An Analysis of Master 2 Students' Exam Copies in Research Methodology and Written Expression: The Case of Department of English at Batna 2 University

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Abstract
Experts in writing, most notably in writing research reports, papers, and theses, emphasize both the utility and the complexity of writing in the academic context. The development of an ability to write effectively needs time and practice. It was observed that Second Year EFL Master’s students at Banta 2 University face difficulties in respecting academic writing features despite a good deal of instruction in written expression. Hence, the paper analyzes Master Two students' exam copies in two subjects, written expression, and research methodology. This study seems appealing because its primary purpose is to investigate the natural causes behind students’ failure in academic writing. It aims to identify students’ lacunas in writing research reports, papers, and theses. To address these objectives, the current study inquires: “Why do so many students fail to write correctly?” To consider the research query as mentioned earlier, an explanation is attempted through content analysis of 196 students’ exam excerpts of research methodology and 191 copies in the exam of written expression. Besides, the research proposal is looked at in a step-by-step chronological order. The combination of good writing and good thinking is presented as the key to academic success. Results indicated that students failed to demonstrate a good command of academic writing norms.

Keywords: Academic writing, content analysis, research methodology, research proposal, written expression

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Introduction

Experts in writing, particularly in writing research reports, papers, and theses, emphasize the utility and the complexity of writing in the academic context (Strong, 2001; Russell, 2000). The development of an ability to write effectively requires time and practice. Nonetheless, what is observed among second-year EFL students in the English department is that many difficulties were faced in respecting academic writing elements despite a great deal of instruction in written expression and academic writing. EFL students demonstrated a lack of competency in mastering features of academic writing. They failed to write appropriate research papers, reports, and theses that meet academic standards. Henceforth, this study attempts to look at students' copies in the modules of research methodology and written expression. It encompasses the identification of students' difficulties in presenting a sound and coherent research proposal and their obstacles in academic writing and style. The aim is to showcase the extent to which students can respond to the requirements of the research proposal and to those of writing for academic purposes. The far-reaching aim is to see, first, whether students have developed a clear understanding of research methodology principles and, second, if they can nicely relate these principles one to the other and to the topic under study. This study inquires into the following research queries “Why do so many students fail to write correctly?” and “Why do so many students lack the ability to write a sound research proposal?” Accordingly, it could be hypothesized that causes could range from lack of language abilities, the relation between thought and writing, and inability to conceptualize, to the topic newness, students’ motivation, and lack of predisposition to accept the rules and norms of research. Each of these principles is attributed much importance and emphasis by Robert (1990) and further developed by Russell (2000).

To fulfill the research objectives and to equate with the research queries asked beforehand, 196 students’ copies in the exam of research methodology and 191 copies in the exam of written expression have been analyzed, aiming to highlight students’ knowledge in these two fundamental modules. The number of students represents fifty percent (50%) of the entire Second year EFL Master’s students. This overall appraisal of the research structure is much emphasized by authors like Creswell (1994), Krathwhol (1988), and Kumart (1999). Analyzing the written expression copies is an attempt to identify students' abilities to write and structure sentences and paragraphs and organize them in a coherent text. For each item in both topics, an attempt was made to understand students’ failure in writing a sound research proposal.

Literature Review

Academic writing

Writing is a skill required in many contexts in life. However, academic writing differs in many things from personal writing. Academic writing has its own set of rules and norms. These regulations and practices may be recognized around a formal order or structure in which ideas are presented and to ensure that ideas are supported by author citations in the specialized literature. In this line, Lennie Irvin (2010) stated that “Academic writing is always a form of evaluation that asks you to demonstrate knowledge and show proficiency with certain disciplinary skills of thinking, interpreting, and presenting” (p. 3).

In contrast to personal writing contexts, academic writing is different, for it deals with the underlying theories and causes governing processes and practices in everyday life. Scholarly writing also explores alternative explanations of these events. Academic writing follows a particular tone and adheres to traditional conventions hereafter explained.
Structure

Some kinds of structure are required, such as a beginning, middle, and end. This simple structure is typical to an essay format as well as to other assignment writing tasks which may not have an articulated design. A well-thought structure helps the writer always find each element of the text in its due place. This is how he will succeed in including vital aspects of academic writing like coherence, linkage, and cohesion to make his piece of work a text which reads nicely. These aspects were explained by many authors and experts like (Murray and Beglar, 2009).

References

A significant difference between academic writing and other writing genres is based on the citation and referencing of published authors and sources of information. Whatever the citation style, a reference needs to be provided to add credibility to our ideas while also avoiding plagiarism. In addition, acknowledging the sources of information enables the reader to understand the provenance of the borrowed ideas (Murray & Beglar, 2009). Writers have to always remain faithful to other authors by properly citing them any time they use their findings, their results, and their theories.

Abstract Thought

Traditionally, academic topics have focused on abstract things, like ideas and concepts not necessarily presented in a concrete or physical form. The many theories in the literature are good examples (Harwood et al., 2008). Other academic texts are based on scientific reasoning. They tend to use a form of thinking based on fact and evidence and on results produced by research scientifically and systematically conducted. This is another aspect of rigorous and mathematical thinking used in results analysis and interpretation.

Academic Tone

Like all varieties of writing, academic writing has its tone, which dictates the choice of words, phrasing, and style. Directness, simplicity, clarity and objectivity are some aspects of this tone. Besides, the academic writer does not favor any interpretation tendency that may lead to bias. Instead, he lets his results speak for themselves. Similarly, we do not write in the same way for all people.

Method

This study falls into the realm of a mixed-method approach wherein both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analytical procedures are employed. The mixed-method approach is considered appropriate for the scope of this study because of the nature of the required data. Exam copies are conceived using content analysis which is a mere qualitative approach, and statistical data obtained through students’ questionnaires which needed quantification. In the quest to understand the subtleties of the issue, the present paper endeavors to collect data by analyzing Master 2 students’ exam copies in two subjects, written expression and research methodology, bearing in mind exam questions and answers. Content analysis has been applied as an analytical framework. In the following section, a treatise on content analysis to understand its application in the current research is provided.
Participants
The current research project considers Second Year EFL Master students during the academic year 2014-2015 to be the core population for the investigation, with randomly selected samples of 196 students for research methodology and 191 students for written expression randomly chosen.

Content Analysis
Content analysis is a qualitative analysis method focusing on recorded human artifacts such as manuscripts and voice recordings through unobtrusive research. Along the same line, content analysis investigates these written, spoken, and visual productions without explicitly extracting data from participants. Within the research setting, content analysis can inform the development of surveys and questionnaires for collecting research data. It can also provide researchers with qualitative data from texts based on human thoughts, behaviors, and emotional responses, supplementing their quantitative numerical analyses for the problem under investigation (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

In other words, the content analysis attempts to compile qualitative data based on human language in written form or through cultural artifacts. Subsequently, with content analysis, the investigator seeks to understand the full context and how humans think, feel, or use language and why. Hence, the researcher does not necessarily need to interact with participants wherein the data produced can be analyzed (Huxley, 2020).

Results
Results indicate that students face severe difficulties in written expression, research methodology assignments, and dissertations. For instance, it has been noticed that Master 2 students do not respect academic writing regulations because of miscomprehension, misuse, and lack of awareness. They are summarized as follows:

Analysis of Students' Exam Copies of Research Methodology
The exam contains ten questions related one to the other in chronological order. These are also part of the research proposal. Besides, this kind of exam is one way of testing the students' abilities to properly move from step one, which is problem identification, to the last step concerning what should be done to avoid subjectivity in the thesis writing process. It is also meant to bring students to become aware of order and structure on one side, and of the interrelation of the different items, on the other. Undoubtedly, in research, a good start leads to a good finish, for precise topics lead to a better organization of research proposals. A bad start will not help the students identify the steps to come because they all relate to the topic.

Question 1: Identify a problem you would like to investigate
In problem identification, almost all students (184 out of 196) did not consider problem identification procedures. They show more ambition than needed. Consequently, they do not evaluate how much time the study will take. They tend to choose topics in which they possess neither competence nor knowledge. They do not even consider the study budget and forget to start with a first elementary bibliography to construct a theoretical background for their research. In other words, instead of choosing searchable topics, they prefer unsearchable ones which have no
relation to their field of specialization. Here are some examples of the issues suggested by the students.
1- The effect of the poison on people in the south
2- Obesity among children
3- Junk food
4- Schools suffer from the culture of students.
5- Mass media and the internet’s effect on society.

These topics do not correlate with students’ different modules at the Department of English. This wrong choice does not tune students to their field of specialization.

**Question 2: Ask appropriate questions to precise your problem**

This question expects students to move from general to specific, that is to gradually narrow down the problem to obtain an as precise issue as possible. Asking “WH” questions like where, whom to, when, and what are likely to help precise the identified problem. What students tend to do, instead, is to state irrelevant hypotheses or answer research questions that have not been asked yet. The following is one example found in the majority of students’ copies:

**Identified topic**
“Effects of large groups on learning”

**Questions to precise the topic**
1- What are the problems of the large group?
2- Are students interested?
3- Educational difficulties?
4- Educational relationship between teachers and large groups.
5- How to behave in the situation?

Each of these questions is another topic in itself. Hence, instead of asking questions about effects, large groups, learners, kind of learning, place, and learning time, students state other issues. So, even when the topic is identified and fits students’ fields of interest, good questions to narrow it down are not asked. This resulted in a large majority (180 out of 196) that failed to narrow down the problem correctly.

**Question 3: Formulate your accurate problem**

Here, the difficulty almost all students face is to state the problem clearly. One hundred seventy-two (172) students failed to move from general to specific and present a clear topic. They do not precisely know what they want to do. Even when they succeed in asking appropriate questions to precise the problem, they fail in correctly stating it. What they tend to do is to go back to the problem initially identified. They lack precision and fail to make the right decision.

The following examples demonstrate students’ inability to move from general to specific:
1- The large numbers of students and education.
2- The effect of the new educational system on students.
3- Laboratory and pronunciation.

These are other identified vague problems that are unsearchable. A Lack of logic and rationality appears right at the beginning when students attempt to specify issues.

**Question 4: State and explain your hypothesis as related to the problem**
Very few students (only eight out of 196) succeeded in working out a reasonable hypothesis nicely related to the problem. This feature of methodology stands as one of the major problems students encounter. They rarely understand what a hypothesis is. Beyond, when they do, they fail to find a hypothesis related to the problem. They instead present hypotheses that do not go along with their topics. A hypothesis is the core of the whole work, for research is constructed around hypothesis testing. Working out a rationale in the research proposal already becomes impossible when students fail to narrow down the problem and suggest a working hypothesis directly related to the problem.

**Question 5: Which method have you decided to use, and why?**

Students suggest using the method they like but not the one imposed by the nature of the case. They neither realize that each topic corresponds to one method or a combination of methods nor understand that each method corresponds to a set of data-gathering tools and one specific model of analysis and interpretation of results.

Instead of obeying research requirements, they tend to do what they favor and show some resistance to change. This is why the majority (175 out of 196) either fail to select the appropriate method or the suitable data-gathering tools.

**Question 6: Name your data-collecting tools**

As already stated, students do not select appropriate data-collecting tools which fit the method and the kind of information they need for their investigation. They very often confuse between method and approach and between procedure and tools. In a study that needs description and analysis, they select the experimental method. When choosing the experimental method, they suggest interviews to collect information. They do not possess a clear perception of research methodology to help them use, in a rational way, the appropriate methodology design for their investigation.

When asked to account for the choice of data-gathering tools, they tend to give reasons concerning simplicity of use instead of rationality. They use incoherent and nonsensical forms of thinking and reasoning. Consequently, 181 students did not select data-gathering tools imposed by the nature of the topic and the method.

**Question 7: Identify your population**

This question is simple, primary, and elementary. They at least understand the need to work on a population and make the difference between a population and a sample. One hundred eighty students managed to identify the population of their study and suggested the need to work on a representative sample instead of a too-large population.

**Question 8: Do you need a sample?**

They also correctly account for their decision to work on a sample because the population is too large.

**Question 9: What are the limitations of your methodology?**

This question is another hurdle in students’ minds in that 170 could not be aware of the methodology design weaknesses. They do not realize that no research is perfect and that no approach, method, or tool are ideal. Best methodologies will still have limitations because of many
other aspects, such as bias, subjectivity, unknown and unidentified variables, the competence of the researcher, extraneous variables, and the like.

**Question 10: What should you do to avoid subjectivity?**

Answers obtained show that 177 students are aware enough of the mistakes to avoid in order not to have excessive subjectivity in their research. They make the difference between a research result and a personal opinion.

Table 1. *Students’ responses to research methodology exam questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Answers (196)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correct</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Wrong</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Identified problems for research</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>93.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Narrowing down the problem</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>91.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Formulating the precise problem</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>87.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Hypothesis as related to the problem</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>95.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Accounting for choice of method</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>89.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Choice of data-collecting tools</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>92.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Population identification</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Need for a representative sample</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Methodology limitations</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>86.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Avoidance of subjectivity</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table one indicates the extent to which the research problem in methodology deserves rethinking in terms of what to teach, when, and to whom. The many weaknesses in students’ exam copies already signal an urgent need for more practice in this module.

To conclude this first part of the paper, it is worth mentioning how the same students responded to the two following questions:

1- How can methodology help you perform better in your academic life?

2- What do you like and dislike about methodology?

Students’ answers are interesting and raise the teacher’s awareness of two fundamental things. First, almost all students (190) know the value of methodology not only in their academic life but also in their life in general. However, what they dislike most is the effort they have to make always to be as precise as possible. Besides, students tend not to value and obey rules, norms, and the strict use of the methodology principles. Students are aware of the importance of methodology, but they, at the same time, develop a certain social resistance to meet the requirements of methodology. They resist newness and do not show enough flexibility to learn to do things differently. It is, in fact, challenging to teach someone to do differently from what he used to do in his way for a long time. The methodology may be taught early in primary school to become a habit, and part of the student's daily behavior. Naturally, it is easier to teach good patterns at an early age of schooling than to try to modify already existing negative habits at an age when habit modification sounds impossible.

**Analysis of Students’ Exam Copies of Written Expression**

There is no doubt that writing and the research proposal are intimately related. Weakness in writing for academic purposes diminishes the students' ability to produce an acceptable research
proposal. To ascertain this cause-and-effect link, we have selected the following students' exam answers relevant to written expression, research style and scientific reasoning.

**Question 1: Explain the following principles/concepts**

1. Citing
2. Summarizing
3. Paraphrasing
4. Plagiarism
5. Wordiness
6. Coherence
7. Relation between thought and mind
8. Rationality
9. Abstract
10. Introduction
11. Body
12. Simplicity
13. Cohesion
14. Repetition
15. Deductive reasoning
16. Inductive reasoning
17. Research style.

No single student succeeded in accurately explaining all these principles. Moreover, in almost all cases, students confuse concepts like citing and paraphrasing, and between plagiarism and paraphrasing. They overuse repetitions because they do not possess a vocabulary rich enough to select each word for its proper strong use in the text. They also rarely make a clear distinction between an abstract and an introduction. They use too long sentences they fail to master. Additionally, they fail to write in directly using simplicity, clarity, and cohesion. Besides, they fail to structure their sentences and paragraphs. Henceforth, it is sometimes hard to understand the meaning of their texts. They are aware of the importance of methodology but fail to use it as a complete frame of behavior and thought. Similarly, they know the value of the research style but fail to succeed in writing according to its requirements.

**Question 2: Identify the weaknesses of the following paragraph**

Researchers ensure that in higher education, and in other programs, which use teaching subjects written in English, reading becomes the pioneer among all the different skills of the English language. Accepting the fact that reading is of great importance for all students, it is attached to great importance for ESP learners. But traditional methods of testing it are problematic.

The paragraph contains elementary weaknesses like the use of inappropriate words, repetitions, and redundancies. However, even these elementary weaknesses in writing have been identified only by a minority of students (17 out of 191). What is more surprising is that this paragraph was already given to the students, in one of the lectures, as an example of how to identify elementary mistakes in writing.

**Question 3: Rewrite the same paragraph using a more academic style**

Almost all students failed to rewrite the paragraph more acceptably. They have introduced other repetitions and language misuses like grammar and style mistakes. This proves, again, that
students really lack the basics of not only academic writing, but those fundamentals beginners start with like capitalization and full stop to indicate the sentence end.

**Question 4: Punctuate the following paragraph**

Research methodology is a technical topic needed by all researchers it presents and explains all approaches methods and tools in use a good understanding of methodology allows the researcher to present a sound research proposal and also permits him to successfully conduct his research.

This short paragraph needs the use of ten punctuation items to be correctly structured. It contains only four short sentences. Students did not fully succeed in appropriately punctuating it. They have proved a clear inability to identify the beginning and the end of each sentence. Furthermore, many of them have even missed to capitalize the first word of the first sentence. This is a mistake that shows a clear lack of command of punctuation, an elementary aspect of writing we learn at an early stage.

**Weaknesses in Written Expression Exam Copies**

Table Two demonstrates students’ inefficacy to write in accordance with the major rules and regulations highly appreciated in writing for academic purposes, though they are part of the written expression module. It illustrates students’ weaknesses in the written expression found in their exam copies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Answers (191)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Correct</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explaining principles</td>
<td>00</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paragraph weaknesses</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paragraph rewriting</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paragraph punctuating</td>
<td>09</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As is indicated from the table above, the different weaknesses spotted in students’ written exam copies vary between issues in explaining principles, paragraph writing, paragraph punctuation, and rewriting, wherein students represented a high rate of paragraph weaknesses related to rewriting and explanation principles. This might be because students do not respect the norms of academic writing or maybe due to their inability to write at all.

**Discussion**

Considering the findings of the current study and to answer the aforementioned research query, it is found that students have serious problems in written expression, research methodology assignments and dissertations. Data obtained revealed that students are unable to identify a problem, they are unable to ask appropriate questions to narrow it down, and they have difficulties in formulating a precise topic with its appropriate methodology, data collection tools, identifying the population, the sample and more importantly how to avoid subjectivity in their accounts. The analysis of students’ exam copies revealed that students are unable to abide by academic norms and standards. These difficulties perceived throughout students’ exam copies are because students are demotivated, they are misoriented to the English stream and they are the result of an imposed educational system that does not equate with students’ needs, levels, and context.
context, previous literature affirms that the current study’s set hypothesis which purports to the lack of language abilities relation between thought and writing, the ability to conceptualize the chosen topics for writing, the lack of previous position to accept the rules and norms of research are emphasized as it has been claimed by Robert (1990) and Russel (2000). In sum, this study confirmed that students only can write, but also, they are unwilling due to their demotivation and reluctance towards writing.

Conclusion

The issue is many-sided and of paramount importance to academic people. Consequently, it certainly needs larger and wider research conducted by highly qualified experts. The aim was to highlight some students’ difficulties in writing a research proposal. These difficulties do exist and are the direct consequence of an ill-training right at the beginning of one's schooling life. This is what appears in students' written productions and explains why only a few people succeed in writing for academic purposes. It is a complex construction of a whole cognitive and linguistic process that should start early in primary school to be continually refined. Academic writing is different from other forms of writing and a research proposal is an academic work in itself. Writing as a process does not take place all at once. This process includes planning, completing a first draft, revising and editing. It needs a good command of grammar and vocabulary. This is why it stands as the major difficulty students encounter. This study found that students do really face real hurdles in academic writing due to the lack of practice and awareness of the different academic norms, the impact of the newly devised educational system, and students' lack of awareness towards academic writing standards in general. The student has to work out a rationale for his research proposal. He will show his capacity to think rationally and to give each element its due place. Also, he has to work out a clear hypothesis well related to the topic. His objectives have to be significant, sound and worthwhile enough to make his study original research. The methodology suggested should treat the specifics of the topic and his research tools should equate with the needed information. This tied up the relationship between thinking and writing and is likely to stand as the greatest difficulty students face when writing a research proposal.

Limitations of the study

Considering the limitations of the study, one can say that this investigation is based only on one section of students, and their grades obtained in two modules. However, the only consideration of the poor grades allows for making some recommendations. The first is a call for other researchers to investigate the issue in detail and for a longer time using a wider perspective to scrutinize the problem more systematically. The second recommendation concerns the modules themselves, for it is believed that more time should be devoted to the teaching of writing for academic purposes and to research methodology. They are prerequisites to any academic activity. Besides, students need more practice to master the techniques of writing and the principles of research methodology. The overcrowded sections and groups do not permit this form of teaching. This is why the need to introduce tutorials is urgent, though we know that the great numbers of students remain a major obstacle. Undoubtedly, the need to learn how to think differently to meet the requirements of research methodology principles and norms is urgent. Similarly, learning to form new habits stands mandatory, yet there is an aspiration to see future generations of students enter the university with already existing abilities to write correctly and to think rationally. This is, and this should be, the main task of the school and, maybe, its unique task. Prior to these
changes, we would probably begin with a clear philosophy of education and, similarly, of methodology.

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