

## Enhancing Writing Skills: An Analytical Study of Obstacles in Writing at B. A. Level in Najran University, KSA

Zahid Bashir Raja<sup>[a],\*</sup>; Rubina Zamir Zahid<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Department of English, Colleges of Arts & Sciences, Najran University, Najran, Saudi Arabia.

\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

Academic writing demands a deliberate endeavor and a conscious effort to achieve a desirable efficiency in the academic pursuits of learners. Academic writing is considered perhaps the most challenging and difficult skill in terms of L2. This study critically explores the obstacles in academic writing faced by students and teachers alike at Najran University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. To investigate, a comprehensive questionnaire has been floated among professional teachers to get their expert opinions in order to identify some problems and form effective remedial strategies eventually. This paper will primarily focus on the two significant aspects of academic writing i.e. language skills (LS, Grammar etc.) and writing skills (WS, writing itself as a skill).

**Key words:** Obstacles in writing; Language skills (LS); Writing skills (WS); Process writing

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### INTRODUCTION

The researchers enjoyed teaching in three different countries (Pakistan, R. O. Yemen and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia). The researchers observed that the students always remain intimidated and unmotivated to handle writing tasks in their academic pursuits. While writing, students always face a

multitude of obstacles in both the streams known as language skills and writing skills. Equally relevant to the issue are organization, coherence and connectivity. One can agree up to a certain point that the learners have poor learning background in writing skills due to the lack of compatible syllabus and teaching methods. Apart from this, identifying problems only is not sufficient to take students out of writing phobia, it is need of the time to suggest practical treatment. Furthermore, it is admitted fact that poor reading habits also lead to this kind of frustration. Most of the learners lack ideas and they do not know how to initiate their composition. This paper will prove to be an academic contribution to improve the writing skills among ESL/EFL learners in general and students of the Najran University in particular.

### 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The nucleus of this study is to identify problems of organization, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, vocabulary, and grammar in writing among the students of writing skills courses at College of Arts and Sciences, Najran University. Consequently, the study suggests some remedial strategies to cope up with the problems faced by the students and teachers alike.

### 2. PAST RELEVANT STUDIES

El Sadiq (2010) unfolded that the old educational policies were the main factors for the students' problems. Another study by Hirose (2003) showed how Japanese EFL students have difficulty while writing cohesive paragraphs in English since most high school EFL classes focus on sentence-level translations. Msanjila (2005) noted with great concern that students face writing obstacles in expressing themselves systematically and logically. Apart from this, students mix English structures and expressions with those of L1. Darus and Subramaniam (2009) commented that errors that participants committed were

basically grammatical. The participants also had relatively weak vocabulary and their sentences were sometimes incomprehensible. Ahmed and Alamin (2012) pointed out that keeping the ideas simple and the language clear of errors is a safe way to ensure success. Elshirbini Abd-Elfatah Elashri (2013) suggested that teachers should talk to other teachers who use the process approach to become familiar with what is happening in the field of writing. Kellog, R.T., & Raulerson, Bascom A (2007) said that deliberate practice, we suggest, should be a fundamental principle that guides the instruction and training of students.

### 3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to identify the problems in writing and suggest some reliable remedial strategies to enable BA level students make their compositions almost error-free. Furthermore, it will also devise new strategies to take the students out of writing phobia while studying at the College of Arts and Sciences, Najran University, KSA. We are quite optimistic to cultivate a very rich crop of writing skills in the future.

### 4. METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

A likert scale questionnaire was developed by the researchers to get teachers' feedback on some significant aspects of writing, i.e. organization, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, vocabulary, and grammar. Twenty lecturers and assistant professors took part in this study by giving their valid opinions in the given questionnaire. The students were randomly selected from different sections and were given some tasks in writing (e.g. Phrases, sentences, and paragraph etc.) in order to get writing samples from them.

### 5. ANALYSIS OF TEACHERS' QUESTIONNAIRES

The following figures and six sub-categories have been scrutinized meticulously to know the accurate feedback of the teachers in terms of organization, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, vocabulary, and grammar.

#### 5.1 Organization

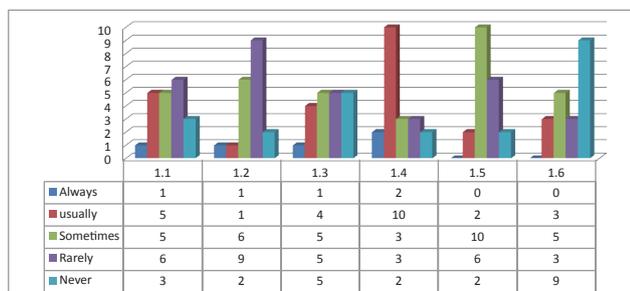


Figure 1 Analysis Based on Teachers' Questionnaires

As shown in Figure 1, the respondents pointed out that 30% students are rarely clear about their writing tasks, 45% students rarely indent paragraphs, 25% students never organize ideas logically, 50% students' writing usually seems to be a mess, 50% students sometimes use transition words to achieve coherence, and only 45% students revise to reorganize their paragraphs.

#### 5.2 Spelling

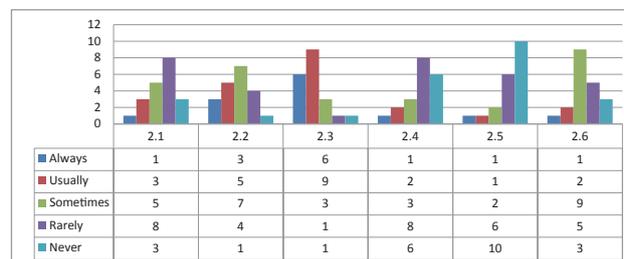


Figure 2 Analysis Based on Teachers' Questionnaires

Figure 2 exhibits that 40% students rarely spell words correctly, 35% students sometimes get confused in homophones, 45% students usually get puzzled between /p/ and /b/, 40% students rarely distinguish between /b/ and /d/, 50% never get confused between /w/ and /v/, and 45% students sometimes memorize spellings of relevant words.

#### 5.3 Punctuation

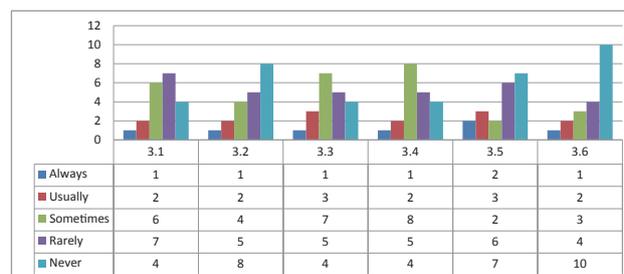


Figure 3 Analysis Based on Teachers' Questionnaires

As presented in Figure 3, 35% students rarely know when and where to punctuate, 40% students can rarely differentiate between colon and semicolon, 35% students are sometimes clear about the use of comma, 40% students sometimes use full stop or question mark properly, 35% students never use the apostrophe to show contractions and possessions, and 50% students never use inverted commas properly.

#### 5.4 Capitalization

The teachers' feedback regarding capitalization, as Figure 4 shows, points out that 35% students usually use capital letter in the beginning of the sentence, 40% students rarely capitalize the initial letter of proper nouns, 35% students rarely capitalize all the important words in a topic/title,

50% students sometimes capitalize “I” when it comes as a pronoun, 35% students sometimes capitalize letters of abbreviations and acronyms, and 50% never capitalize the “H” in the pronoun (He) while referring to Allah.

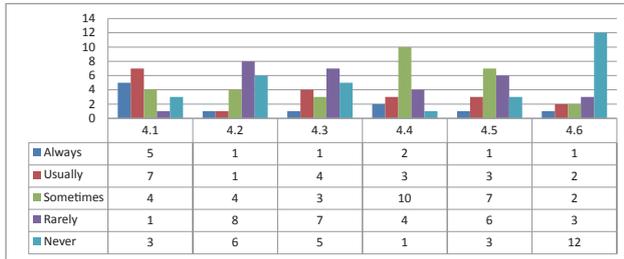


Figure 4  
 Analysis Based on Teachers' Questionnaires

### 5.5 Vocabulary

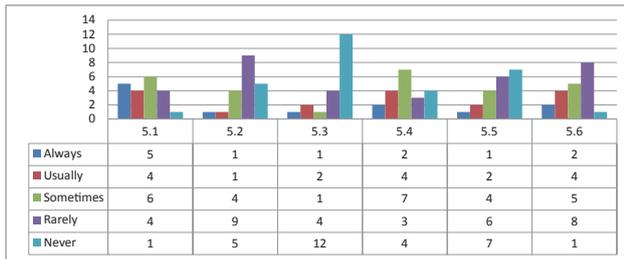


Figure 5  
 Analysis Based on Teachers' Questionnaires

While responding to the questionnaire, teachers pointed out that 30% students sometimes use appropriate vocabulary in writing, 45% students can rarely use the same words in different forms/parts of speech, 60% students never indulge in reading-to-write activities, 35% students can never use compound nouns/adjectives, 35% students never write comprehensible words/phrases, and 40% students rarely come up with varied words in order to make their composition presentable.

### 5.6 Grammar

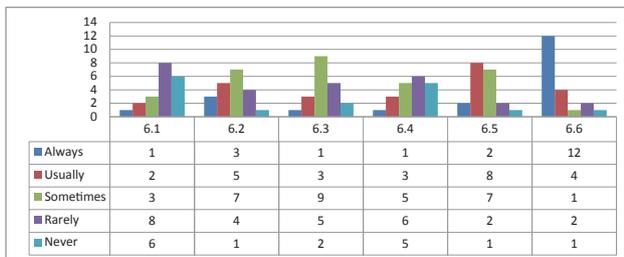


Figure 6  
 Analysis Based on Teachers' Questionnaires

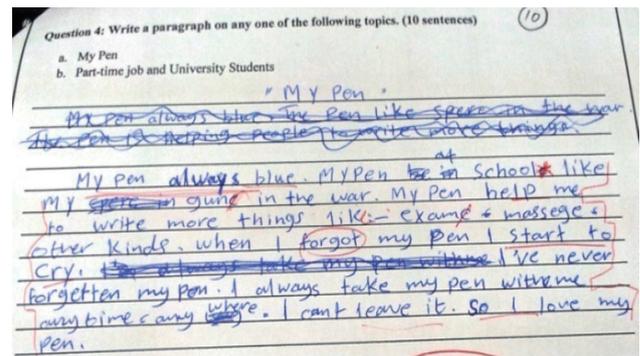
As exposed in Figure 6, 30% students can never use “Adjective and Nouns” in proper sequence, 35% students sometimes know “Subject-Verb” agreement, 45% students sometimes use basic sentence structures, 30% students can rarely use required form of verbs in their writing, only

40% students usually use articles adequately, and 60% students always use modals and auxiliary verbs properly.

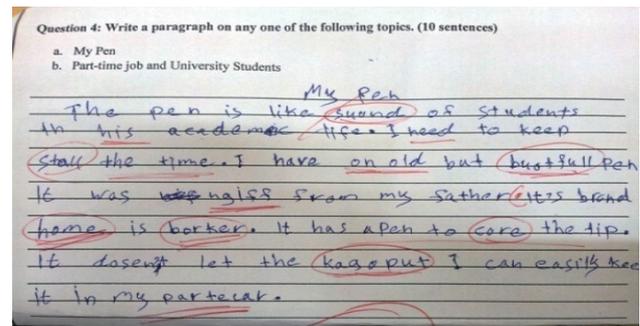
## 6. ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' WRITING SAMPLES

Needless to say, the juxtaposition of the teachers' feedback and the students' writing samples correspond to the same problematic areas like organization, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, vocabulary and grammar. Fifty five students were involved in the writing task to obtain samples. After a thorough correction and error-analysis of the samples, problems in writing were highlighted in order to suggest some practical remedial strategies.

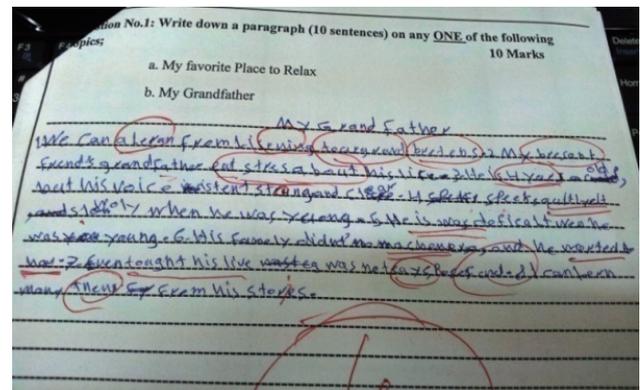
### Organization



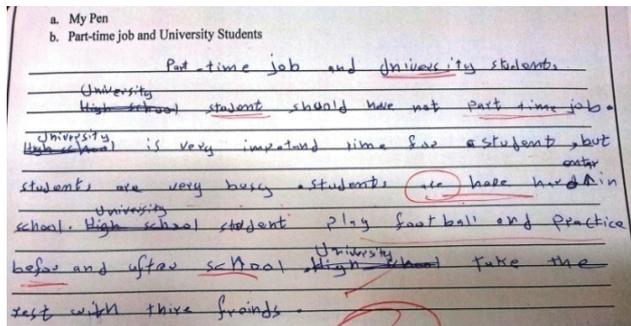
### Punctuation



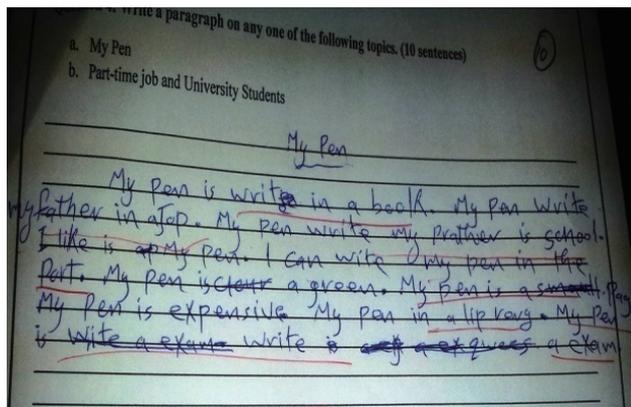
### Spelling



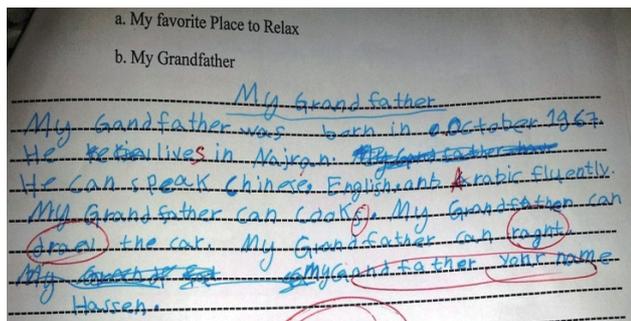
## Capitalization



## Vocabulary



## Grammar



### 6.1 Suggested Remedial Measures

The following suggestions and remedies may be useful to minimize the problems of organization, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and grammar.

#### Suggestions in General

- The first and utmost duty of the teacher is to make the writing task interesting and relevant to the students' interest. It will help them remove barriers and boost their motivation.
- Poor reading habits result in lack of ideas. Therefore, *Reading-to-write* activities can be more rewarding.
- Explaining rules is not enough for the students to understand instead there should be activity-based teaching.
- Writing skills could be developed through three phases i.e. controlled, guided, and free writing.

- The importance of home assignment cannot be denied but it is a matter of grave concern that most of the students intend to copy assignments of their classmates. Therefore, classwork is more reliable than any other task.

### 6.2 Remedial Strategies

The following areas need special attention as they have been pointed out by the respondents.

#### 6.2.1 Spelling

- Tricky techniques or activities are useful to enhance spelling skill i.e. slaughter is laughter with an 'S' at the beginning;

Slaughter

Laughter

- Spelling can be made easier by chopping up multi-syllabic words. For instance, parti-ci-pation
- Well-explained rules of plural formation can also help reduce spelling problems.
- Spell Check in the word processing can be rewarding in home assignments if the students pay attention to the misspelled words
- It has been observed by the researchers that the readers always read the whole body of words. They, generally, recognize the first, middle, and the last letters. Therefore, if the students make a deliberate effort to look at every single letter while reading, they will improve their spelling skills. The researchers practically exploited the following small paragraph in the class and the students were successful in reading out loudly.

#### Twisted Version of Text

The students should read all the words as a whole and also pay attention to individual letters. This continuous practice will make them not only recognize the body of words but also parts (letters), which will enhance their spelling skills.

#### Original Version of the Text

The students should read all the words as a whole and they must also pay attention to the individual letters. This continuous practice will make them not only recognize the body of the words but also the parts (letters). This will enhance their spelling skills.

#### 6.2.2 Capitalization

- The rules of capitalization should be explained with the help of text.
- While writing on the whiteboard, the teacher should use red or green board marker to highlight the beginning of proper nouns and the beginning of sentences.
- The students may be given a paragraph to punctuate it.

#### 6.2.3 Vocabulary

- The more active your vocabulary is, the more choices you have for communicating precisely what you intend to convey. Therefore, the art of accumulating and using a good stock of vocabulary should be taught positively.
- It is always advisable to teach vocabulary in *association* rather than in *isolation*. Learning new words

in isolation can be helpful sometimes, but remains inactive. The students do not know which part of speech the words belong to.

- A regular reading habit also results in accumulating vocabulary. Therefore, teachers must try their best to motivate students to develop reading habit.

- A list of *high frequency words* can be generated along with their usage in sentences.

- Teaching vocabulary in context and categories always shows better results. It can be taught in various situations.

#### 6.2.4 Grammar

- Grammatical accuracy is one of the important elements in a piece of writing. However, it should not be over-emphasized initially as it might block generating ideas in writing tasks.

- Habitual and frequent errors should be identified and corrected properly.

- Common grammatical errors should be communicated to the students properly. Furthermore, error-analysis helps students overcome their errors only if explained and corrected efficiently.

- In addition, self and peer correction should also be encouraged, which will motivate the students to write correctly.

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## CONCLUSION

In the light of the respondents' expert opinion and the students' writing samples, it has been inferred that students face more difficulty in organization, capitalization, vocabulary and grammar. It is advisable that teachers should attend some training sessions in order to be aware of the latest development in the field. In addition, keeping in view the educational and cultural backgrounds of the

students, teachers may devise more ways to tackle the identified problems in the best possible manner.

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## APPENDIX

### IDENTIFYING OBSTACLES IN WRITING (Questionnaires)

The in-hand questionnaire has been developed by the researchers to utilize the expertise of the lecturers and professors of the Najran University to identify the obstacles in writing among Saudi students (B.A. Level) studying at the College of Arts and Sciences, Najran University. Please check (√) where appropriate.

#### 1. Organization

| S.No. | Statement  | Always | Usually | Sometimes | Rarely | Never |
|-------|--|--------|---------|-----------|--------|-------|
| 1     | Students are clear about their writing task        |        |         |           |        |       |
| 2     | Students indent paragraphs properly in writing     |        |         |           |        |       |
| 3     | Students can organize ideas logically              |        |         |           |        |       |
| 4     | Students' writing seems to be a mess               |        |         |           |        |       |
| 5     | Students use transition words to achieve coherence |        |         |           |        |       |
| 6     | Students revise to reorganize their paragraph      |        |         |           |        |       |

#### 2. Spellings

| S.No. | Statement                                      | Always | Usually | Sometimes | Rarely | Never |
|-------|--|--------|---------|-----------|--------|-------|
| 1     | Students spell words accurately                |        |         |           |        |       |
| 2     | Students get confused in homophones            |        |         |           |        |       |
| 3     | Students get puzzled with /p/ and /b/          |        |         |           |        |       |
| 4     | Students can differentiate between /d/ and /b/ |        |         |           |        |       |
| 5     | Students write /w/ instead of /v/              |        |         |           |        |       |
| 6     | Students memorize spelling of relevant words   |        |         |           |        |       |

#### 3. Punctuation

| S.No. | Statement  | Always | Usually | Sometimes | Rarely | Never |
|-------|--|--------|---------|-----------|--------|-------|
| 1     | Students know where and when to punctuate                    |        |         |           |        |       |
| 2     | Students can differentiate between colon and semi colon      |        |         |           |        |       |
| 3     | Students are clear about the use of comma                    |        |         |           |        |       |
| 4     | Students use full stop or question mark properly             |        |         |           |        |       |
| 5     | Students use apostrophe to show contractions / possession    |        |         |           |        |       |
| 6     | Students make proper use of inverted commas in writing tasks |        |         |           |        |       |

#### 4. Capitalization

| S.No. | Statement   | Always | Usually | Sometimes | Rarely | Never |
|-------|---|--------|---------|-----------|--------|-------|
| 1     | Students use capital letter in the beginning of a sentence      |        |         |           |        |       |
| 2     | Students capitalize the first letter of proper nouns            |        |         |           |        |       |
| 3     | Students capitalize all important words in a title / topic      |        |         |           |        |       |
| 4     | Students capitalize the letter " I " when it comes as a pronoun |        |         |           |        |       |
| 5     | Students use capital letters for acronyms and abbreviations     |        |         |           |        |       |
| 6     | Students capitalize "H" in He while referring to Allah          |        |         |           |        |       |

#### 5. Vocabulary

| S.No. | Statement   | Always | Usually | Sometimes | Rarely | Never |
|-------|---|--------|---------|-----------|--------|-------|
| 1     | Students can use appropriate vocabulary in compositions                           |        |         |           |        |       |
| 2     | Students can use the same word in different forms/parts of speech                 |        |         |           |        |       |
| 3     | Students indulge in Reading-to-write activities                                   |        |         |           |        |       |
| 4     | Students can use compound nouns /adjectives                                       |        |         |           |        |       |
| 5     | Students write comprehensible words /phrases                                      |        |         |           |        |       |
| 6     | Students come up with varied words in order to make their composition presentable |        |         |           |        |       |

## 6. Grammar

| S.No. | Statement   | Always | Usually | Sometimes | Rarely | Never |
|-------|---|--------|---------|-----------|--------|-------|
| 1     | Students can use "Adjective and Nouns" in proper sequence |        |         |           |        |       |
| 2     | Students know "Subject-Verb " agreement                   |        |         |           |        |       |
| 3     | Students use basic sentence structures                    |        |         |           |        |       |
| 4     | Students can use required form of verbs in their writing  |        |         |           |        |       |
| 5     | Students use articles adequately                          |        |         |           |        |       |
| 6     | Students use modals and auxiliary verbs properly          |        |         |           |        |       |

Teacher's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Designation: \_\_\_\_\_

Qualification: \_\_\_\_\_

Teaching experience: \_\_\_\_\_