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Problems Facing English Major Students at Al-Quds and
Birzeit Universities and the Resultant Weaknesses in
their Writing Skill

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the EFL learning problems facing senior English major students at Al-Quds and Birzeit universities, as perceived by those students, regarding their writing skill, and the resultant weaknesses. The study, also examines the differences among the students in their perception of these problems and their writing weaknesses, due to the differences in the university enrollment, the place of residence, the school type and the secondary school stream of study. Furthermore, the study examines the correlation between the learning problems, namely, those related to the learner, the teacher, the curriculum and the learning environment, and the writing weaknesses on the essay, the paragraph, the sentence, the word and the mechanics of writing levels.

The population of the study consisted of 62 senior English major students at Al-Quds and Birzeit universities in the academic year 2004-2005. The learning problems and weaknesses were investigated using a refereed questionnaire and a writing test, which were answered by those students. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested using a pilot sample and its internal consistency factor (Chronbach Alpha) turned out to be (0.75) at (0.05) significance level. Three raters (including the researcher) assessed the writing test on the essay and the paragraph levels using an agreed upon checklist. The average of the marks given by the three raters was taken as a reliable measure of the writing weaknesses. The researcher also conducted a thorough error analysis to assess the weaknesses on the sentence, the word, and the mechanics of writing levels. The data collected from the questionnaire, the checklist-based assessment, and the error analysis processes were statistically analyzed.

The results of the statistical analysis have shown a low level of the learner related problems, a medium level of the teacher related problems, a high level of the curriculum related problems, and a medium level of the learning environment related problems. The mean comparison tests have shown that that there are no significant differences among the students' perception of the EFL learning problems due to the differences in the university, the place of residence, the school type, and the secondary school stream of study. The results of the statistical analysis have shown high level of weaknesses on the essay and the paragraph levels. Regarding the weaknesses on the sentence, the word, and the mechanics of writing levels, the results have shown that the sentence level has the highest percentage of errors followed by the word and the mechanics of writing levels respectively. The mean comparison tests have shown that there are no significant differences in the students' writing weaknesses due to the differences in the university, the place of residence, the school type, and the secondary school stream of study. The correlation test which was applied to each combination of the items of the EFL learning problems and the writing weaknesses has shown significant relationships between a considerable number of the EFL learning problem items and the writing weaknesses items on different levels of weaknesses and different types of the EFL learning problems.

In order to generalize the results obtained from such a study, the author recommends that the study must be applied to a larger number of universities and students with a collective effort from the teachers, the students, and the Ministry of Higher Education. Also, the study must be applied a number of times over different periods of the academic year.

المخلص

الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو التعرف إلى مشكلات تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، خاصة في مهارة الكتابة، التي تواجه طلاب السنة الرابعة في تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعتي القدس و بيرزيت كما يراها هؤلاء الطلاب. بالإضافة إلى البحث في الضعف الناتج لديهم في كتابتهم باللغة الإنجليزية. بحثت الدراسة أيضا في الفروق بين الطلاب من ناحية رؤيتهم لمشكلات تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية و الضعف الذي لديهم في كتابة اللغة الإنجليزية نتيجة للفروق في الجامعة التي ينتمي إليها الطالب و مكان السكن و نوع المدرسة التي تخرج منها و الفرع الذي أنهى فيه الثانوية العامة. كما هدفت الدراسة أيضا إلى دراسة العلاقة بين مشكلات تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية و تحديدا المتعلقة بالمتعلم و المعلم و المنهاج و البيئة التعليمية من جهة و الضعف الناتج لديهم في مهارة الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية على مستويات المقالة و الفقرة و الجملة و الكلمة و آليات الكتابة (علامات الترفيم و التهجئة) من جهة أخرى.

تكون مجتمع الدراسة من 62 طالبا من طلاب السنة الرابعة في تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعتي القدس و بيرزيت في العام الدراسي 2004-2005. و قد تمت دراسة مشكلات التعلم عن طريق استبانة محكمة أجاب عنها الطلاب بموازاة اختبار كتابي محكم كان المطلوب من الطالب فيه كتابة مقالة باللغة الإنجليزية و الهدف منه الكشف عن الضعف الذي يعاينه الطلاب في مهارة الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية. و قد تم فحص صدق و ثبات الاستبانة عن طريق تطبيقها على عينة اختباريه حيث وجد أن معامل الاتساق الداخلي (كرونباخ ألفا) يساوي (0.75) على مستوى دلالة يساوي (0.05). و قام بتقييم امتحان الكتابة ثلاثة مصححين (من ضمنهم الباحثة) معتمدين على قائمة تصحيح متفق عليها من أستاذين متخصصين. و قد تم اعتماد معدل العلامات من الثلاثة مصححين من أجل أن تكون عملية تقييم امتحان الكتابة ذات مصداقية و ثبات. كما قامت الباحثة بعملية تحليل معيارية و مفصلة للأخطاء التي ارتكبها الطلاب على مستوى الجملة و الكلمة و آليات الكتابة. و قد تمت معالجة البيانات التي تم الحصول عليها من الاستمارة و تقييم الاختبار و تحليل الأخطاء معالجة إحصائية.

أظهرت نتائج الدراسة مستوى منخفضا من المشاكل المتعلقة بالمتعلم، مستوى متوسطا من المشاكل المتعلقة بالمعلم، مستوى عاليا من المشاكل في المنهاج، و مستوى متوسطا من مشاكل البيئة التعليمية. كما أظهرت نتائج فحوص مقارنة المتوسط أنه لا توجد فروق ذات دلالة بين الطلاب في نظرهم للمشاكل التي تواجههم في تعلم مهارة الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية تعزى لاختلاف الجامعة و مكان السكن و المدرسة التي تخرج منها و الفرع الذي أنهى فيه الثانوية العامة. كما أظهرت النتائج الإحصائية أيضا أن لدى الطلاب مستوى عال من الضعف في الكتابة على مستوى المقالة و الفقرة. أما بالنسبة للضعف على مستوى الجملة و الكلمة و آليات الكتابة فقد أظهرت النتائج أن لدى الطلبة مستوى عاليا من الضعف على مستوى الجملة يليه مستوى الكلمة ثم مستوى الضعف في آليات الكتابة. و قد تبين من فحوص مقارنة المتوسط انه لا توجد فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية بين الطلاب في الضعف الذي لديهم في مهارة الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية تعزى لاختلاف الجامعة و مكان السكن و المدرسة التي تخرج منها و الفرع الذي أنهى فيه الثانوية العامة. أما فحص معامل الارتباط بين عناصر مشكلات تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية من جهة و عناصر الضعف التي يعاني منها الطلاب في كتابة اللغة الإنجليزية من جهة أخرى فقد أظهر عددا معتبرا من العلاقات ذات الدلالة بين هذه العناصر.

ومن أجل جعل نتائج مثل هذا البحث قابلة للتعميم فإن الباحثة تقترح تطبيق هذه الدراسة على عدد أكبر من الجامعات و الطلاب و بجهود تعاوني يشارك فيه الأساتذة و الطلاب و وزارة التعليم العالي على أن يتم تطبيق الدراسة عدة مرات على فترات مختلفة من العام الدراسي.

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1.3 Problem Statement and purpose of the Study

It is unfortunate to observe the general weakness among EFL students at the university level in Palestine. It has been the case to lay the blame for this weakness at students who in turn tend to blame the teaching-learning circumstances. As such, it is our purpose here to investigate the problems that cause weaknesses of the major English language department students in the writing skills at Al-Quds and Birzeit universities.

1.4 Significance of the Study

As will be shown in chapter 2, several studies, conducted on English major students at Arab universities have revealed serious weaknesses in those students communication skills. Some of the studies, also, tried to identify the problems causing these weaknesses. Other studies only address the learning problems quantitatively. However to the best of our knowledge, there isn't any study which has identified qualitatively and quantitatively the weaknesses in the writing skill and the problems facing English major students in developing it then statistically attributes the weaknesses to the learning problems. The importance of our study stems from being an analytical study in addition to being a descriptive one. So this study is of great importance to people working on the development of the English language teaching/learning process in the Arab world in general and in Palestine in particular. It is particularly important for EFL teachers and students at Palestinian universities. For teachers, it gives a feedback of the teaching process elements and results in their departments. It also draws their attention to the students attitudes, motivations and needs so as to improve their teaching methods, the curriculum used in the departments and the learning-teaching environment in a way that serves improving the students abilities and performance. For students, this study raises their awareness of the weaknesses they have in writing and urges them to improve themselves by taking the responsibility of curing the sources of the problems they face during and after their academic life.

1.5 Questions of the Study

The study aims at addressing the following questions:

- I. What problems do English major students at Al-Quds and Birzeit universities have in developing writing skill , as perceived by those students?
- II. Are there any differences in the students' perception of the learning problems due to:
 1. The university to which the student belongs, Al-Quds or Birzeit University.
 2. The place of residence, (city, village, refugee camp).
 3. The type of school from which the student graduated (private or governmental).
 4. The secondary school stream (literary or scientific).
- III. What are the weaknesses that English major students at Al-Quds University and Birzeit University, have in their writing product?
- IV. Are there differences in the students' weaknesses in writing skill due to:
 1. The university to which the student belongs, Al-Quds University or Birzeit University.
 2. Place of residence, (city, village, refugee camp)

3. The type of the secondary school from which the student graduated (private, governmental).
 4. The secondary school stream (i.e. scientific or literary).
- V. Are there any relationships between the weaknesses EFL students at the two universities show in their writing skill and the problems they face?

As will be shown in chapter 3, these questions were stated to deal with a population. As only 62 out of 83 students of the population successfully participated in the study, we had to consider them as a voluntary sample. So, null hypotheses for questions two and four are needed and will be as follows:

- *For question two, the null hypothesis is "There are no significant differences, at significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$), among the students in their perceptions of the learning problems due to the differences in the university, the place of residence, the type of the secondary school from which the student graduated, and the secondary school stream".*
- *For question four, the null hypothesis is "There are no significant differences, at significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$), in the students' weaknesses in writing skill due to the differences in the university, the place of residence, the type of the secondary school from which the student graduated, and the secondary school stream".*

The statistical analysis will be conducted on this basis.

1.6 Limitations of the study

In implementing our study, the following limitations were considered:

1. The population consisted of the senior English major students of the academic year 2004-2005 only. This is because they have almost completed all the writing courses.
2. The population is restricted to the senior English major students of Al-Quds and Birzeit Universities only.
3. The study is only concerned with the writing skill.
4. The writing test involved writing a four paragraph essay only.
5. The students were asked to write their essays on a specified topic, and to fill the attached questionnaire.

1.7 Organization

In **this chapter** we gave an overview of the learning process, including its elements and problems, in general. The learning elements and problems of learning English as a foreign language are identified with a special concentration on the writing skill. The aspects of the study like, problem statement, the purpose, limitations and the questions of the study are also defined.

Chapter-2 includes a literature survey of the weaknesses which the Arab EFL learners suffer in the writing skill. The problems facing the EFL learners in general, and the Arab EFL learners in particular, are also surveyed. The problems are presented and classified in association with the learning elements (the learners, the curriculum, the instructors and the environment). The weaknesses are then attributed to the problems according to what the literature suggests.

Chapter-3 includes a detailed description of the methodology. This includes a rationalization of the sections and the items of the questionnaire and the checklist prepared for assessing the essays written by the students. An explanation of the error analysis process of the written essays is provided. Also, the chapter includes a description and an explanation of each step of the data collection and the statistical analysis processes.

In chapter-4, the results of the statistical analysis are presented. Their implications to answering the questions of the study are discussed and clarified.

Chapter-5 includes the conclusions of the study, the recommendations and the suggested further work in this field of study.