



## A Case Study on Libyan Learners' Written Discourse in Al Mergeeb University

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### 1. Introduction

Writing a correct sentence in one's own language is difficult enough; it will be more difficult if students are asked to form a sentence in a second language. This is because a learner does not write English by putting words randomly. Instead he or she carefully arranges his/her words into patterns. For example, when a student writes a sentence, he cannot use his gestures, facial expressions or give his audience additional clues; words are only the means of communication (Cohen, R. and Miller, J., 2003).

Failure to put words in correct patterns usually prevents communication because sentences are the foundation of all writing and speaking. The sentence is very important and the mastery of it will lead to effective writing and speaking as well (Khurma and Hajjaj, 1989).

### 2. Literature Review

Throughout the scholar's experience in teaching English as a foreign language, it has been observed that students of English of the fourth level of university at the College of Education in Khoms have encountered difficulties in forming correct sentences in English within the paragraph level. Some of these difficulties are: grammar, spelling, vocabulary, style, punctuation, cohesion and coherence.

Helping students to write a successful paragraph is a part of teachers' role. For example, topics should be selected with care. The following guideline points may be instructed to the students when writing a paragraph: 1. the title: correctly capitalized, indicates the subject clearly; 2. clear indentation for the paragraph; 3. logical development of one idea in a paragraph; 4. a clear controlling idea in the topic sentence supporting statements that focus on the controlling idea; and 5. clear relationship or transition between sentences.

Another important point is 'language use'. The following points help students to achieve good paragraphs, namely: 1. connectives used with precision to show relationship; 2. careful, correct use of expanded vocabulary; 3. examples of artful phrasing; 4. correct spelling and hyphenating; 5. correct punctuation to develop the meaning of sentences; 6. good use of parallel structures in series; 7. good use of phrases to modify the expression of an idea; and 8. a good conclusion that draws the sentences together. (Cohen, R. and Miller, J., 2003 & Savage, A. and Mayer, P. 2006)

The other important point is the organization of content. Students are helped to write a coherent, logical composition. Coherence in writing is achieved by rhetorical devices and by logic of thought. (Halliday and Hasan, 1974) There are three major rhetorical devices for achieving coherence within and between the paragraphs: transition words, parallelism, and punctuation marks (Warriner and Griffit, 1977). Transition words may be either the same words or synonym repeated in the following sentence, substitute words, or sentence connectives. Parallelism is taught by giving students a passage with many parallel constructions and have them re-write the passage with all parallel structures (Tanskanen, 2006). Students also need to recognize that punctuation serves a more serious purpose than decoration, for it serves to achieve coherence and unity of thought.

### 3. The Methodology of the Study

In this study the researchers looked at writing difficulties of the fourth year university students attending writing class at the College of Education in Khoms, during the academic year 2011-2012. The approach adopted in the present study was to examine the actual writing assignments and paragraphs given to the students in their classes. Accordingly, the tool used for this study was a test given to the students in order to show and analyze students' ability to produce cohesive and coherent paragraph. The number of the respondents was twenty. The subjects of the study were given one topic, and they were required to write a paragraph about that topic. The students' papers were collected and then corrected in order to find out which areas are difficult for the students.

### 4. Results and Discussions

The current research revealed the following results:

In Figure 1, grammar constituted a great difficulty for the students. Fourteen students had difficulties with the percentage of 70, whereas six students had no difficulties with the percentage of 30. The errors were related to the subject -verb agreement, word order, fragments, tense and wrong use of articles.

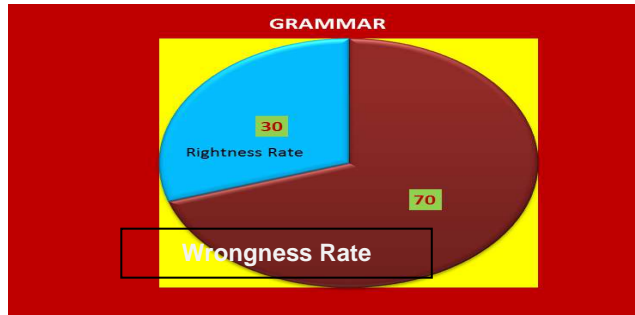


Figure 1. Grammar Rightness and Wrongness Rates

In Figure 2, spelling was also identified as a problematic area for the students. Fourteen of the students faced difficulties in spelling with 70 % while six students faced no difficulties equivalent to 30%. The errors were attributed to the irregular verbs, irregular plurals, doubling the last letter, silent *e*, and words ending in *y*.



Figure 2. Spelling Rightness and Wrongness Rates

In Figure 3, vocabulary was problematic for the students. Eleven of the students had difficulties in the use of vocabulary with 55%, but only nine of the students had no difficulties. Thus, the percentage was 45%. The problems were here related to the use of faded words, meaningless words, inappropriate words, and exaggerated words.



Figure 3. Vocabulary Rightness and Wrongness Rates

In Figure 4, style was relatively problematic for the students. Nine of the students had difficulties in the use of style with 45%, whereas eleven of the students had no difficulties. Thus, the percentage was 55%. The errors were due to the use of informal words, contracted forms and the use of ambiguous sentences.



Figure 4. Style Rightness and Wrongness Rates

In Figure 5, punctuation seemed relatively less problematic for the students. Only eight students had problems in the use of punctuation marks. Thus, the percentage was 40%. However, the number of the students who had no difficulties was twelve, so the percentage was 60%. The problems were here related to the wrong use of comma, full stop, capitalization, and colon.

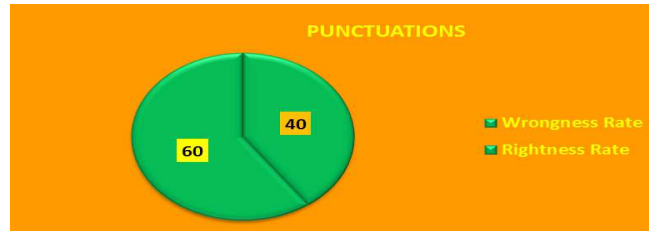


Figure 5. Punctuations Rightness and Wrongness Rates

In Figure 6, cohesion seemed also relatively less problematic for the students. Eight of the students had difficulties in the use of cohesion with 40%. However, students who had no difficulties were twelve, so the percentage was 60%. The errors were here related to the wrong use of conjunctions, wrong references, and the use of isolated sentences.

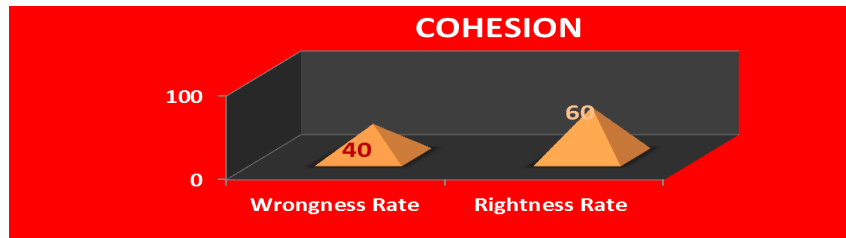


Figure 6. Cohesion Rightness and Wrongness Rates

In Figure 7, coherence was also relatively less problematic for the students. Only eight students had problems in writing coherent paragraphs. Thus, the percentage was 40%. However, students who had no difficulties were twelve, so the percentage was 60%. The problems were here related to the wrong use of the patterns of organization, and the lack of relationship between sentences.

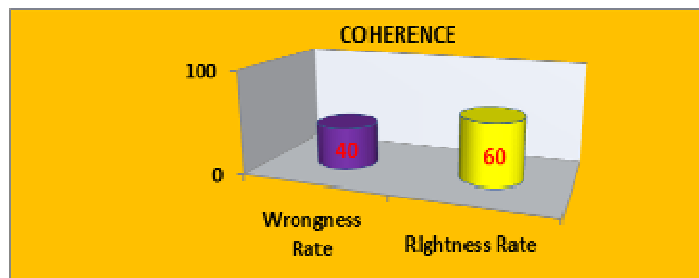


Figure 7. Coherence Rightness and Wrongness Rates

## 5. Summary

It can be summarized that the major causes of the errors in this study include intra and inter-lingual transfer as cited by Ellis (1992); and the faulty language teaching methodology. It can be inferred that in terms of intra and inter-lingual transfer the outcome of the study revealed that students are relatively consistent in committing errors in producing sequential sentences in English at a level higher than the sentence.

## 6. Conclusion

The researchers conclude that students' background of English language especially in writing is very weak. Most of the students' problems are attributed to L1 transfer and overgeneralization. Therefore, mother tongue interference is always noticeable in the students' performance in the written production; for instance, students think in Arabic then they transfer their ideas to English.



## 7. Recommendations

In the light of the results obtained from this study, the researchers recommend suitable ways of teaching writing by providing students with guidelines, strategies, and practice in writing in order to prepare them for academic demands; decreasing the use of Arabic in classrooms; and exposing the students to supplementary materials to make writing classes more meaningful.

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