

**Language and Strategic Challenges in EFL Essay Writing:
A Case Study of Master's Students at the University of
Sidi Bel Abbes- Algeria**



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Summary:

Writing is an essential language skill that is believed to be difficult to learn since the writer must maintain control over several aspects varying from word choice and spelling to overall text structure and layout. Many EFL students still face language and strategic difficulties that impede them from constructing satisfactory essays. Therefore, this paper aims to identify the nature and the sources of essay writing difficulties encountered by EFL master's students at the University of Sidi Bel Abbes -Algeria, and to find remedies for better-written productions. The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the collected data revealed that participants under investigation need to develop language and strategic competencies to avoid stylistic errors in academic writing. Consequently, several suggestions are put forward as building positive attitudes, adapting writing materials that attempt to make writing lectures meaningful and motivating; and improving writing skills through technology-based instruction.

Keywords: Essay writing; writing difficulties; academic writing; positive attitude; technology-based instruction

INTRODUCTION

To meet the expectations of advanced literacy associated with the university level, students have to ensure high standards and adequate final written production, chiefly, the underlying rational discourse deficiency, which is to fulfill the requirement of the academic community. Accordingly, the interest of academic literacy writing in different disciplines in the university context has been the focus of numerous investigations for many years from different perspectives and fields of study. Therefore,

written production has always been considered as a relevant skill in applied linguistics and plays a notable role in professional and academic settings.

Clarifying thoughts and ideas into words is an act of creation. The act of writing often includes particular instructions for both content and structure, such as following rules of punctuation and grammar avoiding plague words and phrases and respecting the formality associated with a particular audience. These are the reasons why learners assume that writing is a complex skill and stressful subject. In view of the writing disability and incapability of learners to adapt to new ways of knowing, understanding, interpreting as well as organizing, the challenges of academic writing among students can be related to the reason that language structures used at the tertiary level are different and more complex than those used at lower levels of education.

1.1 Effective writing

Writing effectively is a vital skill that encompasses learning, understanding, applying, and synthesizing knowledge. According to Hedge (2005), effective writing requires several key elements: a high degree of organization in the development of information, ideas, or arguments; a high degree of accuracy to ensure ambiguity issues in meaning; and the use of complex grammatical patterns and sentence structures to create a style that is appropriate for the subject matter and intended audience. In the same vein, Starkey (2004) argues that a good and effective piece of writing is organized, clear, and coherent, with accurate language and effective word choice. Therefore, effective writing follows a logical order of ideas and information. Well-organized papers convey persuasive arguments with transitions guiding the reader smoothly through the text. As far as clarity is concerned, writers should be engaged in a meaningful experience where they tackle authentic topics, write for a clear purpose, and address a real audience. Winch and Wells (1995) explain that neatness and accuracy in writing have an aesthetic value which reveals the extent to which the writer values writing and values the reader. Furthermore, "the extent to which the language produced conforms to the target language norms" (Skehan, 1996) is essential for clear and effective communication. To reach these end writers are required to master the linguistic features used in the target situation. Accordingly, cohesion and coherence are important devices in building both discourse and text. Halliday and Hasan (1976) clarified that cohesion refers to the connections that link sentences and parts of a text, making it coherent. This includes conjunctions and pronouns. Coherence, on the other hand, refers to the logical connections between ideas in a text and how effectively it conveys a unified message. It is achieved through a logical organization of ideas, while cohesion focuses on the technical aspects of language.

1.2 Writing across the university

Writing assignments require mastering different tips of academic writing. Students who are skillful in writing processes can get better grades than those who are unskilled. Thus, the basics of good writing should be taught and practiced intensively. At the tertiary level, a student must transcribe his/her thoughts into written language while maintaining control over several items at the same time including word choice, mechanics, spelling, and overall text structure and form. In addition to its multifaceted nature, writing requires a considerable amount of effort and practice on the part of the learner in order to reach an acceptable level. The challenge is particularly noticeable for EFL students who are unfamiliar with academic writing patterns since the latter are more intricate and formal.

A case in point, at the level of the English Department at the University of Sidi Bel Abbes master students are confronted with new and unfamiliar contexts of learning and teaching. Besides, different hindrances impede students from producing a piece of writing as good as expected to be. It could vary from lack of motivation, where they do not give importance to the techniques in composing, to time allotment, students' readiness, and lack of exposure to books and reading materials. Hence, one of the main tasks of the English department is to develop students' language skills and ensure high academic achievement. Unfortunately, the English department of the University of Sidi Bel Abbes-Algeria is grappling with challenges such as overcrowded classes and untrained teachers. The situation triggered an investigation of this critical issue. Therefore, it is crucial to explore the leading writing difficulties encountered by EFL master students in writing essays, and also to study students' attitudes and teachers' perceptions of the possible causes of these essay writing failures.

Accordingly, the present paper aims to analyze and classify the persistent errors committed by EFL master's students of English at Sidi Bel Abbes University while composing; mainly, more effort has been done to uncover the causes and the sources of various errors of usage at a different linguistic level, vis-a-vis grammar, syntax, and spelling.

2. The Study

As mentioned before, students at universities are required to learn how to master the academic discourse; therefore, they are expected to adapt their learning strategies to new ways of knowing, understanding, interpreting as well as organizing their ideas. Academic success is linked to the ability to express thought using a structured piece of writing; however, some students fail in studies since they struggle with academic writing requirements, especially because most of the assignments- are written-based. Thus, after identification of Master students writing challenges and needs, the primary purpose of this present paper is to analyze and classify the persistent errors committed by master's students of English at the University of Sidi Bel Abbes when writing academic papers, mainly, more

effort has been done to uncover the causes and the sources of various errors of usage at a different linguistic level, vis-a-vis grammar, syntax, spelling, etc.

2.1 Research method

This case study involves a great deal of participants who are randomly chosen for the purpose of identifying their attitude and writing performance; it gives an in-depth study of this phenomenon and intensive detailed knowledge about student writing failure. Case study research generally uses a range of methods for collecting and analyzing data, and it is not limited to a single procedure. This allows for a variety of sampling, which is an important methodological aspect for the present research. Thus, being interested in detailed data on students' writing proficiency, the researcher has opted for both qualitative and quantitative research methodology. The aim has been to investigate in depth the difficulties students encounter when writing in order to gain insights into the way to remedy and overcome these weaknesses. The rationale for mixing approaches is that neither quantitative nor qualitative methods are sufficient by themselves to capture the complexity of the issue. When used together, both methods complement each other and allow for more complete analysis (Greene & Caracelli, 1997).

2.2 Participants

The sample population in this study is composed of two types of informants: Master's students specialised in didactics and English teachers in the department of English.

Regarding the students, a total of 47 Master's students are enrolled in didactics, and 40 students responded to the questionnaire. For sample selection, a stratified random sampling method was applied. This population was chosen because their papers should display good performance and exhibit fewer difficulties in writing, i.e., they should contain few errors in grammar and mechanics of writing. This belief was based on two assumptions: they had been studying English for four years, and second, they had been academically assessed (evaluated) twice a year over the four years (which is eight times in all). During their first and second university years, they are supposed to acquire the basic grammatical and writing elements. Consequently, they become acquainted with the form and the content which characterizes any piece of writing, such as grammar rules, punctuation, language coherence, and cohesion. Therefore, students' evaluations twice a year should automatically eliminate these points of difficulty in writing.

Concerning the second group of informants who took place in the current study is composed of seven teachers at the English department at Sidi Bel Abbes University. All of them were full-time experienced teachers who had already been teaching the writing module for several years. They were specialized in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and applied linguistics. Four participants held a Doctorate degree (one professor and three senior lecturers). The three remaining were assistant lecturers who held a Magister degree.

2.3 Instruments

In order to test the validity of the research hypotheses, the researcher used two research tools deemed appropriate for investigating the research questions upon which the current work is postulated. A research instrument is a tool used to collect data, which is designed to measure knowledge, attitude, and skills. First, two questionnaires are employed, one for students and the other for teachers. The questionnaires are a mixture of closed-ended questions and open-ended questions; each type is used for a particular purpose, depending on the nature of the data the researcher wants to collect. The teacher's questionnaire is mainly made up of a list of open-ended questions in order to explore further issues concerning students writing level and gaining a deep understanding about the main causes that lead to writing failure. Second, the following data-gathering instrument that is used in this study is a corpus based on the objectives and specific research problems by utilizing students' first-term written examination related to three different modules. Since the study was concerned with academic writing challenges that students faced when writing academic texts, fifteen paper of students written assignments and examination, already marked, were used as instruments to collect data. The rationale behind using these documents was not to assess the content of the essays but mainly to see to what extent academic writing conventions and mechanics were employed. Therefore, essays from each of the categories graded as good, satisfactory, poor and very poor were selected as data collection instruments

3. Results and discussion

It is worth mentioning that students' and teachers' questionnaire as well as students' written assignments and examinations served as the primary data sources which help the researcher identify and illustrate participants' responses as far as the problematic rose. These data sources provided valuable insights into both the challenges faced by students and the perspectives of the teachers regarding the writing process.

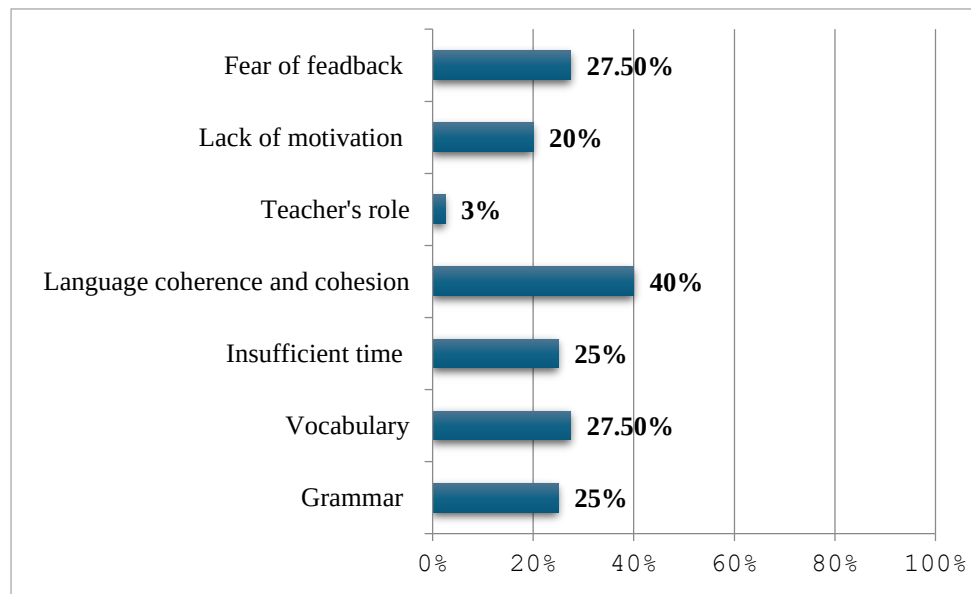
3.1 Students' writing difficulties

The following results revealed that despite students' higher educational level, they have a low competency in writing skill. For instance, higher standards of language are demanded to ensure a successful piece of writing; in this respect, precise vocabulary, clear layout, mastery of grammar and relevant knowledge of the topic are all essential to write an assignment. Lack of competence in the aforementioned areas constitutes a real handicap when dealing with extended essays, especially that this latter is a powerful means of self-expression and support for learning and research.

The collected data revealed that the majority of students (66, 50%) consider writing in English as a challenging task, and it is not easy to communicate ideas when writing in English. Student's writing difficulties is due to various reasons and in different areas (see figure 1). It should be noted that 40% of the participants face

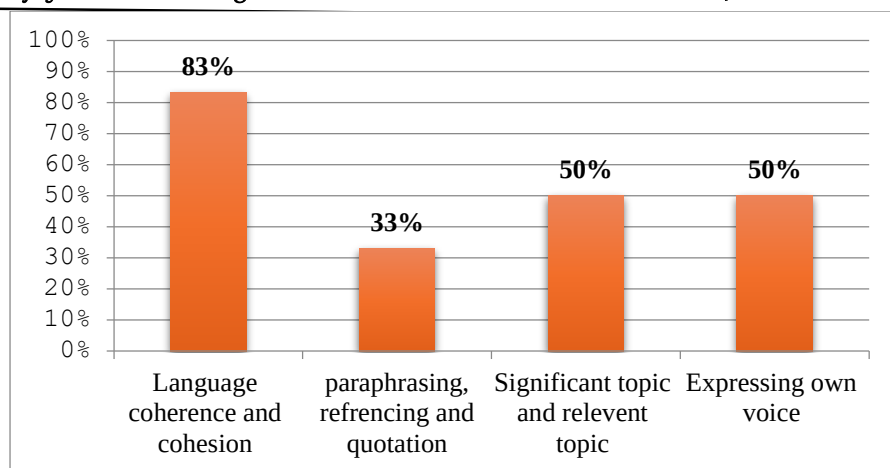
issues to express ideas coherently and using the appropriate cohesive devices. Lack of vocabulary is also considered as a barrier to write (27, 5%). In addition, informants explained that it is difficult to use the correct grammatical rules when writing an academic paper.

Figure.1: Major difficulties encountered by Master Students when writing assignments



Besides, the teachers view that students' low proficiency level in writing is due to their lack of practice. Writing needs mastery of language and reasonable development of thoughts. Language inaccuracy, directly affect the clarity of the sentences. This happens often when students go through the assignments without revising or putting enough effort into structuring their work. All the questioned teachers believe that their students have serious problems in writing; this indicates that they have a weak performance, and they are manifested when expressing their own voice, significant topic, paraphrasing, referencing and quotation, and language coherence and cohesion.

Figure .2: Master students' problems when composing essays



Many students enter higher education with significant gaps in their writing skills due to inadequate preparation in high school. For example, a focus on translating from Arabic or French to English often leaves them ill-equipped with academic writing tasks. Teachers have identified several reasons behind students' struggles to produce satisfactory academic writing. A common issue is that many students have difficulty applying essential writing techniques, such as revising and editing, primarily because they lack a proper understanding of these processes.

Data analysis reveals that students often begin writing without a clear plan for organizing their ideas. Additionally, they struggle with mechanics and layout, which further complicates their writing. Beyond having trouble addressing topics clearly and systematically, students also face challenges with organization and idea development. These various issues primarily stem from their unfamiliarity with the writing process.

3.2. Students' written assignments and examination investigation

The analyses cover the essential structural elements of an assignment, considering both the form and the content. The identification of students' weaknesses occurs at different levels of language: Grammatical accuracy, appropriateness of vocabulary, and text organization (cohesion and coherence)

A- Grammatical accuracy

Grammatical inaccuracies directly affect the clarity of the sentences because managing tenses is a critical issue. Findings revealed that subject-verb agreement and tenses were the most common types of errors. The mistakes that are recorded in students' papers are at the level of auxiliaries use, correct tenses, articles and prepositions use, word order, and inappropriate sentence structure. Table 1 below shows some errors made by the students.

Table .1: Students' performance and the correct forms

	Erroneous form	Correct form
Grammatical accuracy	It consists	It consists
	Will suffering	Will suffer
	These information	This information
	In general and in particularly	Generally and particularly

B- Appropriateness of vocabulary

Exam papers' assessment highlights an important number of mistakes fall into the category of lexical semantics. For example, inappropriate expressions are used for the given context, especially in terms of nouns and verbs. Even when suitable expressions are used, they are often combined incorrectly with other terms that are mutually incompatible.

C- Text Organization

Most of students do not show a logical development of ideas and arguments dealing with the subject matter, it has been noticed that they are unaware of how ideas are gathered in the text to form an organized essay. Most of them fail to use appropriate links to separate as well as connect ideas and sentences. This failure often results in ambiguous or disjointed sentence construction or too long and complicated sentences that are confusing for the reader; additionally, an excessive repetition and redundancy of words, clauses, and expressions. Finally, the flow of the essay and its content are not planned in a way that assumptions presented in the initial sections of the paragraph are well justified by its end because many assumptions are all justified within the word limit; this makes the work dilute.

To sum up, students' papers indicate that writing can be indeed difficult for university students at different levels. In general, the assignments written by the students revealed the existence of common problems but not with the same level of weaknesses. First, it has been noticed that the majority of students encounter real difficulty to develop coherent sentences; a fact that is observed in their poor written productions (form and content). In addition, students' written production revealed the frequent stylistic errors in writing, which are the level of sentence structure, grammar use (i.e., use of tenses, use of auxiliaries, subject-verb agreement, etc.), choice, and limitation of vocabulary in addition to the organization of ideas. Therefore, students end up repeating the exact words; this hinders creativity and prevents them from giving voice to their thoughts because of the lack of the adequate stock of vocabulary. Moreover, language interference in writing by translating from Arabic to English and sometimes from French to English lead to different errors. English teachers advocated that most of students

while composing have difficulties to apply some writing techniques such as revising and editing because they do not know what those techniques are about due to the fact that students did not have a previous explanation about them. Students generally start composing without any idea about how to organize their ideas. Besides they are unable to address topics in a clear and systematic manner. All these problems stem from students' unfamiliarity with the writing process. As a result of all the stated issues students develop negative attitudes towards writing assignments in general.

4. Recommendations

Throughout this investigation, the researchers identified different issues that hamper students' written production. Yet, in light of these problems, a number of solutions and recommendations can be suggested to improve students writing competencies.

4.1 Building positive attitude and motivation

Negative attitude and lack of motivation can lead to obstacles in learning a language. Nevertheless, a student's negative attitudes can be changed and turned into positive ones and facilitating positive results. Having a positive attitude towards learning a language is a good start. Notably, some research has shown that with low motivation levels, the writing process can further be difficult and unrewarding for both the learner and the teacher. However, students need to develop their writing skills in order to cope with their university coursework in the medium of English. Motivation is also a similar term that the teachers used when talking about their work regarding writing. One of the teachers mentioned that motivation has a significant role in the learning process as it is the key element of successful writing. He added that motivation strengthens commitment and participation in consequent practice. Teachers should let their students write about topics that interest them. Thus, the teacher will motivate their students to write and be active.

4.2 Provision of necessary feedback

Providing feedback is one of the most important tasks for teachers. Coffin et al. (2003) claimed that providing feedback on students' writing is a central pedagogic practice because it fosters students' writing skills, provides or builds upon subject-specific information, evaluates the positive and negative attributes of written work, and provides guidance on how students can write better next time. There are several ways and techniques for providing feedback on students' writing. The common types of feedback are teacher-student conferencing, peer feedback, and teacher-written feedback (Hyland, 2003). Each method offers distinct advantages and can be effectively applied in the writing process. Teacher-student conferencing provides personalized, immediate feedback, which helps clarify misunderstandings and address specific writing issues. It encourages

communication and fosters a deeper understanding of how to improve their writing.

On the other hand, peer feedback creates a collaborative atmosphere between classmates. This feedback fosters learning and helps students become more critical of their writing. Teacher-written feedback is beneficial because it provides a permanent source that students can refer to as they revise their work. This method helps address specific errors, such as grammar or word choice. These feedback methods support the writing process by promoting self-reflection, encouraging collaboration, and providing targeted guidance for improvement.

4.3 Incorporate technology to enhance writing

New technology software and platforms are being created each day, and it is important for educators to incorporate these technologies into the classroom. By integrating technology, educators provide more opportunities and strategies to increase students' abilities to write more detailed and grammatically correct essays. It is essential to incorporate technology into the classroom while learning to write and particularly while creating essays. For instance, various tools can be used to assist students with writing in various ways. These tools can help students with academic research, topic development, and drafting papers. They additionally provide automated writing evaluation, corrective feedback, and machine translation. Computer-supported writing has brought new trends in education and developed new literacies. Word processors can be helpful in different ways, including spell-checking, grammar-checking, and text layout features, to support the writing process.

The process of writing can be exciting and enjoyable; for instance, it was stressful for students to incorporate all the fine motor skills while using a pencil and paper to write and to think of how they needed to formulate sentences based on what they were thinking. However, the rise of technology has the potential to significantly relieve many challenges. With the help of digital tools, students can prioritize the substance of their writing, rather than mechanics, such as letter formation or holding pencil. This shift not only enhances their creativity but also fosters a deeper engagement with their ideas.

Furthermore, word processors should be part of every classroom material to support students, especially those with motor skills issues, because students are more apt to write since the physical act is less difficult. This is consistent with Van Leeuwen and Gabriel's (2007), findings who claimed that students with stronger writing skills can sustain their focus while writing with paper and pencil. Though, those with motor skill delays have an easier time working with the word processor because they do not have to stress about pencil grip, letter formation, and word spacing. These students are able to perform certain strokes on the keyboard to formulate the words and thoughts they want to express. Hence, Students can quickly make changes, try out different structures, and refine their ideas more efficiently. By implementing these strategies, educators can develop a dynamic and

supportive learning environment that empowers students to overcome the obstacles they encounter in written production, ultimately boosting their overall writing proficiency and confidence.

5. Conclusion

Studies consistently show that master's students struggle with learning English, particularly in academic writing. These students often lack the necessary language proficiency, exhibiting issues like incorrect tense usage, unclear and poorly structured sentences, weak vocabulary and style, and difficulty synthesizing information for research papers. They also demonstrate a lack of familiarity with academic writing conventions and make frequent errors in grammar and punctuation, i.e., particularly written text is organized according to specific audience, tone and purpose.

The investigation carried out throughout this research led to many findings at different levels. There is a myriad of difficulties that learners face when learning to write English successfully. Because of a poor background in English, students need to make more effort to learn the language rather they prefer to pass the exams by memorizing certain important questions in the examination. Teachers should encourage students to develop their creative ideas rather than using expected/repeated paragraphs. Teachers must use modern methods and techniques of teaching in the classroom. The use of traditional teaching methods is reportedly a major cause for their weak writing, Teachers also need to develop pedagogy for success which opens doors to creativity or at least allows learners to try to quench their thirst for knowledge.

Furthermore, it was noticed that the teachers are required to use some pedagogical and innovative techniques to teach writing to create a positive attitude towards the writing module, foster the students' motivation and boost their inspiration to write adequately. Likewise, many methods help to develop writing, some teachers need to consider their assessment procedure, its characteristics, and feedback as well. Besides, it is essential that the teacher raises students' awareness to both language criteria: accuracy and fluency and explains the importance of both aspects in linguistic productions.

It is important to mention that, in order to have a good piece of writing, students should have first, related background knowledge and second, the ability to demonstrate their ideas and express their thoughts in complete sentences and logical order, taking into consideration executive functioning skills, such as planning, organizing, analyzing, prioritizing and sequencing, at the same time ensuring that the written text is clear, coherent, concise and especially responding to the question using explicit English.

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