

Students' grammatical difficulties in written expression

*Aliouchouche fadhila **

University of Bejaia , (Algeria)

Fadhila.aliouchouche@univ-bejaia.dz

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Abstract:

The present study aims at investigating the grammatical difficulties encountered by first year students at the department of English, University of Bejaia. Furthermore, the study tries to shed light on students' attitude towards grammar. The data were collected through two research instruments, namely: a corpus analysis of 48 students' writing productions and a questionnaire designed for the population under study. The results obtained by the corpus analysis of students' written production revealed the existence of many errors particularly in the use of tenses, prepositions, subject-verb agreement and word order. Concerning students' attitude towards grammar courses, the findings collected from the students' questionnaire indicate that most of the students acknowledge the importance of grammar in developing their writing skill. However, the respondents recognize that they face grammatical difficulties in writing. Furthermore, they consider that the scheduled grammar sessions are insufficient.

Keywords: Grammar, grammatical difficulties, students' attitude, written expression.

ملخص:

تحاول هذه الدراسة البحثية إلقاء الضوء على موقف الطلاب من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة بجاية تجاه القواعد. تم جمع البيانات باستخدام أداتين بحثيتين، وهما: تحليل جماعي لـ 48 منتجًا مكتوبًا للطلاب واستبيانًا مصممًا للجمهرة التي تمت دراستها. كشفت النتائج التي تم الحصول عليها من خلال تحليل مواد الإنتاج الكتابي للطلاب عن وجود العديد من الأخطاء، لا سيما في استخدام الأزمنة وحروف الجر والاتفاق بين الموضوع والفعل وترتيب الكلمات. فيما يتعلق بموقف الطلاب تجاه دروس القواعد، تظهر النتائج التي تم جمعها من استبيان الطلاب أن معظم الطلاب يدركون أهمية القواعد في تنمية مهاراتهم الكتابية. ومع ذلك، يدرك المستجيبون أنهم يواجهون صعوبات نحوية في الكتابة. علاوة على ذلك، فإنهم يعتبرون أن الدورات النحوية المخطط لها غير كافية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: القواعد، الصعوبات النحوية، موقف الطالب، التعبير الكتابي

* Aliouchouche fadhila

Introduction

Research strongly suggests that students' command of grammar in writing is of paramount importance since it allows them to express their thoughts and ideas in a clear way thus avoiding misunderstanding. In other words, the use of proper grammar and the mastery of grammatical rules are essential aspects of good writing. Therefore, in order to produce a good piece of writing, students need to have strong grammatical skills. In this regard, (Mulroy, 2003) states that "individuals who understand the concept of sentence combining and grammar rules have an advantage over ones who do not." Therefore, the correct use of grammatical patterns, lexical choices and sentence structures will establish a coherent and meaningful written text.

Statement of the problem and research questions

For many students, producing a good piece of writing is a very challenging task because of the difficulties they encounter in writing. This state of fact is reflected mainly in their writing assignments and exam papers. Some of the challenges students encounter in writing are due to limited vocabulary, spelling mistakes and difficulties in using grammar appropriately. Therefore, the present study is guided by the following research questions:

- What are the main grammatical difficulties faced by first year students of English at Bejaia University?
- What are first year students' attitudes towards grammar courses?

Aims of the study

The present research aims at investigating the grammatical difficulties encountered by first year students at the department of English, University of Bejaia. Furthermore, the study tries to shed light on students' attitude towards grammar courses.

Review of Literature

The writing skill

A substantial body of research provides insight about the importance of writing as (Walsh, 2010) states, writing is important because it is used extensively in higher education and in the workplace. In an academic setting, students, who do not master the writing skill, may face difficulties in their studies mainly in writing reports, dissertations and exam papers. In this regard, writing is one of the tasks that cannot be avoided for university students since they are required to write essays, articles, reports and research papers. Therefore, EFL students need to develop good writing skills so as to cope with the requirements of their academic journey. However, writing remains one of the most difficult and complex skill to be mastered by EFL students, (Nunan, 1989, p. 36) pointed out that "writing is an extremely complex, cognitive activity for all which the writer is required to demonstrate control of a number of variables simultaneously". Many researchers (Harmer, 2007; Nunan, 1989; Tribble, 1997; Richards & Renandya, 2003) agreed that writing is the most complex and difficult skill, (Richards & Renandya, 2003, p. 303) argued that "there is no doubt that writing is the most difficult skill for second language learners to master". The difficulty of the writing skill lies in the different aspects that students need to master. Bell and Burnaby (1984, as cited in Nunan, 1989, p. 23) pointed out that: Writing is a very complex cognitive activity in which writers must show control over content, format, sentence, structure, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling and letter

formation, i.e., control at the sentence level. Besides, writers must be able to structure and integrate information cohesively and coherently within paragraphs and texts. (Raimes , 1983) identified nine components crucial for producing a clear, fluent, and effective communication of ideas, that are syntax, content, the writing process, audience, purpose, word choice, organization, mechanics, and grammar; the combination of all these components make writing a difficult skill for the learners since they have to handle them at the same time. In the same vein, dealing with the aspects of writing, (Hughes , 1996, p. 91) mentions five aspects of writing; they are (1) grammar, (2) vocabulary, (3) mechanics, (4) fluency and (5) form.

Grammar in EFL context

Grammar is central to the teaching and learning of languages as it is considered as a key element for accurate and clear communication in both oral and written form. To put it differently, communication cannot be reached without an appropriate use of grammar. Accordingly, (Brown , 1994, p. 194) stated that without the grammatical structure, the use of language could easily become disordered and might not be understandable. Therefore, grammar plays a role of paramount importance in communication. Thus, the ultimate goal of teaching grammar in an EFL context, is to equip students with knowledge of the rules so as to express themselves in a correct and clear way and avoid confusion and misunderstanding. In this context, many researchers (Ellis, 2006; Hinkel & Fotos,2002 and Ur,1999) consider that it is important to teach grammar in EFL contexts as it helps students to reach an appropriate level of accuracy in the language.

Importance of grammar in writing

Grammar is the rules of how words are combined, arranged, or changed to show certain kinds of meaning (Swan , 2005, p. 19). In the same vein, (Bowen , Madsen , & Hilferty, 1985, p. 161) argued that grammar is the rules by which we put together meaningful word and parts of words of language to communicate messages that are comprehensible. Since writing is a matter of combining ideas in a meaningful way so as to achieve the main objective of communication, the mastery of grammatical rules of the language is crucial. In this context, (Morenberg, 2009) states if the students have good mastery of grammar, they can manage words to become a fully understood sentences. As a matter of fact, grammar knowledge is the elemental foundation for writing (Fearn & Farnan , 2007, p. 63-87). According to research following this line of thought, a study conducted by Syopiana (2011) on the correlation between students' grammar mastery and their ability in writing narrative paragraphs indicates a significant correlation between these two variables.

Methodology

The current study is based on a mixed-method research design in which both the quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments were employed in order to obtain the necessary data: The two research instruments are namely: a corpus analysis of 48 students' written production and a questionnaire designed for the population under study.

Setting and Participants

The participants of this research were first year students of English at Bejaia University. The population is made of 228 students but only 196 answered the questionnaire. Besides, we have asked 48 of them to write a paragraph on a free topic. Their written productions were analysed so as to highlight the main grammatical difficulties encountered by the population under study.

Students Questionnaire

The participants' profile (N=196)

Number of handed questionnaire 228 Number of returned questionnaire 196

Table 1 : Respondents' demographic details

| | |
|---------------------------|------------|
| Gender | Percentage |
| Male | 10.72% |
| Female | 89.28% |
| Total | 100% |
| Age | Percentage |
| 18-19 | 62.24% |
| 19-20 | 34.70% |
| +20 | 03.06% |
| Total | 100% |
| Years of study of English | Percentage |
| 07 years | 58.16% |
| More than 07 years | 41.83% |
| Total | 100% |

Data collected from section 1 of the questionnaire

The main variables under consideration in this first section include gender, age and years of experience in learning English. In terms of gender distribution, the results displayed in the a table1 indicate that 89.28% of the participants are female and 10.72% are male. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 20 years and more. Thus for 18-20 years, we have recorded 62.24%, from 19-20 years the percentage is 34.70%, for 3.06% the age group corresponds to more than 20 years old. Concerning students' experience in learning English, most of the respondents 58.16% reported that they have been learning English for 07 years and 41.83% of them have more than 07 years of experience in learning English.

Table 2 : Students' perception of the Writing Skill

| The importance of writing | Percentage |
|--|-------------------|
| A very important skill | 18.88% |
| Important | 75.51% |
| Not important | 5.61% |
| No opinion | 00% |
| Total | 100% |
| Students' difficulties writing | |
| Yes | 70.60% |
| No | 20.40% |
| Total | 100% |
| Types of difficulties | |
| Grammatical | 21.44% |
| Limited vocabulary | 15.82% |
| Coherence and cohesion | 6.12% |
| Grammatical and limited vocabulary | 26.53% |
| Grammatical coherence and cohesion | 10.71% |
| Limited vocabulary, coherence and cohesion | 6.12% |
| All of them | 13.26% |
| Total | 100% |
| Students' evaluation of their writing skill | |
| Very good | 4.09% |
| Good | 11.22% |
| Average | 35.20% |
| Low | 33.67% |
| Very poor | 15.82% |
| Total | 100% |

Data collected from section 2 of the questionnaire

Section 2 is devoted to the writing skill. Based on the data obtained from the participants' answers, we can notice that a majority of the respondents are aware of the importance of the writing skill, thus 18.88% consider writing as very important and for 75.51% writing is important and a minority 5.61% do not judge it important. As far as the students' perception of writing difficulty is concerned, the gathered data indicate that 79.60% recognize their difficulties in writing whereas only 20.40% opted for the other option i.e. they do not encounter difficulties. For the types of difficulties, students face, for 21.44% their difficulties are linked to grammar for 26.53% grammar and vocabulary, 15.82% of the respondents answered limited vocabulary, for cohesion and coherence as well as limited vocabulary we have recorded 06.12% of the answers and finally, 13.26% of the participants face difficulties in all the mentioned aspects. We have asked the respondents to evaluate their writing skill, their answers revealed that only 4.09% of them are satisfied by their level in writing since the consider their level in writing as being very good , 11.22% opted for good, a majority, 35.20% consider that their level is average, 33.67% of them recognize that they have a low level and 15.82% opted for very low.

Table3 : Students' attitude about Grammar

| | |
|---|--------|
| The importance of grammar in an EFL learning context | |
| Very important | 35.72% |
| Important | 63.26% |
| Not important at all | 00% |
| No opinion | 1.02% |
| Total | 100% |
| The importance of grammar in writing | |
| Very important | 19.89% |
| Important | 80.11% |
| Not important at all | 00% |
| No opinion | 00% |
| Total | 100% |
| Students' opinion about grammar courses | |
| Overloaded | 13.26% |
| Affordable | 26.53% |
| Insufficient | 34.69% |
| No opinion | 25.52% |
| Total | 100% |
| Students' grammatical difficulties when writing | |
| Verb tense | 6.12% |
| Articles | 00% |
| Singular/Plural | 00% |
| Punctuation | 1.53% |
| Preposition | 00% |
| The use of pronouns | 00% |
| More than one option | 83.16% |
| All of them | 9.19% |
| Total | 100% |

Data collected from section 3 of the questionnaire

Section 3 concerns grammar teaching and students' attitudes towards this module. From the collected data, we observe that first year students are aware of the importance of grammar in learning English. For 35.72% of the participant grammar represents a very important aspect in an EFL context and for 63.26% it is important only 1.02% did not express opinion. As far as the importance of grammar in writing, the results revealed that a high percentage 80.11% view grammar as an important component in writing and for 19.89% it is very important. Regarding the evaluation of the students for their courses in grammar, we have recorded the following results: 13.26% judge that the syllabus is overloaded, 26.53% consider that it is affordable, for 34.69% it is insufficient and 25.52% did not express any opinion. As displayed in the above table, students' grammatical difficulties are various: verb tenses 6.12%, punctuation 1.53%, 9.19 all the mentioned aspects and for 83.16% more than one option.

Section 4: This space is provided to the participants to add any suggestion or comment concerning the topic under research. We have collected the following points of view.

- Grammar study is key element for producing a good piece of writing.
- More sessions should be scheduled in order to overcome our difficulties
- Syllabus need to be revised because some lessons are repeated each year so this makes grammar courses boring
- Using new methods in teaching grammar so as to motivate students.
- Grammar and writing are connected and should be taught together
- Grammar is very important in learning any language.

Research findings from the analysis of the corpus

From the analysis of students' written productions, we have recorded the following observations:

Inappropriate use of tenses

Sentence fragments

Subject- verb agreement, they use the auxiliary "are" for the singular and the auxiliary "is" for the plural.

Problem of "word order" related to the misunderstanding of syntactic rules of for example the place of adjectives and adverbs in sentences.

The incorrect use of the different prepositions. -

Analysis and discussion of the results

The current study explores the challenges that students face when writing with a focus on grammar. The findings from the corpus analysis revealed that students' main difficulties are related to grammar which is a key element in writing. Therefore, students' written productions are reflecting some grammatical aspects that are not mastered and which consequently influence negatively the quality of their writing. We have recorded for example an inappropriate use of tenses, a misuse of articles, problem of subject-verb agreement as well as syntactic difficulties as the place of adjectives and adverbs in a sentence. As far as the results obtained from the students' questionnaire, they revealed that first year students are aware of the importance of writing mainly in an academic context, however they acknowledged that it is very challenging. Moreover, they recognized that their level in writing is limited because of the different problems they face when writing. These results concerning students' writing difficulties are online with studies stated in the literature review (Harmer, 2007; Nunan, 1989; Tribble , 1997; Richards & Renandya, 2003). As many research studies suggest, a good mastery of grammar contributes in the development of students' writing skills (Brown , 1994; Fearn & Farnan , 2007; Syopiana, 2011) and based on the respondents' answers to the questions in relation to grammar, we can observe that first year students are aware of the central role grammar plays in writing. Concerning the students' views about the grammar courses, they declared that more time should be allotted to the module. Furthermore, the content of the syllabus need to be revised so as to avoid repeating the same courses because this redundancy may affect students' motivation.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following suggestions are drawn:

Because of the importance of grammar in language learning in general and an EFL learning context in particular, more time should be devoted to its teaching by including additional sessions.

Since reading is an important factor to develop their writing abilities, teachers should encourage their students to read in order to enrich their knowledge of the grammatical rules. Because when reading, they will be confronted to different situations where the grammatical rules are used and this will reinforce their writing ability.

Grammar should be taught in context in order to provide learners with opportunities to understand how grammar structures work and how to apply grammatical rules.

Applying new trends in grammar teaching so as to increase students' motivation.

Carrying further studies to explore the importance of grammar for developing other language skills

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Some limitations in this study need to be acknowledged. In terms of the size of the corpus to be analysed, the findings of the study cannot be generalized. We recommend a further study which would involve a large number of students' written productions so as to have a deeper insight about students' grammatical difficulties in writing. Besides, the population may be extended to include teachers of written expression in order to know their views concerning the topic under investigation.

Conclusion

Grammar is considered as a key element in written expression. In other words, producing a good piece of writing in an EFL context, is bounded to a mastery of the grammatical rules because any incorrect use may result in misunderstanding, thus a failure to express one's thoughts and ideas. Therefore, grammar and writing are two interrelated aspects which need to be mastered in the EFL classroom. The present research aims at investigating the grammatical difficulties encountered by first year students at the department of English, University of Bejaia. Furthermore, the study tries to shed light on students' attitude towards grammar. The results obtained by the corpus analysis of students' writing production demonstrate the existence of many errors particularly in the use of tenses, prepositions, subject-verb agreement and word order. Concerning students' attitude towards grammar courses, the findings collected from the students' questionnaire show that most of the students recognize the importance of grammar in developing their writing skill. However, the respondents recognize that they face grammatical difficulties in writing. Furthermore, they consider that the scheduled grammar sessions are insufficient.

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