

English Second Language Writing Difficulties and Challenges Among Saudi Arabian Language Learners

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the writing difficulties and challenges that Saudi Arabian English as a second language learners experience at different levels of proficiency. The participants of the study consisted of 114 Saudi Arabian students between the ages of 15 and 36 (53 female, 61 male). The research questions not only focused on understanding the challenges presented to the students, but, also, the metacognitive strategies that the students used to solve these challenges. The results showed that the participants lacked experience in writing English and, as such, experienced grammar issues.

Keywords: second language writing, Saudi learners, Challenges

1. Introduction

Second language refers to a language other than the native one. The first language that one learns or the so-called mother tongue is usually affects the ability of the person to read and write in a second or foreign language. Due to increased interrelationships, people find it important to learn a second language. Literature work has also contributed much to the need for the use of second language. As a result, to meet international standards for example, writers have to publish their work in a second language, English being one of the most commonly used. Second language writing is the use of the foreign, learnt, language in writing. Students are normally faced with many challenges in their writing using a second language (Ellis, 1997). This paper will explore various issues in second language as well as the challenges face by Saudi students.

In this study, I will explore the writing difficulties and challenges faced by Saudi English as a second language (ESL) learners. I chose to investigate these issues because a common stereotype is that Saudi Arabian learners are poor writers of English. As an ESL learner myself, I understand the frustrations that come with having a lack of experience writing in English. As such, I believe that this topic warrants further examination.

As schools within Saudi Arabia utilize memorization to teach students, a technique leftover from the Kuttab School that forced students to learn Quran phrases via memorization and repetition (Rugh, 2002), they have little experience utilizing their higher thinking abilities in order to compose critical written text. As such, Saudi Arabian learners tend to experience issues when attempting to undertake such projects, especially such projects in English. Therefore, this study will focus on what difficulties, specifically, these learners experience and what strategies they use to overcome these difficulties.

1.1 Literature Review

It has been found that second language writing is strategically, rhetorically, and linguistically different in a number of significant facets and leaning issues. Alnufaie (2012) explains that the group of writing adopted is a major determining factor towards learning the second language. Individuals may decide adopting either the process group or the product group. To begin with, there exist dissimilar linguistic proficiencies and intuitions about language. Linguistic proficiency refers to the ability of a person use a certain language. Use in this case refers to both reading and writing. For one to be considered fluent, they must be in a position to speak or perform the language with fluency and accuracy. Some people may understand a second language well though they may face difficulties in speaking the language. Such people cannot therefore be considered proficient in a language. In addition, however much one learns a second language, they might never be in a position to use the language in the same way they use their native language. People also prejudice on different language (Ellis, 1997). They normally have judgments on a second language. Some believe that they cannot communicate fully. These intuitions normally deter people from learning or using the second language. Some also may discourage their colleagues in the use of a foreign language; this may be even up to the small things do such as comments that are meant to ‘confirm’ the impossibility of using a second language. (Ellis, 1997)

Latif (2011) come up with three factors that are major influences in language learning and mastering. These include competence in using word processors, cultural and linguistic problems and the lack of strategies in writing and the grammar mechanical problems. The other major issue is the difference in learning experiences and classroom expectations. Most Saudi students in expect to study a language and pass their examinations. This in mind they see second language as a burden they have to conquer. For this reason then, such students do not learn the language fully. They therefore face problems in using the second language in writing. When students are in classrooms for second language, they expect to study only examinable parts of the language. They do not take their studies to the next level of putting it into practice. In a case where students are studying their first language, however, they are eager to learn since they can practically see the sense in using the language. Students in this case expect to learn new things in the language, thus will understand it more. At the same note, in their second language writing, students will only write to finish their tasks of assignments. Most of the students will have a limited choice of words and will take little time searching for more. In first language writing, students can use a wide variety of words. The changing language and geographical status in the United States makes it difficult for learners to understand their language with tutors giving a certain degree of assumption on first language knowledge. (DelliCarpini, 2006)

There also exists different sense of audience and writer. According to Hassan (2014) the integration of language speaking into the writing process help improve one's writing skills. Writers using the first language normally target the locals, in most cases. They therefore experience an easy time in writing since they use a language that they have been using. The complexity of writing both languages is compounded by personal learning difficulties of a second language and how similar or dissimilar first literacy skills may be in compatibility to a first language (Ellis, 1997). The similarity in the audience allows even the use of trending language phrases. Some words and phrases that will only make sense to a particular group of people can extensively. On the other hand, second language writers target different audience, locals, and non-locals, those who are proficient in the second language and those who are not. This therefore calls for a better choice of words and well-structured work. Depending on the audience targeted, the writer will have different levels naivety; this will influence the ease they have in second language writing. (DelliCarpini, 2006)

There is a debate on the amount of vocabulary one has to know to gain proficiency in a particular language. Kwoon (2009) opines that the lack of knowledge and lexical richness is a major determining factor in learning L2 language. In second language writing there is a difference in preferences of organizing texts. Different languages have different ways of organizing its text. Some languages will value some text types more than others will. For example, some prefer using poems, songs; depending on the type of information, others will prefer prose (Ellis, 1997). As a result, a second language writer must understand first the types of text that are used for certain type of information. Direct translations; for example, appears to be grammatically wrong on foreign languages. What makes sense in one language may be wrong for another language. Second language writing possess problem to the writer especially in the formatting of sentences.

There also exists difference in writing processes. Different languages use different styles.

Second language writers may therefore be mixed up while writing in cases where the second language writing process is different from the native language. The writing process is normally set according to the language in question. Some languages follow processes such as prewriting, writing, revision, and publishing (Hedge, 2001). Others may follow a slightly different format, skip some steps or include other steps.

Another issue is the difference in the understandings of text uses and the social value of different text types. Various languages employ different types of texts to pass different information. It becomes a problem where a text type is used into different ways by the first and second language. When a writer is faced with such circumstance, they will encounter difficulties (McLaughlin, 1988). They may for example use a certain type of text to pass certain information, which may mean otherwise in the foreign language. This may lead to failure in communicating the intended information. On the same note, different language users accord different meaning to certain texts. Attractive texts in one language may be unattractive in the other. The social facet of texts is diverse. Writers therefore must understand the second language well, up to the extent of social relevance of certain things such as texts, so that their writing is successive. A writer may have very organized work, touching an area of concern or reporting findings, but by the way they organize their text it becomes ineffective. Due to such issues, writers in second language must be prudent in their writing not to overlook any important factor.

There are many challenges faced by students in the EFL setting. Social factors are among the challenges. Research shows that students with positive attitudes, motivation and have preset aims will have their attitudes facilitated if they succeed. In the same way, students with negative attitudes will have their negative attitudes strengthened by failure. A strong positive correlation exists between learner's attitudes and motivation. Integrative motivation is where the students are willing to learn because they want to be able to fit in the community. Those who are motivated to learn a certain language so that they can use to do something, say for example, writing jobs, will excel in the language. On the other hand, those learning the language without having in mind what they want to achieve, will be less motivated towards learning the second language and thus can easily develop a negative effect (Odlin, 1989). Research also shows that, if students have interest in the language they are learning and feel that they have necessary support from such categories of people as parents and teachers, they will succeed in the foreign language.

Teachers also play a significant role in as far as learning the second language is concerned. How the teacher motivates the effort of the student will translate directly to how the student will perform in the subject. Teachers pose a challenge to students if their teaching methods do not boost the morale of the students.

Another social factor is lack of close contact between students and the primary users of the language. Students require the practical sense of the language. They need to see the language in use by the native users. This will enhance such things as pronunciation of words and choice of words. However, this has remained a challenge since students do not have direct interaction to native users. There should also be a close distance to the target culture and social environment of the natives.

Under the cognitive factors, students face the challenge in putting the idea into use. Writing is

a complex skill and to make the best out of it, students should be in a position to learn these skills. Active process should presume the development and constant error corrections. Students should interact with their teachers, fellow students and the native language users so that they familiarize themselves with the language (McLaughlin, 1988).

Learners should also be made effective and co-opted so that they can use their writing skills even in adverse skills. For example they should be in such a way that they can be able to write for such things as application letters or apologies (Odlin, 1989). Students are normally faced with the challenge of including feelings in writing. Emotional influences affect largely the quality of our writing. In fact, some students get out of topic when writing having unrelated emotions.

Students are also faced with the problem of language transfers. Transfers are the similarities and variances between the target language and any other language previously learnt. This involves both facilitation and negative transfers and so on. It has been argued that transfers cause errors by behaviorist, however, it has been proved that transfers are instrumental in strengthening the language skills of the students. Learning second languages during adulthood is complicated due to the involvement of psychological, cognitive and environmental factors (Christo Moskovsky, Merzin Alsharani, Silvia Ratcheva & Stefani Paolini, 2015)

Interaction and input are also significant in developing writing skills. Studies have shown that input and interaction in classrooms help reinforce the writing skills of students. Collaboration, input and interaction have assisted much in improving the writing skills of students, teachers should create a helpful environment so that students will improve their skills to great extents. Such activities as preparing contexts and text papers as well as revising the together with students in a friendly manner will help even in cultivating positive attitude for the students. However, if teachers and students will not go beyond the obvious class arrangements, the growth in writing will remain to be suppressed. (DelliCarpini, 2006)

Students should be updated about the social-economic activities that are taking place in their country. Writing mostly deals with contemporary issues thus a writer will have an easy time developing their work if they have rich knowledge on such matters. Linguistic proficiency refers to the ability of a person use a certain language. (DelliCarpini, 2006) Use in this case refers to both reading and writing. For one to be considered fluent, they must be in a position to speak or perform the language with fluency and accuracy. Some people may understand a second language well though they may have difficulties in speaking the language. The homogeneity in the audience allows even the use of trending language phrases. Some words and phrases that will only make sense to a particular group of people can be used extensively. On the other hand, second language writers target different audience, locals, and non-locals, those who are proficient in the second language and those who are not. (Christo Moskovsky, Merzin Alsharani, Silvia Ratcheva & Stefani Paolini, 2015)

As the writing approaches for decades were influential by contrastive rhetoric work that presented by Kaplan 1966 (re-assessed in 1983). This work which brings a great attention to linguistic and cultural differences in second language learners' writing claims that learners' first language influences their writing in a second language, and it has a significant impact on teaching second language writing for both ESL and EFL classrooms. However, the focus

shifted to writer, context, and the writing processes as Raimes (1991) eminent. This process oriented analysis has a great emphasis on language communication which brings teacher attention to the influences of the collaboration among teachers and students in the learning process.

Writing in a second language is a difficult task for many second language learners due to many factors, such as different cultural backgrounds and different rhetorical instruction. Saudi Arabian learners who study English in the U.S. and other countries whereas English is the primary language have perceived English writing challenges and difficulties. These challenges occur due to several factors, including that Western institutions see Arab writers as knowledge tellers rather than knowledge transformers (i.e., they only report information and are not able to synthesize the information into critically meaningful information) (Cummings, 1995) and that Arab learners comprehend writing via the traditional method, which adheres to rules and specific structures (i.e., they utilize and are dependent upon modeled, written passages provided by their teachers, which prevents them from becoming creative and critical writers). This style of writing is in direct contrast with the Western style of critical and creative writing (Smith, 2001).

Several language learning strategies have been shown as affective in regard to learning a language (O'Malley & Chamot, 1987; Green & Oxford, 1995; Cohen, 1998; Hsiao & Oxford, 2002). O'Malley and Chamot (1987) presented the three main learning strategies: metacognitive, cognitive and social-affective. The metacognitive strategy involves the learner in the process by forcing the learner to plan before writing, reread information aloud or silently read what has been written.

2. Research Questions

In order to explore the difficulties and challenges faced by Saudi Arabian ESL learners, this study will answer the following research questions.

- 1) What difficulties and challenges are faced by Saudi Arabian learners while writing in English?
- 2) What strategies are used by Saudi Arabian learners to solve these difficulties and challenges based on their level of proficiency in writing scores?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants for this study were recruited through the Saudi Arabian Student Organization at Murray State University. The members were located via the organization's website, Facebook page and Whatsup application. In order to gather the participants, I utilized the snowballing method. I shared the survey link via Facebook and my friends send it to their friends. As such, some of the study participants attend universities outside of Murray State University, including Tennessee State University and Middle Tennessee State University; however, each of the participants is a native of Saudi Arabia and is currently studying at a university in the U.S. where he or she is enrolled in an ESL program.

The levels of proficiency of the participants range from ESL beginners to Ph.D. students (See Figure 1). Of the 114 participants who completed surveys, 53 were female and 61 were male. They ranged in age from 15 to 36-years-old and the mean age was 26.

All of the participants came to the U.S. on government scholarships provided by the Saudi Arabian government. This scholarship program provides learners with 18 months of schooling during which they attend ESL programs in the U.S. After completing these programs and completing the IELTS or TOEFL, the students are able to apply for admission to a U.S. university in order to continue their education.

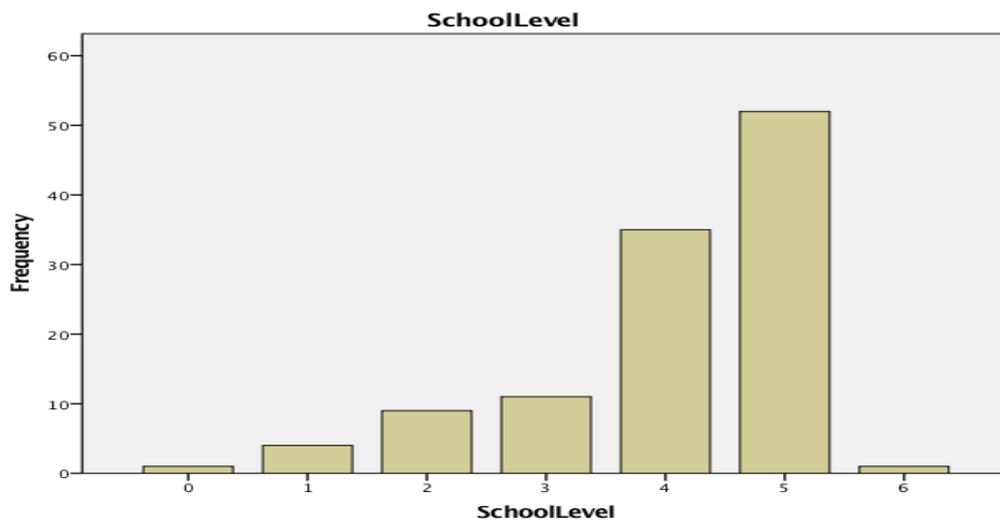


Figure 1. Note: ESL beginner: 1, ESL intermediate: 2, ESL advance: 3, Bachelor: 4, Master: 5, Ph.D.: 6.

3.2 Materials and Procedures

Each participant completed a two-part survey. The first section focused on statements to which the participants showed their agreement or lack thereof. The second section contained five open-ended questions.

Prior to the start of this study, I completed a pilot study in order to test my survey. For this pilot study, the survey was sent to four learners studying at Tennessee State University. In this study, only two of the respondents answered the five open-ended questions in the second section. When the other two respondents were questioned as to why they did not complete the open-ended questions, they stated that they did not have the time to write the answers. They also stated that they preferred multiple-choice questions as they are quicker to answer. Due to this feedback, I changed the second section of the survey from open-ended questions to scale questions for which the participants only needed to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statements.

It should be noted that the original research survey contained three sections. The first section contained questions focused on demographic information, such as age, level of proficiency and IELTS or TOEFL writing score. The second section contained several statements to

which the participants were to indicate their agreement or lack thereof. The last section contained several statements to which the participants were to indicate their agreement or lack thereof.

3.3 Results

What difficulties and challenges do Saudi Arabian learners perceive when writing in English?

The first research question focused on the difficulties and challenges perceived by Saudi Arabian ESL students when writing in English. The results of the survey showed that 44 of the participants kept a blog or diary within which they practiced English. In addition, 44 of the participants did not keep a blog or diary in which to practice English.

Table 1. Q2

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Always	10	8.8	8.8	8.8
Sometimes	44	38.6	38.6	47.4
Rarely	16	14.0	14.0	61.4
Never	44	38.6	38.6	100.0
Total	114	100.0	100.0	

Another factor that influences the difficulties and challenges perceived by the students in their ability to be conscious of their grammar when writing in English. As such, question nine specifically focused on this topic. The results showed that 40 of the participants were always aware of their grammar, while 60 of the participants were sometimes aware of their grammar.

Table 2. Q9

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Always	44	38.6	38.6	38.6
Sometimes	60	52.6	52.6	91.2
Rarely	8	7.0	7.0	98.2
Never	2	1.8	1.8	100.0
Total	114	100.0	100.0	

What strategies do Saudi Arabian ESL learners use to solve these difficulties and challenges based on their level of proficiency?

In order to answer this question, I included three survey questions (i.e., three, five and 11) focused on strategies. Question three focused on whether the participants plan before writing (see Table 3). The results showed that 47 of the participants always planned before writing, while 42 sometimes planned before writing.

Table 3. Q3

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Always	47	41.2	41.2	41.2
Sometimes	42	36.8	36.8	78.1
Rarely	15	13.2	13.2	91.2
Never	10	8.8	8.8	100.0
Total	114	100.0	100.0	

Question 5 focused on whether the participants create an outline before writing. The results showed that 46 of the participants always wrote an outline, while 37 of the participants sometimes wrote an outline.

Table 4. Q5

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Always	46	40.4	40.4	40.4
Sometimes	37	32.5	32.5	72.8
Rarely	21	18.4	18.4	91.2
Never	10	8.8	8.8	100.0
Total	114	100.0	100.0	

Question 11 focused on whether the participants read aloud or silently what they just wrote. The results showed that 40 of the participants always read aloud or silently what they just wrote, while 49 sometimes did.

Table 5. Q11

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Always	40	35.1	35.1	35.1
Sometimes	49	43.0	43.0	78.1
Rarely	19	16.7	16.7	94.7
Never	6	5.3	5.3	100.0
Total	114	100.0	100.0	

3.4 Discussion

What difficulties and challenges do Saudi Arabian learners perceive when writing in English?

It requires effort and practice in order to improve one's writing. The results of the survey show that less than half of the respondents practiced their writing on a daily basis. Such a lack of practice means that the participants will continue to encounter writing difficulties and challenges.

In addition, the more aware a writer is of his grammar, the more likely he is to be frustrated while writing, which will cease the creative flow. As almost all of the survey respondents were conscious of their grammar at some level, they were not able to be fully engaged in the creative or critical writing process as they were worried about incorrectly using grammar.

What strategies do Saudi Arabian ESL learners use to solve these difficulties and challenges based on their level of proficiency?

The results of the survey showed that most of the participants utilized metacognitive strategies in their writing processes. As illustrated in Tables 3, 4 and 5, most of the learners planned their writing or created an outline before they wrote or read aloud or silently what they had just written. These results indicate that advanced learners, such as the ones in this study, find metacognitive strategies to be useful.

5. Conclusion

In this study, I investigated the difficulties and challenges faced by Saudi Arabian ESL students studying English in academic settings. I found that, while the students utilized useful strategies to solve the difficulties and challenges that they encountered, the majority did not write every day, which is a valuable tactic in order to improve one's proficiency in a language. In addition, the students surveyed were conscious of their grammar as they wrote, which made them unable to complete participate in the creative writing process.

The results of this study indicate that, in order to improve in proficiency, Saudi Arabian students should focus on writing daily and ignore their grammar while in the process of writing. Reducing the anxiety related to creating perfect grammar will help free their writing processes.

Several limitations exist for this study. First, although the survey contains rich data because it was self-reported, it also creates the possibility that bias exists as respondents often give themselves more credit than they deserve. For this reason, future research should make the participants report a blog or diary during their studies in English.

In addition, future researches could determine additional difficulties and challenges by examining papers written by the participants.

Due to a preference by the respondents in the pilot study, this study and its survey lacked data from open-ended questions. As such, future studies should include open-ended questions in their surveys in order to gather rich data.

Two other important limitations of this study are the time constraints that I faced as well as the number of participants. The data gathering process was only undertaken for short time. As

such, future studies should engage in a longer data gathering process in order to create a more robust participant pool.

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