

The Effect of English Writing Proficiency In The Type And Amount Of Errors Produced By Moroccan EFL Students.

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Abstract: *The present paper is mainly concerned with the study of the effect of English writing proficiency in the type and amount of errors produced by Moroccan EFL students. It is meant to see whether the writing proficiency has an effect on the errors produced by students, and whether there are ways to overcome the making of such errors. The participants in this study are first year letter Moroccan EFL students enrolled in "Ibn Battouta" high school for the term 2008. Therefore, to meet the objectives of this study, 97 students participated in this study. The written test was the only instrument used. The data obtained has been quantitatively analyzed through the use of the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS). The results of the paper showed that the English proficiency in writing affects deeply the amount and type of errors made by Moroccan EFL students.*

Keywords: *writing, error analysis, English writing proficiency*

I. Introduction:

Globalization can be described as a process by which people of the world are unified into a single society and function together. The emergence of this concept made the world face a new challenge. This made them think about a way that can help people get together and understand each other. The new political space boosted the learning of foreign languages in order to facilitate the communication between nations and help them narrow the filter that separates them. Therefore, the learning of English emerged all over the world since it was considered as a language that can be spoken beyond the frontiers. The learning of English was integrated in almost all the educational curricula and from the early stages.

In recent years, the Moroccan educational system encouraged the learning of foreign languages, especially English. New curricula were designed and new teaching materials were introduced in order to facilitate the learning of the foreign languages. English was not only introduced in high schools but also in secondary schools and private primary schools.

Yet, despite the awareness of the importance of learning different language skills, curriculum designers give more importance to the development of communication skills at the expense of writing. Students are exposed to writing from their early learning stages; however, their level of proficiency differs considerably. Students tend to make errors in their writing. For this reason curriculum designers should give more importance to the development of the writing skills.

1. Statement of the problem and the rationale

Teaching a foreign language is not an easy task. A great number of teachers tend to simplify their language and the lessons that they have to teach in order to make the students motivated and willing to learn a new language. Learning a foreign language implies learning how to read, listen, speak and write in that language. The ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill, it is usually learned. Writing skills must be practiced and learned through experience. Moroccan students had the ability to write in Arabic and French but the problem is that writing in a new language requires new techniques and methods, because they are using a new system.

Since the process of writing in English is not an easy task for Moroccan students, we expect them to face some problems that will push them to make various errors. Therefore we can ask the following questions:

- ❖ How do Moroccan students find writing in a new language?
- ❖ Is there a difference in their level of proficiency in English writing?
- ❖ What are the types of errors that students make?
- ❖ How can teachers help students produce good papers?

The study's aim then, is to attempt to find answers to the questions and related concerns so as to be able to know the effect of English writing proficiency on the amount and type of errors produced by EFL Moroccan students.

2- The rationale of the study:

Throughout the history of literacy, writing was given a higher status. It was considered as the major medium of language. Nevertheless in recent years, focus is shifted to oral skills. The majority of curricula give a great importance to communication and the ability to speak accurately and fluently. In the light of the aforementioned, writing remains an area which has received little attention in many countries including Morocco, particularly in high schools and primary school levels.

The study will attempt to show how writing proficiency in English affects the number and type of errors produced by Moroccan EFL students.

3- The objectives of the study:

The major objectives of the study are:

- ❖ To see the relation between the writing proficiency in English and the types and amount of errors produced by Moroccan EFL students.
- ❖ To identify the different types of errors made by Moroccan EFL students.
- ❖ To find out ways to help students overcome these errors.

4- Research questions:

The study has three major questions to investigate:

- ❖ What is the relation between writing proficiency in English and the type and amount of errors produced by Moroccan EFL students?
- ❖ What are the different types of errors that are made by Moroccan EFL learners?
- ❖ How can teachers help students overcome the writing errors?

II. Literature review.

English is seen as the dominant international language in communication, science, business and other fields. It is spoken approximately all over the world, since it is a Lingua Franca. Hence it is appropriate to admit that written English is the predominant medium. Written English has an important role in the world today. It helps people and professionals communicate, maintain, and circulate their ideas.

EFL students especially in Morocco, are introduced to the written English in order to develop their productive skills. Teachers try to give students the necessary tips that they will have to use so as to produce a good paper. Added to this, it would be worth mentioning that writing is a complex and many-sided activity. It requires a number of skills and a certain level of proficiency. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to provide an operational definition of all the concepts and constructs that have a relation with the present study.

I- What is writing?

In this section I will attempt to clarify the meaning of writing as it appears in dictionaries, encyclopedias and web-sites. I shall also attempt to discuss the different views about writing namely writing as a process and as a product. Finally, I will state the writing stages that writers (EFL learners) should abide by in their writings.

1.2- Writing as a system

In *A History of Writing*, Steven Roger Fischer [1] argues that no one definition of writing can cover all the writing systems that exist and have ever existed. Instead he states that a 'complete writing' system should fulfill all the following criteria:

- Complete writing must have as its purpose communication.
- Complete writing must consist of artificial graphic marks on a durable or electronic surface.
- Complete writing must use marks that relate conventionally to articulate speech (the systematic arrangement of significant vocal sounds) or electronic programming in such a way that communication is achieved.

Writing systems are both functional, providing a visual way to represent language, and also symbolic, in that they represent cultures and peoples. In *The writing systems of the world*, Florian Coulmas describes them as follows:

As the most visible items of a language, scripts and orthographies are 'emotionally loaded', indicating as they do group loyalties and identities. Rather than being mere instruments of a practical nature, they are symbolic systems of great social significance which may, moreover, have profound effect on the social structure of a speech community. [2]

1.3- Writing as a process

Writing as a process developed as a reaction to product approach, it questions the simplistic assumptions of product approach. On the pragmatic level it focuses on self discovery and authorial voice. [3] It stresses the need to plan out writing as a goal oriented contextualized activity. Donald M. Murray said in his article writing as process: how writing finds its own meaning that:

At the beginning of the composing process there is only blank paper. At the end of the composing process there is a piece of writing which has detached itself from the writer and found its own meaning, a meaning the writer probably did not intend. [4]

A process approach to writing sees writing as a process of several steps, beginning first with generating ideas, writing to discover what one wants to say, revising, getting feedback, from various readers and writing again, only at the final stages is editing done for grammatical and mechanical accuracy (Claudia L. Keh, 1990). [5]

Writing is a creative discovery procedure characterized by the dynamic interplay of content and language: the use of language to explore beyond the known content. Although writers do plan, they are obliged to adapt their strategies as they write.

(Perl S., 1979) [6] wrote an article entitled the composing processes of unskilled college writers; research in the teaching of English. the important finding of this research is that writing is a discovery process for both skilled and unskilled writers the difference however between the two is the fact that unskilled writers are more concerned with the surface features of the text and do not engage deeply in exploring their ideas.

(Nancy summers, 1980) [7] worked on revision strategies of students writers and experienced adult writers she found out that revising is an important composing process which gives writers the opportunity to develop their content further and avoid errors.

According to many specialists, writing is a process that involves at least four distinct steps: Prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. It is known as a recursive process.

1.4- Stages of writing process:

Writing is a task that no two people do the same way. However, there are some logical steps that every writer seems to follow in the creation of a paper.

➤ Prewriting:

Prewriting is the first step in the writing process. It includes thinking, brainstorming either ideas or details that may support the thesis statement, outlining, gathering information and identifying the audience. It is defined as anything the writer does before writing a draft of his document.

➤ Drafting:

Drafting occurs when the writer puts his ideas into sentences and paragraphs. Learners should not expect perfection in their draft. They should write with the knowledge that change is desirable and necessary in the writing process. At this stage, learners do not pay attention to spelling and other grammatical features. Drafting is seen as writer centred since it is the stage at which the writers tell themselves what they know about the topic.

➤ Revising:

At this stage learners think more deeply about their reader's needs and expectations. They make sure that the thesis statement is clear and that they have clear topic sentences. They rethink and rearrange ideas, sentences and paragraphs to best support their thesis. They check the unity and coherence. They make sure that each paragraph provides good details and well-chosen examples. Finally, they gather additional information to support their paper. Murray identifies two distinct kinds of revision: internal and external. [8] Through the internal revision writers concentrate on fully exploring what has been discovered on the page and rework the subject, the information, the arguments, and the structure until they are satisfied that the meaning is successfully communicated. External revision is that briefer final process of preparing the essay for an external audience. It involves concern with style, tone, language and mechanics.

➤ Editing:

This is the final stage. Writers check grammar, spelling, mechanics and punctuation. They make sure that the language is exact, concise, and fresh. They proofread for errors in punctuation, spelling, and mechanics.

According to what has been said before, writing is a very demanding task which requires cognitive energy and efforts and a good practice in composing. [9]

2. The implication, of the Critical Period Hypothesis in L2 acquisition.

2.1. The Crititcal Period Hypothesis:

The Critical Period Hypothesis states that the first few years of life is the crucial time in which an individual can acquire a first language if presented with adequate stimuli. If language input does not occur until after this time, the individual will never achieve a full command of language, especially grammatical systems.

In general it is a time in the early stages of an organism's life during which it displays a heightened sensitivity to certain environmental stimuli, and develops in particular ways due to experiences at this time. If the organism does not receive the appropriate stimuli during this critical period, it may be difficult, or even impossible to develop some functions later in life.

Lenneberg (1967) believes that: 'the language acquisition device, like other biological functions, works successfully only when it is stimulated at the right time.' [10]

2.2. Crit ical period for l2 acquisition:

Lenneberg (1967) hypothesized that language could be acquired only within a critical period, extending from early infancy until puberty. [11] In its basic form, the critical period hypothesis need only have consequences for first language acquisition. Nevertheless, it is essential to our understanding of the nature of the hypothesized critical period to determine whether or not it extends as well to second language acquisition. If so, it should be the case that young children are better second language learners than adults and should consequently reach higher levels of final proficiency in the second language.

Scientists tried to find out whether or not there really is a critical period and conducted a number of researches and studies which attempted to approve or disapprove of this hypothesis.

3. Writing proficiency and errors

3.1 Language proficiency

Language proficiency or linguistic proficiency is the ability of an individual to speak or perform in an acquired language. As theories vary among pedagogues as to what constitutes proficiency, there is little consistency as to how different organisations classify it. Additionally, fluency and language competence are generally recognised as being related, but separate controversial subjects. In predominant frameworks in the United States, proficient speakers demonstrate both accuracy and fluency, and use a variety of discourse strategies. Thus, a high number of native speakers of a language can be fluent without being considered proficient.

A limited English proficient student, is one who comes from a non-English background and who has sufficient difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language, and whose difficulties may deny such an individual the opportunity to learn successfully in classrooms where the language of instruction is English or to participate fully in our society.

3.2. Writing errors

Although current trends in second language acquisition theory do not seem to favour the role of error analysis in understanding learner's second language acquisition process, it is believed that it is still crucial to analyze errors made by second language learners as this can give all parties involved in the teaching field some insight on why errors occur, where they stem from and offer thus some valuable input for curriculum and materials writers. Systematically analyzing errors made by language learners makes it possible to determine areas that need reinforcement in teaching.

3.3. Tips of Good Writing.

Good writing expresses a clear point, is tightly structured, grammatically and syntactically correct, substantive, and interesting. To express a clear point means to convey the writer's main idea or, in the case of descriptive writing, the significance of the object, place or person described, in other words, an attentive reader should be able to grasp the writer's purpose. To be tightly structured, writing should contain logical or associative connections and transitions that clearly express the relationship of the ideas described. To be grammatically and syntactically correct, writing should adhere to the rules of Standard English, including proper punctuation and spelling.[12] If writers choose to use unconventional syntax, they should be able to justify their choices. To be substantive, writing should convey the impression that the writer is informed about the subject. The writer does not need to be an authority on the subject but should demonstrate awareness of its significance and its implications within a specified context. Informed writing might include any or all of the following: citations of authorities, experiential evidence, and discussion of debatable issues related to it, and relevant questions it raises. To be interesting, writing should engage its readers through original insights and precise, fresh language expressed in a "human" voice. It should demonstrate the writer's awareness of the specific audience for whom she/ he is writing. [13]

III. Research design.

1. The target population.

Ninety seven first year letter students that are enrolled in 'Ibn Battouta' high school, are the target population. Their amount of exposure to English is the same, but their level of proficiency differs considerably. After the written test the sample was divided into three groups according to their level of proficiency in English writing: high, middle and low.

2. Instruments

In order to be able to answer the research questions, a corpus of relevant data needs to be collected through relevant instruments. This paper has opted for a writing test in which the students are given instructions to write about a specific topic. The topic or subject is as follows:

'You are at a clothes shop. You want to buy a jacket. Imagine the conversation between the shop-assistant and yourself.'

The task was carried out in the classroom and the subjects were allowed one hour to do the task.

3. Data analysis.

The analysis of the written essays will be done according to the holistic approach in order to be able to divide students according to their level of proficiency. Then the analysis of the major errors made by students will be processed. The study will try to find out if there is a relation between proficiency in writing and the errors made by students.

The study will make use of descriptive statistics in order to analyse the scores and errors of students. For each component we will make use of frequencies and percentages calculated by the aid of the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS). Therefore, we will try to draw a general pattern for analysis, discussion and interpretation of the findings.

4. Data collection.

The target population set for a written test that was relevant to the participants' level. This test was distributed to 97 first year letter students in 'Ibn Battouta' high school in kenitra, in the presence and with the help of their English teacher. The students performed the task within the allotted time. They were given instructions about the topic since some students needed further explanations. Once the students finished their writing tasks, the papers were collected and given to their teacher to correct them by adopting the holistic approach and then identify the different mistakes made by students.

IV. Presentation of the results.

This chapter will report the results yielded by the analysis of the written essays. It will first divide the students into three groups: high, middle, low according to their writing proficiency. It will then try to find the frequent errors that are made by students in order to see the effect of writing proficiency on the type and amount of errors made by Moroccan EFL students.

1- Proficiency level of students.

First of all students were divided into three level groups based on the scores that they had in the written test.

	N	%
High	46	47,4
Middle	34	35,1
Low	17	17,5
Total	97	100,0

The majority of students in this sample have a high proficiency level in writing (47%). (35%) of students have a middle proficiency level in writing and only (17%) have low proficiency level. This shows that there is a clear difference in the level of students especially when it comes to writing.

2- Writing errors produced by Moroccan EFL students.

After correcting and analysing the papers of all the target population, we tried to see the frequent errors that are made by students. Then in this section we will try to see if the proficiency level has an effect on the type and amount of the errors that are produced by Moroccan EFL students

Of the total subjects that this study covers, only (23%) of students with high proficiency make punctuation errors. In middle group (47%) of learners make this type of error and in the low group (64%) of students. This shows that people with low proficiency level in writing tend to make lot of punctuation errors which may make their production meaningless.

❖ Capitalization.

	N	%
High	4	8.6
Middle	11	32.3
Low	11	64.7

In the high group only (8%) make capitalisation errors. (32%) of students in the middle group and over (64%) of learners in the low group make this errors. We can say that capitalization errors are mostly linked to the first kind of error which is punctuation. Since the majority of students in low group make punctuation errors therefore they tend to make capitalisation errors because of the lack of punctuation in their essays.

❖ Spelling.

	N	%
High	28	60.8
Middle	33	97.1
Low	14	82.3

Spelling is a major problem in writing. Since English is a foreign language, students tend to make spelling errors due to many factors that can be either interlingual or intralingual. The majority of students who tend to make spelling errors are located in the middle group (60%). They are followed by people in the low group (82%). Then come people in the high group with (60%). To explain this fact, we can say that people in the middle group give more attention to organisation and do not pay attention to the minute details in their writing. However, people in the high group are more pertinent since they try to avoid grammatical and especially spelling errors. Some of the spelling errors that were frequent in the essays are: wos "was", tank you "thank you", waht "what", they "day", grin "green", neice "nice", hlpe "help", smoll "small", kridy carte "credit card", Trey "try", and other types.

❖ Tense.

	N	%
High	5	10.8
Middle	13	38.2
Low	12	70.5

Most of the Moroccan EFL students see that English grammar is strenuous. When it comes to tenses people in the low group (70%) make more tense errors than people in the middle (38%) and high group. After analysing the essays I have noticed that many students have a problem with the future tense. They primarily prefer to use the simple present instead of the other tenses ex: I take it "I will take it".

❖ Missing.

	N	%
High	3	6.5
Middle	20	58.8
Low	16	94.1

Students who learn English as a foreign language find difficulties in expressing themselves with English words or expressions. (94%) of people in the low level leave blanks in their essays. (58%) of students in the middle group and only (6%) of students in the group make this kind of error.

❖ Article usage.

	N	%
High	16	34.7
Middle	8	23.5
Low	16	94.1

(94%) of students in the low level do not use the articles adequately. (23%) of students in the middle group and (34%) in the high group make this error. Most of the students misuse the articles or do not use them at all. Ex: the moment later “a moment later”, a orange jacket “an orange jacket”.

❖ **Preposition.**

	N	%
High	2	4.3
Middle	9	26.4
low	8	47.1

The written test revealed that (47%) of Moroccan EFL students in the low group have problems with prepositions. (26%) of students in the middle group and only (4%) of learners in the high group make preposition errors. The use of prepositions can be regarded as an arduous task especially for learners who are in the first year in high school. They find problems with finding the appropriate preposition that will explain their intended meaning. Ex: I am looking a jacket “ I am looking for a jacket”, pay for check “ pay by check”.

❖ **Inappropriate word.**

	N	%
High	4	8.6
Middle	7	20.5
Low	7	41.1

We notice from the percentages above that students in the low group (41%) use inappropriate words in their essays. Over (20%) of students in the middle group make this kind of error, and a total of (8%) of learners in the high group use inappropriate words. The use of inappropriate words can be due to the fact that many EFL Moroccan students have little knowledge in English. Ex: I have buy a blouse “ I am looking for a blouse”, pay by cash “ pay by check”.

❖ **Unclear expression.**

	N	%
High	0	0
Middle	5	14.7
low	7	41.1

The majority of students (41%) that use unclear expressions are located in the low group. Over than (14%) of students who make this type of error are in the middle group. The surprising thing is that no one in the high group use unclear expressions. This can be due to the fact that people in the high group revise adequately than the ones in the low group. They write in a simple and clear manner.

❖ **Word order.**

	N	%
High	3	6.5
Middle	4	11.7
Low	7	41.1

(41%) of students in the low group have problems in word ordering. Over than (11%) of learners in the middle group and (6%) of students in the high group make this error. The problems in word ordering can be due to the interference of other language. The language system used in English is totally different from the one used in other languages. For this reason people in the low group mix the system and fall in the trap of making word ordering errors.

V. Discussion of the results.

- What is the relation between writing proficiency in English and the type and amount of errors produced by Moroccan EFL students?
 - After analysing the written test it can be confirmed that there is a relation between writing proficiency and the type and amount of errors produced by Moroccan EFL students.
 - People with high proficiency in writing produce less errors than the other two groups namely the middle and low groups. Their writing is clear, simple and clean. It would be worth saying that those students follow the writing processes perfectly. They try to think about the topic before writing. They also make use of a draft in order to avoid errors. Added to this they tend to revise their writing before submitting it. They do an internal and external revision and these help them reduce the amount of errors that they may make.
 - People with middle writing proficiency produce an acceptable amount of errors. If compared with the low group they can improve their writing if they give more attention to the mechanics of writing.
 - People with low writing proficiency produce a great number of errors. They have lot of serious problems that are considered as the basis of a good writing. It was argued by many specialists in the field of writing that those people may have a low writing proficiency not only in the target language but also in their L1. The techniques that those students use lack basic foundations. Most of these students argue that writing in a foreign language is a strenuous task. However, as far as my classroom observations are concerned I can say that these students are wrong, because they have problems that are common to all languages.
 - Students in all the levels produce the same kind of errors but what differentiates them is the amount of these errors in their writing. Nevertheless while the low and middle groups make use of unclear expressions from time to time, the high group does not make use of such an error. Students make punctuation, capitalisation, spelling, tense, missing, article usage, preposition usage, inappropriate words, unclear expressions and word order errors.
- What are the different types of errors that are made by Moroccan EFL learners?
 - Moroccan EFL students made use of ten major errors in their writing test.
 - The first type of errors is punctuation errors. Students still do not use punctuation adequately. There was a problem with the use of the question mark, the period and the comma. This can not be linked to the fact that students are writing in a foreign language but to the problems that they might encounter with their L1.
 - The second type of errors is capitalisation errors. As it was said before students misuse punctuation, so they do not know where and when to use a capital letter and when not to do so.
 - The third type of errors is spelling errors. Students misspell some words. This can be due to the fact that they are learning a new language. Another problem that may arise in this respect is the fact that there can be interference from their L1. Students write words as they are pronounced not as they should be written. For this reason teachers should make students work more on their spelling by proposing activities like dictation.
 - The fourth type of errors is tense errors. Students find difficulties with English grammar, especially tenses. In the early stages of learning English, they do not know when to use the appropriate tense.
 - The fifth type of errors is missing errors. Students leave blanks in their writings because of the limited knowledge that they have in English. They do not know which words can best describe their ideas.

- The sixth type of errors is article usage errors. They have problems as to when to use the definite and indefinite articles. Even if they know the rules they do not know how to apply them in their written productions.
 - The seventh type of errors is preposition usage errors. Students mix prepositions and do not use them appropriately.
 - The eighth type of errors is the use of inappropriate words. The learners use words that do not express their intended meaning. This reveals that they have a little knowledge about the target language. They have a limited vocabulary and background knowledge in English.
 - The ninth error is the use of unclear expression.
 - The final error is word order errors. English is an SVO language. Students tend to mix the word order of English with the one of their L1. They either use the verb in the initial position or adopt a word order of their own.
- How can teachers help students overcome the writing errors?
 - Teachers can respond to students' writing by providing their feedback on the written essays. Teachers can outline the different problems that students suffer from in order to raise their awareness about how their writing should be or how it should look like.
 - Research evidence on error correction in L2 writing classes shows that students who receive error feedback from teachers improve in accuracy over time. It was also argued that miscues or errors are a clear evidence for students' improvement.
 - The central aim of error correction is not only to correct students' linguistic performance, but also to improve their accuracy and language acquisition. This could help them become independent speakers/writers. Carroll and Swain (1993) argue that EFL correction is very useful. [14]
 - Rivers (1968:243) argues that any academic writer must meet four major conditions: The students must learn the graphic systems of the foreign language; he must learn to spell according to the conventions of the language; he must learn to control the structure of the language so that what he writes is comprehensible to his reader; and he must learn to select from among possible combinations of words and phrases those which will convey the nuances he has in mind in the register which is most appropriate. [15]
 - Teachers can encourage group correction in order to make students learn from each other.

VI. General conclusion.

As a recap to what was said in the previous chapters, the main objectives of this study were: 1- To identify the different types of errors made by Moroccan EFL students. 2- To see the relation between the writing proficiency in English and the types and amount of errors produced by students. 3- To find out ways to help students overcome these errors.

Moroccan EFL students were the target population of this study. The sample consisted of (97) first year letter students enrolled in 'Ibn Battouta' high school in Kenitra for the term 2008. The study made use of one instrument which is the written test in order to investigate the problem at hand and come up with conclusions that will enable us see if there is a relation between the writing proficiency and the type and amount of errors made by Moroccan EFL students.

After analysing and discussing the results, we can say that the writing proficiency has an effect on the type and amount of errors produced by Moroccan EFL students especially the target population. To sum up, I can say that students that have a low proficiency in English writing face more problems than the ones that have a middle or high proficiency level. Therefore, more efforts should be done in order to avoid the kind of errors investigated. I can conclude by saying that the paper has answered the questions that were asked and it has reached its objectives. I should add that Moroccan EFL students with low proficiency suffer from other serious problems in writing and other subjects. Therefore, this paper has covered only a small portion of the problems that they face in writing.

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