

## Obstacles Facing Sudanese EFL Students in Essay Writing as Posed by Syntax at Tertiary Level

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### Abstract:

*Essay writing is an expression of the mental processes which is used as a means of communication. It is the interaction between the writer, the text and the reader. This study aims at identifying the problems that face ESL students in writing essays. The study uses the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for breaking down and analyzing the data. A written text has been administered to a sample of 89 subjects of Department of English Language, College of Languages at the Sudan University of Science and Technology at the academic year 2014-2015. The findings indicate that participants are unable to use correct punctuation and capitalization. Many spelling mistakes are dominant in students' written essays. The findings also display that students cannot use correct grammatical rules and they lack cohesion and coherence. Moreover, the results show that participants have no ability to evaluate, revise and correct their written text so as to produce a final comprehensive text. The researcher recommends that grammatical rules should be taught to participants to help them write more communicatively and meaningfully and also there should be designed courses in writing skills so as to enable ESL students to write essays correctly.*

**Key words:** Mechanics - validity – reliability - transitional words - coherence

## **INTRODUCTION**

Writing competence is essential for ESL students. Writers are always to some degree, reinventing what has already been written. Writing is rather like on two distinctive skills that usually make some difficulty: creating and criticizing. That is to say writing requires ability to generate words and thoughts out of oneself, but it also requires ability to criticize them so as to decide which ones are more appropriate to be used. (Jahin and Idress, 2012) in their study assessing the current EFL students' writing conclude that the participants had low writing proficiency level. (Sattayatham and Ratanpinoyong, 2008) in their study mention that students' writing did not contain introduction, neither topic sentence, nor transitional words. (Adeyemi, 2012) writes that students faced many difficulties in writing composition; they encountered difficulties with surface level errors such as spelling, punctuation and paragraphing. She adds that they could not communicate successfully in writing. Most of them lacked grasping the topics or ideas to be expressed, because of their limited vocabulary and L1 interference. (Kansopon, 2012) investigates the validity and reliability of writing assessments of undergraduates, those English-major students had academic writing skills problem, especially among non-native English speaker whose writing ability was critical to their academic achievement. (Alkhairy, 2013) says that students were poor in writing skills and therefore, produced many errors in their written text. (AL-Buaninain, 2006) mentions that non-native students could not create written products that explain their ability to organize the content, or demonstrate their linguistic ability such as vocabulary, punctuation, and spelling. (Nyoni, 2012) explains that there are many weaknesses in students' composition writing which includes spelling, organization and insufficient vocabulary for certain topic. He mentions that students showed a lack of pertinent vocabulary to express themselves. (AL-

Swalha and Chow, 2012) show that most students failed to express complex ideas in their writing because they lacked appropriate vocabulary. (Kemboi, et al., 2014) comments that students face difficulty in vocabulary and how to express their ideas clearly. The study also reveals that learners could not choose the right English words and they use poor sentence structures. Following these facts the objective of the present study attempts to investigate the problems that face ESL students in writing essays at tertiary level.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

ESL students at tertiary level are supposed to be competent in writing essays. Mastering learning skills; especially essay writing acts as a cornerstone for learners' success in their university studies. However, university students are incapable of producing any written text. They cannot express their thoughts and feelings in comprehensive meaningful sentences. This study attempts to inquire why ESL students at Dalanj University (Teachers' College and Faculty of Education) are unable to produce good written essays.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Thoughts, as introduced by (Dagher, 1976) must be mechanically connected by words, by punctuation, and by the order in which they are arranged so that they will be really understood. (Freedman et al., 2014) states that schools use to teach how to write in second language composition in very limited ways. Concentration is laid on correct usage, and correct spelling. They also lay emphasis on the topic sentence, developing the paragraph and the usefulness of unity and coherence. (Gleason and Mark, 1993) mentions that if students master how to use punctuation and capitalization, their writing

will get better. (Crossmann, 2009) argues that students encounter difficulties in writing composition, by either linguistic difficulties or a lack of skills to write because learners do not write in their L2. So, they lack confidence and experience needed in order to write in L2. Moreover, previous learning experience is also an essential part in students' view of what they can or cannot do. The linguistic problems emerge to some extent since written discourse is generally not just a question of writing down what we say, but it turns to be a combination of clauses that are complex language. (Zamel, 2007) expresses that writing is a consistent attempt of exploring what one wants to say. This act is the key element of the writing process. It is the process of discovering and writing one's intended meanings, the form with which to express more accurately. A reader of English as stated by (Raimies, 1998) generally expects writing to be direct and clear. He also said that a well written piece defines its points explicitly and supporting details to be concrete and specific so that they can carry the writer's own knowledge and experience. Writing has many subskills, writes (Muricia and Mantosh, 1978) one of which is spelling. They mention that spelling is significant for at least two reasons. A writer may not be able to communicate well unless s/he spells well, that is a reader must be able to interpret marks on the page as meaningful words and a reader cannot understand this easily when words are spelt wrongly. This is because it is product processes that harmonize uniquely to specific powerful learning strategies. (Darling, 1999) says that free writing can be very hard for some students because it is not the same to what they have learnt. In free writing students do not first concentrate on the correctness and therefore do not plan well. To write meaningfully and clearly, students need to master the mechanics of writing. The importance role of punctuations as argued by (Grellet, 2006) is to produce clear and easy text. He adds that defective punctuations can make a text very hard to be understood, and even lead to misunderstanding.

(Greenbaum, 1996) also writes that the earliest punctuation systems were used to reflect a division into sense units in order to correlate their boundaries with pause in speech. He further mentions that the punctuation system was introduced for silent reading and was connected with grammatical structures than to the rhythms of the speech. All these factors affect students' motivation, which no doubt plays a significant part in their success. To write meaningfully and clearly, students need to master the mechanics of writing.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to achieve the following objectives:

- a- Measuring students' performance in using mechanics in writing essays.
- b- To what extent students are capable of maintaining cohesion and coherence in their written essays.
- c- Students' abilities in revising the correctness and precision of linguistic structures in essay writing.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study uses the students' writing proficiency test in order to investigate the problems that encounter students while writing their essays. The subjects are (89) third-year ESL students of two colleges (Teachers' College and Faculty of Education) at Dalanj University during the academic year (2014-2015). The study attempts to answer the following questions:

- a- To what extent can students use mechanics in writing essays?
- b- Are students capable of maintaining cohesion and coherence in their written essays?
- c- How far do students have ability to revise the correctness and precision of linguistic structures?

## FINDINGS

After analyzing students' actual written essay, the study yielded the following results:

Table (1) illustrates students' scores, frequencies and percentages in using correct capitalization and punctuations. The table below shows that (15) students got zero (16.9%), (38) participants scored only one mark (42.7%), (22) students attained two marks (24.7%), (13) students have scored three marks (14.6%), (1) participant has got four out of five (1.1%). From the table above only (14) Students (15.7%) were able to use capitalization and punctuation marks correctly, whereas (84) students (84.3%) fail to write with correct use of capitalization and punctuations.

### Correct use of capitalization and punctuations

scores	Frequency of scores	Percentages of scores	mean
Total marks (5)			1.40
0	15	16.9%	
1	38	42.7%	
2	22	24.7%	
3	13	14.6%	
4	1	1.1%	
Total	89	100%	

**Table (1) correct use of capitalization and punctuations**

Table (2) below shows the total scores of the subjects, frequencies and percentage of the scores in misspelling word during writing. The table indicates that (5) students have attained nothing (5.6%), (36) participants got (1) mark (40.4%), (31) students scored two marks (34.8%) and only (17) participants (19.1%) have got three marks out of five. On the other hand, (72) subjects were unable to write down correct spelling.

## Misspelling

scores	Frequency of scores	Percentages of scores	mean
Total marks (5)			1.67
0	5	5.6%	
1	36	40.4%	
2	31	34.8%	
3	17	19.1%	
Total	89	100%	

**Table (2) Misspelling**

Table (3) below illustrates students' scores in keeping cohesion, coherence and a mode of developing paragraph. The table shows (55) subjects attained no mark (61.8%), (14) students got one mark (15.7%), (12) participants have score two marks (13.5%) and only and only (8) participants (9%) were able to maintain cohesion and coherence and are also capable of using a mode of developing paragraph in order to produce written texts. The table also justifies that (91%) of students write incohesively, incoherently and shows no mode of developing paragraph.

## Maintenance of cohesion and coherence

scores	Frequency of scores	Percentages of scores	mean
Total marks (5)			.70
0	55	61.8%	
1	14	15.7%	
2	12	13.5%	
3	8	9%	
Total	89	100%	

**Table (3) Maintenance of cohesion and coherence.**

Table (4) below introduces students' marks, frequencies and percentages in revising the correctness and precision of linguistic structures. The table provides that (75) students scored no mark (84.3%), (10) subjects have attained one mark

(11.2%), (3) participants scored two marks (3.4%) and only one student (1.1%) was able to revise the linguistic structures, whereas (88) students (98.9%) failed to make any changes in their writing. This reveals that students are not competent enough to discover whether what they write are right or wrong linguistically.

**Ability to revise the correctness and precision of linguistic structures**

scores	Frequency of scores	Percentages of scores	mean
Total marks (5)			.21
0	75	84.3%	
1	10	11.2%	
2	3	3.4%	
3	1	1.1%	
Total	89	100%	

**Table (4) Ability to revise the correctness and precision of linguistic structures**

**DISCUSSION**

Most students' writings lack appropriate use of mechanics. The whole essay runs together without means of punctuations or capitalization. There are a lot of run on sentences and periods and commas are inserted where they are unnecessary. So, most of the written texts in the current study are just a group of words or a series of uncommunicative and functionless utterances. There are also a lot of spelling mistakes which shows that students' are poor in writing words correctly.

Cohesion relies upon lexical and grammatical relationships that create sentence sequences to be grasped as concerned discourse rather than as isolated sentences. Coherence within a paragraph is developed from the ordering and relationship between sentences within each paragraph, they should continue in logical order, presenting new idea sequentially. Therefore, it is essential to establish cohesion and

coherence in writing essays. The above mentioned elements are not found in the students' essay writing which proves that students are unable to provide cohesion and coherence in their written essays. So, students failed to organize their paragraphs in accurate patterns that agree with the purpose of the writing as well as the style of the essays.

Having the ability of spotting the mistakes and correcting them in a text helps students reformulate their written essays. Analyzing the subjects' work, it is found out that students cannot afford to make revision to their written essays. This failure is due to students' inability of identifying the mistakes that require correction of linguistic structures.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper attempts to identify problems that encounter ESL students' in essay writing. It aims to find out to what extent students face difficulties in using mechanics, keeping cohesion and coherence and the ability to revise the correctness and precision of linguistic structures in writing essays. The study uses a test to collect the required data. The findings reveal that students are unable to use appropriate punctuation and capitalization. Students are poor in spelling and cannot use correct grammatical structures. Students also fail to achieve cohesion and coherence in their written essays.

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