



# Students' Difficulties in Writing in English Language

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## Abstract

English language is no doubt one of the most used and influential languages around the world. In Albania, English language learning starts since 6-year-old age. Therefore, many studies and research have been done concerning English language and competences. When studying a foreign language, writing is considered as the most demanding and crucial competence. Based on previous studies in Albania, students tend to face difficulties during the writing process. They lack the necessary writing skills needed to have a successful writing performance and they claim that further attention and importance should be given to the writing process by teachers. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to identify the most common errors that Albanian students make in writing and what difficulties they have when it comes to it. The data is provided through a writing task in the form of an essay to second year English language students. There were 47 students of English Language at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Tirana, taking part in the research. Based on the study data, students mostly made grammatical and vocabulary mistakes. They were aware of the patterns used in different writing types and they made less mistakes compared to other errors considered in the study. Even though they tend to be careful not to think in Albanian, its influence is obvious in their writing, especially when it comes to the word order of clauses and sentences. Considering the findings, some practical recommendations have been made in the end.

**Keywords:** Writing, English language, errors, grammar, vocabulary

## 1. Introduction

Writing is one of the essentials of language learning. Writing well is not simply writing correctly but since it conveys a message to the reader, it means communicating effectively. Writing skills have been the focus of foreign and native language researchers over the years. These studies highlight the difficulties that students encounter during the writing process. On the other hand, English is the most-used language around the world, and it is taught since early stages at school. While learning EFL (English as a foreign language), if students need to master their language skills, one of the most crucial things to achieve is writing efficiency. Writing is considered by students as the most demanding competence out of the

four main language competences: reading, speaking, listening, and writing. Teachers also find it challenging when it comes to teaching writing competence. "Writing is often a difficult skill for any language user, which means that writing represents a very challenging task in both native and foreign languages" (Kroll, 1990: 140).

However, it is important to highlight the fact that during the writing process, students have more time to think about what they are going to write, differently from speaking. This is why their sentences need to be correct. Oshima and Hogue (1997) stated that writing is a progressive activity because students think about what and how they are going to write what they intend, before starting putting their thoughts into words. This process somehow makes it easier for them.

However, there are differences between speaking and writing skills. Firstly, unlike oral communication, during written communication students have more demanding tasks with a higher level of difficulty. (Starfield 1990:145). Secondly, many students feel more capable and competent in oral and face-to-face communication. On the other hand, they experience difficulties in completing written tasks (1990:146).

## **1.2 Study Purpose**

Studying English is a challenging task for many non-native English students. Based on previous research in Albania, Albanian students lack the appropriate skills needed to achieve proficiency in writing competence. They state that teachers should give more attention to writing skills compared to other competences. Students have weaknesses in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and some other skills. In fact, based on my experience as a lecturer of English language, students still have difficulties in creating correct sentences. As Nunan (1999) stated, it is highly difficult to create comprehensive written texts, especially when it comes to a foreign language. Ghasemi (2013) said that students studying a foreign language find it hard to express and unify their opinions and convert them into meaningful sentences.

This study focuses on university students, and most of our students need writing competence in their fields of research, because writing is an essential element during their academic years of study.

Therefore, the overall purpose of this study is to spotlight and bring out the difficulties that Albanian students face in writing and give suggestions on how to improve their writing skills.

## **1.3 Study Questions**

There are two main questions aimed to be answered at the end of the research.

1. What are the difficulties that Albanian students face in the writing competence?
2. How can students' writing skills in English language be improved?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Definiton**

Writing competence is one of the essential poles of language learning, and as such it should be one of the main concerns to teachers, students, and researchers. Many studies have been done concerning writing process or what issues are more challenging to students and of course researchers have tried to find ways on how to improve writing skills. By mastering writing skill, the writers can elaborate their ideas in a systematic arrangement. (Asmuti, 2002). In order to do so, firstly, we should clarify the term of writing.

- "Writing is a crucial component of language performances. English writing in both educational and professional settings is increasingly important in countries of non-native speakers of English". (Leki, 2001, p.199).
- Writing is used for different purposes which might be to inform, to learn, to persuade, to entertain, and also to self-reflect. It is essential in terms of skill that students' need to be successful in college (Graham, 2012).
- Writing tasks are critical tools for intellectual and social development" (Bruning & Horn, 2000, p.30.)
- Writing can help students to make stronger by adding more grammatical structures, idioms, and vocabulary, as the important thing in learning a language. (Zulfani, 2001).

## **2.2 Crucial Writing Skills**

Heaton (1975) specified some crucial skills that are considered essential for a text to be evaluated as a good written work. These skills are grouped into five general main areas.

1. The correct use of language which refers to writing appropriate and accurate sentences.
2. Mechanical skills referring to the correct use of punctuation and spelling.
3. Treatment of content referring to thinking creatively and writing relevant information, while omitting the unneeded information.
4. Stylistic skills referring to the right and effective use of sentences and paragraphs.
5. Judgmental skills referring to the idea that writers should keep in mind the purpose and audience that they are writing to, which defines their writing type and the way they organise the relevant information.

## **2.3 Characteristics of Writing**

Ur (1996) pointed out some characteristics of writing:

1. writing can be continuous and lasting because its form is fixed and stable and we can read it in any condition.
2. writing should be explicit and clear when it comes to the context and reference, not allowing ambiguity and misinterpretation from the reader.
3. writing should be coherent, and the information should be transmitted to the reader effectively. Repetition should be avoided, differently from spoken discourse.
4. writing should be predictive regarding the readers' reaction and the writer should pay great importance to this detail.
5. writing should be well organised and well purposed. This is why pre-reading and editing is important.
6. writing takes more time than speaking.
7. writing has standard language depending on the type of the written task that is required.
8. writing is a learnt skill, which means that this ability can be taught.

## **2.4 Difficulties in Writing Process**

As mentioned before, writing is considered as a problematic and difficult skill by students and teachers. Heaton (1975) stated that writing skill is complex and sometimes difficult to teach. It involves many essential processes starting from learning and comprehension of what the writer intends to write, then putting this knowledge into application, and synthesis. Writing can be further complex because it requires creative inspiration, problem-solving, critical thinking, reflection and revision so that the written work results into a completed piece of writing. This makes writing even more compelling.

Because writing is a complex activity, students of EFL encounter some problems, including interference, grammar, vocabulary, and other factors.

Students who are not well familiar with the target language and face difficulties when it comes to grammar and syntax, will find it challenging to produce correct, accurate and understandable written tasks. In order to be good writers, students must master other competences as well, especially, grammatical skills which may include conditionals, the correct use of verb tenses, phrasal verbs, adverbs etc.

Another crucial aspect of good writing is vocabulary, that is the use of the appropriate terminology. This is in fact is one of the most challenging issues of students learning English as a foreign language. During the writing process, students find it hard when trying to select the appropriate words to convey the aimed message. In practice, students are exposed to various familiar terminology, and they tend to use these terms without a problem. However, some concepts can be problematic and provide a challenge to students because they might be ambiguous phrases or difficult terminology whose meaning is still not entirely evident.

The third possible struggle to English language students during their writing tasks, is incorporating their mother-tongue language. It is perhaps the most challenging barrier that students face. This struggle is identified when there is a discrepancy between the intended meaning and what is meant, due to unsuitable and incorrect interference of mother tongue language. This tendency usually happens to all students, and it is impossible to be avoided completely depending on how the target language is taught and the writer's degree of familiarity with the culture of the target audience.

### **3. Methodology**

This chapter describes the different methodological procedures that were used to gather information for the study.

#### **3.1 Research Design**

Qualitative research is used as the design for the study because the results of the research are identified and analysed through students' written assignments in the form of an essay test. Creswell (2009:4) "Qualitative research is a means of exploring and understanding the meaning that individuals or groups give to a social or human problem". The design of this research consists of the collection of the data and their interpretation and discussion. Qualitative research itself is about describing the information gathered. In this study, students' written works were taken. Students are given several topics, and they should choose a particular topic to write about it in the form of an essay.

#### **3.2 Participants**

The participants that took part in the research are second year students that study English as a Foreign Language at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Tirana. There were 47 students taking part in the study. They had different levels of English language and they come from different socio-cultural backgrounds.

#### **3.3 Data Collection**

The instrument used for the data collection was a written task assignment. The task consisted of five different topics and students chose one of them to write an essay. Students' essay writings were analysed based on the focus of research variability, which means what the most common mistakes were made by students and the frequency of these mistakes. The data were collected during the lesson of Academic Writing subject. In the students' essays, it was

analysed whether students made grammatical, lexical, or organizational errors. It is important to emphasize that it is normal to make mistakes while studying a foreign language and it also improves your learning.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Results

The results of the research are presented in the table below.

*Table 1: Study Results- Students' Mistakes in their essays*

Clacification of errors	Frequency of errors	Types of errors		
Grammatical errors	169	Passive Voice	Verb tenses	conditionals
Lexical/ vocabulary errors	121	Phrasal verbs		Pronoun misuse
Mother-tongue interference	74	Nominal phrases		Word order
Organizational	48	Linking words		Paragraph division

### 4.2 Discussion of the Findings

Based on the results of the research, there are some findings that have been found. First of all, the most common mistakes by students were grammatical ones. Students tend to misuse the passive voice and conditionals. They also made mistakes in the usage of verb tenses. They confused present perfect and past continuous.

Examples from students' essays: Social media effect wasn't always like nowadays.

Social media has changes our life.

If we will use TikTok a lot, we would lose time.

Students also made lexical errors in their essays. They misused phrasal verbs, confusing their meanings. They also misused pronouns, wrongly writing possessive and reflexive ones.

Examples: Ours new communication tools...

They can use theirselves ....

One of the common mistakes that foreign language learners make is mixing their mother tongue language forms to the English ones. In this study, some students made mistakes in the word order of the sentences and nominal phrases, using the Albanian word order form.

Examples: Is important to know that...

The furnitures can be ....

If we will use TikTok a lot, we would lose time.

Another mistake taken into consideration in the study is the organizational rules and patterns of writing specific essay types. Most of the used were familiar with the fact that each essay type has specific organizational rules. However, few students made mistakes in the usage of linking words and paragraph division.

Examples: Furthermore, on the other hand, ....

Social media connects people around the worlds. However, there are some bad points. ...

Based on the results that the researcher got from the data collection, there were very few students that had almost no mistake in their essays, practically only 7 students out of 47 students taking part in the study.

## **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **5.1 Conclusions**

Conclusions are related to the first research question of the study. Writing competence is considered as one of the most difficult skills when studying a language and being proficient in writing automatically makes you a good language learner. "Writing is often a difficult skill for any language user, which means that writing represents a very challenging task in both native and foreign languages" (Kroll, 1990: 140). As mentioned in the previous section, Albanian students have difficulties when it comes to writing and consider it as a highly challenging task. Students tend to feel more comfortable when speaking but when it comes to writing their ideas mix with one another and they tend to forget the rules of different text types when writing essays. Unlike oral communication, during written communication students have more demanding tasks with a higher level of difficulty. (Starfield 1990:145). James (1998) stated that students of EFL mostly made grammatical, syntactic and semantic errors during writing. As shown above, Albanian students mostly made grammatical and vocabulary mistakes. They were aware of the patterns used in different writing types and they made less mistakes compared to other errors considered in the study. However, many students blended the paragraphs together. They used arguments and the counter arguments at the same paragraph although using contrasts linking words. Even though they tend to be careful not to think in Albanian, its influence is obvious in their writing, especially when it comes to the word order of clauses and sentences. In Albanian, there is no need of a subject in a sentence like: *Neser mund te bjere shi- Tomorrow can rain*. This is a very common mistake made by students. Specifically, this research also shows that students have some problems when transferring their ideas from Albanian to English because of differences between the two languages, and the lack of knowledge and linguistic structures of the English language of our students. Yin Mei and Ung T'Chiang (2001) also made research about errors made by ESL students caused by the mother tongue language and low proficiency of the second language, in their written books. Based on their findings, the errors that were mostly found are an approximation, slang words, language switch, transfer, wrong tenses used, omission, etc.

### **5.2 Recommendations**

Considering the second research question, some recommendations have been made. The first recommendation addresses students. As found out in the study, students face difficulties in language use aspect. That is why they should try to be more careful when it comes to grammar and vocabulary and try to improve their language abilities. They should read as much as possible and try practicing writing essays in their free time. Students should pay attention to the verb tense, conditionals, passive voice, phrasal verbs, vocabulary, punctuation etc.

The second recommendation is to teachers and lecturers. They should give more importance to the writing competence. They should organise extra lesson hours focusing on writing and give students more written related exercises.

One last friendly suggestion is given to other researchers. They are advised to further investigate and make research on writing and find out what difficulties students face so that to improve their writing skills.

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