



Investigating Students' Learning Difficulties in English Composition Writing

(A Case Study of First Year Students at University of Nyala, Sudan)

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Abstract:

The title of this study is: Investigating Students' Learning Difficulties in Writing English Composition. It has been observed that university of Nyala students confront a variety of problems in writing English composition. This study investigates the problems encountered by the students when learning to write English composition. The objectives of the current study were: (1) To find out what problems University of Nyala students encounter when learning to write English composition. (2) To examine how strategy instruction affects University of Nyala students' performance in writing English composition. This case study was conducted at University of Nyala. (40) University of Nyala students participated in this study. The researcher used two pretests and two posttests with a teaching instruction. The main findings of the study were: (1) Writing composition strategies improve students' performance in writing English composition. (2) The most problems that face the students in writing composition were: spelling , lack of vocabulary , punctuation marks uses, poor handwriting, paragraph, organization , expressing ideas, sentence writing, communicative quality, cohesion and coherence English tenses, spelling and capitalization. The current study recommended that more emphasis should be given to composition writing for its importance to the students. The most important implication is that students should be serious and keen for composition writing.

Keywords: *writing composition , writing skills, composition difficulties, composition skills*

المستخلص:

عنوان هذه الدراسة هو تقصى الصعوبات التي تواجه التلاميذ في تعليم كتابه الانشاء الانجليزية.

من الملاحظ أن طلاب جامعة نيالا يواجهون العديد من المشاكل في كتابة الأنشاء الانجليزية. هذه الدراسة تتقصى هذه الصعوبات التي تواجه الطلاب عند تعلمهم لكتابة الأنشاء الانجليزية. تهدف هذه الدراسة لتحقيق الأهداف التالية: (1) اكتشاف الصعوبات التي تواجه طلاب جامعة نيالا عند كتابة الأنشاء الانجليزية. (2) اختبار مدى فعالية البرنامج التدريسي في تحسين أداء كتابة الانشاء الانجليزية لطلاب جامعة نيالا. أجريت دراسة الحالة هذه في جامعة نيالا. أربعون طالب من جامعة نيالا شارك في هذه الدراسة. أستخدم الباحث الاختبار القبلي والبعدي مع برنامج تعليمي. أهم نتائج هذه الدراسة هي: (1) ان استراتيجيات الأنشاء تعمل على تحسين أداء الطلاب في كتابة الأنشاء الانجليزية. (2) أهم المشاكل التي تواجه الطلاب في كتابة الأنشاء الانجليزية هي: الكتابة الخاطئة للمفردات, النقص في المفردات, علامات الترقيم, رداءة الخط, عدم الامام بفنيات كتابة الانشاء, التنظيم وعدم المقدرة على التعبير, استخدام الحروف الكبيره, ترابط وتماسك مواضيع التعبير بالاضافه لاستخدام الأفعال. توصي الدراسة بزيادة الاهتمام بالأنشاء الانجليزية وذلك لأهميتها للطلاب. من أهم المطوبات التطبيقية هي ضرورة الجدية من قبل الطلاب عند كتابة الأنشاء الانجليزية.

Introduction

Writing is essential skill and valuable activity for university students in education.

It was noticeable that University of Nyala students were facing many problems and challenges when learning to write English composition. Hussain (2017 : 37) declares that " Students need to learn the writing process to improve their writing skills ". These acute problems come from the fact that mastering it requires an understanding of particular related aspects. Writing in a foreign language is one of the most challenging skills for almost all learners. Writing composition is not an easy task. It is a complex activity. It needs thinking, writing and writing again. Elbow (2000: xiv) points out that " Most people have had bad experiences with writing. They have come to dislike it or fear it and usually they avoid it ". This case study has been done to analyze these problems. As teachers we can help our students to overcome these problems. We can help them to learn and write English composition well. This can be done by teaching them useful techniques and strategies properly. Kane (2000: 9) declares " Strategy involves choice-selecting particular aspects of a topic to develop, deciding how to organize them, choosing this word rather than that, constructing various types of sentences, building paragraphs. Style is the result of strategy). Beach and Bridwell (1984: 183-184) provide six functions of writing:

- * Writing has special advantages for learning.
- * Writing enables students to learn new information.
- * Writing enables makes the integration of old and new information easier.
- * Writing teaches pragmatic conventions and audience awareness; both are very important strategies to master when communication in the second language is the purpose of a language course.
- * Writing teaches students the ability to critically evaluate to the information they are learning.
- * Writing can teach students how they perceive personal experiences.

The main hypotheses of this study were:

- (1) There are many problems face the students in writing English composition. (
 - 2) English composition strategies have positive effects on students' performance.
- This study is important because it draws attention to techniques and strategies that might improve students' performance and quality in learning and writing English composition. Besides, discovering the difficulties that face Sudanese university students in writing composition.

Previous Studies

Study One

The title of the study is : English Writing Composition Skills among Education Students. A study was conducted by Vanessa Joy (2022). A thesis published at Globus Journal of Progressive Education. The analysis of the study revealed that majority of the respondents were exposed to news. The participants using Facebook got very low in structure. Significant differences exist between younger respondents and the level of writing skills and also between exposure to social media and the level of writing skills.

Study Two

The title of the study is : Improving Basic Composition Skills of Secondary Level Students in the Srilankan School Context : An Action Research. A study was conducted by Hashini Abeysena (2019). A thesis at Deakin University, Australia. The findings of the study declared that the researcher's intervention sessions were impactful in improving students' basic writing mechanics in developing composition skills of junior secondary L2 learners to a considerable extent.

Study Three

The title of the study is : Students' Competence in Composition Writing : Basis for Proposed Intervention Strategy Plan. A study was conducted by Arturo G. Palaming (2023). A thesis at Pangasinan State University. The findings implied that English teachers should be given an adequate training and should attend seminar and

workshops in ESL writing pedagogy for them to have in-depth knowledge of the complexities involved in the writing process and learn more intervention strategies that they could apply in the classroom to help students improve their writing in English with less effort. The results of the study may be used as inputs to curriculum development and the implementation of intervention strategies in English composition writing.

Study Four

The title of the study is : Effective Practices on Teaching Composition. A study was conducted by Divya C. and Padma Priya. A thesis at National Conference On Teaching Innovations and Enhancing Learning (2017). The study results indicate that the students become more capable writers. The writing as a process approach and ongoing skill-building sessions are essential components in service programmes.

Study Five

The title of the study is : Approaches to Teaching English Composition Writing at Junior Secondary Schools in Botswana. A study was conducted by Deborah Adenihun Adeyemi (2008). A thesis at University of South Africa. The major findings were that: Teachers utilized mainly the product oriented approach to the teaching of English writing. Teachers were confronted with challenges emanating

from the use of the product oriented approach to writing such as surface level errors, wrong grammar / tense, lack of vocabulary and organization skills and inability of students to compose and communicate effectively in writing.

Materials and Methods

This study adopted the analytic descriptive approach to facilitate the gathering of data to assist in achieving study objectives.

Subjects

To conduct this study, (40) students at University of Nyala, Sudan were included willingly in this study. They have joined voluntarily in the academic year 2023. They were in the first semester in the faculty of education. They are English as a foreign language learners (EFL). They were of both genders male and female. Their age range between 17 - 18.

Tools

For collecting data, the researcher used:

1. Two pre-tests

The pre-tests were used to measure the participants' actual level in writing composition.

2. Treatment

A full semester teaching programme was conducted to the subjects. It was done by the researcher, two times a week.

3. Two Post-tests

The two post-tests were given to check the progress made by the participants after the composition writing instruction period.

Procedures

Pre-tests

Pre-tests were the starting point before conducting the treatment. They were used to evaluate the participants' ability in writing English composition. The researcher informed the participants about the two pre-tests, in order to prepare them for the tests. The lecture-room environment was good, so the participants were not anxious. The participants were given pre-test 1, and on the following day they were given pre-test 2 (See appendices). The pre-tests started with short instructions, to motivate the participants. They were told to do the pre-test 1 within one hour and also the time for the pre-test 2. Both tests were conducted in the morning period. The participants' papers were collected and thoroughly marked. The scores were carefully and fairly listed.

Treatment

The researcher gave the participants a full semester training course on writing English composition. The researcher gave them two lectures a week. Two hours for each lecture. The participants received this instruction in addition to their normal general English course. Based on the pre-tests, the researcher discovered that the majority of the participants do not even know English writing composition skills. So, in the treatment the researcher taught them the following composition skills:

- * Writing process (planning, drafting, editing, final version)
- * Handwriting
- * Cohesion and coherence
- * Vocabulary
- * Sentence structure and types of sentences
- * Communicative quality
- * Organization
- * Paragraph
- * Capitalization rules
- * Punctuation marks
- * English tenses
- * Spelling

The majority of the participants were interested in the treatment contents. A few were less happy, because of the mistakes they did. The researcher kept on motivating them. That was making them feel comfortable. The writing composition course has two components: the course content and the presentation of that content. Teaching composition skills is an active and on-going practice, that includes:

- * Explaining the purpose of the skill.
- * Giving the participants' opportunities to practice and reinforce each skill.
- * Assessing the degree of mastery of each skill.

All the composition topics were interesting and relevant to the participants' needs. There were a variety of topics : descriptive, narrative and argumentative. Also, there were guided and free compositions. This teaching programme was done by the researcher himself. The researcher wrote the participants' errors on the board to be corrected. The researcher encouraged the participants to use simple and correct language.

Post-tests

After doing the treatment, the researcher gave the participants the two post-tests. The researcher explained what the post-tests were and the purposes of them. The post-tests were held with the same procedures which were mentioned in the pre-tests. Both sets of tests were the same topics. The two post-tests were administered to the same participants to determine the extent of progress in the performance of the participants that occurred as a result of the defined treatment.

Results and Discussion

The researcher used t-test and mean scores to check whether there were significant differences between pre-tests and post-tests scores.

Table 1: Comparison of Participants' Performance on the Pre-test 1 and post-test 1.

Test	Means scores	Difference Of means	Standard deviation	T. value	P value
Pre	12.2	7.2	3.6	-19.60	0.00
Post	19.4				

As can be seen from table 1, The t-test was used to perform the comparison of the pre-test 1 and post-test 1. The pre-test 1 was used to assess the participants' composition writing ability before the composition writing instruction. The post-test was used to check the effects of the composition writing instruction on the participants' ability. The results of pre-test 1 and post-test 1 were used to set baseline for comparison to help check if any difference occurred.

In the pre-test 1, the mean score is 12.2 while it is 19.4 in the post-test 1. The post-test 1 checked the effects of the composition writing instruction on the participants' composition writing ability. The statistical analysis was adequate because it compared the means of two variables (The pre-test 1 and post-test 1). Table 1, obviously revealed that the participants' scores were improved on the post-test. The mean scores of the post-test 1 was higher than the pre-test 1. The difference of the two means was 7.2 from 12.2 to 19.4.

Table 2: Comparison of Participants' Performance on the Pre-test 2 and Post-test 2.

Test	Means scores	Difference Of means	Standard deviation	T. value	P value
Pre	12.0	7.50	3.75	-14.30	0.00
Post	19.50				

As can be seen from table 2 , The t-test was used to evaluate the performance of the participants in the pre-test 2 and post-test 2. The pre-test 2 was conducted to assess the participants' composition writing ability before the treatment. The post-test was used to check the effects of the composition writing instruction on the participants' ability. The results of pre-test 2 and post-test 2 were used to set baseline for comparison to help check if any difference occurred.

In the pre-test 2, the mean score is 12.0 while it is 19.50 in the post-test 2. The post-test 2 check the effects of the composition writing instruction on the participants' composition writing ability. The statistical analysis was adequate because it compared the means of two variables (The pre-test 2 and post-test 2). Table 2, revealed that the participants' scores were improved on the post-test. The means scores of the post-test 2 was higher than the pre-test 2. The difference of the two means was 7.50 from 12.0 to 19.50 .

Table 3 : Comparison of Participants' Performance in the Pre-tests (1 and 2) and Post-tests (1 and 2).

Tests	Means scores	Difference of means	Standard deviation	T value	P value
Pre 1	12.2	7.2	3.6	19.60	0.00
Post 1	19.4				
Pre 2	12.0	7.50	3.75	14.30	0.00
Post 2	19.50				

As can be seen from table 3, the probability (p) values were all less than the significance level (0.05) set before. This means, there is a significant difference between the two tests. The means of two tests' performance were significantly different. This proves the fact that participants' ability was improved after the treatment. The greater progress was for the benefit of the post-tests. In addition, the highest scores were achieved in the post-tests.

Based on the participants' mistakes in the pre-tests, the researcher found the following difficulties that face them in composition writing:

- * Writing process (planning, drafting, editing, final version)
- * Handwriting
- * Cohesion and coherence
- * Vocabulary
- * Sentence structure and types of sentences
- * Communicative quality
- * Organization
- * Paragraph
- * Capitalization rules
- * Punctuation marks
- * English tenses
- * Spelling

So, the treatment focused on these points.

Comparison between this study and the previous studies

The sample of the current study is university students. The tools used for collecting data were two pre-tests, two post-tests and a full semester treatment. The findings of the current study revealed that: writing composition strategies improve students' performance in writing English composition and there were many problems face the students while writing composition (mentioned before). The current study used tools similar to the previous studies but differ with in the sample. The sample of the current study was Sudanese university students while in all other previous studies the sample either basic or secondary students. A very important point was that, this current study covered a large number of difficulties challenge the sample in writing composition. Based on the researcher's experience in teaching English as a second / foreign language, these a lot of difficulties are due to: Text books used in Sudan do not consider many of the essential educational requirements (level of students' standard in English ... etc.) . The text book contents are presented at a high level of English. Furthermore, the teaching strategies are teacher –centered where students have less time to practice. So, the findings of the current study will contribute to the field of curriculum and instruction as well by assisting English language teachers to adopt new techniques with their students in the classes.

Conclusion

The primary aims of the current study were to shed light on the difficulties face students in composition writing and the importance of treatment in developing students' ability in composition writing. Based on the findings of this study, the researcher concluded that using composition skills improve students' ability in writing composition. The researcher recommended that teachers should encourage and reinforce students to write composition using composition skills. This study is important because it uses an experimental approach which enables the researcher to obtain an understanding of the participants' abilities and weaknesses. Extra researches are needed for more advanced-level foreign language university students.

References

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Appendices

Appendix 1 : Pre-test 1 (Hill : 1966)

Write a composition on the subject "**A day in my life**".

Use the following points: (You may add to them if you like).

- * At what time you get up in the morning.
- * What you do before you start the day's work.
- * At what time you leave your house.
- * How you go to your work.
- * What you see on your way.
- * What you do when you get to the other end.
- * At what time you return home.
- * How you spend the evening.
- * At what time you go to bed.

Appendix 2 : Pre-test 2 (Hill : 1966)

Write a composition on the subject "**My favourite sport**".

Use the following points: (You may add to them if you like).

- * What your favourite sport is .
- * Why you prefer it to other sports.
- * How your favourite players and teams are, and why they are your favourites.
- * Whether you have yourself played this sport, or taken an active part in this sport ; and if so, when, for what clubs, and with what success.