essay. The researchers intended to find out the reasons for the students' weakness in writing an academic essay. The descriptive-analytical method was adopted. A diagnostic test was used as a tool for gathering data. It was given to 50 university students selected randomly from one batch of 170. The researchers also distributed a questionnaire among a sample of university teachers in order to verify the last hypothesis that certain techniques will be most effective in teaching academic essay writing .The most important findings of the study included that there exist some problems confronting EFL university students in writing an academic essay; the most serious of those problems are grammar and punctuation. This is in addition to the finding that the best technique for a teacher's academic essay writing is assigning the students a lot of reading consolidated with giving them many writing assignments. The important recommendations of the study included that teachers of writing should bear in mind the fact that their students have problems with writing academic essays. The researchers suggested that special attention should be given to teaching grammar and punctuation. In addition, students should be assigned a lot of reading and given a lot of writing assignments in order to develop their writing abilities.

Keywords: Writing skills, Academic essay, ELT. , Higher education, and institutions.

Introduction

Writing is a very important skill in all languages. It is considered the most important means of communication that people use to convey different messages to others in the world. Since the beginning of recorded history, man had written on leaves and rocks and many of his written words still exist in different parts of the world. For a student of a foreign language writing should constitute a major part of his concern since his goal is not always to use that language for oral communication. Moreover, he gets most of his knowledge by reading what other people write. If they know well the techniques of writing, they will benefit most from what they read because professional writers write according to rules and techniques. So, It is this special significance of writing that stimulated the researcher to investigate some of the problems of writing facing university students of English as a foreign language. The difficulty is actually greater with academic essay writing because it needs special skills. The students here are not free to write in any way they choose; they should stick to particular rules and techniques.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Many EFL university students have problems when they set out to write an academic essay. Some of these difficulties also present themselves when the student is doing any other type of writing.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

This study is aimed to

a. investigate the problems confronting EFL university students in producing a well-organized and accurate academic essay.

b. find out the reasons for the student's weaknesses in writing an academic essay.

c. explore whether the students also have problems with general writing.

d. find effective techniques to improve easy skills in EFL classes.

e. give students sufficient time to practice writing skills inside and outside classrooms.

f. motivate and encourage students to practice writing skills.

g. find out the problems that encounter students to write.

1.3 Questions of the Study

This study is intended to answer these questions.

a. What are the obstacles that prevent EFL university students from writing a good academic essay?
b. What other problems do the students also have in general writing?
c. To what extent do the students know the general techniques for academic essay writing?
d. To what extent are the students good at writing sub-skills like grammar, spelling, and punctuation?
e. What are the most effective techniques for teaching academic essay writing?
f. What factors contribute to written active students in EFL classes?
g. What do teachers of English think of the assessment of student's ability to express themselves orally in English?

1.4 Limitations of the Study

This study was carried out in 2023 at the Department of English, Faculty of Education (Hantoub), University of Gezira. The sample for the questionnaire included teachers from the Department of English, Faculty of Education (Hantoub) as well as teachers from the Department of English, Wad Medani Ahlia University.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

CHAPTER TWO
Literature Review
2.1. Definition of Academic Essay?

To define an academic essay, it is necessary to break up the term into its parts. Hornby (1989:6) defines the word ' 'academic' as ' having to do with school or university'. In the Browse electronic dictionary, the word' 'academic'; means acquired by formal education at college or university and at the same time conforming to set rules and standards.

The other component of the term, which is 'essay', has been given so many definitions by different authors. Fox (2000:8) views an essay as a specific argument that has a theme clearly and logically expressed from start to finish. Hornby (1989: 408) defines it simply as a piece of writing in prose on one subject. According to Peck and Coyle (1991:91), an essay is ' an intellectual argument that develops from the ideas and theories you have been taught'. It is an expression of your understanding of the course's themes and topics as they are being presented to you in lectures and seminars. In a later edition, Hornby (2005:518) explains the word 'essay' as a short piece of writing on a particular subject either by a student as part of a course of study, or by a professional writer to be published.

2.2 Format and Length:

Academic writing has particular forms and lengths that are expected by academic readers. Reid (1988:2 -57) states that an academic essay is a series of paragraphs about one subject with an introduction, body, and conclusion. He adds that the number of body paragraphs should range between one and seven according to the complexity of the subject. Sheal (1981:96) claims that an essay consists of an introduction of one paragraph, a main body of two or more paragraphs, and a conclusion of one paragraph.

Reid (1988: Xiv) believes that 'to produce students who can function in a university class… the students (should be) taught to write according to … set of rules, to write in a very specific format, according to a formula'.

According to him, each paragraph begins with a key sentence. The four to eight sentences that come after are supporting sentences that explain the key sentence. Both the introduction and the conclusion have specific forms and several techniques from which the students have to choose. This essay format is especially useful because if the students in the future write essays that are not perfect in terms of grammar, at least the format will be understandable, and the student will have a better chance of communicating.

2.3 A Complex Process:

Writing is a complex process requiring so many sub-skills like thinking, grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, handwriting, spelling, and arrangement of ideas. Lyons (1988:2) believes that good writing is the last language skill to be acquired for both native speakers and second-language learners. He states that only a few people are comfortable when they are asked to answer a formal writing question. Many students do not like to write for the critical eye especially when that eye is the teacher's. It will be good if the teacher helps his students and not frightens them. The first person to write should be the teacher and what he writes should be discussed with the students. The first attempt by the students should be made in groups. They write together and then come to discuss what they write. In this respect, Reid advises that composition students in general and students of English as a foreign or second language in particular 'need to spend more time practicing writing then reading about theories of writing'.

2.4 The Teacher of Writing

Ozarka (2008: 30) thinks that teaching writing skills in English is not an easy job. Part of this is due to how students feel. In addition, many teachers fear the tedious job of marking all students' work. There should be a lot of exciting essays to be discussed. Learning to write a proper academic essay is a real challenge for students because mastering the writing style requires an understanding of an academic text's logic, structure, and formal vocabulary. Many teachers are not interested in teaching academic writing because it takes too much time to draft and revise before producing an acceptable final composition.

2.5 Before Learning to Write

Spencer (1967: i) suggests that before writing an essay, students should do a lot of practice in single-sentence building. He suggests two techniques for that practice:

1) Imitation of selected sentence patterns.

(2) Independent construction of sentences within a given framework. An example of technique It can be:

She speaks English very well, but she doesn't understand Spanish.

ride a bicycle/ drive a car / play the piano / read music

An example of technique **2** can be:

Henry – teacher – wife – nurse – four children – two sons- two daughters- eldest son – medicine- one daughter- like her mother.

2.6 Selecting a topic

Although the teacher chooses the subject for an academic essay, the student must narrow it down to a topic. For example, if the subject is Africa, the topic may be African Deserts or African Rivers wildlife in Africa, or many things else. If there are options, the student should choose the topic they know something about and they feel it will interest their audience. As they are narrowing their subject, they should decide the method or methods of topic sentence development they will use to present it.

2.7 Prewriting

Before starting to write when you are still beginning to plan your essay, keep asking yourself questions about your subject until you reach an interesting more specific topic. Reid (1988:45) suggests two other techniques for the prewriting stage. One way is to begin with a single idea and then develop it through asking questions. Another way is to write as many thoughts as possible and to go back to select and organize the material. This is known as brainstorming. It is an important part of essay writing because it helps you see how much you know and how much you do not know about a topic, and because it helps, you organize your material.

2.8 Essay Introduction

As mentioned in 2.2. above, the first part of the essay is called the introduction. It consists of only one paragraph that introduces the whole topic. The introduction for an essay begins with an interesting general statement that indirectly alludes to the topic of the essay. However, the most important part of the introduction is the last sentence in it. It is called the thesis statement. This is also the most important part of the whole essay because it contains the controlling ideas.

A successful thesis statement is usually reached after several qualifications and specifications. Consider, for example, the following thesis about Holy Quran

1. 'The Quran is wonderful'. The controlling idea 'wonderful' is not suitable for development because it is a final judgment.
2. 'The Quran is a perfect book'. This is too general a judgment.
3. 'The Quran is one of the best religious books. There is a qualification in this sentence but the sentence is still too general- 'best' and 'worst' are difficult to support.
4. 'The Quran is one of the most important religious books. This sentence is more qualified, more objective in language, and more specific, but one more controlling idea is necessary.
5. 'The Quran is one of the most important religious books that form the basis for the behavior of millions of people'. The opinion in this sentence is so specific that it is easier to support.

2.8.1 Introducing Examination Essays

Sheal (1981:97) maintains that some essays like those written for answering examination questions can do without introductions. The purpose may be to save valuable examination time. But, according to Sheal, many students dislike sudden beginnings in their essays. To help these students Sheal advises that an introduction for an examination essay should contain the following (1) an explanation of the terms used in the question for the essay,

(2) a quick reference to the history of the topic.

(3) a statement of the main points or ideas that will be developed later in the essay.

(4) raising a question that will be answered in the rest of the essay.

2.9. Body of the essay

The body or middle of an essay is the part between the introduction and the conclusion. It is the main part of the essay where the writer explains or supports the controlling ideas contained in the thesis sentence. As stated in 2.2. above, the number of body paragraphs should range between one and seven according to the complexity of the subject.

According to Reid (1988:60), the purpose of each body paragraph is to support one part of the thesis statement. Each body paragraph has four to eight sentences. A body paragraph should be completely like the essay itself. It should have a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning of a body paragraph is called the topic sentence. It contains at least one of the controlling ideas from the thesis statement of the essay. The middle of a body paragraph is a group of sentences that explain or support the topic sentence. The end of a body paragraph is called the concluding sentence where the writer draws together the thoughts expressed in the paragraph.

Oshima (1991:28) claims that each paragraph in the body of the essay should contain:

1. A topic sentence that states the main idea or main point.
2. An explanation of the point you are making.
3. Evidence for your point from your reading or by an example drawn from the subject area.
4. A critical conclusion that is drawn from the evidence.

2.10 Concept of the Paragraph

Reid (1988:8) defines a paragraph as 'a series of sentences that develop one idea'. That idea is usually stated in the first sentence of the paragraph, which is called the topic sentence. In the topic sentence, the writer tells the reader what to expect in the paragraph. In the same way, Sheal (1981:1) states that every paragraph starts with a topic sentence that expresses the whole idea of the paragraph. He adds that there is no rule for the length of a paragraph but paragraphs in essays are often longer than paragraphs in letters. In addition, Sheal mentions two problems in paragraph writing. One of them is the use of two brief or underdeveloped paragraphs. The other is the confusion of two ideas into one paragraph, which makes the essay disorganized and as a result, lacking in clarity.

2.11 Essay Conclusion

As stated in 2.2. above the conclusion or end of an essay is usually one final paragraph. Oshima (1991:32) maintains that it is a brief repetition of the main points discussed in the body. He adds that even though the conclusion might introduce a new viewpoint, it should not introduce any new information. Similarly, Reid (1988:60) states that 'the conclusion borrows from everything that has gone before, summarizing, suggesting, predicting'. It is a last chance for the writer to strengthen his point. Reid adds that the conclusion may also contain a solution to a problem stated in the body, a comment, or a viewpoint. He suggests the following techniques for writing a strong conclusion:

a) Begin your conclusion with a narrow statement that connects it with the last body paragraph.
b) Then broaden toward your final sentence, a structure that is contrary to the introduction: from broad to narrow.
c) Refer to the most important controlling ideas stated in the body paragraphs.

Usually, the conclusion is necessary for the completion of the essay. However, Sheal (1981:99) declares that' Not every essay needs a concluding paragraph. If a topic has been adequately dealt with, then a conclusion may not be necessary, He adds that a conclusion would be especially useful for an examination essay in these ways:

a) If you have digressed from the question, the conclusion will enable you to return to it.
b) The conclusion is a chance for you to influence the examiner in your favor by creating a good final impression on them.

According to Sheal, there are four main types of conclusions:

i) Summary of the main points in the essay.
ii) Prediction of what might happen in the future and suggestions for future policy.
iii) Solutions to problems or difficulties.
iv) Expression of a new viewpoint that arouses interest in the situation.

2. 10. 1. Methods of developing topic sentences:

Reid (1988: 24-43) cites the following methods for developing and techniques for supporting the topic sentence. He says that several methods of development are possible for one topic sentence:

(a)　　Telling facts:

Using facts to support the topic sentence requires that the writer is sure that the facts are accurate and relevant. To make your support more believable to your reader, let the source for your facts be authoritative and reliable.

(b)　　Physical description:

The five senses offer writers a good source for supporting their topics. You can see round or flat shapes, blue or green colors dark or bright light. You can hear a loud or soft sound. You can smell a sweet or bad smell. You can taste a sweet or bitter taste. You can feel a smooth or rough surface, or touch a cold or hot body.

Using physical description to support a topic sentence requires that the writer is precise in their choice of words. Using the right word to describe or explain a point will affect your readers' responses as well as their understanding. Successful written communication is based on successful word choice. A general or vague term would often confuse rather than clarify the point.

(c) Giving examples:

Supporting a topic sentence by the use of examples often makes it understandable on a more concrete level. Sometimes, a single example with many details can be sufficient for one paragraph. Sometimes, several examples with few details can support the topic sentence effectively.

(d) Personal experience:

Telling the reader, a brief story of an actual event that happened to the writer would be very effective since the reader accepts the details as illustrating a personal experience.

(e) Describing a process:

To describe how a dish is prepared in the kitchen or how an experiment is done in the laboratory, you need to organize your sentences and paragraphs chronologically in time moving forwards step by step. This will result in the reader being able to follow the process being described. Logical movement from one step to another is necessary for a successful process paragraph.

(f) Definition:

Concrete things like pen and dictionary are easier to define than abstract things like freedom and democracy. The definition of concrete words is often short and complete. A concrete thing can be defined in a single sentence. On the other hand, abstract things require extended definitions where the writer needs to apply other supporting techniques like telling facts and giving examples if they want to define the words more fully.

(g) Comparison and contrast:

To compare means to show likeness or similarity, while to contrast means to show difference. There are two ways to organize comparison-contrast paragraphs. One way is to discuss first one subject and then the other. The other way is to discuss one part of both subjects and then another part of both subjects. In a comparison–contrast paragraph you should determine the basis upon which you are comparing the two things. For example, one thing is preferable to the other. or while the two things are different, both are acceptable.

(h) Classification:

In this method, you divide a thing into groups or classes according to a common basis. A good classification happens when the classes are arranged according to a logical method and when classes do not overlap.

(i) Cause and effect:

Here the writer explains why something happened or happens or shows the results of an event or situation. A good cause–effect paragraph presents not only the immediate causes but also the remote causes that happened before the direct ones. In such a case, an effect becomes a cause as well forming a chain of events.

(j) Adding details:

This method is similar to telling facts (see 'a' above). The writer develops the topic sentence simply by giving more factual information about the topic.

(k) Giving evidence:

This method is also similar to telling facts and adding details mentioned above. If the topic sentence contains a claim or opinion, the writer needs to prove it in the supporting sentences.

(l) Explanation:

This method is similar to the definition and cause–effect mentioned above. When you explain, you either define or give reasons for something.

2.11 Essay outlining:

One way to order the ideas in an essay, according to Reid (1988:52), is by making an outline that consists of the thesis statement for the essay and the topic sentence for each body paragraph. The controlling ideas could be underlined. It is important to decide the type of audience and to state the purpose of the essay. The method of development for each paragraph should also be determined.

2.12 Some rules of writing:

According to Bright (1958: 68), it is very necessary to think well when you are making general statements to check that you are telling facts. For example, if somebody says: 'Before the invention of the train animals were the only means of transport', and he then remembers the ship, his statement must read like this: 'Before the invention of the train animals were the only means of land transport'. Bright also believes that a 'careful statement is the result of careful thinking about all the facts concerned'. If you leave out any fact purposely, that means you are not honest. If you leave out any fact carelessly, the result will be the same.

As a rule of writing, Sheal (1981:20) advises writers of descriptions to move from simple to complex and from familiar to unfamiliar to help their readers understand them. Sheal (1981:110) adds the following principles of writing:

(a) avoid unclear statements by explaining and giving examples.
(b) avoid the inclusion of irrelevant information.

2.13 Types of the essay:

Maclin (1996:153) states that there are four types of prose writing in general: exposition, description, narration, and argument. But sometimes students at university are asked to write an essay where they analyze a written text. That means analysis can be added to the four main types of prose writing.

2.13. 1 Expository essay:

Maclin declares (1996:153) that 'most academic writing is mainly exposition'. The purpose of an expository essay is to explain something by giving facts and examples in logical order.

2.13. 2 Argumentative essay:

According to Maclin (1996.50), an argumentative essay presents both sides of a topic although the writer believes that only one side is correct. The opinion the writer supports is presented in the thesis statement. A good argument usually tries to make you either do something or believe something. The argument to which the writer agrees is called pro while the argument against the writer's own opinion is called con. The two opposite arguments together are called the pros and cons.

2.13.3 Analysis essay:

Sometimes students are asked to read a passage, a chapter in a book, an article, or a poem, and to analyze it.
To respond to written material, as Reid (1988:109) advises, students should include two things:

(1) a summary of the written material.

(2) an analysis of part or all the material. According to Reid, a summary is a brief complete statement of all the main ideas in a topic. It should be objective in the sense that you add no idea or judgment of your own. The purpose of a summary is to give the reader an objective complete view of an article they have not read. A good summary begins with a sentence that informs the reader of the title and author of the article.

2.14 Coherence devices:

Coherence devices or cohesive markers are expressions like 'but', and 'however', that are used by writers to connect their sentences. One type of Coherence device is connective words like 'therefore' and 'also'. Reid (1988:68) comments that the purpose of using Coherence devices is to create a sense of logic in the essay and as a result make it easy to read and understand. Betta et al (1998:107) use the term 'transitions' for connective words like 'also', 'on the other hand', and 'moreover'. He says that 'writers use transitions to help readers move from one idea to another'. According to him, transitions 'prepare the reader for what type of information will come next'.

Reid (1988:69) believes that the most important coherence device for an essay is to keep to the general plan for writing an academic essay. According to him, an essay with a clear thesis statement and body paragraphs that support the thesis statement will have a good sense of coherence even if there is too little use of connective words.

2.15 Punctuation marks:

These are the signs like the full stop and the comma that are used in writing to divide sentences and phrases. They help to complete the meaning of the sentence. For example, a question mark is used to distinguish between a question and a statement. Wrong use of punctuation marks can cause a lot of misunderstanding on the part of the reader.

Maclin (1996, 269- 82) cites the following usages of punctuation marks:

(a)   **Apostrophe (')**
   i.   Use an apostrophe and –s to show possession or a relation similar to possession. The general rule is adding an (s) to the noun, for example, the child's doll / or the children's book.

If a noun ends in an (s) or (z), put the apostrophe after, for example, Charles 'jacket - the students' book.

(b)   **Brackets [ ]**

These are used to insert an explanation or modification of your own into a direct quotation, for example

His words were 'Only punctual workers [in his firm] receive a weekly bonus'.

(c)   **Colon (:)**
   i.   To introduce a list of details for example. She likes two cities, Paris and Veins.
   ii.   To introduce a long quotation, for example. Wordsworth wrote about nature:

'My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky
So was it when my life began
So is it now I am a man'

(d)　　(,)
i.　To separate the items in a list of words or phrases, for example: Tom, Jim, and Nell come from the same town.
ii.　To divide a compound sentence, for example, g. He is intelligent, but he is unlucky.
iii.　Between the clauses of a complex sentence for example. If you want to get an 'A', you should study hard.
iv.　After a word that does not flow into the rest of the sentence, for example, Yes, you are right, and so on.

(e)　　**(e)Dash (-)**
It is advisable to avoid using a dash in most formal writing. However, a dash can be used in formal writing to replace a colon or around extra information instead of a pair of commas.

(f)　　**Ellipsis (…)**
This is used to indicate that part of a direct quotation has
been left out.

(g)　　**Exclamation Point (!)**
This is used to express strong feelings, for example. Help!

(h)　　**Hyphen (-)**
i.　Use a hyphen in the middle of a two-word number, for example, forty –six.
ii.　Between the parts of a fraction, for example. one–third, three–tenth.
iii.　Between the parts of a compound adjective for example. germ-free rooms.

(i)　　**Full–stop (.)**
i.　At the end of every sentence, for example. It is raining.
ii.　After an abbreviation, for example. Mr. / Dr. / a.m. However abbreviations should be avoided in formal writing.

(j)　　**Question mark (?)**
This is used at the end of a direct question, for example. Is he there?

(k)　　**Quotation marks ('')**
These are used to enclose the exact words of a speaker or writer, for example. 'Come here', he said to the child.

(l)　**Semicolon (;)**
This is used to separate two independent clauses which are not joined by a conjunction, for example.:
The sun was already low in the sky; it would soon be dark

(m)　**Slash (/)**
This is used between two words to show that both or either one of them can give the correct meaning, for example. Mary and Bob can help you. Mary or Bob can help you.

(n)　**Underlining**
Underline titles of complete publications like books, periodicals, and television programs, for example. He wrote <u>A Tale of Two Cities</u>.

(o)　**Parentheses ( )**
These are used to separate extra information or a comment from the rest of the sentence, for example. He thinks that modern poetry (that was written after 1900) lacks deep feeling.

(p)　**Capitalization**
i.　Reid (1988:45) states that either you capitalize all the letters in a title or you capitalize only the first letters of the major words.
ii.　Hago (2005: 57) cites the following rules for capitalization:
1.　The first word in a sentence, for example. He is absent.
2.　Proper names: Peter, Paris, Red Sea, Quran, Sunday, June, English, Department, Hospital Street, and others.
3.　Titles: Dr. Jone, Professor Ian.
4.　Derivatives of capitalized words: Sudanese, English.
5.　'I' and 'O' when used as words, for example.:
Tell me, O reader how I can get there

2.16 Proofreading:
　　Sheal (1981:11) advises that before passing your essay on to readers you should read through it yourself and make necessary corrections. This is called proofreading. The writer does it to check for errors. Every writer should do the proofreading when he /she has finished writing. If a topic is to be read by other people, it had better be proofread by its writer because careless mistakes can make the writer appear weak or foolish.
　　Reid (1988:82) uses the term 'editing' for proofreading. He says that after you have revised your essay and before you stop writing completely, be sure to proofread it for errors in grammar, sentence structure, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation,

and verb-tense agreement. According to Reid, such errors can distract the reader and lessen your authority as a writer. So, you should reread loudly and slowly to hear and see the error at the same time.

2.17 Spelling:

William (2008:5) asserts that English spelling is hard as a result of the complex system of the alphabet. It is difficult to tell what sound a letter is going to make. Sometimes a letter like 'x' has more than one sound in one appearance. Sometimes one sound like 'sh' is represented in so many ways, for example. shoe, sugar, passion, ambition, ocean, and so on.

According to Sheal (1981:11), 'Spelling is one of the major problems which students face in writing English'. Maclin (1996:310-13) also believes that 'English spelling is difficult and irregular'. However, he offers the following rules and says that they can work most of the time:

(a)   To get the plural of a noun or simple present of a verb:
i.   Add-es if the base word ends in ch, sh, s, z, or x, e.g.:
ii.   matches, dishes, buses, quizzes, fixes.
iii. Add-es if the base word ends in –o except when the 'o' is preceded by another vowel or the word relates to music, for example. goes, does, heroes, echoes, potatoes, zoos, pianos.
iv. Add-es if the base word ends in-y preceded by a consonant; the 'y' is changed into 'i', for example.:
v.   Lorry/lorries, bury/buries, try / tries, satisfy/satisfies, pay/pays, buy / buys.
(b)   Double the final consonant if you are adding – ed, -er, or -ing, on condition that the final consonant is single, preceded by a single vowel, not followed by a vowel, and the syllable it belongs to is stressed, for example. big / bigger / biggest, begin / beginning, stop/stopped/stopping.
(c)   Drop a single final –e before endings beginning with a vowel, e.g., Hope /hoping, line /lining, believe /believable, spine /spinal.

To say more about the problems of English spelling, Sheal (1981:91) observes that 'Students sometimes confuse one word with another because of some similarity between the two words in spelling'. You have to decide which word is needed for your sentence, for example. adapt/adopt, devise/ device, and others. To overcome this problem Sheal suggests using a good dictionary

2.18 Style of writing:

In Oxford Dictionary the term 'style of writing' is defined as 'correct use of language'. There are rules of correctness of language use. For example, Bright (1958: 94) maintains that one of the secrets of all good writing is to use as few words as possible. He adds that 'The more meaning we can put into the fewest and simplest words the better we shall be writing'. If many words can be omitted without altering the meaning, the style is said to be wordy, which is not good. Bright still adds that (1985:111) the sentences should have a variety of lengths and pattern, and that connectors should be used to achieve coherence between the paragraphs in the essay and between the sentences in each paragraph.

In the same way, Betta et all (1998:193) mention that 'Writers use a variety of sentence types to make their writing more interesting to read'.

3. Methodology

3.1. Method adopted

The researchers adopted a descriptive–analytical method in this study. Aspects of the problem were described, and the results of the empirical study were analyzed.

3.2. Sampling

Subjects of the study were chosen randomly from a study population of 170. There were two samples: one for the test, and the other for the questionnaire. Subjects for the test were selected from the students of the English language department, faculty of Education (Hantoub), University of Gezira. The sample consisted of 50 students who were given the freedom to, or not to join the study, Subjects for the questionnaire were selected from university staff members in Wad Median City, namely the University of Gezira and Wad Medani Ahlia College. The sample consisted of 20 teachers.

3.3. Tools of data collection:

Two tools for data collection were used. The first was a test for the students, and the second was a questionnaire for the teachers. both the test and the questionnaire were refereed by six professional teachers from the Department of English, Faculty of Education (Hantoub).

3.3.1 The test

The purpose of the test was to measure the students' ability to produce a good academic essay where they would follow correct writing techniques and use grammar, spelling rules, and punctuation marks properly.

3.3.1.1 Contents of the test [see appendix]

Subjects were asked to choose one of five topics and to write either an expository or argumentative academic essay on it. The topics were about women's education, the mobile, transport, football, and money. Criteria for assessment were laid down according to the hypotheses of the study. They consisted of knowledge and application of techniques for essay writing, use of punctuation marks, thematic unity, and cohesion.

3.3.1.2 Administration of the test

The researchers themselves administered the test to the Subjects inside a lecture room. He started by explaining the purpose of the test to the Subjects. The time allowed for answering the test was 40 minutes. The Subjects showed great interest and looked very active in answering the test.

3.3.1.3. Reliability of the test

The test was divided into two halves to calculate the correlation between the two sets of scores. The SPSS program was used to calculate this correlation. The reliability obtained was 0.81.

3.3.1.4 Validity of the test

The degree of reliability of the test [0.81] was calculated to obtain its validity. The result was 0.90 for validity.

3.3.2. The questionnaire

The purpose of the questionnaire was to examine the hypothesis that certain techniques will be most effective in teaching academic essay writing.

3.3.2.1 Contents of the questionnaire [see appendix]

The questionnaire consisted of 8 statements; Subjects were given options for answering: strongly agree, agree, to some extent, and disagree. Statement I suggested that the students should be provided with a wide vocabulary if they were to improve their ability to write. Statement 2 suggested doing a lot of reading. Statements 3 was about providing the students with a lot of examples of carefully written academic essays. Statement 4 assumed that a topic should be discussed with the students before they were asked to writing period. Statement 6 proposed using the students' native language to collect ideas about the topic. Statement 7 was about giving the students a lot of assignments in writing. The last statement suggested that the students should take part in discussing samples of their own written work.

3.3.2.2 Distribution of the questionnaire

It took the researcher 3 days to distribute and collect the questionnaire from the teachers. A few of the teachers, however, responded to the questionnaire and returned it immediately.

3.4 Tools of data analysis

The data collected through the test and questionnaire was analyzed by the use of the SPSS programme. Tables, graphs, and charts were used to show the results of the study.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter deals with the presentation, analysis, and discussion of data.

4.1 The test

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the test was meant to measure five aspects of the writing skill. These aspects were the use of essay writing techniques, use of grammar, accuracy of spelling, use of punctuation marks, and use of cohesive markers. Each aspect was considered a question. Each question was assigned ten marks. The table and the chart below will give you an idea about the performance of the subjects in each question. You may refer to Appendix 'c' to see the marks in detail.

Table 4.1: Descriptive statistics for the data

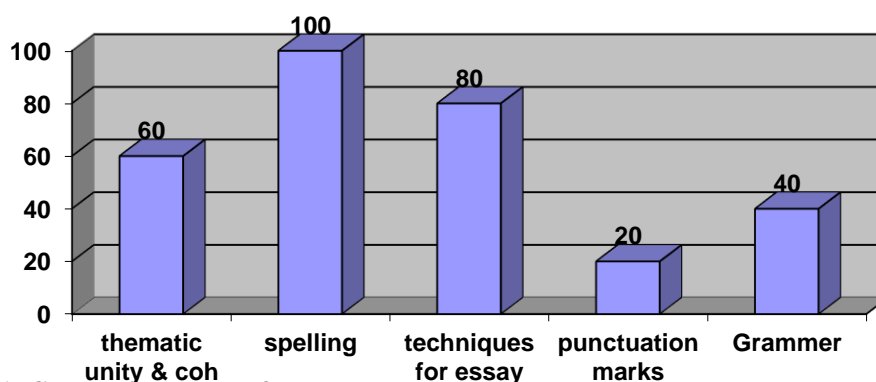| Aspects of essay writing	Number of subjects	Mean	Standard deviation
Techniques for essay writing	50	5.94	2.08
Grammar	50	4.92	1.72
Spelling	50	5.60	1.65
Punctuation marks	50	4.80	2.05
Thematic unity and cohesion	50	5.50	2.11

Chart 4.1: Cumulative percent for the test

As for the question about essay writing techniques, 30% of the subjects did not get the pass mark. The mean for this question was nearly six out of ten the cumulative percent was 80. This result, however, does not confirm the hypothesis that most of the students do not know the general techniques for academic essay writing. The word ' most' at the beginning of the statement should be replaced with 'some '.

All of the questions on grammar, spelling, punctuation, and cohesion were intended to verify the one hypothesis that the students are generally weak in general writing sub-skills like grammar, spelling, and punctuation. In the grammar question, 46% of the subjects failed. The mean was less than five out of ten. The cumulative percentage was 40. In the spelling question, 34% of the subjects failed. The mean was 5.60. The cumulative percentage was 100. In the question about punctuation, 44% of the subjects did not pass. The mean was less than five. The cumulative percentage was only 20. In the question on cohesion, 36% of the subjects did not get the pass mark. The mean was 5.50. The cumulative percentage was 60.

The subjects did best in spelling and worst in punctuation. They did better in cohesion than they did in grammar. In general, the results for these questions partly confirm the hypothesis and partly do not. It was confirmed that the students were weak in grammar and punctuation but were to some extent good at spelling and cohesion.

The low marks the subjects got in grammar and punctuation also confirm the first two hypotheses of the study that many EFL university students face obstacles in academic essay writing, and that the students also have problems in general writing.

4.2 The questionnaire

This part of the study was intended to verify the hypothesis that certain techniques will be most effective in teaching academic essay writing. You may refer to Appendix 'D' for the results in detail.

4.2.1 Teaching academic writing is greatly supported by providing the students with a wide vocabulary.

50% of the subjects agreed with the first statement that the students should be provided with a wide vocabulary if they are to improve their writing ability. 40% of the subjects strongly agreed to this statement while 10% of the subjects agreed to some extent.

Frequency Table 4.2.1 Teaching academic writing is greatly supported by providing the students with a wide vocabulary.

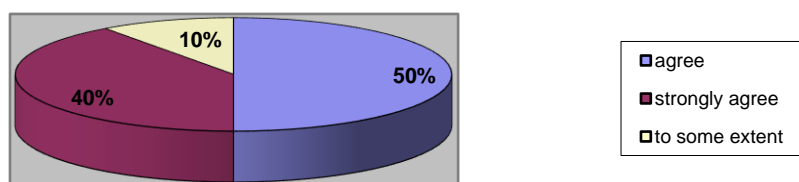| Options	Frequency	Valid Percent
To some extent	2	10.0
Agree	10	50.0
Strongly agree	8	40.0
Total	20	100.0

Chart 4.2.2: Teaching academic writing is greatly supported by providing the students with a wide vocabulary

4.2.2 Assigning the students a lot of reading topics, will improve their ability to write

Statement 4.2.2 which recommended assigning the students a lot of reading received the following responses. 85% of the subjects strongly agreed while 10% simply agreed. The rest of the subjects agreed to some extent.

Assigning the students, a lot of reading topics, will improve their ability to write

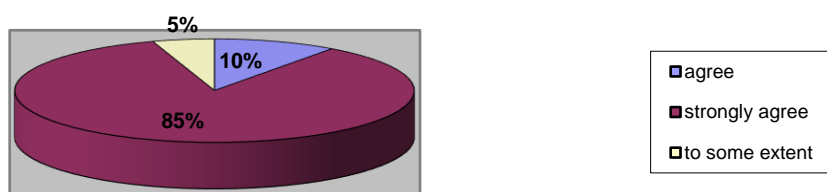| Options	Frequency	valid Percent
To some extent	1	5.0
Agree	2	10.0
Strongly agree	17	85.0
Total	20	100.0

Chart 4.2.2- Assigning the students a lot of reading topics, will improve their ability to write

4.2.3 Teaching academic writing is effective and will have better results if the teacher gives the students a lot of examples of carefully written academic essays.

45% of the subjects agreed and 50% of them strongly agreed to statement 3 which was about providing the students with a lot of examples of carefully written essays. The rest of the subjects agreed to some extent.

Frequency Table 4.2.3 – Teaching academic writing is effective and will have better results if the teacher gives the students a lot of examples of carefully written academic essays

Options	Frequency	Valid Percent
To some extent	1	5.0
Agree	9	45.0
Strongly agree	10	50.0
Total	20	100.0

5%
50%
45%

- agree
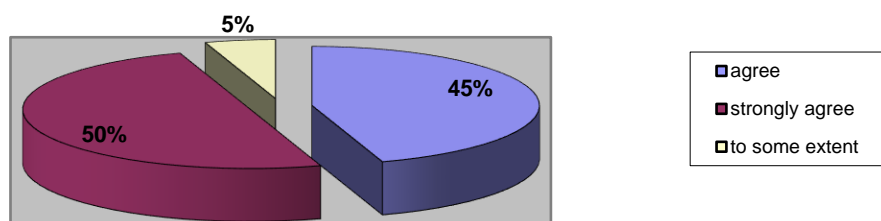- strongly agree
- to some extent

Chart 4.2.3 Teaching academic writing is effective and will have better results if the teacher gives the students a lot of examples of carefully written academic essays.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion:

According to this study, there are problems confronting EFL university students in academic essay writing in Sudan. This is true at least at the time and place of the study shown in 1.7 above. However it has been proved that these problems are not as serious as hypothesized by the researcher. The subjects did well, for example in essay writing techniques and spellings. In the question on essay writing techniques, 70% of the subjects got the pass mark. The mean was nearly six out of ten. In the question on spelling, 60% of the subjects got the pass mark. The mean was 5.6. part of this good performance might be attributed to the fact that the subjects had already had a course on essay writing techniques in the second semester of the first year. It is expected that some other students could not have been as good as the subjects in this study.

It is also important to mention here that the topic of this study could have better been tackled if it had been split into a number of topics, for example, each dealing with one point like writing techniques or punctuation. So, the topic will continue to be open for further research.

5.2 Findings

1. There are some difficulties confronting EFL university students in academic essay writing.
2. Essay writing techniques and spelling are not very serious problems for the subjects of the study.
3. The most serious problems for the subjects are grammar and punctuation.
4. Although the writing of more than half the subjects is coherent, they have used only a limited number of cohesive markers.
5. The best technique for teaching academic essay writing is assigning the students a lot of reading. This because more useful if the students are given a lot of writing assignments.
6. It may be harmful to encourage the students to collect ideas in their language and then translate them into English.
7. An important technique for teaching writing is discussing the topic with the students before asking them to write about it.

5.3 Recommendations

1. Teachers of writing should bear in mind the fact that their students have problems with writing an academic **essay.**
2. Although the subjects for this study did well in essay writing techniques and spelling, the teachers are recommended to continually check that their students are good at these important subskills of writing.
3. Special attention should be given to teaching grammar and punctuation.
4. A wide range of cohesive markers and their use should be introduced to the students, especially at this level of education.
5. Students should be assigned a lot of reading and given a lot of writing assignments to develop their writing abilities.
6. In doing a writing assignment, students must be encouraged to think in the foreign language itself, not in their mother tongues.
7. Before requesting the students to write about a topic, they should be given some opportunities to discuss a topic in pairs, groups, or even collectively guided by the teacher.

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"الصعوبات التي تواجه طلاب جامعة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في كتابة المقال الأكاديمي"

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الملخص:

تبحث الدراسة وتبحث في المشكلات التي تواجه طلاب جامعة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في إنتاج مقال أكاديمي جيد التنظيم ودقيق. هدفت الباحثة إلى معرفة أسباب ضعف الطلاب في كتابة المقال الأكاديمي. وتم اعتماد المنهج الوصفي التحليلي. وتم استخدام الاختبار التشخيصي كأداة لجمع البيانات. تم تقديمها إلى 50 طالبًا جامعيًا تم اختيارهم عشوائيًا من دفعة واحدة مكونة من 170 طالبًا. كما قام الباحثون بتوزيع استبيان على عينة من معلمي الجامعة من أجل التحقق من الفرضية الأخيرة القائلة بأن بعض التقنيات ستكون أكثر فعالية في تدريس كتابة المقالات الأكاديمية. ومن أهم النتائج التي توصلت إليها الدراسة وجود بعض المشكلات التي تواجه طلبة جامعة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في كتابة المقال الأكاديمي؛ وأخطر هذه المشاكل هي القواعد النحوية وعلامات الترقيم. هذا بالإضافة إلى اكتشاف أن أفضل أسلوب لكتابة المقال الأكاديمي للمعلم هو تكليف الطلاب بالكثير من القراءة مع منحهم العديد من المهام الكتابية. وتضمنت التوصيات المهمة للدراسة أن على معلمي الكتابة أن يأخذوا في الاعتبار أن طلابهم لديهم مشاكل في كتابة المقالات الأكاديمية. واقترح الباحثون إيلاء اهتمام خاص لتدريس قواعد اللغة وعلامات الترقيم. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، ينبغي تكليف الطلاب بالكثير من القراءة وإعطاء الكثير من مهام الكتابة من أجل تطوير قدراتهم الكتابية.