# Difficulties Faced by Iraqi University

# Students of English in Writing Composition

# from the Students' Point of View

## By

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**2016**
الصعوبات التي يواجهها الطلبة العراقيين الجامعيين في كتابة الانشاء من وجهة
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# Abstract

The majority of EFL students face difficulties in writing composition which reflect negatively on their exam results.

The researcher has noticed this problem and decided to trace the difficulties they face in order to put an end to them or at least to minimize them. To fulfill the aim of the research, a sample of (100) second year students of English Department / College of Basic Education / Diyala University have been selected as the subjects of this research. A scaled questionnaire as an instrument of measurement is used in this research to be an investigatory tool. The results of this research proves that the hypothesis of this study is verified and accepted which reads that Iraqi students of English face challenges in writing composition.

Then, the conclusion have been made on the basis of the findings, and the recommendations have been drawn.

ملخص البحث :ـ

يعاني غالبية الطلبة من ضعف في مهارة الكتابة باللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية وهذا ما انعكس بشكل سلبي على نتائجهم في الامتحان .

ولاحظت الباحثة هذه المشكلة وقررت ان تتبع هذه الصعوبات وتضع حد لها او تقلل من هذه الصعوبات .

ولتحقيق هذا الهدف اعتمدت الباحثة على عينة مكونة من (١٠٠) طالب وطالبة في قسم اللغة الانكليزية / كلية التربية الاساسية / جامعة ديالى لتكون عينة البحث ، وكذلك تم استخدام الاستبانة المدرجة كوسيلة احصائية في هذا البحث وقد اظهرت النتائج ان فرضية البحث قد اثبتت وتم قبولها والتي تنص على ((أن الطلبة العراقيين يواجهون صعوبات في كتابة الانشاء)).

## 1- Introduction

## 1-1 Statement of the problem and its significance

The use of English is more widespread of the business–environment revolution. Nowadays, English is used by all people worldwide because of the ongoing advances in technology such as internets and other businesses. (Zawahrch, 2012: 218) English also plays an important role in education and students are expected to use it effectively. (Brown, 2000: 7) States that languages consist of four main skills: reading, listening, writing and speaking. Learners should be exposed to the all mentioned skills to successfully master English language. However, Teaching English in Arab World is challenging. Many students are able to understand the language, but most of them face the problem of communicating their ideas effectively. The problem is the lack of both the adequate stock of English vocabulary and creativity in writing. It is evident that writing is the biggest challenge for many students. (Mourtaga, 2010: 1)still it is a very tough mission for teachers to teach English creatively so that students could become independent learners and benefit a lot from the innovative teaching techniques adopted by the teacher.

According to (Harmer, 2007: 112) Writing requires appropriate language use, text construction, lay–out, style and effectiveness.

The researcher has noticed that EFL students face difficulties in writing composition and one of these difficulties is their own fear, they worry about writing in correctly. So the research is meant to provide a clear picture about the areas of difficulty that the students may face in writing a composition and it tries to answer the following

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**question : Which aspect of their writing practice do the students find most challenging ?**

## 1-2 Aim of the study

The present study aims at identifying and classifying the difficulties Iraqi students may face in writing composition.

## 1-3 Limits of the study

This study is limited to second year students of English Department in College of Basic Education / Diyala University.

## 1-4 The Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that Iraqi students of English face difficulties in writing composition.

## 1-5 Procedures

To achieve the aim of the present study, the following procedures will be adopted by the researcher to collect data: Choosing a number of (100) students from the Department of English, College of Basic Education (at random) to represent the study sample.

1. Preparing an elicitation tool (rating scales questionnaire) under the supervision of a number of specialists who examine its validity and put comments, suggestions and modifications.
2. Interpreting the results in the light of the hypothesis by using the proper statistical means that suit the study.

## 1-6 Definition of Basic Terms

**Challenging: (the situation of being faced with) something that needs great mental or physical effort in order to be done successfully and therefore tests a person's ability: Finding a solution to this problem is one of the greatest challenges faced by scientists today. (Cambridge Dictionaries, 2016)**

**Composition: According to Al–Hassan and Razzak (1981: 49) in any prose composition, the sentences are grouped into paragraphs. Each paragraph begins on a new line and is usually indented. A paragraph is usually a group of sentences closely concerned with one idea. The purpose of paragraphing is to break up a composition into logical, interesting, and readable parts.**

## 2- Theoretical Background

## 2-1 The Importance of Writing

**Harmer (2007: 112) states the importance of writing for learning and the importance of writing for writing, according to the importance of writing for learning : writing is used as a practice tool to help students practice and work with language they have been studying. For example, the teacher may ask his students to write five sentences using a given structure, or using five of the new words or phrases they have been learning. Writing activities like this are designed to give reinforcement to students.**

**Teaching "Writing for Writing" is entirely different, however, since our objective here is to develop the students' skills as writers. There are good "real–life" reasons for getting students to write such things as emails, letters and reports. And whereas in writing for**

learning activities it is usually the language itself that is the main focus of attention, in writing for writing we look at the whole text. This will include not just appropriate language use, but also text construction, layout, style and effectiveness.

## 2-2 Coherence and Cohesion

Coherence and cohesion represent the most significant features of writing composition. "According to Carter (1990: 245) coherence is a text which is perceived as coherent when it makes consistent sense, with or without the help of devices of cohesion".

Harmer (2004: 24) explains that when text is coherent, the reader can understand at least two things :

1. The writer's purpose:- The reader should be able to understand what the writer's purpose is. Is it to give information, suggest a course of action, make a judgement on a book or play, or express an opinion about world events, for example ?

2. The writer's line of thought :- The reader should be able to follow the writer's line of reasoning if the text is a discursive piece. If on the other hand, it is a narrative, the reader should be able to follow the story and not get confused by time jumps, or too many characters, etc.

   According to Larsen–Freeman and Anderson (2011: 238) Cohesion is a property of discourse where sentences are connected with explicit linguistic forms such as :

   1- repetition of words i.e. the writer can use the word (people) five times.

2- **Lexical set "chains" i.e. the words in the same topic must interrelate with each other. (Harmer, 2004: 22)**

## 2-3 The Importance of Punctuation Marks

**Punctuation is a type of writing device that can be taught through both spelling and composition. (Al–Hamash and Younis, 1985: 164)**

**Greenbaum and Nelson(2009: 205) show that punctuation helps readers to understand the written communication by breaking it down into smaller components. According to Al–Hamash and Razzak (1981: 90) Punctuation marks are very important; they have their own meanings, and these meaning supplement the meanings of words. The purpose of punctuation is to make the meaning clear, and without punctuation marks we cannot see the relationships among the words and groups of words, so we cannot understand the paragraph very easily.**

**3- Procedures**

**3-1 Population and Sample**

**3-1-1 Population**

Richard and etal (1992: 282) state that population refers to any set of items, individuals, etc. Which share some common and observable characteristics and from which a sample can be taken. The population of this study comprises the students of English at the Department of English in the College of Basic Education / Diyala University. And it is random in the selection of a representative number of 100 students from the College of Basic Education.

**3-1-2 Sample**

The logic of using a sample of subjects is to make interferences about some larger population from a smaller one (a sample) (Berg, 2004: 34). The sample of the research consists of (100) students of English language Department. (20) students have been randomly chosen from the college of Basic Education for the participation in the pilot study. The participants in the pilot study were excluded from the sample of the final administration of the questionnaire. The sample of the students consists of 100 students.

**3-2 Instrument of the Study**

To achieve the aim and to verify the hypothesis, a questionnaire was constructed by the researcher, as shown in Table (1). At first, the researcher constructs an open questionnaire contained the following open question: "What are the main challenges that face you in writing the composition ?" The researcher distributes this open

**question to a sample of (20) students. After analyzing the results obtained from the open questionnaire, the researcher constructs the closed questionnaire and considered it as the main instrument of the present study. It consists of (15) items. These items supposed to conclude students' difficulties by three rating scales: I agree, I partially agree, I disagree. These items represent the most important challenges in writing the composition from the points of view of the students. The type of questionnaire used in this research is rating scales questionnaire.**

## (Table 1) Questionnaire items

**Which of these aspects of your writing practice do you find most challenging especially in writing composition ?**

| No. | Items | I agree | I partially agree | I disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1- | To make all the sections of a necessary writing paragraphed clear and coherent is a difficult task for most students. | | | |
| 2- | Writing composition is required to focus on spelling, punctuation and the proper use of grammatical structures. | | | |
| 3- | All the sentences inside the composition should be related to the controlling idea. | | | |
| 4- | Using long sentences in writing composition will make it more impressive. | | | |
| 5- | A paragraph that is too long makes it difficult for your audience to follow. | | | |
| 6- | Writing composition is something which disturbs the students. | | | |
| 7- | Students face difficulties in conveying the idea from Arabic into English. | | | |
| 8- | Students face difficulties in using the correct tenses. | | | |
| 9- | Students face difficulties in writing the controlling idea or the topic sentence. | | | |
| 10- | Students face less difficulties in writing guided compositions than free compositions. | | | |
| 11- | Students face difficulties in using the articles. | | | |
| 12- | Students face difficulties in using the prepositions. | | | |
| 13- | Students' vocabulary which help | | | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | them write composition is limited. | | | |
| 14- | Students face difficulties in the usage of the capital letters in their correct places. | | | |
| 15- | It is difficult to use the appropriate punctuation marks in order to make the reader follows the paragraph easily. | | | |

## 3-3 Face Validity

It is worth mentioning that it is not enough to ensure that the test really what it is supposed to test, but it is also necessary to ensure face validity. In the words of Harris, face validity is "the way the test looks to the examines, test administers, educator, and the like". (Harris, 1969: 7)

To ensure face validity, the questionnaire was exposed to a jury of experts* in the field of English language. They are especially required to determine the suitability of the questionnaire items to the sample of the study, and to propose and make any necessary suggestions for modifications, deletion or addition that enrich the sharpen of the test. The jury have agreed that the test and the procedures are suitable for some modifications which have been taken into consideration.

* The jury of experts consist of the following members whose names are arranged according to scientific titles:

1. Prof. Khalil Ismail Rijia (Ph. D) College of Education for Humanities, University of Diyala.
2. Asst Prof. Muslim Mehdi Jassim. (M. A) College of Basic Education, University of Diyala.

3. **Instructor. Sarab Kadir (Ph. D) College of Basic Education, University of Diyala.**
4. **Instructor. Ghazwan Adnan Mohammed (Ph. D) College of Education for Humanities, University of Diyala.**
5. **Instructor. Ya'arub Mahmood Hamidi (M. A) College of Education for Humanities, University of Diyala.**

## 3-4 Pilot Administration

The aim of the pilot study is to find out the clarity of the questionnaire instruction. In order to conduct a pilot study, 20 students of English were chosen randomly from the English department, College of Basic Education / University of Diyala.

The findings of the pilot administration reveal the followings:-

1. **The students are able to answer all the questionnaire items.**
2. **There is no serious ambiguity in the instructions of the questionnaire.**

## 3-5 Final Administration of the Questionnaire

After achieving face validity, the questionnaire in its final version was administrated to students of English language department / College of Basic Education. They were asked to either agree or partially agree or disagree on the problems they might face in writing composition.

## 3-6 Overall Performance

In order to investigate the hypothesis of the study which reads "Students face challenges in writing composition". The responses of the subjects were investigated by using the weighted mean. The mean

score of the subjects was (53.32) compared with the theoretical mean (30). The result indicates that the score mean is higher than the theoretical mean. This prove that students of English face challenges in writing composition Accordingly, the hypothesis that mentioned above is verified and accepted.

### (Table 2) The Responses of the Subjects

| Item No. | I agree | I partially agree | I disagree | The Weighted Mean. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 75 | 10 | 15 | 75% |
| 2 | 80 | 10 | 10 | 80% |
| 3 | 29 | 32 | 25 | 29% |
| 4 | 38 | 32 | 30 | 38% |
| 5 | 40 | 40 | 20 | 40% |
| 6 | 55 | 22 | 23 | 55% |
| 7 | 69 | 16 | 15 | 69% |
| 8 | 65 | 22 | 13 | 65% |
| 9 | 40 | 20 | 40 | 40% |
| 10 | 30 | 25 | 45 | 30% |
| 11 | 63 | 18 | 20 | 63% |
| 12 | 60 | 13 | 27 | 60% |
| 13 | 72 | 11 | 17 | 72% |
| 14 | 28 | 28 | 44 | 28% |
| 15 | 70 | 13 | 17 | 70% |

**4- Conclusion and Recommendations**

## 4-1 Conclusions

**The following are the findings of this study :**

1. Item number (2) which reads "Writing composition is required to focus on spelling, punctuation and the proper use of grammatical structures" has got higher weighted mean which is (80%). This constituted the first challenge faced by students.

2. Item number (1) which reads "To make all the sections of a necessary writing paragraphed clear and coherent is a difficult task for students" has got a weighted mean of (75%). This constituted the second difficulty faced by students.

3. Item number (13) which reads "students' vocabulary which help them write composition is limited" has got a weighted mean of (72%).

4. Item number (15) which reads "It is difficult to use the appropriate punctuation marks in order to make the reader follows the paragraph easily" has got a weighted mean of (70%).

5. Item number (7) which reads "students face difficulties in conveying the idea from Arabic into English" has got a weighted mean of (69%).

6. Item number (8) has got a weighted mean of (65%) and this item reads : (Students face difficulties in using the correct tenses).

7. Item number (11) has got a weighted mean of (63%) and this item reads (Students face difficulties in using the articles).

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8. **Item number (12) has got a weighted mean of (60%) and this item reads (Students face difficulties in using the prepositions).**

9. **Item number (6) which reads "Writing composition is something disturbs the students" has got a weighted mean of (55%).**

According to these findings, the main reasons of difficulties is the lack of practicing English writing and also the students do not have large bank of vocabulary which help them to write a composition, and also the students face difficulties in using tenses, articles and prepositions and these difficulties may be related to Arabic interference and negative transfer of the mother tongue rules.

## 4-2 Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of the study, the following recommendations are put forward :-

1. **Intensive lessons should be given to the students to improve their writing.**

2. **Students should be given clear instructions and demonstration of how to write composition.**

3. **It is advisable for students to practice English writing frequently so that they can enhance their writing performance.**

4. **The effort should be given on vocabulary and their meanings.**

5. **Intensive lessons should be given on punctuation marks and their usage.**

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