
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Investigating Difficulties Moroccan High School Students Face in Writing: A Case Study of Ibn Sina High School

Ouafae Benzizoune

Doctoral Student, English Department, Faculty of Languages, Letters, and Arts, Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco.

Corresponding Author: Ouafae Benzizoune, **E-mail:** ouafae.benzizoune@uit.ac.ma

| ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Moroccan high school students' challenges regarding writing skills. Its purpose is to determine what problems students have with their writing skills, why they have them, and how to fix them. To achieve the study's goal, a total of 72 high school students and two English teachers took part in this study. The students were first- and second-year baccalaureate students of Ibn Sina high school for the 2019 term. They had at least three years of school-based exposure to the English language. This study used students' writing assessments for students. According to the findings, Moroccan high school students struggle with writing due to a lack of grasp of grammar, syntax, vocabulary, punctuation, cohesion, and spelling as well as the effect of the French language.

| KEYWORDS

Writing, Writing Components, EFL Students, Assessment

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1. Introduction

Language is a primary source of communication. It is how we communicate our ideas and thoughts to others. People of all cultures, ethnicities, and social backgrounds use English as a lingua franca worldwide, says Dewi (2015). While learning English, there are skills that the learner has to master to become fluent. Those skills are listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Writing skills are always less focused on in the curriculum. Also, they are not given much time and attention in class, which results in the incompetence of students' potential to master these skills. Writing, as a skill, allows students to learn a variety of other helpful skills that will benefit them in their academics, careers, and other aspects of their lives. According to Harmer (2004), writing was considered a support system for acquiring grammar and vocabulary rather than a skill on its own.

This article is mainly concerned with finding why students have difficulties with writing. It is determined to see students' problems with writing skills, the cause, and how to fix having them. The used materials were the students' writing tests and questionnaires for both students and teachers. The research showed that the misuse of writing components deeply affects the number of students' mistakes, whereas writing in English is not an easy task for high school students. It was expected that they would face some problems that would push them to make various mistakes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Writing

Writing is a valuable skill, and it allows anyone to deliver and share ideas through a piece of writing. Writing, according to some scholars, has numerous definitions. Gillett et al. (2009) state that writing is one of the main ways human beings communicate: it is a social practice. This claim can be clarified by stating that writing is used in everyday life to communicate with others such as writing messages, sharing ideas, or filling out job applications. Brown (2001) defines writing as a thinking process. According to Elbow (1973) and Brown (2001), writing is a two-step process. The first step is to determine the meaning, and the second is to express that meaning in words, i.e., what we believe is mirrored in our writing. Thoughts that have remained in mind are reflected

in the writing process. This process typically has negative implications for students who are afraid to write down their thoughts. Therefore, students run into obstacles when looking for reasons to write and compose written sentences. There is another definition of writing by Abbas and Dwita (2019), where they state that writing is an action to make a record or data in the middle by means of a script.

In light of the above definitions, it can be concluded that writing is an activity that involves arranging words into a sentence, which then becomes a paragraph in written form. It is used in daily human life to interact with others. Learners must grasp and master several rules to perfect their writing skills. As a result, these steps make writing one of the most challenging skills in English, yet there are numerous benefits to writing. For example, the writer can convey sentiments by creating a story while earning money. Also, writing helps in broadening knowledge. Mueller (2014) suggests that writing down information helps reinforce learning, making it more likely to retain information for longer.

Moreover, according to Willis (2011, para. 11), "the many varieties of writing can serve to guide the brain to recognize, construct, and extend its patterns." That is, writing helps in the development of analytical and problem-solving abilities.

Writing enables students to focus on appropriate language use, says (Harmer, 2001). They consider the language they are using when they are writing. Through this practice, students overcome the challenges that writing creates in their minds, promoting language development. Therefore, we can conclude that writing is a multi-stage process.

First, writing helps express and explore ideas, thoughts, and feelings. Second, several revision processes are carried out to produce grammatically correct and structured texts. Finally, the texts are straightforward materials that everybody may comprehend.

2.2 Difficulties in Writing English

Writing challenges can have a negative impact on a student's academic performance. The writing skills are complex and sometimes challenging to teach, says Heaton (1975). Grammatical skills must be learned to produce a cohesive and well-structured piece. As students grow, they will be expected to write more to express what they know about various topics. If a student lacks basic writing skills, they will be unable to produce with the speed and fluidity required to thrive as their workload grows. Indeed, for a student who struggles with writing, the writing process may become a barrier to learning. Students who are confronted with such difficulties find it hard to stay motivated. Levine (1993) states that a child's language abilities must improve continuously overtime for them to write well. He also adds that in a child's writing, a language difficulty may appear as 1) poor vocabulary, 2) awkward phrasing and unconventional grammar, 3) difficulty with sentence structure and word order, 4) trouble reading back what is written.

Writing is difficult since it requires language characteristics or skills such as capitalization, punctuation, spelling, grammar, and vocabulary. Bryne (1988) identified three types of issues that make writing difficult. The first is Linguistic Difficulty. Grammar, vocabulary, language use, and sentence choice are all linguistic aspects that must be carefully monitored while writing. The second is Physiology Difficulty. This difficulty focuses more on the writer's challenges due to the reader's lack of direct engagement and input when they are writing. The problems of generating written material or composition content are the subject of this challenge. The third is Cognitive difficulty. Formal guidelines like spelling, grammar, capitalization, and paragraphing must be considered when writing.

2.3 Writing Mechanisms

There are several guidelines that the writer must follow while writing to construct a good piece that is acceptable to the readers. Writing contains mechanical components, just like any other skill. It is critical to master and understand how to use these components correctly. Danielson (2000) regards the mechanics of writing to be standard writing conventions such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Being skilled in them enables writers to communicate their readers clearly and understandably.

2.3.1 Capitalization

The use of capital letters in writing is known as capitalization. It is writing a word with its first letter in uppercase and the remaining letters in lowercase. Proper nouns, keywords in titles, and sentence openings are capitalized in most cases. Also, the letter "I" should be capitalized under all circumstances. Linder (2005) states that capitalization is a mechanic of writing. It is not simply a rule that we must memorize and follow; it is a specific signal to the reader. This mechanic is used to determine the meaning and to clarify intent. It is possible to change the connotation of a sentence by altering it.

In addition to the first word in a sentence, the following terms should be capitalized: proper nouns, the pronoun I, titles of people, acronyms, initialisms, initials, days, months, and holidays.

2.3.2 Spelling

Writing, spelling, and reading are all beneficial to one another. Spelling enables students to recognize language patterns and comprehend how words are put together. Learners who study spelling see that the English language follows the rules, making it easier to understand those principles when reading or writing. Okyere (1990) states that spelling is an essential ability to master a language because it provides a clear expression of thoughts in any written text.

Misspelling a word may appear to be a simple error, yet it can reflect poorly on a writer. It could mean one of two things: the writers do not care enough about their work to proofread it, or they do not understand their subject well enough to spell words correctly. In any case, a reader will be less likely to trust a writer's authority if there are spelling problems.

2.3.3 Punctuation

Choosing the right words in the appropriate order isn't enough when writing formally in English. When the writer uses punctuation in their writing, it helps the reader understand the conveyed message. Harmer (2004) regards punctuation as one of the critical aspects of writing, and employing appropriate punctuation is an important skill. A grammatical error or absence of punctuation can completely alter the meaning of a text. Punctuation adds silent intonation to work. The reader can pause, stop, emphasize, or ask a question using a comma, a period, an exclamation point, or a question mark.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

The purpose of this article is to investigate the following research question:

- What are the common mistakes made by students?

Data was gathered via analyzing students' responses to a written test to answer this question.

3.2 Population

There were 72 students and two English teachers who took part in this study for the 2019 academic year. The students were first- and second-year baccalaureate students of Ibn Sina high school. They were between the ages of 15 and 18. Also, they had at least three years of school-based exposure to the English language.

3.3 Instrument

A corpus of relevant data was collected using appropriate tools to answer the study objectives. This article was designed around one main activity: Students' writing tests to research the most common errors they make. Statistical tools were used to assess and count the test results.

3.4 Data Collection

The target population was 72 students from both grades, first- and second-year baccalaureate, and both majors, ECO and STM, at Ibn Sina high school in Kenitra. They took the test in the presence and with the assistance of their English teacher. The students completed the work in the time provided. Once the students completed their writing assignments, the papers were collected and presented to their teacher, who used the holistic approach to correct them and identify the various errors committed by the students.

3.5 Data Analysis

The written essays were analyzed using a holistic method to divide students according to their level of skills. Following that, an analysis of the significant errors made by students was conducted. The research goal was to detect the most common errors made by students. Students' scores and mistakes were analyzed using descriptive statistics in this study.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings of the written essay analysis will be reported in this section. It will attempt to identify the most common errors made by Moroccan EFL students, the areas where students struggle with writing, and the reasons for that?

After correcting and analyzing the papers of the target population, the most noticeable common mistakes students made regardless of their grades are as follows:

- *Subject-Verb Agreement:*

Incorrect: It have a bad influence on children.

Correct: It has a bad influence on children.

- *Capitalization:*

Incorrect: it makes life easier.

Correct: It makes life easier.

- *Punctuation:*

Incorrect: So you will be responsible for yourself.

Correct: So, you will be responsible for yourself.

Incorrect: On my part I think it's beneficial for children.

Correct: On my part, I think it's beneficial for children.

Incorrect: You can suffer from racism, because there are people who hate Arabs.

Correct: You can suffer from racism because there are people who hate Arabs.

Incorrect: It saves time and energy and money.

Correct: It saves time, energy, and money.

- *Incorrect tenses examples:*

Incorrect: I'm sure that every student will nailed it.

Correct: I'm sure that every student will nail it.

- *Misspelling examples:*

Incorrect: Finally, music is a good subject to be teached.

Correct: Finally, music is a good subject to be taught.

We noticed that the majority of misspelled words were written in French.

The examples can be summarized in the following words: 'commun', 'technologie', 'porvoque', 'educatif', 'developpe', 'environnement', and 'humain'.

- *Prepositions examples:*

Incorrect: You will be responsible of yourself

Correct: You will be responsible for yourself

Incorrect: It is important to stay away of the city.

Correct: It is important to stay away from the city.

Based on these findings, most writing issues were grammar, syntax, vocabulary, punctuation, coherence, spelling, French influence, and students' lack of the necessary terminology. For instance, we mention subject-verb agreement, pronouns, tenses, articles, prepositions, and basic sentence constructions.

A lack of ideas has an impact on students' writing abilities. Students will be unable to write much or go off-topic if they do not have any ideas relevant to the issue. They face difficulties with organized writing because it lacks coherence, knowledge consolidation, formal transitional, and cohesive techniques.

The responders proposed several solutions to improve undergraduate students' writing skills. To begin, reading was suggested to enhance writing and expand vocabulary. A student said, "I think that reading is what helps most when it comes to writing skills. Reading will not only improve your vocabulary and grammar but also makes writing somewhat intuitive, and mistakes start to sound odd as you get used to the correct form of writing."

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to determine the various types of errors produced by Moroccan EFL students. Seventy-two students and two English teachers participated in this study for the 2019 academic year. The students were Ibn Sina" high school first- and second-year baccalaureate students.

This paper was formed around one primary activity, which is researching students' most common mistakes using their writing tests.

After analyzing and evaluating the findings, we conclude that writing skills influence the type and number of errors made by Moroccan EFL high school students. Students have significant writing difficulties. As a result, additional efforts should be made to avoid the types of errors that have been identified.

To sum up, the article has addressed the questions raised and has realized its objectives. However, this study has only covered a small portion of their writing issues.

By understanding both the teachers' and students' difficulties in teaching and learning writing skills, we provide further suggestions which are as follows: the teachers could choose the best possible approach to teaching writing skills by giving feedback and guidance. Besides, teachers may stress the importance of learning writing skills to the students in order to motivate them to learn writing skills. Finally, textbook designers, as well, should emphasize the importance of writing skills in English textbooks.

Including the limited scope of how the study was conducted at only one institution, it is recommended that future studies target a larger number of participants from more institutions. Further research can also focus on younger EFL learners to investigate the source of these difficulties. Also, the teachers' remarks and feedback on students' writings should be examined, which can help students improve their writing significantly.

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ORCID iD <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0296-9451>

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