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## Investigating Students' Writing Difficulties and Causes: the Case of Selected Public University in Ethiopia

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### Abstract

This study aimed at identifying students' difficulties in writing in university English classes. To achieve the intended objectives, a descriptive research design was employed. Students' written texts were used as the sources of the research data. Twenty copies of students' written texts were collected and examined for their errors. The finding indicated that inappropriate use of mechanics, inappropriate word choice, and inadequate sentence structure characterized many of the students' written texts. The analysis also showed that evidence of difficulty in using correct grammar, tenses and transitional markers was available in the analyzed texts. Overall, the errors observed in the analysis of the students' written works have made the messages of the students' written texts obscure. Relevant recommendations were forwarded.

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Writing skills, Writing difficulties, Writing readiness, English as foreign language, Meta cognitive skills, Instructional settings

### Introduction

English plays a prominent role in the world today. It serves as a working language in various fields of business, science and technology. It is used as a Lingua Franca among peoples of different nations, states, or countries that speak different languages. In addition, English is the dominant business language and has become almost a necessity for people to speak it if they are to enter a global workforce. Research shows that cross-border business communication is most often conducted in English and many international companies expect their employees to be fluent in the language. In general, English appears to have gained the power to weave the world together.

Like in business, English is an essential language in education. It serves as a medium of instruction beginning at different levels of the educational sector in many parts of the world. In Ethiopia, too, English has been used both as a compulsory school subject and a medium of instruction for nearly a century now.

English language is taught as a subject starting from grade one in all schools in Ethiopia. It is also used as the medium of instruction in the secondary and higher education institutions although variations can be observed among the regional governments in the country about the level at which English begins to be used as a medium of instruction.

The curriculum of the new education and training policy of Ethiopia (1994) was designed focusing on the

competencies the students should attain at different levels of the educational ladder. The curriculum aspires to effectively prepare future professionals for diverse job opportunities in the areas where the country needs skilled professionals. Writing skill is among the language skills in which the country needs skilled professionals. Apparently, the primary purpose of writing courses is to help students develop competencies in writing in English. This means that writing courses are offered to help students develop academic writing skills and attain the learning demands placed on them in their academic career at the university. Beyond the academic context, university writing courses are expected to produce students who can give professional services in writing to government and non-government organizations, private companies and different institutions in their future field of work.

As an effort to realize this, different modules for teaching writing have been prepared and are now in use in higher education institutions. After completing their writing courses, students in higher education are expected to achieve minimum competences in the skill. Writing discourses of science and technology, writing and analyzing literary works, writing reports, minutes and business communications are among the writing competencies associated with the writing courses offered to students in higher education

Learning to write coherently and in a way which is appropriate for one's purpose and audience is something which many people find difficult to achieve despite the fact that a substantial part of the educational process is devoted to the development of the skill. Nunan (1999) states that writing is among the most difficult skill for students to learn. Producing a coherent, fluent, and extended piece of text, in Nunan's opinion, is a difficult task to do in language classes. Doing this is even more challenging for foreign language learners. This study, has therefore, been designed to identify the writing difficulties students face.

### **Statement of the problem**

Writing is used extensively in higher education and in the workplace. If students do not know to express themselves well in writing, they will not be able to communicate with their instructors, or peers in their academic career or with their employers and colleagues later in the world of work. Much of academic communication is done in writing. For example, writing proposals, memos, reports, e-mails, etc., are part of the

daily life of university students. Even if some students manage to learn the material in their university classes without knowing how to write well, they may not be able to express their knowledge to the people who are making big decisions in their lives.

In recognition of the prominent place writing has in students' academic life, a greater attention has been given to the educational curricula and framework and promote the learners' writing skill and competences since recently. Hence, writing has a unique position in language teaching. Its acquisition involves practice and knowledge of the other three language skills - listening, reading and speaking. Moreover, writing requires mastering of other skills, such as meta cognitive skills. Learners need to set an objective for their writing, plan it carefully, think about its layout and logical structure and revise it. In the process of writing students have to use cognitive skills; they have to analyze their sources and then synthesize them in a compact piece of writing. Therefore, knowing how to write is a valuable asset in a foreign language communication.

In the context of higher education institution in Ethiopia, writing is an especially important language skill. This is because students are required to produce a variety of written texts in English. For example, they write essays to express their opinions and illustrate their knowledge of the courses. They write examinations, academic papers and research or laboratory reports. However, learners at different levels of education in the universities in the country find it difficult to acquire the writing skill required at their level. The status of the writing skills of students in the secondary school appears to be much worse but discussing it in depth is not the concern of this study, as university students are the focus of the study.

Students at all levels in university English departments are required to write essays and compositions both in class and in final exams. Student-written texts are normally marked and judged by their teachers. Among others, language use, unity, consistency, organization, diction, and relevance of content to given tasks are among the criteria markers often consider to judge the students' writings. The researcher has noticed that learners in general lack adequate skill to express themselves and their ideas in a coherently developed written text in university context.

Numerous studies have investigated problems which hinder students from expressing themselves in writing. For example, Teh (2005) points out that writing is the

skill most Malaysian students are less proficient in; they do not know how to accomplish the written tasks in satisfactory ways. This implies that in the process of learning writing learners faced difficulties and did not get the right response to their writing difficulties from their instructors. Or it may be the case that the students failed to attend to their teacher responses as properly as was needed.

Furthermore, ÖzgeRazı, (2013) states those Turkish students who learn EFL usually find it difficult to write well. In the same way, Haiwen Mo (2013) investigated the teaching of writing in English in one college in China, and reported that college students' writing ability is far from satisfactory.

Nofal (2010) investigated the reasons behind the weaknesses of English major students writing skill in Philadelphia University, Jordan. He states that students in the university could not express themselves adequately in writing. According to Nofal, most discrete characteristics of a good paragraph are virtually absent in the writing of most students considered in the study. Nofal noted that unity, consistency, order and coherence are lacking in the students' writing. In addition, Nofal reported that the students considered in the study could not signal the direction of their thoughts by the use of transitional words such as, 'however', 'moreover', 'nevertheless', and phrases like 'on the other hand', 'in fact', 'of course', etc.

According to Al-Buainain (2010), there is a general consensus among English language instructors at the University of Qatar - they tend to agree that most EFL students are weak in writing courses., Ansari (2012), on the other hand, mentioned that more than 50% of students in Saudi Arabia face difficulties in expressing their opinion, ideas, feeling and thoughts through writing.

Similarly, a number of local studies have reported that the level of many students' writing skill at different levels of education is far below the desired level. According to Mesfin (2013) there are many factors that make university students produce written texts which are below their standard. Students' lack of experience of practicing writing at the secondary school in Mesfin's opinion, is among the front ranking factors. Kefelegn (2003) reported that the major problems in learning in general are the students' lack of a good command of the target language. Moreover, Solomon (2004) explained that most students at the secondary school level do not

produce written texts which meet the required standard. In the same way, Tsegaye (2006) reported in his study that most grade twelve students were unable to write meaningful sentences, let alone large texts like paragraphs or essays. This indicates that university students lack the background needed to develop their writing skill prior to joining universities.

Similarly, Yonas (1996) and Haregewoin (2008) confirmed that most students who joined Addis Ababa University could hardly produce paragraphs or essays which met the required standard. Teshome (2007) explored the effectiveness of the teaching and learning of writing and reported that there was a significant mismatch between the purpose of teaching and learning writing and the actual writing classroom practices. He reported that writing is not taught as a communicative skill.

In summary, related studies reviewed locally and globally seem to confirm that students at different levels of education have inadequate writing skills. The main purpose of the present study is therefore to identify the difficulties university students face in writing.

### **Objective of the study**

Identifying the writing difficulties that university students face is the objective of this study.

### **Materials and Methods**

#### **Research design**

In this study, the researcher used a descriptive design. This research design describes relationships that exist, beliefs that are held, effects that are evident, or trends that are developing. A descriptive design is non-experimental; it deals with the relationships among non-manipulated variables (Best and Kahn, 2003). A descriptive design has a high degree of representativeness and the ease in which a researcher can obtain the participants' opinion (Polit & Beck 2004). In this study, the respondents' views on the difficulties they face while writing were obtained and described.

#### **Research setting**

In the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Regional State (SNNPRS), there are ten universities. Thus, the researcher collected data from Arbaminch University. The researcher selected the research site

because of its proximity. This helped the researcher easy to access the expected data.

### **Participants of the study and sampling techniques**

According to the information obtained from the Department of the English Language and Literature, Arbaminch University, the number of section of students was one in 2011 E.C. From this section, twenty copies of students' written works were randomly selected and analyzed using the aspects prepared for this issue.

### **Results and Discussion**

Shangarfan and Mamipour (2011) stated that writing is a crucial language skill that has largely attracted the attention of researchers. Writing is a crucial language skill because it contributes to learning a new language. Learning writing requires a lot of time and excessive attention. Moreover, the skill of writing is a major factor for a successful academic performance in educational contexts. Most of the students often encounter several difficulties in writing and they consider it as a challenging task to carry out as a result of various instructions they need to respect.

It is important for teachers to recognize areas of difficulties in students' writing and assist them to address the areas. Difficulties can be in grammar, spelling, vocabulary, punctuation, capitalization, content, and idea generation etc. Frequently, students who have difficulty in writing demonstrate a significant discrepancy between oral expression and reading ability. This functional gap is a source of extreme frustration for everyone involved, particularly the students who do not understand why they are unable to write with the same ease as they can understand, think and discuss. Sources of this breakdown include: lack of skill/expertise with the writing process - i.e. putting thoughts on paper in an organized, sequenced and edited form, not following the necessary writing stages - i.e. prewriting and writing, weak active working memory - i.e. remembering and using all the skills involved in written production: expressing ideas and knowledge, grammar, punctuation, capitalization, editing, weak revision and proofreading skills.

The objective of this study was identifying the main writing difficulties that university students face. To address this objective, texts written by twenty students were selected randomly and analyzed as follows.

Essays written by each of the twenty study participants were used as data sources for the study. After collecting the essays, the researcher read them in detail and identified the errors in the texts.

The above figure shows the summary of errors committed by students when they wrote texts. A total of 1088 errors were identified and categorized into 16 error types. Some of the errors noted in the essays were errors in word choice, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Other error types observed in the essays include errors in sentence structure, in grammar and singular/plural use, and errors in using transitional markers. Errors in tenses, prepositions, and word order were yet other error categories found in students written texts. There were also word omissions, colloquial language and wrong use of pronoun antecedents in some of the essays analyzed in this study.

As indicated in the figure, there exist five main errors with high frequency in students' written work. These include errors in word choice/poor vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, capitalization and sentence structure with a percentage of (12.04%), (10.84%), (9.83%), (9.46%) and (9.00%) respectively. Moreover, students committed errors of difficulty in grammar by (7.16%). In addition, errors of singular/plural, missing words, wrong use of transitional markers, tense and the clarity of meaning appeared in approximate percentages (6.98%) and (6.52%), (5.79), (5.42%) and (5.23%). Furthermore, less frequency errors in students' written text were awkward phrasing by (3.49%). errors in appropriate use of colloquial language by (3.12%), wrong use of pronoun antecedent reference with (2.48%), prepositions (1.93%), and word order (0.62%).

As revealed in figure 1, students have committing a wide range of errors while writing using the target language. Mastering writing skill is a very difficult task for students of English as a foreign language. Most students tend to commit errors in writing. A close examination of the written texts shows that many, students wrote very little, and this might be explained by their limited vocabulary. Many found it difficult to get appropriate words and phrases to express their ideas. This is an expression of their lack of adequate vocabulary. As revealed in the data in this study, the students had the greatest difficulty in choosing appropriate words to express their ideas clearly. There were instances in the student-written texts in which some messages were totally obscure due to incorrect word usage.

Vocabulary is a basic component of language and communication. This has made it a central part of language learning. In learning writing, students face difficulties to express their ideas and communicate messages to their readers. They also cannot grasp what other people write if they do not master vocabulary. Having good vocabulary stock is therefore an important thing for students to express their ideas in writing. This can be realized by giving a special importance to vocabulary learning as (Thornbury 2002:13) claimed “without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary *nothing* can be conveyed.”

According to Shejbalová (2006) more importantly, knowing words generally means knowing their meanings, basic forms and their distribution which often results a confusing for students at different occasions. As the researcher examined the written work of the students, they fail to know the meaning, forms and distribution of vocabulary in their written work. In other words, developing vocabulary through memorizing words of a list is not sufficient, for students to acquire vocabulary they need to learn words as a part of the context in which they occur. As Mehring, (2005) states knowing the words in the context they appear help the students to understand the word's correct usage. Moreover, Yongqi Gu as cited in Mehring (2005) asserts that vocabulary acquisition is a learner-centered activity with the effectiveness of the learners' strategies depending on their attitude and motivation towards new vocabulary acquisition. As a result, vocabulary can have a great impact on students writing for the importance, and the contribution it adds to the value of writing ability. Therefore, students are expected to have a positive attitude towards learning new vocabulary, and to recognize new words as part of their context of occurrence, while attempting to identify their meanings. This helps the students how to use vocabulary correctly in their writing.

Spelling, punctuation and capitalization are of high frequency errors among the other deficiencies identified in this study. The ability to spell accurately is an important aspect of any written communication; and is usually associated with one's level and quality of education. While spelling is often used to judge an individual's written language competency, for many students it is a difficult task to master. Learning to spell words correctly is expected to take place in the earliest stages of language teaching, yet it is always the case for spelling to become difficult in some instances. According to Bancha (2013), difficulties in writing are

partly linked to difficulties in spelling. Misspelling words is partly a result of the irregularities of the English spelling system. Bancha further explained that spelling mistakes may occur when students are less concentrated due to tiredness or carelessness about the correctness of words. Harmer (2001: 256) states that “...the correspondence between the sound of a word and the way it is spelt is not always obvious”. Furthermore, he indicates that the reason spelling is difficult for students is “...the fact that not all varieties of English spell the same words in the same way”.

As reported earlier in this work, many students in this study committed errors in spelling. The types of spelling errors seen in this study were categorized according to Cook's classification of errors. Cook's classification of spelling errors includes ‘omission’ or ‘substitution’ of certain letters, Language acquisition is considered a hypothesis testing. This means that students in their trial and error testing either add or omit certain letters in their writing.

Most of the time academic writing poses challenges to both teachers and students. One of these challenges is orthographic errors made by students of English as a foreign language. Orthographic errors can sometimes be relatively harmful, as they undermine the credibility of any piece of writing, and even raise questions related to the writer's basic literacy skills. This is why analyzing learners' errors has attracted the attention of many theoreticians and practitioners in the field of education. The analysis, if properly carried out, is believed to enhance students' performance in any EFL writing classroom; it should provide teachers with the required information about their students' performance in general and linguistic weaknesses, which hinder their improvement, in particular.

The common understanding in the field of education is that errors are inevitable, i.e. errors cannot be avoided in the sense that they are an inseparable part of the language learning process. Hence, eliminating or rather reducing the frequency of errors made by learners in English as a foreign language writing classroom is largely associated with analyzing types and causes of such errors, among other factors. The analysis of the data in this study revealed that punctuation and capitalization are of high frequency errors. The researcher tried to identify, discuss, and attempt a solution to these errors in the present study, as they are frequently made and commonly observed in students' writings at the selected public university.

Punctuation and capitalization present obstacles in writing. Carroll and Wilson (1993) illustrate three problems linked to punctuation. The first problem is that punctuation rules are not totally exact. Punctuation is complex, and it depends on one's style to determine the meaning. The way a student punctuates writing can change the meaning completely, because each punctuation mark is a distinctive way of interpreting the meaning. Therefore, students need to pay attention to the way they punctuate, which is in most cases a problem for them.

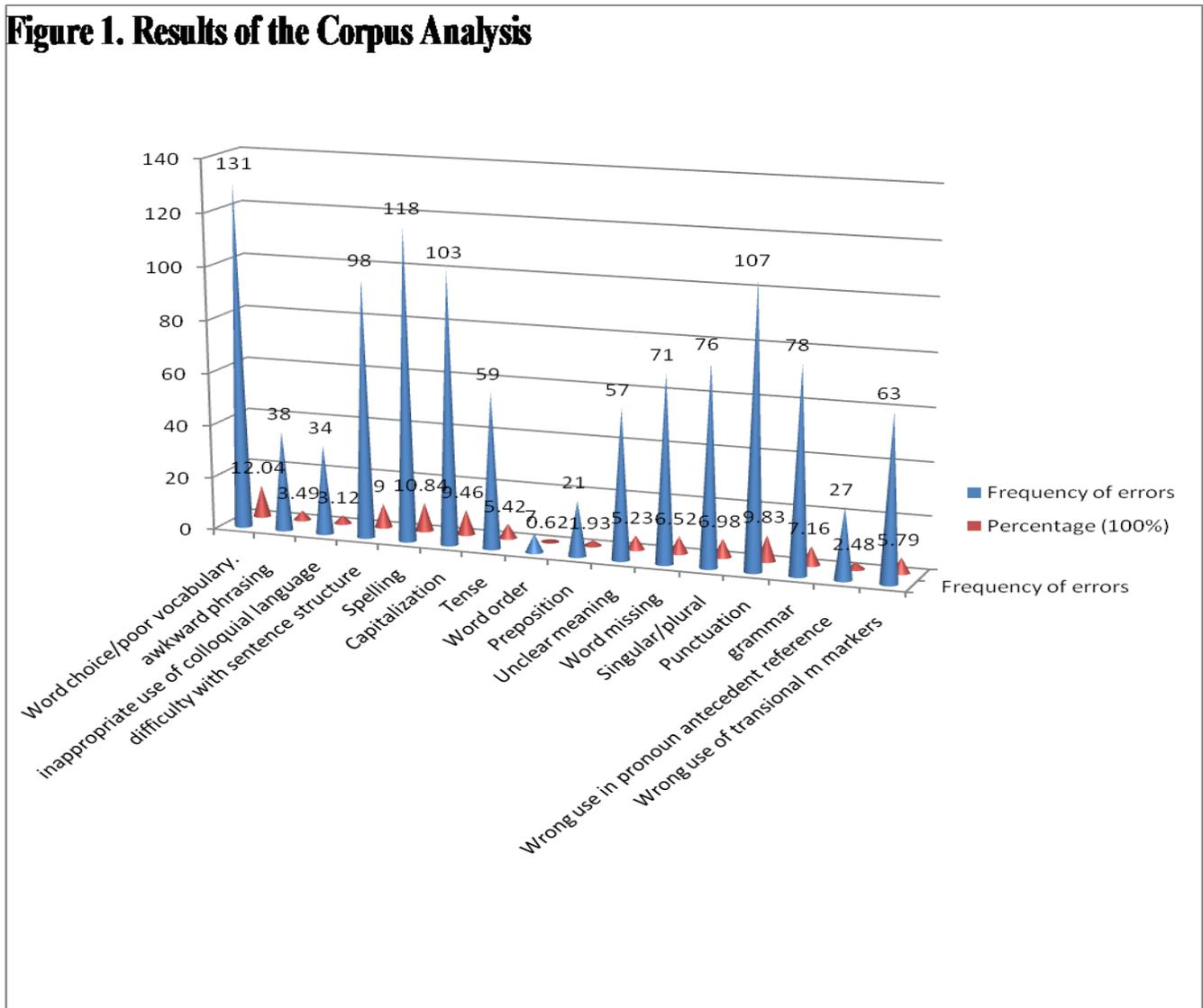
contributed negative impact to the construction of good sentences. However, to be effective, sentences must be grammatically correct. In addition, sentences should be well chosen and effectively combined with a goal of clarity, emphasis and interest. These goals are often thrown off target by any one of a variety of common errors in sentence structure.

The errors examined above in students written work such as spelling, capitalization and punctuation have all

In terms of grammar, students are at fault for writing incomplete sentences to express a complete thought. The main writing difficulties students find in relation to grammar is the low understanding of grammar, which results later on in difficulties in arranging proper writing (Bahri and Sugeng, 2010).

Figure.1 Below summarizes the data obtained from the analysis of student-written texts

Figure 1. Results of the Corpus Analysis



## Conclusions

The objective of this study was to identify the writing difficulties that students face in selected public university. To achieve this, students' written work was used as data source. Twenty copies of students' written works were collected and studied in detail. This was done to identify the students' writing difficulties.

Increasing the writing proficiency of students is a challenging task especially in the case of English as foreign language learners. The complexity of writing as a cognitive process requires profound considerations to the rules, and careful use of the target language. During writing composition, students generally hesitate to write, for they strive to find the proper words, struggle with the grammar of the language, or they may find punctuation difficult.

The findings of this research reveal that students at selected public university of Ethiopia have writing difficulties. According to the results obtained from the corpus analysis of students' written works reveal that the majority of errors found were in relation to spelling, capitalization, punctuation and vocabulary. Therefore, EFL teachers are advised to use these findings for an effective teaching of writing in the future, whereas students are encouraged to use the findings in developing their writing proficiency.

## Recommendations

On the basis of the major findings in this study and the conclusions drawn, the researcher forwarded the following recommendations.

Among language skills reading is very important to increase the knowledge of vocabulary, grammatical structure, idea generation, etc. So, students should read more books, magazines, course modules etc to widen their minds in generating ideas and increase the vocabulary proficiency.

EFL teachers should let their students for free writing practice. It is a good exercise for improving one's writing skill. Writing is a skill and therefore it requires continuous practice like any other language skill. Moreover, note taking and note making are very helpful in enhancing the way students generate ideas. So, students are expected to do such activities regularly in their life.

EFL teachers create affiliation with the Department of English Language and literature to establish the writing

center in the university level to develop the writing culture of students in general.

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