

Investigating Major Academic Writing Problems Encountered by Yemeni MA Students of English in Writing Examinations' Answers at the Faculty of Education/ Saber - Lahij University

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ABSTRACT: *The present study aimed at investigating the problems of Yemeni Master students of English in writing examinations' answers at the faculty of education/Saber -Lahij University. The population of the study was (20) master students in the department of English during the period 2019 to 2021 who were chosen as the sample of this study. The data was obtained from analyzing the students' written answers for the examination questions in relation to the course of semantics. The students' difficulties in writing were viewed in relation to analyzing their exams' answers according to the academic writing conventions. The results of the analysis showed that there were variations between the students in their writing performance as well as their scores due to the problems and difficulties they face in writing answers for the examination's questions. The results showed that there were problems in both sentence as well as paragraph levels in terms of vocabulary, sentence structure, using conjunctions and punctuation marks and the organization of paragraphs. Such problems were related to both linguistic and cognitive types. The linguistics' problems were clear in relation to language use and vocabulary, and the cognitive problems were related to organization and mechanics. The results also showed that the master students of English face problems in achieving cohesion and coherence in terms of creating linkage and relationships between the constituents of a sentence, between sentences in a paragraph and within paragraphs.*

KEY WORDS: academic writing, coherence, unity

INTRODUCTION

Written exams are the main tool for evaluating students' performance in (90%) of the courses they study, in which the students are required to answer open-ended questions in a paragraph form. In fact, writing is a way of communicating and expressing thoughts, ideas, experiences and feelings through the written word. The ability of the MA students' in writing English is supposed to be good enough, however they still

have difficulties in terms of accuracy, achieving coherence and expressing their ideas meaningfully in a written form. In general, the major writing difficulties for Yemeni MA students are of a syntactic and semantic nature. These difficulties are related to grammar, vocabulary, achieving unity and coherence, using cohesive devices, punctuation, and some other skills that are supposed to be early mastered during their study in the bachelor level (BA). These writing skills are supposed to be reflected in the students' writing production through producing well-structured and meaningful answers for examinations' questions. These academic writing difficulties were clear in the sentence-level as well as the paragraph-level. Such difficulties can be noticed in vocabulary, sentence structure, paragraphing, unity, organization of thoughts, coherence and cohesion, language use, linkage, transition signals, and creating relationships between various parts of a sentence or a paragraph. Students also have problems in structuring topic sentences, adding supporting details or developing ideas, adding specific information to a main idea, keeping stick to the topic of writing (unity), extending the specifics into extenders to support and clarify their ideas, and writing concluding sentences.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the academic writing problems encountered by Yemeni master students of English in writing answers for examinations' questions.
2. To identify the sources and reasons of academic writing problems and find out solutions to overcome such problems.

Research Questions

1. What are the major problems encountered by Yemeni master students of English in writing examinations' answers?
2. What are the causes of these problems and the solutions to overcome such problems?

Significance of the Study

The present study is significant as it focuses on the problems encountered by Yemeni MA students of English in writing convincing answers for examinations' questions. The results of the study will be helpful for both teachers and students in discovering and dealing with the mistakes in academic writing. The study also will provide suggestions to overcome such problems in academic writing, which will help in building a solid ground for mastering the skills required for writing well-formed and meaningful answers for examinations' questions. This, in turn, will help teachers in evaluating students' writing proficiency and lead to better results in the examinations' scores.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since writing is a complex process that requires a combination of skills, it means that students do not only rely on their previous knowledge in the skill of writing, but also on the other skills which provide them with materials and conventions to be used in their writing production. In his study of students' problems in cohesion and coherence, Ahmed (2010:2), asserts that the major sources of incoherence and textual deviation in students' written texts are related to repetition, parallelism, sentence length, lack of variation and misuse of certain cohesive devices. This is applicable to what is noticed in analyzing master students' written answers in the present students in this study. Other studies of students' difficulties in academic writing asserted that Yemini and Moroccan students have some weaknesses, in terms of coherence and cohesion, manifested in the students' written texts (Qaddumi, 1995).

Definition of Academic Writing

Academic writing is a formal style of writing used in universities and scholarly publications. Academic writing is always a form of evaluation that asks you to demonstrate knowledge and show proficiency with certain disciplinary skills of thinking, interpreting, and presenting (Irvin, 2010: 8). For John (2020) academic writing is a formal expression of thoughts and ideas, how you talk is not how you write, don't use idioms, expressions, or colloquialisms (John, 2020:3). The purpose of academic writing is to help a reader understand the written text through conveying meaning in words and phrases which must be well-structured and well-organized, and this cannot be achieved without the efficient use of cohesive devices.

Cohesion and Coherence

According to Halliday & Hasan, the concept of cohesion is a semantic one; it refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as a text (Halliday & Hassan, 1985:4). According to Witte & Faigley (1981:202), cohesion defines those mechanisms that hold a text together (the built up), while coherence defines those underlying semantic relations (the meaning) that allow a text to be easily understood and used by the reader. Accordingly, teachers seek meaning in the students' answers for the examination paper which reflects their understanding of the subject matter rather than grammar rules or meaningless separate sentences without any relationships between them. The aim of the students' written answer must be conveying meaning for the teacher rather than just writing grammatically correct sentences without any relationships between them. The various constituents of the paragraph should help meaning to flow smoothly from one sentence to another, which will help the reader easily comprehend and understand the student's intended meaning.

In relation to EFL essay writing cohesion, many researchers agree that cohesion, on the macro level is related to linking ideas whereas on the micro level, it is concerned

with connecting sentences and phrases. According to Halliday & Hassan (1985), the concept of cohesion is a semantic one, it refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as a text. In fact, the text cannot be considered as a text unless it reflects cohesion and coherence in terms of using cohesive devices in logical manner. Hinkel, (2004) asserts that cohesion constitutes a serious problem to Arab students, which reflects the reality of the situation in all Arab world and for those who were enrolled in higher studies departments of English outside the Arab countries.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopts a mixed (quantitative/ qualitative) research method for the purpose of gathering data about the problems faced by master students of English in writing answers for examinations' questions. Mixed methods research is an approach to inquiry that combines or associates both qualitative and quantitative forms of research. It involves philosophical assumptions, the use of qualitative and quantitative approaches, and the mixing of both approaches in a study. (Creswell 2014:75)

The Sample

The sample in the study were (20) master students (MA) of English in the department of English- faculty of education Saber- Lahij university who enrolled in the master program during the years 2019-2021. The students' answers were corrected and analyzed in relation to the conventions of academic writing, on the assumption that they have mastered these conventions during their study in the bachelor level (BA) as well as the period they spent in the master program.

The Instruments

The instruments utilized in collecting data for the study were written exam's answers for the examinations' questions then the students' answers were analytically analyzed in terms of the problems and difficulties found in their writings. The findings were grouped and discussed to find out legible results for the study.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

A descriptive analysis is drawn on the students answers for examinations' questions for the purpose of investigating the major problems and difficulties encountered by master students of English in their writing production. Literature on writing skills revealed that a paragraph is effective if it is logically woven in a way which makes it easy to be understood and comprehended rather putting separate sentences or sentence fragments in a text even though they were grammatically correct. In a good piece of academic writing, each paragraph must be coherent and must be attached to the other to help meaning smoothly flows from one sentence to another and also from one paragraph to another. Cohesion and coherence are and must be achieved in a

paragraph as well as the overall piece of writing. This can not be reached unless sentences are syntactically and semantically connected to each other in a logical way and according to academic writing conventions. The following lines present the findings and a discussion for them as will be shown below.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After correcting the students' written answers analytically, and identifying the problems of academic writing found in the students' writings, the findings were classified, analyzed and discussed to clarify areas of weakness and suggesting solutions to overcome such problems. The problems of academic writing found in the students' written answers can be classified into several groups starting from choosing and generating ideas, organizing ideas, selecting words to start writing, structuring topic sentences, and adding specific details and extenders to develop the ideas. Such problems are related to unity and writing about one idea, and such problems of achieving cohesion and coherence in writing. The analysis of students' written answers showed that there were syntactic problems in terms of creating grammatically correct sentences and semantic problems in terms of creating meaning and the smooth flow of meaning from one sentence to another in a paragraph. All these problematic areas lead to low-rated answers which affects students' scores in the examinations. Another problem was found in using reference and using connectors or linking words and expressions in both sentence-level as well as paragraph-level, creating connections between various constituents of a sentence and within sentences in a paragraph as will be shown in the following lines.

In spite of their study for a number of writing courses during the period of the bachelor (BA), the majority of Yemeni MA students still have problems and difficulties in writing effective answers for examinations' questions. The analysis of the master students' answers indicated that the majority of them were unable to write convincing and well-structured answers, which means that they have difficulties in applying the academic writing conventions as will be shown in the following lines. Table (1) below shows the major problems or difficulties encountered by master students of English in writing convenient answers for examinations' questions.

Table (1) Summary of major problems encountered by Yemeni master students of English in academic writing

No	Major Problematic Areas	Number of students	Percentage %
1.	Inappropriate topic sentences	8	40%
2.	Inappropriate introductory sentences	8	40%
3.	Inappropriate supporting details	12	60%
4.	Inappropriate extending of ideas	13	65%
5.	Inappropriate organization of ideas	11	55%
6.	Inappropriate development of ideas	8	40%
7.	Inappropriate choice of vocabulary	6	30%
8.	Inappropriate concluding sentences	8	40%
9.	Inappropriate text structure	7	35%
10.	Incorrect sentence structure	10	50%
11.	Inability of achieving unity	8	40%
12.	Inability of achieving coherence	13	65%
13.	Misuse of linking words	7	35%
14.	Misuse of signal words and expressions	9	45%
15.	Irrelevant use of reference	8	40%
16.	Inability of using ellipsis	14	70%
17.	Overuse of repetition	10	50%
18.	Inability of paraphrasing & summarizing	13	65%
19.	Inability of expressing their own views	17	85%
20.	Inability of using critical thinking skills	14	55%
21.	Interference of mother tongue	5	25%

According to the data in table (1) above, the analysis of master students' answers showed that (40%) of them were unable to construct appropriate topic and introductory sentences for their paragraphs, which led to difficulties in writing efficient answers for the examination's questions. The data also showed that (65%) of the students were unable to provide appropriate supporting details related to the topic sentences they have written before and (65%) of them were unable to extend the ideas or provide additional information to clarify the topic. Again, the analysis showed that (55%) of the students face problems in organizing their ideas in their writing and (40%) of them have difficulty in developing the ideas in meaningful manner. For vocabulary, the data showed that (30%) percent of the master students face difficulty in choosing relevant vocabulary related to the topic they write about and ((40%) of them have difficulty in providing meaningful conclusions in their writing. For text structure, the data showed that (35%) of the master students face difficulty in providing convenient and logical text structure according to the academic writing conventions. All the previously mentioned elements are basic for any type of writing and under any context and genre.

The other side of the problems is related to the flesh which covers the bones or the skeleton of a piece of writing to make it meaningful for the reader. This side is of a syntactic and a semantic nature in terms of achieving cohesion and coherence in a written text. In relation to this perspective, the data showed that (50%) of the master students face difficulty in providing well-formed sentences, which means that they have difficulty in applying grammar rules in academic writing especially in answering examinations' questions. For this aspect we can say that there is an interference of the mother tongue (Arabic) which causes confusion in using grammar rules in the foreign language. The data also showed that (40%) of the students face difficulty in achieving unity of the topic itself and to keep writing about the same topic in the question in which the supporting details must be related to the main topic of the text. This problem led, in turn, to padding and providing needless information to the answers for the purpose of increasing the amount of words or sentences in a way that did not contribute to the topic itself.

For coherence, the data in table (1) above showed that (65%) of Yemeni master students in this study face problems in achieving coherence in their writing, which means that they face difficulty in writing meaningful answers for the examinations' questions. The data also showed that (35%) of the students have difficulty in using of linking words within a sentence, and (45%) of them have problems in using signal words and expressions in their writing. Another (45%) of the students have difficulty in using reference in their writing, and the majority of them (75%) experience difficulty in using ellipsis in their writing. Another problematic area was found in the students' writing was related to the overuse of repetition in their written answers, which implied that there is a problem in implementing vocabulary, ideas and structures in their writings. It also reveals the fact that they were unable to express their own views and voice in a written form. This problem was assured in the results of analyzing their writings, in which the data showed that (85%) of the students have difficulty in expressing their own views or writing in their own words. The data also showed that (55%) of them have difficulty in using critical thinking skills, which means that they have no finger print in convincing the reader of their own point of view. The analysis showed that some of the master students find it hard to get their thoughts and ideas down on the answer's paper. Finally, the data indicated that (25%) of the master students' answer experience problems related to interference of the mother tongue, such problems were clear in using and organizing words and expressions as they are used in Arabic. Such transfer from the native language also resulted in another problem in terms of ambiguity in their expressions and paraphrasing especially in using grammar, organizing sentence elements and choosing vocabulary, which resulted in committing mistakes in their written answers in relation to their field of study.

The causes and reasons for academic writing problems vary from one context to another and from one group of students to another. According to what has been

mentioned above, it will be valuable to refer to the possible causes of the problems of Yemeni master students in academic writing. In the sentence-level, the problems faced by Yemeni EFL learners of English were related to vocabulary and sentence structure, which implies that the courses of English either to be unauthentic or the ways of teaching them were inefficient. The majority of problems encountered by Yemeni MA students in the sentence-level were of a grammatical nature in terms of sentence structure (built-up) and creating relations between the constituents of the sentence. This implies that the Yemeni MA students face difficulty in applying grammar rules in their writing and that there is a sort of interference of the native language in applying the grammatical system in their writings. The possible reason for their inability to create relationships between the different constituents in a sentence might be insufficient use of preposition, linking word and punctuation marks. This implies using insufficient teaching strategies and the ignorance for the means of creating meaning in writing. Thus, the sources of problems might be related to the course material or using inappropriate ways of teaching. These problems also might be inherent from the basic education upwards and were left without remedies.

In relation to the Yemeni MA students writing problems in the paragraph-level, the data showed that there were problems in unity, paragraphing, and achieving coherence. These problems might be a result of insufficient materials of writing and ineffective ways of teaching used for teaching such materials. Since exposure to the foreign language is rare in Yemeni society, students need to be exposed to writing tasks and get feedback on their writings. This will help them to master conventions of academic writing and overcome such problems in their writing production. There were also problems of organization, paraphrasing, using the students' own words and expressions, reflecting ones' feelings and voice in his writing. This can not be reached without a constant focus on renewing writing courses, using various ways of teaching, encouraging students to write and providing effective feedback on students' writing production. Thus, teachers must encourage their students in carrying out writing tasks and to be exposed to samples of writings from which they can benefit in making their texts meaningful and more effective.

CONCLUSIONS

The previously mentioned analysis for the major problems encountered by master students in writing answers for the examinations' questions revealed that master students encounter problems in the sentence as well as paragraph-levels. They encounter cohesion problems in terms of linking ideas (macro-level) and coherence problems in terms of connecting sentences and phrases with each other to create produce meaningful sentences and expressions (micro-level). Such problems impede students of producing meaningful answers and achieving high scores in their examinations. Again, the analysis of students' answers showed that there is a high percentage of master students were unable to write coherent paragraphs in terms

format, layout, sentence structure or creating logical linkage within sentences and between sentences in a paragraph in their written answers.

In short, the master's students' common problems can be identified as lexical problems in terms of vocabulary and using linking devices for ideas. Problems related to achieving cohesion and coherence in terms of grammar and punctuation rules, misuse of prepositions and auxiliary verbs, misuse of transitions and signal words and expressions, and using irrelevant words beyond the context of the topic. Finally, the problems related to text structure in terms of creating good introductions, logical development for the topic being discussed or explained which is considered as the main part of any piece of writing (body), and creating good conclusions. Students also lack the ability of using reference, ellipsis, and substitution related cohesive devices, which affect their writing quality and results in problems in creating or producing meaningful texts. Moreover, since meaning is a semantic feature, the students' answers for questions related to the semantics' course reflected their weakness in expressing meaning clearly for the reader. The analysis of students' answers also indicated that a high percentage of master students lack paraphrasing and summarizing skills, using sufficient academic writing vocabulary, and reflecting critical thinking skills in their writings. All these problems and difficulties negatively affect the students' scores in tests and final examinations. The reasons and causes for MA students' weakness in academic writing vary. Some reasons are related to the courses taught which are old and there is no development for them, other reasons are related to the educational environment at schools and colleges, and reasons related to the economic situation itself which poses many obstacles on education and the ability of people to pay time and effort in learning.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Depending on the what has been said before, the researcher provides a number of suggestions and recommendations for solving such academic writing problems found in the master students' writings. Since the purpose of academic writing is communicating effectively and meaningfully by means of a written word, EFL teachers should investigate the sources of writing problems in classrooms and outside classrooms. In teaching writing, there must be a great focus on writing conventions and techniques for creating meaning, achieving cohesion and coherence in writing, logical use of vocabulary and cohesive devices, sentence as well as paragraph structure, and arrangement of constituents in a sentence and ideas in a paragraph as the basic unit for writing any piece of writing. The researcher recommends that there must be a focus on both syntactic as well as semantic features in teaching writing and in correcting students' assignments, tests and examinations. Students should be given opportunities to be exposed to writing tasks and provided with continual feedback about their writing production. Again, since coherence is the source of meaning, it should take priority in teaching academic writing especially in the bachelor level and the master level. The teacher is responsible about providing clear feedback on the

students' trials of writing to help them overcome areas of difficulty in the future. Teachers should pay more time and effort for using reference, ellipsis and paraphrase in teaching academic writing. The researcher recommends a strict policy for accepting students in the English language programs or depending on their competence and abilities. Furthermore, since writing is a productive skill in which students utilize all their previous knowledge of the language skills, there must be constant focus in integrating all language skills in a way which enables students benefit from their knowledge of these skills. Finally, researchers should investigate the sources and roots of writing difficulties and provide solutions and remedies to overcome such problematic areas.

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