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Measures of Eliminating EFL Students' Errors in Writing

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Abstract

As far as the writing skill is concerned, our EFL students are suffering from a serious problem while writing using the target language "English". For this reason through this paper we seek an answer to the following question: What mainly lead our students to commit such number of errors when writing in English? And what measures should be taken to eliminate their occurrences again?

This presentation aims at spotting the light on those factors behind EFL students' deficiencies in the writing skill and finding the way that help them write correctly and effectively.

We relied mainly on:

1. Observation made while correcting students' exam papers, homework, research papers, and classroom production and the number of errors they commit.
2. Questionnaires addressed to around 25 teachers of the English Department Mohamed Khider University (full-time and part-time teachers) in addition to 60 students of different levels (10 students of each level L1, L2, L3, M1, M2 and 4th Classic) to collect information about their awareness of the writing skill importance, their motivation to write in English and the way they correct their errors.

More than 60% of the respondents from the teachers pointed out those EFL students are unaware of the importance of the writing skill, in addition to their poor level in writing.

Over 50% of the informants from the students link their weaknesses in writing to their lack of concentration while writing, and around 30% of them stated that they have a lack in mastering English grammar rules and that they are unaware of the writing skill importance.

students' deficiencies in the writing skill are the result of their poor background knowledge in the target language and the lack of practice, and their low motivation to write in English. In addition, the teachers agreed that the most suitable measures are to encourage students to write more, supply feedback immediately and call for peer correction.

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Key words: Measures, Writing Errors, EFL students, Eliminating, M K Biskra University

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1. Introduction

As far as teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) is concerned, a special interest should be given to all the skills of that language (writing, speaking, listening, and reading) from both the teachers as well as the learners. This interest is the responsibility of both partners of the teaching learning process at all stages of learning. When it comes to higher education precisely, language learners should give equal importance to each of the skills because mastering one rather than the other will result in a gap. For this reason, language learners should have a good mastery of all of those skills. Without denying the importance of any skill, our focus in this paper goes particularly to one of the productive skills: writing. The latter has attracted our attention for the simple reason that our students suffer from many weaknesses, that's why we decided to spot the light on this serious problem which touches all levels. To be a good language learner is to be good in writing but it's not compulsory to be talented as Ruszkiewicz et al (2011, p.2) stated that "Writing is not a mysterious activity at which only a talented few can succeed". Our interest comes out of the observations we've made during the correction of the students' exam papers, homework, class room productions,...etc.

Unfortunately our students have a great problem in expressing themselves using the target language "English" because of many factors that will be stated in later sections of the paper. It is quite natural to commit mistakes, but what's important is to be aware of their occurrence and to work seriously to avoid their appearance again as it is stated by Blanchard and Root (2004) "Not everyone is a naturally gifted writer. Writing is a skill that can be practiced and mastered. In many ways, it is like driving a car. If you have ever driver in another country, you know that some of the rules of the road may be different. Just as the rules for driving differ from county to country, the conventions for writing may change from language to language". (p.1)

2. Writing and Learning Vocabulary

As far as EFL classrooms are concerned, it is the responsibility of all EFL teachers to encourage their students to be successful learners as well as to master the language skills in general and writing in particular. In other words, not only written expression teachers should pay attention to their students writing style, vocabulary, and mistakes, but also the teachers of other courses should give their students' writing errors the same importance. In what concerns the Algerian language classrooms, the English language is a foreign not a second language as in other countries, that's why the Algerian students of English commit a remarkable number of errors when writing in that target language. Therefore, having a good background Knowledge in English is quite important for EFL students. This can be realized by giving a special importance to vocabulary learning as Thornbury claimed "without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary *nothing* can be conveyed." (2002, p.13). In addition, teaching writing is implicitly embedded in teaching grammar and vice versa, i.e. to write well one should master grammar rules and mastery grammar rules (sentence structure, tenses,...etc) leads to good writing as it its mentioned in the following: "Teaching writing is of ten about teaching grammar. If grammar comes up any where in EFL, it is the Writing classroom." (Teaching Writing in the EFL Classroom), Moreover, EFL teachers should motivate their students to write because of the great impact of such skill on their learning process as it is argued by Bjork and Raisanen (1997 cited in Tahaine,2010, p.78): "we highlight the importance of writing in all university curricula not only because of its immediate practical application, i. e. as an isolated skill or ability, but be cause we believe that, seen from a broader perspective, writing is a thinking tool. It is a tool for language development, for critical thinking and, extension, for learning in all disciplines."

3. Writing Errors and Their Correction

It is obvious that every EFL student commit mistakes of different Kinds when using the target language "English". Indeed, the problem is common in all Arab world countries, as it is stated by Tahaine (2010) "Notwithstanding the exerted attempts to tackle the difficulties and problems of English language learning / teaching at all levels of education in the Arab World ; Arab students still encounter serious problems in their English – writing" (p.80), "Now, the correction of those errors is the teachers' mission in the first place as it is believed in the following: " when and how to correct students errors in the EFL classroom is an issue of concern for every EFL teacher". (Correcting Errors in the EFL Classroom).

Providing feedback is quite helpful for the students to know their mistakes, so that they avoid them the next time, Harmer stated that "Feedback encompasses not only correcting students, but also offering them an assessment of how well they have done, whether during a drill or after a longer language production exercise". (2001, p.99)

Sometimes even with their teachers' correction, students still commit the same errors and this what let the teachers wondering "One to the things that puzzle many teachers is why students go on making the same mistakes even when such mistakes have been repeatedly pointed out to them." (ibid).

The errors we found in our students' productions include spelling mistakes in the first place, mistakes in tenses, in word choice, in word order...etc and the table below comprises a collection of some of those errors.

Student's Level	Mistakes	Type	Correction
L1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Will organized - Leaved - Thinked - To Keeped - Langage - Defer - Compoend - Diffinition - Bybies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Verb form Verb form Verb form Verb form Spelling Spelling Spelling Spelling Spelling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Will organize - Left - Thought - To keep/ kept - Language - Differ - Compound - Definition - Babies
L2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - learner have - evaluation - should aware - acceptibal - appertionity - writing - students are discussed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subject verb agreement Spelling Something missing Spelling Spelling Spelling Verb from 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learner has - Evaluation - Should be aware - Acceptable - Opportunity - Writing - Students are discussing
4Th C1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Own why - Can does - Verity - Will knowing - Choice, the chosing - Education background 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Word choice Verb from Spelling Verb from Word choice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Own way - Can do - Variety - Will know - Choice - Educational background

Table 01: Collection of Students' Writing Errors.

The appearance of those errors refers to the students' lack of concentration, lack of vocabulary, and other factors. To learn from their errors, students should receive feedback in a way that pushes them to write more and more and this is the teachers' role. Teachers should not over correct their students' written productions and should not use the red ink too much because this may have a negative impact on the students. "Most students find it very dispiriting if they get a piece of written work back and it is covered in red ink, underlinings and crossings out" (Harmer, 2007, p.120) and "of course, some pieces of written work are completely full of mistakes, but even in these cases, **over-correction** can have a very demotivating effect."(ibid).

To benefit from the correction, teachers should make their students a ware of the kind of errors they often commit by providing some symbols standing for each type and this idea is shared by both Harmer (2007, p. 121) who stated that "Another technique which many teachers use is to agree on a list of written symbols (S= spelling, WO= Word order, etc). When they come across a mistake, they underline it discretely and write the symbol in the margin. This makes correction look less damaging.", and we've found a list of symbols suggested in Hedge's work "Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom (2000, p. 316) as it appears in the figure below:

Figure 01: An Example of a Coding System for Correcting Written Work

WF	Wrong from: the best will be its achievements
WW	Wrong word: patient, funny kindly ^{ww}
T	Wrong tense: in the last few weeks you didn't have much fun
Λ	Something is missing: you arrived in Brighton the 1 st
	Λ
SP	Wrong spelling: comfortable ^{Sp}
WO	Wrong word order: you haven't seen [yet] London
P	Wrong punctuation: Look out. ^P
V	Wrong verb form: the Titanic sunk very quickly
//	New paragraph needed
∅	Not necessary: John came in and he sat down
∩	You don't need a new sentence
	Join up the ideas
?	I don't understand what you're trying to say
~W~	This isn't quite right: it needs clearer expression (usually the teacher provides an alternative)
[]	This part needs to be re-arranged or reworded.
!!	You really should know what's wrong here because.
	- We've just done it in class.
	- I've told you so many times.

Obviously as any EFL teacher, when correcting our students' writing errors, we often hope this correction to be taken into consideration seriously but unfortunately most of the time the students do not care about it at all "Every English writing teacher would like to imagine that their students take their corrected paper home, pulls out a dictionary and grammar book and goes carefully over each correction .Unfortunately, most students only check to see how much "red" is on the paper and then file it away, never to be looked at again". (How to Correct English Writing Errors).

4. Questionnaires' Description

To find an answer to our main question, we've relied on a questionnaire administered to 24 teachers of the department of English at Mohamed Khider University, Biskra- Algeria (full-time and part- time teachers) and another one addressed to 60 students of different levels including (L1,L2,L3, M1, M2, '4th Cl), 10 students of each. The teachers' questionnaire was divided into two sections: the first about teaching the writing skill (six questions) and the second about writing and students 'errors (eleven questions). On the other hand, the students' questionnaire also induced two sections: one about general information (age, sex ...etc) and the other about the writing skill (thirteen questions).

5. Questionnaires' Analysis and Results' Discussion

5. a. Teachers' questionnaire

From 24 teachers, only 14 have handed back the questionnaire. The first section included items about the importance of the writing skill, the students' awareness of such importance, the students' writing level in English, their motivation and interest in writing using English, and their preferences in practicing such skill. The answers to these items were as follows:

Concerning their opinion about the importance of the writing skill, around 60% of the respondents stated that it is very important for EFL learners, while 40% didn't answer this question at all.

When the question deals with the students' awareness of the writing skill importance, also around 60% of the participants agreed on that most if not all of their students are not aware enough because of many reasons such as: the tremendous problems they face when it comes to produce a piece of writing (paragraph or essay); they come from the high school without being taught about that skill, the majority of the students think that speaking is the most important skill and that writing is a difficult and complicated one. Only 10% of the teacher stated that their students ignore writing as a basic element in learning any language and they don't know its basic rules. And around 30% of the respondents claimed that the students are aware enough of the importance of writing and this is clear from their constant attempts to write better and improve their writing style, the priority that is given to writing over spoken English: the fact that there are more written exams than oral ones.

Approximately all the respondents agreed on that the majority of the students do not write well in English because they lack self-confidence and the necessary linguistic and stylistic knowledge and training, for others the major problem is the lack of knowledge of grammatical rules and often they misuse them, they encounter many difficulties and constraints at different levels, their writing is very poor in terms of accuracy, fluency, and complexity, they are influenced by their mother-tongue, most of them don't read and don't practice while writing is a skill which needs practice and still according to some teachers writing well in a language means writing without mistakes, errors, or even lapses. It also refers to products which are complete in terms of the absence of any non-native voice. If this is the denotation of writing well, for that they don't think that their students have so far reached this level. And still other teachers stated that few of their students even if they write well, they do so as if they are speaking or as if they write in Arabic (awkward style and their sentences are ill structured in terms of grammar and spelling).

When asking them about the students' motivation to write using the target language "English", there answers were as it is mentioned in the table below:

Students' Motivation	High	Medium	Low
Students' Answers %	7.14%	50%	42.85%

Table 02: Students' Motivation to Write in English

In addition, when the question was about the students' interest in writing, the teachers' replies were as follows: only a minority of about 14.28% of them said that their students are somehow interested in writing in English simply because they noticed that their students are trying to improve their writing level even if they start with difficulty but with the introduction of some activities and techniques (introducing the process-genre approach), they showed an improvement. Still 35.7% of the teachers stated that their students are really interested to write in English mainly for the simple reason that they need this skill in their academic career, and most of them to get good marks in the first place because most of their academic examinations are in written form, and others have tendency to write rather than to speak because they feel free to express their thoughts and ideas with full concentration. Whereas 50% of the teachers said that the students are not interested in writing at all and this goes back to many factors:

- Writing demands knowledge and competence in other skills
- Students are not motivated enough.
- The majority of students refuse to write except when they are given this as a drill in an exam. They feel they are obliged to move their pens (to answer).
- Writing is too demanding and severely evaluated.
- Writing needs a lot of practice and the class size (number of students per group) doesn't allow for writing activities.
- Writing is a very difficult skill and they feel unable to overcome their writing problems.

When we asked the teachers about how their students prefer writing whether in small groups (4-5 students), in pairs, or individually, their answers showed that the majority of students have tendency to work individually and some of them prefer writing in pairs while the minority prefer writing in small groups and as the table below illustrates this, we understand that EFL students don't prefer collaborative work in writing.

Students' Preferences in Writing	In small groups	In pairs	Individually
Students' Answers %	7.14%	35.71%	57.14%

Table 03: Students' Preferences in Writing

All what is discussed above concerns the first section of the questionnaire. The second section which is composed of 11 items deals with writing and students' errors. The first item of the latter was about the number of written assignments given to students and the respondents' answers were:

- Few of the teachers said rarely because of the number of mistakes they'll struggle to correct.
- Others said at the end of each theoretical part to help students apply what they have learnt in order to be memorized and it's a chance to teachers to check the students' understanding through these tasks.
- Still some teachers said once a week and it lasts more than one session during which students improve their drafts based on the teacher's and peers' feedback.
- And others give the written assignments as group activities such as posters and word splash weekly or each 15 days.
- There are who said just sometimes because of teaching in halls (lectures) and the time allotted, besides the class size is huge and some of their students need to see models.

When the question concerns whether students ask for more written tasks or not, around 65% of the teachers said no and linked this to: lack of motivation in the first place, they consider writing as a heavy task and some of the students don't like it at all, they believe that writing is a very difficult task that requires both linguistic and cultural knowledge, and others abhor producing anything in writing. While around 35% of the respondents said yes stating that most of the students ask for written tasks to improve their style, so that through intensive writing, they can develop themselves, as they are always eager to write more in order to do better.

Moreover, we've asked the teachers about how often they correct their students' writing errors and we received the following:

- Only a few of them said that they don't correct their students' errors because of the large number of students per group.
- Still few others said sometimes because of using co operative strategies in which there is peer feedback and peer evaluation.
- The majority of teachers correct students' writing errors very often or we can say always especially while correcting their exam papers, homework... etc. They do so in order to follow their students' writing so that they'll do enough efforts to strengthen them. They believe that immediate correction is an effective strategy and that correcting students' writing errors is the language teacher's job.

When the question deals with the way used by teachers to attract their students' attention to their writing errors, the teachers' answers can be summarized in the following:

- The use of check lists.
- Writing the common mistakes on the blackboard or mentioning them openly in class and try to ask so many questions about them for collective correction.
- Highlighting them using circles or lines.
- Underlining them using symbols and different colors.
- Taking one performance as a sample, write it on the blackboard to be corrected (whole class is involved).

As far as the students' level in writing is concerned, the respondents' answers were as shown in the table:

Students' Writing Level	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good
Students' answers %	50%	2.85%	7.14%	0%

Table 04: Students' Level in Writing

50% of the teachers claimed that their students have a poor level in writing, 42.85% stated that their students' level is average, 7.14% said that the level is good, and none of them thought of their students' level to be very good and this is explicit in their writing performance.

After asking the teachers about the students' level in writing, we moved to know about their students' satisfaction of this level, and all of them agreed on that they are not satisfied at all because they usually ask for correction, guidance, and clarification; they claim all the time of having problems with this skill in terms of accuracy, shortage in vocabulary, punctuation, and grammar. Even though they acknowledged that their style of writing is very poor, yet they believed that it's not their mistake and they do not want to do much effort to improve themselves.

In addition, we've tried to know how teachers correct their students' errors and how they help them to improve their level in writing and in their replies they stated that some of them believe that the best strategy to correct students' errors is to give them more and more drills with concentration on common weaknesses, for others collective correction in class is very effective, rereading students' written productions to help them discover their faults, making comments on some of their errors, giving remedial activities in the areas in which they notice any kind of weaknesses, sensitize them to write according to the rules of the English style, providing them with documents and samples, but still other teachers who said that they don't use any specific strategy or technique but they cope with the situation according to the nature of the course they're teaching.

Besides, we've asked them about the strategies and techniques they use to deal with students' errors and help them eliminating their occurrence again, their replies vary from one to the other, some of them rely on self evaluation quizzes, dictation, encourage students to use simple statements use dictionaries and handbooks, encourage them to read short stories as a step toward being familiar with the Eng way of writing, encourage internet activities as Google documents by Gmail writing emails to motivate them write, give hem general remarks about common mistakes to raise their awareness and avoid making (causing) anxiety, give intensive writing tasks, provide them with practical sessions with weekly given written assignments insisting on classroom correction, doing reading comprehension in class, usually draw their attention to the fact that reading and practice are the most important ingredients of the learning process.

At the end of the questionnaire, we've tried to know the students' deficiencies in writing are linked to what exactly. The results revealed that the great majority of teachers with around 85.71% claimed that the main source of those deficiencies is the students' background knowledge in the target language, about 42.85% of them believed that it's a question of concentration while writing, but 21.42% of the teachers thought that it's their students' unwillingness to learn Eng in general which is behind such serious problem in EFL classes.

5. b. Students' Questionnaire

As it is mentioned in the questionnaire's description previously, this questionnaire was addressed to 60 students at the English Department, 10 of each of the following levels (L1, L2, L3, M1, M2; 4th CI) and who answered were 90% of the population of the study. Their age is between 18-29 years old, 24.07% male and 75, 92% female, 48, 14% of them were Literary in their BAC stream, 31, 48% were scientific, and only 20.37% of them were in language classes. When it comes to their will to study English, the participants' replies showed that the great majority with 87.03%. of them have a strong will whereas only 12.96% their will is weak. From this section, we get the result that most of our students suffer from weaknesses in writing as EFL learners despite of their age, gender, Bac stream and even their will to study English.

In addition, we've tried in the second section to spot the light on the writing skill in EFL classes particularly including: their motivation to write in English, the number of written assignments they get, how often they write in English, their level in writing, the number and type of mistakes, the ways of correction and feedback.

At first, we've tried to have an idea of the students' practice using the target language "English", and the results as they appear in the table below indicated that even those 29.62% who write more than twice a week commit mistakes when writing in English; i.e it's not a question of practice but it may refer to other factors.

Number of Practice Times	Once week	Twice week	Once a month	More
Students' answers %	28.92%	20.37%	20.37%	29.62%

Table 05: Number of Students' Practice Times per Week

Then, we moved to know about their motivation to write in English, we found that only a minority of about 22.22% of the respondents who stated that they're not motivated to write in English because of; lack of time, lack of feedback, lack of vocabulary, lack of interest and interesting topics and lack of objective (why writing?), and most of them claimed that they like writing in Arabic or French rather than English because of the previously stated factors, and some others don't like writing at all, but still some others 77.77% stated that despite their weaknesses, they are motivated to write in English simply because it 's their favorite language; they have passion to express themselves in that language, and they feel at ease in doing so.

Students' opinion of their writing level	Poor	Average	Good	Very good
Students' answers %	7.40%	33.33%	50%	9.25%

Tables 06: Students' Evaluation of their Level in Writing

As it appears in the table above, 50% of the participants judge themselves to have a good level in English, 33.33% of them think that their level is average, 9.25% others believe that they have a very good level, but still 7.40% of the students believe that their level is poor.

In addition, we've asked them about how often they commit mistakes they commit when writing in English and the kind of those mistakes the results revealed that the majority with 55.55% stated that they commit mistakes sometimes, 35.18% rarely, and only 9.25% who said that they often do so. When it comes to the kind of errors 27.77%, spelling with 33.33% and word choice 27, 77% whereas word order takes only 12.96% of their errors and 38.88% said others without precising the type.

Moreover, when asking the students about the factors behind their errors in writing, we found that the major factor is the lack of concentration when writing with 48.14%; 31.48% goes back to the lack of mastering the Eng Gram rules, 20.37% link their problem in writing to their poor background knowledge in English, still 11.11% link it to their unawareness of the writing skill importance, while 12.96% stated other factors such as: the French language impact on their English and the lack of well -ordered ideas.

In what concerns the students' way of asking for the correct form of a word when they doubt about it, most of them with 61.11% stated that they consult a dictionary, 27.77% of them use all of the suggested ways in duding the teacher's help, the classmates' help; and consulting the dictionary, whereas 16, 66% of them prefer asking for their teachers' help and 11.11% others prefer asking for their classmates' help instead.

Then, we've tried to focus on feedback particularly asking about how many times students receive feedback, from whom, and in what manner. The results showed that most of the students receive feedback sometimes from both their teachers and their peers as written remarks with 9.25%, oral remark with 35.18%, and both with 53.70%.

When the question deals the number of writing assignments they have, some of them said regularly and others said sometimes or even rarely.

Then, we finished the students' questionnaire with a question about their opinion concerning their teachers' correction in improving their writing level, almost all of them believed that it's really beneficial for them because they feel gradual improvement at all levels (grammar, vocabulary,... etc) thanks to their teachers' remarks that help them in knowing their deficiencies and work hard to decrease their number or avoid their appearance again at all.

6. Conclusion

After discussing both the teachers' and the students' questionnaires, the results revealed that students' errors in writing should be taken into account seriously and work on eliminating or at least reducing their number. Therefore, at the end of this paper we come to the conclusion that writing problems in EFL classrooms concern both pillars of the teaching learning process. The students' responsibility goes back mainly to their poor background knowledge in the target language "English" and their unawareness of the importance of the writing skill. In addition their lack of concentration while writing in English stands as the major obstacle in their way of improving their writing style. As far as EFL teachers are concerned, their responsibility is in attracting their students' attention to the importance of writing, providing enough and immediate feedback in a way that enhances their students' motivation to write more and more, giving enough written tasks taking into consideration their students' needs and wants to raise their interest in such a crucial skill, encourage them to read a lot so that they'll enrich their vocabulary as it is stated in the following: "Each time and every single time you read, you should keep growing your database of words, keep looking for new prominent words. "(How to Write Good English).

7. Recommendations

At the end of this work, we'd like to state the following recommendations, and we hope that they'll be taken into consideration in the future:

EFL teachers should:

- look for new techniques and strategies to help their students improve their level in writing
- encourage and motivate them to read and practice writing
- select interesting topics to be given in their writing assignments
- encourage them to learn from their errors by providing them with checklists of those errors, help them to have a positive attitude to wards the correction of errors.

EFL students should:

- give enough importance to the writing skill- take their teachers' feed back into account whenever needed
- not think of their errors' correction as a demotivating factor
- keep in mind is that getting rid of their writing errors is something reachable with a strong will to do better.

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