The Effects of Students' Prior Knowledge of English on Their Writing of Researches

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Abstract

This descriptive correlational study aims at examining the effects of students' prior knowledge of English on their writing of researches at the tertiary education. It investigates students' last achievements in different English courses they had learned before conducting research papers and shows their writing problems in researches. A convenient sample of forty nursing students in the Hashemite University in Jordan was asked to complete a structured questionnaire. The results revealed that students with previous knowledge in English performed better in writing researches than those who lacked this knowledge. Some students whose achievements had been low in English got the lowest grades in the research course. They made many errors in their research content exemplified in the research questions, organization, references, results and literature review. This study can be helpful in increasing students' consciousness of research writing.

Keywords: Prior knowledge, Writing a research

1. Introduction

Learning English is considered crucial for students to fulfill their purposes not only in the academic aspect but also in the job market (Chou 2011). Therefore, students need to establish and develop their English writing skills while moving from school level to tertiary level. They should be able to write well constructed sentences, paragraphs, articles and researches to help them pass some English courses at universities. Undergraduates and postgraduates in Jordanian universities should conduct a research as a request to pass in a research course. Many students fail this course because they do not have good experience or prior knowledge in writing strategies.

Having prior knowledge can help students overcome their writing errors to successfully do their researches. Recalling this knowledge will have beneficial effects on students' writing performance. Strangman and Hall (2004) stated that teachers may improve students' writing skill by activating their background knowledge. Hailikari, Katajavuori and Lindblom-Ylanne (2008) said that there is a strong relationship between prior knowledge on one hand and learning and students' achievement on the other hand. Moreover, students' prior knowledge in writing has a strong effect on the way they realize writing (Gupta, 2006). Those students had learned how to produce good writing in their schools before they entered universities.

This research paper investigates a number of researches written by nursing students at the Hashemit University in Jordan. It shows the role that students' background knowledge plays in writing up their researches and clarifies the research errors they encountered. Wong (2002) showed many problems in writing a research which should be avoided to conduct a perfect research. A researcher should convince the audience by conveying sufficient, coherent and clear information.

2. Significance of the Study

The major purpose of this paper is to examine the effects of students' prior knowledge and achievement in English on their writing of researches and to show what problems that students face while doing their researches. Therefore, this study will be helpful for students to learn and improve their writing of researches. They can get the knowledge of how to conduct a research in English. The application of this study in practice provides a guide for the effective writing and to ensure that students' quality will be improved in this aspect.

Moreover, conducting a research which explores students' way of writing a research in a second language will provide a basis for conducting other researches and to come up with the final procedures that help students in their writing. In addition, the content of this study can be a resource for curriculums taught in Jordan in order to reinforce the process of teaching writing skill.

3. Literature Review

There has been a growing number of researches which deal with writing a research in English as a second language. In a review of writing a research literature, Gocski (1997) pointed to the differences that should be considered to assist ESL writers. They are different rhetorical

purposes, different rhetorical conventions and different rhetorical patterns among different cultures. Moreover, Carson (1992) showed that writers use some of their first language educational experiences. In this aspect, the researcher viewed that first language literacy learning strategies reinforce or complicate the acquisition of second language literacy skills. Kobayashi and Rinnert (2001) discussed the nature of students' writing experiences in their first language to understand their needs and to bridge the gap between their first language and second language writing skills.

Gupta (2006) examined the role that writing played in the transition of the students to the university. Students have previous ideas about writing before entering the university. The study relies on the teaching members' feedback on students' written tasks at the university, and analyses of the syllabus and examination requirements at Junior College. This study emphasized that prior knowledge has a high impact on students' writing.

Hailikari, Katajavuori, & Lindblom-Ylanne (2008) investigated the impact of different types of prior knowledge on the students' achievement and how prior-knowledge can be used as an instructional design tool. The researchers assessed the students using a questionnaire before the beginning of basic science courses and chemistry course. The results showed that Prior knowledge played a vital role in the students' academic achievement. Students' prior knowledge should be considered in course designing and planning.

In addition, Seliger and Shohamy (1989) showed that researches in second language vary according to the circumstances under which the research is done, the research methodology and the tools used for studying second language. However, Weissberg and Buker (1990) showed that researches share common elements which are abstract, introduction, method, material, recommendations and discussion. They analyzed the "Introduction" part as it can be conducted by establishing a context, reviewing previous research and advancing to present research. It consists of five stages; a general statement about a setting for the problem, statements about parts of the problem investigated by other researchers, a more specific statement that shows the needs for more investigation, a very specific statement about the purpose and an optional statement about the value of the study.

In another study, Leki (2003) viewed that"L2 writing research seems at times oddly insular not even referencing work in second language acquisition much, not to mention other contemporary thinking that might help both to clarify and complexify our project".

Other researchers pointed to some problems found while writing a research. Wong (2002) addressed some of these problems which are, not providing the appropriate context of the research question, failing to determine the conditions of the research, not presenting landmark studies and theoretical and empirical contribution of other researchers, not focusing on the research question, not providing a coherent and persuasive argument of the research, providing details for minor issues not for major ones, not using a clear direction, using incorrect references and writing too long or too short. The same researcher explained other problems in writing a literature review. These are classified as, lacking of organization, not including recent developments, failing to evaluate cited papers, using repetitions, depending on secondary resources and using irrelevant references.

4. Statement of the Problem

"If I had to reduce all of educational psychology to just one principle, I would say this: The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows, ascertain this and teach him accordingly." (Ausubel, 1968). Anderson and Pichert (1978) wrote: "The knowledge a person possesses has a potential influence on what he or she will learn and remember…".

Machiels-Bongaerts& Boshuizen (2011) examined the role of prior knowledge in developing the instruction. It is necessary to know how prior knowledge affects learning. Prior knowledge had its influence on considering learning as "conceptual change." (West & Pines, 1986). learning was considered before as an accumulation of information.

Teachers have an important function in helping students to link their own prior knowledge with new one. As the Knowledge is a group of ideas, it can facilitate learning activities. Eliciting enough information about a topic before discussing it, affects how a learner builds meaning that helps to understand that topic in a full picture.
Teachers have to establish a series of new knowledge, of which some aspects might overlap with prior knowledge in a specific topic. The problem that students face in understanding a topic is the misconception about that topic which could affect their new knowledge. Therefore, teachers should encourage students to revise their previous information and develop their prior knowledge.

A number of students lack the experience and the knowledge required for conducting the steps and the content of a research. Wong (2002) stated that students might fail to provide the functions of the literature review.

5. Research Questions

1) What are the effects of students' knowledge and achievement in English on their writing of researches?

2) What are the problems that students face while writing a research?

6. Definition of Terms

Prior Knowledge: the knowledge that stems from previous experience.

Writing a Research: students present and discuss information about a problem.

7. Methodology

7.1 Research Design

In this study, a descriptive correlational (cross sectional) design was used to identify the level of students' achievement in English language. Furthermore, this research design is appropriate to examine the effects of students' achievement in English language on their writing of the researches which they were asked to do.

In addition, a qualitative design was used to address the most important problems that students made during writing the researches.

7.2 Sample and Sampling Technique

A convenient sampling method was used to recruit potential participants. All fourth year nursing students from the Hashemeit University were the potential participants. Forty participants were recruited to participate in this study because all of them are a- fourth year b- nursing students c- from the Hashemeit University d- they took the research course e- mentally competent. Exclusion criteria include the fourth nursing students who did not take the research course. This study was conducted at the Hashemite University / nursing faculty.

7.3 Data Collection

Structured questionnaire was used to elicit the necessary information (see the appendix). This questionnaire took ten minutes to complete. It was used to obtain the data relevant to students' achievement and knowledge in English language.

7.4 Instruments

This structured questionnaire will be utilized to collect the data for the purpose of the study. The questionnaire started with a brief statement regarding the purpose of the study followed by twelve questions. The first one was demographic. The rest measure the students' achievement and knowledge in English language. The questionnaire consists of multiple choice questions concerning all variables addressed by the study.

7.5 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to describe the study sample and to identify the level of students' achievement in English language. Qualitative analysis was used to identify the most important problems that students made in their researches.

8. Results

Forty nursing students completed the questionnaire. They are thirteen females and twenty seven males. The results revealed their achievement and knowledge in English language by investigating their grades in English courses, (Tawjihi, E 101, E 102, research course).This is shown in the following table:

Table 1. Students' grades in English courses

	50 -60	61-70	71-80	81- and more
Tawjihi	7.5%	27.5%	40%	25%
E101	10%	32.5%	40%	17.5%
E102	17.5%	22.5%	37.5%	22.5%
Research course	20%	30%	22.5%	27.5%

Most of the students who got more than 81 in English courses performed better in their writing of researches than those who got less than 81. That is, most students with the best achievement and knowledge in English got the highest grades in the research which is 8.1-10. This is clarified in the following table (students' researches were checked and the grades are classified as: less than 6, 6.1-7, 7.1-8, 8.1-10).

Table 2. Classification of research grades and English courses grades

Research Grades	Grades in English Courses
8.1-10	81-100
7.1-8	71-80
6.1-7	61-70
Less than 6	50-60

This shows the relationship between students' achievement in English, revealed by their grades in English courses, and their research grades. Most of the students who got 50-60 in English courses, had the lowest research grade which is less than 6. However, most of the students who got 61-70 had a higher research grade which is 6.1-7.

Students' achievement is investigated in terms of other factors. Most of the students got the highest research grade which is 8.1-10 because they conducted other research papers, participated in a scientific research team, and attended English courses.

On the other hand, students whose research grades were less than 6 made many problems. These problems include lack of organization, not including research questions, not answering the research questions, using incorrect references, not using major headings, not including theoretical frameworks, not appropriacy of the research questions to the purpose and research design, not indicating to recent studies and the variables of interest, not providing a complete description of the sample and not clarifying the findings by figures or tables.

9. Discussion

The results show that students who had better knowledge and achievement in English got the highest research grade. They get this knowledge by conducting research papers, participating in a scientific research team and attending English courses. These factors were important resources of useful information which assist the students in writing their researches. Students who got a high grade in the research course could learn how to write a research. This course taught the students the steps to be followed and mistakes to be avoided. In addition, other English courses E101 and E102 reinforced students' competence of how to organize their written data and produce correct grammatical sentences. However, other students got lower research grades. They neither conducted researches nor recognized the ways of correct writing. I suggest that these students can benefit from attending intensive

research courses and to engage in a field work with other researchers.

10. Conclusion

This paper examined the effects of students' achievement and knowledge in English on their writing of researches. A number of students have good background knowledge in English, they conducted a number of research papers and took several English courses. These students got the highest research grades. In contrast, other students are weak and lack this knowledge which affected the way they write a research. They got the lowest research grades because of the mistakes they did. Some of these mistakes exemplified in including neither the significance of the study nor the research questions, lacking organization and not providing the major components of researches. Finally, Students' research grades rely on their knowledge and achievement in English. Students made fewer problems got a high research grade because of their advanced level of knowledge in English.

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