

# Analysis of Common Errors Made by Second Year English Language Department Students in Writing Academic Paragraph: The Case of Gilgel Beles CTE

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore and analyze the common errors of second year English department students in writing paragraph with reference to Gilgel Beles CTE. The students wrote paragraphs (about causes of environmental pollution) with the range of 150 to 200 words approximately. They also completed the questionnaires that were adapted from Korbel (2001) regarding their views toward writing skills. The instructors completed the questionnaire and replied for opened-ended question. The study was a survey method using 4-point Likert Scale questionnaire. Systematic sampling technique was implemented to select 10 students in each section from the total population of 196 students. Though the total numbers of the students were 196, only 50 students had responded to the questionnaire. Among 50 sample sizes, only forty-five students completed the questionnaire formally. Two students completed the questionnaire wrongly whereas three students were absent during data gathering. Comprehensive (available) sampling technique was used to select instructors. Among the seven English instructors, six instructors completed the questionnaire formally and returned to the researcher. This study employed a mixed method design which includes both quantitative and qualitative research analysis methods. In general, there were different types of errors; grammatical errors in particular, were made by the students. These were passive voice, verb form, subject-verb agreement, word order, prepositions, articles, plurality and auxiliaries. Especially, words spelling and the lack of sense of sentences/paragraphs/ are the most problems. This incomprehensibility of grammar rules has negative effect on student compositions. After analyzing students' and teachers' questionnaire, it has been found out that the students made grammatical errors due to many reasons: the lack of practices daily, lack of motivation, problem of teaching methods, lack of writing activities, teachers escape writing lesson, school text book is not conducive (it focuses more on speaking) and the lack of opportunities to practice writing skills.

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## Introduction

Writing is one of the most difficult skills for students to acquire. Writing is unlike spoken language, it requires the readers or the audience to understand and interpret what has been written. Gunning (1998) agreed that writing is difficult, more complex and abstract than speaking. In addition, he advocated that writing is definitely "hard work". Therefore, it is evidently true that writing poses a number of problems to the students, as it is a skill that is difficult to master. It is believed that writing demands a great deal of skills and conventions such as writing readiness and grammatical rules for the students to become proficient and effective writers. Besides that, teachers face great challenge to teach these skills and conventions as students may at times find them confusing and difficult to understand and write effective writing in English. Writing therefore is not just putting pen to paper or writing down ideas but it is how these ideas are presented or expressed effectively. This highly demanding process of writing requires a number of skills and conventions like organization in the development of ideas and information; a high degree of accuracy in choosing the right words so that there is no ambiguity of meaning and also the right use of complex grammatical devices to focus and emphasize ideas. Besides, writing demands the writer to have careful choice of vocabulary and understand grammatical patterns and to be able to write sentence structures that is appropriate to the subject matter. Therefore, besides having knowledge in skills and conventions of writing, students have to practice a lot of writing (Gunning, 1998).

It is true that non-native speakers are more exposed to committing errors. Teachers of English in Ethiopia are currently facing the challenge of adopting and developing a wide range of methods to accomplish effective teaching of English writing. This, of course, is not an easy task. A large number of students in Ethiopia continue to fail to master the basics of the English writing even after long years of formal education. Teachers of English feel satisfied to have a student who speaks and writes correct English. This has been the ambition of all English teachers. Students in government schools in Ethiopia start learning English from the first primary. The students have spent more than ten/twelve years of learning English language. At the end, the students are expected to understand advanced English, to communicate with an English speaking person within certain reasonable areas, to read simple English with ease, fluency and understanding, and to write an essay or a paragraph in English using

basic structures of the language. However, during my long experience as a teacher of English in Gilgel Beles CTE, I have found out that the majority of students have great difficulties in reading with comprehension and that very few of them are able to write meaningful and error-free English sentences. In spite of the fact that they have studied English for more than ten/twelve years, most of the students are still unable to write a correct paragraph using adequately the basic structures of the English language they have learned. Why do students still find difficulties in writing in English when their teachers do their best to help them to achieve good results? The answer to this question might be that learning English or any other foreign language is difficult for all non-native speakers. According to Hwang (1970) the main problem is that, even in their very first lesson, the learners of a foreign language do not start learning new language from zero. Hwang (1970), points out the way to become a better writer is to write. She remarks students who feel incompetent at writing avoid writing. They do not practice. They do not get better.

Teachers of writing skills are generally faced with students who have memorized a good amount of English vocabulary and grammar rules, but have seldom put that knowledge to practical use (Wachs, 1993). The challenge for the teacher is to find methods to activate in a meaningful way the passive knowledge the students possess in terms of the writing skill, as well as to help the students become more proficient while working to eliminate some of their common errors. It will aid in the adoption of appropriate teaching strategies to help beginning students learn English writing skills better. As Richards and Renandya (2002) claim; “there is no doubt that writing is the most difficult skill for foreign language learners to master. The difficulty lies not only in generating and organizing ideas, but also in translating notions into legible text”. Yet, it is very necessary to look into the dynamics of writing and its teaching, as writing is a skill that not only is tested in every valid language examination, but also a skill that learners should possess and demonstrate in academic contexts. Writing includes numerous considerations and choices to be made regarding higher level skills, such as content, structure and organization, and lower level skills, such as punctuation and choice of appropriate vocabulary items and grammatical structures, which are the terms used by Richards and Renandya (2002). Moreover, writing skills must be practiced and learned through experience. By putting together concepts and solving problems, the writer engages in a two-way interaction between continuously developing knowledge and text (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987). Indeed, academic writing demands conscious effort and practice in composing, developing, and analyzing ideas. Compared to students writing in their native language, however, students writing in their foreign language have to also acquire proficiency in the use of the language as well as writing strategies, techniques and skills, they want to write close to error-free texts and they enter language courses with the expectations of becoming more proficient writers in the foreign. However, most college students find it difficult to write paragraph free of errors of various types. Therefore, teachers of basic writing need to expect certain common types of errors. They may also find other types of errors, which can be revealed by analyzing the written products or essays of students. These are the conventions, which are usually followed by the teachers of writing when analyzing students' errors. As it is mentioned above, writing is a complex task; it is the most difficult of the language abilities and skills to acquire (Corder, 1974). Its level of difficulty varies between native speakers who think in the language used and non-native speakers who think in their own native language. While writing in English language, students have to think of all rules they need to apply or use. Effective writing requires a number of things: a high degree of development in the organization of ideas, a high degree of accuracy, the use of complex grammatical devices, careful choice of vocabulary and sentence structures to create a style which is appropriate to readers (Hedge, 1998). The general objective of this study was to explore and analyze the common errors of second year English department students in writing paragraph. Thus, the specific objectives of the study are to see the negative effects of students' incomprehensibility of English grammatical rules on their academic paragraph writing, to explore students' common errors in writing an academic paragraph in English language and to investigate the problems that the students faced in writing an academic paragraph in English language.

### **Materials and Methods**

The population of the study consisted of 196 students both from regular and extension second year English department students in Gilgel Beles CTE. The sample size of the participants was 50. They were selected from five sections. Systematic sampling technique was implemented to select 10 students in each section. The participants were chosen only from English department because they are expected to write in more detail than other stream students whose writing ability is limited. The participants have been studying English as a school subject for more than twelve years. All English language instructors were taken as a participant of the study. Comprehensive (available) sampling technique was used to select instructors because their number was manageable.

This study employed a mixed method design which includes both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Such method integrates both approaches to provide much more detailed and comprehensive picture of what is being investigated. For the purpose of exploring teachers' and students' views toward English writing skills and identifying the common errors in students' paragraph, the researcher conducted the study by using the

following tools for data collection: two questionnaires, one for the students and the other for the instructors. The questionnaire was modified from Korbel (2001). It is intended to explore the students' views towards the writing skill. Each scale designated certain measurement such as strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. Similarly, the second questionnaire was adapted from Korbel (2001) that ranges from strongly agree to strongly disagree. It was designed to explore teachers' views in teaching writing skill. Open-ended questions were held to obtain qualitative data from the instructors regarding students writing skills. Moreover, the students were told to write paragraphs. They wrote the paragraphs with the title “causes of environmental pollution” with 150 to 200 words approximately. Before the questionnaire was distributed, the researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participants. The selected students were appointed to complete the questionnaire in free time. They were informed that the items must be completed individually. After all the participants got the purpose of the study, they became charitable to complete the questionnaire without doubt. In the same time and at the same place, the students were provided with the questionnaire to complete it with their views toward learning writing skill. After they returned the questionnaire, they were given a sheet of paper to write the paragraph with the topics: “causes of environmental pollution”. Then they were told to write a paragraph with 150 to 200 words approximately. Similarly, another questionnaire was given to the instructors to explore their views toward the students' writing. They were also given open-ended questions to state their own ideas regarding the causes that college students suffer from weakness in writing skill and to suggest possible solutions.

The analysis method included both quantitative and qualitative approaches of interpreting the data. Both students' and instructors' questionnaires were analyzed in percentage (quantitative) whereas students' paragraph and instructors' open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively.

## Discussions and Results

**Table 1: Analysis of students' views about the difficulty of writing skills in English language**

The data that were obtained from students were calculated by percentage to determine their views toward learning/teaching writing skill. The following table, therefore, summarized the findings of students' views about writing skill in numbers and percentages.

No	Statement	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly agree	
		No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
1	The problems of teaching methods in writing.	4	8.9	9	20	9	20	23	51.1
2	The lack of books and other reference materials in the schools and in the college.	4	8.9	7	15.6	16	35.6	18	40
3	Insufficient activities and homework /assignments/ in writing skills.	8	17.8	11	24.4	11	24.4	15	33.3
4	The lack of sufficient knowledge about the grammar rules.	2	4.4	10	22.2	14	31.1	19	42.2
5	The lack of enough knowledge on the capitalization and punctuation.	9	20	10	22.2	9	20	17	37.8
6	Spelling problems	4	8.9	8	17.8	16	35.6	17	37.8
7	Mother tongue interference	8	17.8	12	26.7	13	28.9	12	26.7
8	Lack of motivation	7	15.6	6	13.3	16	35.6	16	35.6
9	Lack of vocabulary	3	6.7	6	13.3	9	20	27	60
10	Lack of self confidence	3	6.7	11	24.4	17	37.8	14	31.1
11	Lack of interest in writing skill	10	22.2	7	15.6	16	35.6	12	27.6
12	Lack of practices in lower grade levels	3	6.7	3	6.7	11	24.4	28	62.2

As it was indicated on the above table 1, students have showed their views toward writing skill. Based on the evidences in the above table, 23 (51.1%) students strongly agreed that the problems of teaching methods in writing were the sources of their writing skills. Similarly, 9 (20%) students also agreed that the problems of teaching methods in writing made their writing skills unsuccessful. Overall, 32 (71.1%) students agree that there were problems in teaching methods of writing skills both in the college and in lower grades. On the other hand, 13 (28.9%) students believed that the problem of their writing skills were not resulted from the problems of teaching methods in writing skills.

As it was shown in the table, the lack of books and other reference materials in the schools and in the college was also another issue that causes the problems of writing skill for students. 18 (40%) of students strongly agreed that the lack of books in the college and schools was the sources of their writing skill problems. Similarly, 16 (35.6%) students also agreed that the lack of book caused the problems in writing skill. Generally, 34 (75.6%) students agree that the lack of reference books regarding writing skill caused writing skill problems. On the contrary, 11 (24.4%) students believed that the lack of books was not the source for their writing skill problem.

15 (33.3%) of the students strongly agreed that there was insufficient activities and homework /assignments/ in writing skills especial lower grades. There were also 11 (24.4%) students agreed that there was insufficient activities and homework /assignments/ regarding writing skills. Totally, 26 (57.7%) students agreed that insufficient activities and homework /assignments/ in writing skill made them less effective in writing skill. There were, on the other hand, 19 (42.3) who disagreed with the issue of insufficient activities and homework /assignments/ regarding writing skills in the college and schools.

Students reflected their own view about the lack of sufficient knowledge regarding grammar rules. Grammar rules have great role on students' writing skill in English language. As it was shown in the table above 19 (42.2%) students strongly agreed that the lack of sufficient knowledge of the grammar rules has great influence in their writing. There were also 14 (31.1%) students who agreed that the lack of the knowledge of grammar rules affected their writing. They believed that their ineffective writing skill resulted from the lack of grammar rules. Totally, about 33 (73.3%) of the students accepted that the lack of grammar knowledge has great influence in their writing composition. On the contrary, there were a few students who did not believe that the difficulty of writing skill in English language results in due to the lack of sufficient knowledge about the grammar rules. 2 (4.4%) students strongly disagreed that the role of sufficient knowledge about the grammar rules in the writing skill. They believed that students problem in writing skills was not the lack of sufficient knowledge of grammar rules. Similarly, 10 (22.2%) students also accepted that the lack of sufficient knowledge about the grammar rules did not have significant role in students' writing in English language. Generally, 12 (26.6%) students disagreed about the role of grammar rules in writing skill.

The students gave their own responses about the lack of enough knowledge on the capitalization and punctuation marks. More than half students believed there was the effect of the lack of enough knowledge on the capitalization and punctuation marks in writing composition in English language. 17(37.8%) students strongly believed that enough knowledge on the capitalization and punctuation marks was very vital in writing skill in English language. Moreover, 9 (20%) students accepted that there was the role of the knowledge of capitalization and punctuation marks in the writing skill. More than half, 26 (57.8%), students believed that the difficulty of writing skill in English language resulted in the lack of enough knowledge on the capitalization and punctuation. On the contrary, 9(20%) and 10 (22.2%) students strongly disagreed and disagreed about the role of the knowledge of capitalization and punctuation marks in writing skill in English language respectively. That is, 19 (42.2%) students never accepted the effect of the knowledge of capitalization and punctuation marks on the writing skill.

The most difficulty of writing skill in English language results in spelling problem. 17 (37.8%) students strongly agreed that spelling problem affected their writing skill in English language. Moreover, 16 (35.6%) students also agreed that their writing skill problems resulted in spelling difficulty. Overall, the majority of students, 33 (73.4%), said that spelling problem had great influence in their writing skill in English language. There were some students, on the other hand, who believed that their writing problem in English language did not result in spelling problem. Only 4(8.9%) students strongly disagreed with the skill of spelling in the writing skill. There were also 8 (17.8%) students who disagreed with the role of spelling in the writing skill. Generally, a few students, 12 (26.6%), believed that spelling problem did not affect their writing skill in English language.

This study also tried to see the influence of mother tongue in students' writing skill in English language. As the finding indicated in the table 1 above, more than half students said that there was mother tongue influence in their writing skill. 12 (26.7%) students strongly agreed with the influence of mother tongue in the writing skill in English language. Similarly, 13 (28.9%) students agreed with mother tongue interference in writing skill. Generally, 25 (55.6%) students accepted that there was mother tongue interference in writing skill in English language. There were, on the other hand, some students who did not agree with the influence of mother tongue influence in writing skill. For instance, 8 (17.8%) students strongly disagreed with mother tongue interference in the writing skill. Similarly, 12 (26.7%) students disagreed with the influence of mother tongue in writing skill. Generally, 20 (44.4%) students believed that the interference of mother tongue in writing skill in English language was negligible.

This research also tried to see the role of motivation on students' writing skill in English language. According to the analysis made in the table, 16 (35.6%) students strongly agreed that motivation had role in writing skill. Similarly, 16 (35.6%) students agreed that motivation was very important to enhance their writing skill. Generally, majority of the participants, 32 (71.1%), accepted the importance of motivation in teaching/learning writing skill. On the other hand, 7 (15.6%) strong disagreed with the roles of motivation in their writing skill. There were also 6 (13.3) who disagreed with the influence of motivation in their writing skill. Overall, 13 (28.9%) students never accepted motivation as a substantial factor to develop writing skill in English language.

There was evidence that most students did not have enough vocabulary knowledge. As it was summarized in the table above, 27 (60%) students strongly agreed that the lack of vocabulary knowledge affected their writing skill. The lack of vocabulary knowledge was the second big problem of the students to write a composition effectively. There were also 9 (20%) students who agreed that the difficulty of their writing skill in English language resulted in the lack of vocabulary. Generally, majority of the samples, 36 (80%) agreed that the lack of



vocabulary knowledge made them ineffective in writing skill. On the other side, a few students believed that the difficulty of writing skill in English language did not result in the lack of vocabulary. For instance, 3 (6.7%) strongly disagreed that the difficulty of writing skill in English language results in due to the lack of vocabulary knowledge. Moreover, 6 (13.3%) students also agreed that the lack of vocabulary knowledge did not affect their writing skill in English language. Generally, 9 (20%) students did not agree that lack of vocabulary knowledge affect their writing skill.

Lack of self-confidence was another item which was considered as a factor for the difficulty of writing in English language. As the evidence indicated in the table above, 14 (31.1%) students strongly agreed that the lack of self-confidence made them ineffective in writing skill in English language. Similarly, 17 (37.8%) students agreed that the lack of self-confidence created the difficulty of writing skill in English language. Generally, 31(68.9%) students agreed with the idea that self-confidence is very important to develop good writing skill in English language. There were other students, on the other hand, who did not accept the idea of self confidence in the writing skill. For example, 3 (6.7%) students disagreed strongly the idea that their difficulty of writing skill in English language resulted in lack of self-confidence. There were also 11(24.4%) who disagreed that the lack of self-confidence did not affect the writing skill in English language. Totally, 14 (31.1%) students' difficulty of writing skill in English language was not resulted in the lack of self-confidence.

Lack of interest in writing skill was one of the items of the questionnaire in this research. The participants reflected their own views whether the difficulty of writing skill in English language resulted in lack of interest or not. Based on the evidence obtained by analyzing the data, 12 (27.6%) students strongly agreed that the difficulty of writing skill in English language resulted in the lack of interest in writing skill. There were also 16 (35.6%) students who also agreed that the lack of self-confidence made students poor in writing skill in English. Generally, more than half participants, 28(62.2%) agreed that self-confidence is critical to help students to develop writing skill. On the contrary, there were participants who did not consider the lack of interest as a factor for writing skill. 10 (22.2%) participants strongly disagreed with the idea that the difficulty of writing skill in English language resulted in the lack of interest. 7 (15.6%) students also disagreed with the idea of the lack of interest caused writing skill problem. Overall, 17 (37.8%) students did not accept self-confidence as a factor for the development of writing skill.

As the analysis indicated, the lack of practices in lower grade levels is the most problem that made student ineffective in writing skill in English language. As the evidence obtained from the data, 28 (62.2%) students strongly agreed that the difficulty of writing skill in English language resulted in the lack of practices in lower grade levels. In the same way, 11 (24.4%) students agreed that the lack of practices made students effective in writing skill. Generally, almost all participants, 39 (86.7%) believed that practices in lower grade levels is very important to develop writing skill. There were very a few students, 3 (6.7%) who strongly disagreed with the idea of the lack of practices in lower grade levels that made ineffective in writing skill in English language. Similarly, there were 3(6.7%) students who disagreed with the lack of writing practices in the lower grade levels that caused writing skill problem. Totally, 6(13.3%) students did not consider lower grade levels writing practices as a factor to develop effective writing skill.

**Table 2: Analysis of teachers' views about writing skills**

No	Statement	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly agree	
		No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
1	I feel there is evidence of lack of basic writing skill of my students.	0	0	0	0	2	33.3	4	66.7
2	I am satisfied with writing skill that is provided in the curriculum.	0	0	1	16.7	3	50	2	33.3
3	I use supplementary writing materials.	0	0	1	16.7	3	50	2	33.3
4	My students practice writing daily.	0	0	4	66.7	1	16.7	1	16.7
5	The lack of time affects my concentration on writing skill.	0	0	3	50	2	33.3	1	16.7

As it was indicated in the above table 2, 4(66.7%) teachers strongly agreed that there is evidence of lack of basic writing skill of students. Similarly, 2(33.3%) teachers agreed that there is lack of basic writing skill of their students. No teachers who strongly disagreed and disagreed that about the lack of basic writing skill of their students. Generally, all teachers (100%) agreed that there was evidence of lack of basic writing skill of students.

English language teachers are not satisfied with writing skill that is provided in curriculum. This is also one factor that makes students ineffective in writing skill. 3 (50%) teachers agreed that they are not satisfied with the writing skill that is provided in the curriculum. In the same way, 2 (33.3%) teachers strongly agreed that the curriculum has a problem to practice writing skill. On the other hand, 1 (16.7%) teacher believed the curriculum does not have a problem to practice writing skill. Overall, 4 (66.7) accepted that the curriculum is not good for the students to practice writing skill. Generally, a lot of teachers mentioned that the school text was responsible for

students' errors in their writing. 66.7% of teachers believe that the writing drills in the school curriculum were not satisfactory.

English language teachers believed that they use supplementary materials to teach students writing skill in the classroom. For this, 3 (50%) teachers agreed that they often use supplementary materials to encourage their students to acquire writing skill. Similarly, 2 (33.3%) teachers strongly agreed that they use other supportive materials to teach their students writing skill. Only 1 (16.7%) teacher accepted that he did not use supplementary material to help his students to practice writing skill.

As the evidence indicated in the above 2, the students did not practice writing daily. There are 4 (66.7%) who agreed that their students never practiced writing skill daily. Thus, students' writing problem is due to the lack of practice. Whereas 2 (33.3%) teachers accepted that their students make writing practice daily. Lack of writing practices may lead to weakness in the writing skill as a result a lot of errors in students' paragraphs was occurred. Based on the data obtained from the questionnaires, a large number of teachers believe that the lack of writing practices is always responsible for students' weakness in the English writing skill. Some of English language teachers believed that the lack of time affects their concentration on writing skill. On the other hand, some teachers disagree with the idea the lack of time that affects their concentration on the writing skill. That is, 3 (50%) teachers agreed that there is the lack of time whereas 3 (50%) believed that there is not time shortage to concentrate on writing skill.

**Table: 3 Analysis of teachers' concentration while teaching writing skills for students**

No	Statement	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly agree	
		No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
1	Capitalization	0	0	0	0	2	33.3	4	66.7
2	Punctuation	0	0	1	16.7	3	50	2	33.3
3	Spelling	0	0	0	0	3	50	3	50
4	Handwriting	0	0	2	33.3	2	33.3	2	33.3
5	Grammar	0	0	0	0	4	66.7	2	33.3
6	The organization of writing	0	0	0	0	4	66.7	2	33.3
7	The clarity of the ideas	0	0	0	0	4	66.7	2	33.3
8	Vocabulary	0	0	1	16.7	4	66.7	1	16.7

As it is show on the table, capitalization, punctuation, spelling, handwriting, grammar, the organization of writing and the clarity of the ideas are the areas focused to see that the teachers concentrate while teaching writing skill to their students. As the finding indicates, the teachers give due attention to all the areas except a few teachers who give less attention to punctuation marks, handwriting, and vocabulary. All the teachers (100%) accepted that they concentrate on capitalization while teaching students and assessing students' composition. Almost all teachers (83.3%) agreed that they concentrate on punctuation mark while teaching writing skill to their students. Only one of the teachers (16.7%) did not deal with punctuation mark. 3 (50%) teachers strongly agreed that they give due attention for spelling while teaching writing skill to their students. Similarly, 3 (50%) teachers agreed as they concentrate on spelling during teaching writing skill to the learners. Generally, all teachers (100%) give value to spelling of the students when they teach writing skill. Regarding handwriting issue, 2 (33.3%) teachers did not focus about it in teaching writing skill to the learners whereas 4 (66.7%) teachers give great value for handwriting when they teach it to the students. Grammar issue is the most problem of students during writing a composition or sentences. As it is indicated on the above table 3, however, all teachers (100%) concentrate on the grammar while teaching writing skill. That is 4 (66.7%) teachers agreed that they give due attention to the grammar. Similarly, 2 (33.3%) teachers give great value to grammar in writing skill. The teachers also concentrate on the clarity of students' composition or sentences.

All the teachers responded that they give due attention on the organization students' composition. That is, 4 (66.7% teachers agreed that they concentrate on the organization of students' composition. Similarly, 2 (33.3%) teachers strongly agreed that they concentrate on the organization of students' script. Generally, all the teachers (100%) accepted that they give great value to the organization of students' texts. Most all students' compositions lack clarity of the ideas or messages though teachers' responses indicate that as they concentrate on the clarity of the ideas of the students' compositions. As the finding shows on the above table 3, 4 (66.7%) teachers agreed that they give due attention for the clarity of the ideas of students' composition during teaching writing skill. In the same way, 2 (33.3%) teachers strongly agreed that they concentrate on the clarity of the ideas in students' composition. No any teachers who did not concentrate on the clarity of the ideas of students' compositions.

Teachers' concentration on vocabulary is also tested in this research. As the finding indicated that, 4 (66.7%) teachers accepted that they concentrate on vocabulary while assessing students' composition. Similarly, 1 (16.7%) teacher strongly agreed that he focuses on the vocabulary. Generally, 5 (83.3%) teachers give great attention to vocabulary while teaching students writing skill. In order to get a clear picture about what causes students to

commit many grammatical errors in their English writing paragraphs, teachers' general reflection is necessary. The six English language teachers recognized the positive effects they exert on their students' developing writing skill. They put much responsibility on the students for the decline of their writing skill. Here is what some of the teachers indicated regarding the weakness of the students in English writing skill.

### Analysis of instructor's open-ended questions

➤ *What do you think the causes that college students suffer from weakness in writing skill? State briefly*

The instructors reported that students were suffering in writing skill because they did not practice writing in their elementary or high school education level. Teachers in primary or high school concentrated on teaching grammar lessons than practicing writing skill. It was obvious that the college students did not practice writing skill well at primary and secondary grade levels. This could be seen on two sides: teacher side and student side. First teachers did not prepare lesson plan to teach writing skill. They escaped the writing lesson in the actual classroom when they deliver the lesson. Second although some teachers have planned to teach writing skill, the learners were not motivated to attend and learn the skill. They get bored and did not participate actively to do writing tasks. The teachers also stated that college students suffer from writing because they did practice writing skill from the lower grades. The curriculum for grade 1-4 students was designed as it could support continuous assessment and continuous practice but the learners developed difficulty in writing skill. This was because the students did not consider writing skill as essential skill that should be performed practically in each lesson. Similarly, other instructors justified the reason for the weakness of students writing skill as follow: lack of interest in writing activity, lack of knowledge about spelling, punctuation and capitalization rules, lack of knowledge about subject-verb-agreement, lack of practice, word problem.

➤ *How can you help your students to develop writing skill in your college?*

To solve the problems as mentioned above, the English teachers can use some techniques to teach writing such as using various pictures; contextual teaching and learning approach, using parallel writing technique, using mind mapping/clustering technique. By applying one of the techniques, the teacher can encourage the students to participate in the classroom activities. The teacher should be able to encourage the students to express their ideas into good writing and provide constructive feedback continuously. The teacher gives opportunities to the students to write their ideas without afraid of making mistake. It can be done by introducing topics and a good writing process. Teachers should appreciate students' writing skill and errors. The teacher must teach students basic rules related with writing and support them with practical activities. The teachers have to also provide instruction to the students throughout the writing processes.

### Analysis of students' common errors in paragraphs

#### Passive Voice

There is the possibility that the type of compositions written by the students did not require the use of the passive voices. However, the following sentences contain examples of errors in the use of the passive voice in students' paragraphs:

- You should be kept of the environmental air(should keep)
- The sun will be burned the people (will burn)
- Environmental pollution causes by very different working people (is caused)
- Environmental pollution is causes by .... (is caused)
- Most of the time environmental pollution can caused by ....(can be caused)
- Environmental pollution is also created different diseases (creates)
- It is cause by .... (is caused)
- It caused by many causes (is caused)
- People who live in environment may be affect by... (may be affected)
- Environmental pollution can caused ... (can cause)
- Environmental pollution must studied by teachers (must be studied)

In the above examples, it can be said the students get confusion between active voice and passive voice. This might be due to the lack of sufficient training and drills on the rules of passive and active voices which lead to overgeneralization. The misuse of verbs is unusual in the above examples because such use of verbs do not exist in English language. According to Richards (1971), the errors mentioned above could derive from faulty comprehension of differences between passive and active voices in the target language. He added that these were sometimes due to poor gradation of teaching items whereby the form may be interpreted as a marker of the past tense. This developmental error termed as false concepts hypothesized is a common occurrence among learners.

### Verb form

High error rates in this study occurred within the error category of verbs. This finding may explain that the use of English verbs was a major learning difficulty for all students. The use of verb tense shows that the students still find a difficulty when and how to use the tense and the form of the verb. The tenses most commonly misused were the simple past tense, future tense, past perfect and present simple. It can be justified by the incomprehensibility of the correct form and use and usage of the verb. 33 (73.3%) students who participated in answering the questionnaire mentioned in the one hand that the incomprehensibility of grammar rules is always responsible for their difficulty in the English writing skill. Moreover, the tenses in English are considered one of the most difficult structural points that challenge the students' learning English. The following sentences contain examples of errors in the use of the verb form in students' paragraphs:

- We can doing cook (can cook)
- It is to doing any work (to do)
- I haven't other idea (I don't have)
- There are many fuels that can remove out (can be removed)
- ... because we are ignore... (ignore)
- When you go the learning... (to learn)
- It is come with big power (comes)
- Any person can't using toilet (use)
- One environment is pollute (is polluted)
- Animal is died at that time (died)
- Human beings are remove or reject the environment (are removing or rejecting)
- Trees are cut down and don't replace (are not replaced)
- I will going to make solve... (will go)

In this example, the students have confused about the uses of English language forms. There is a kind of language interference. In this example the students don't understand the right form of the verbs, so instead of adding the infinitive form (to do, to learn) of the verb, they inserted unnecessary verb to be and the participle (is to doing, the learning). There is also confusion between active and passive voice. For example, it is incorrect to say 'is died'. It should be written as 'died'. The student over-generalized the use of modal verbs instead of adding the infinitive form after can't, they transferred the participle (can using, can doing) form. Moreover, students don't have awareness about verb to be. It is obvious that verb to be is followed with progression (-ing) form of the verbs. However, in the above example students said 'are remove' instead of 'are removing'. This finding is related Chen's (1998) assertion that most students have difficulties in the use of English verbs due to the absence of verb knowledge. Similarly, many studies conducted in this field indicated that tense errors are the most frequent ones among secondary students (Khuwaileh and Shoumali, 2000).

### Subject-verb agreement

The most common type of error made by students in the study group is subject-verb agreement. In this case the subject and the verb phrase in the English sentences should agree in number and person. It is evident that this item had the highest percentage of errors in this study. Although the students still make errors, they do lack a basic understanding of subject-verb agreement. The following sentences contain examples of errors in the use of the subject-verb agreement in students' paragraphs:

- This are ..... (is)
- Human being are... (is)
- It have caused .... (has)
- Trees is causing environmental pollution (are)
- If that country have rule and regulation... (has)
- The causes is ... (are)
- This are air pollution... (is)
- The causes of environmental pollution is... (are)
- The cause of environmental pollution are... (is)
- Other try to reduce... (tries)
- All this cause... (all these causes)
- These means... (mean)
- Sun light have a power ... (has)
- Without pollution our country are... (is)

In English, the subject must agree with the verb that follows, that is to say if the subject is singular, the verb should be in singular form whereas if the subject is plural, the verb must be in plural form. A possible explanation



why students tend to add –s after plural, and omit –s after singular may due to overgeneralization of the rule. Students over generalize the plural by adding the plural –s to the verb that follows and omit the –s in the verb if the subject is singular. Most students confuse between the third person singular (–s) and the plural (-s). They tend to add --s to the verb if the subject is plural and omit –s if the subject is singular. Handrickson (1979) in his study found out that the most common errors resulted from subject-verb agreement.

### Word order

Once again, there is evidence and counter evidence of transfer in studies related to word order. The following sentences contain examples of errors in the use of word order in students' paragraphs:

- On that place can live human being... (human being can live)
- ...pollution can be naturally attended....( attended naturally)
- ...and tree cutting...(cutting tree)
- Collection of dead bad organisms...(bad dead)
- How I will solve that problem? (How will I..?)
- How I can change by sharing idea? (How can I...?)
- One person other place used...( one person used other place)

The first example shows that the student uses modal auxiliary- verb-subject patterns of words arrangement in a sentence. There is not such pattern of word order in English language. It should be written as 'on that place, human being can live'. In the second example, the word 'naturally' should follow the word attended (can be attended naturally). 'The phrase 'tree cutting' /ዝፍ ሙቁረጥ/ in the third example is occurred due to mother tongue interference that is wrong order of the words in English language. It should be written as 'cutting tree'. It is obvious in English language, the adjective precedes the noun that is modifies. However the phrase 'dead bad organisms' is arranged wrongly. It must be written as 'bad dead organisms'. In the question form 'how I will solve that problem?'- the words are arranged wrongly. It would have been written as 'how will I solve that problem?' The students' overgeneralization in forming the right question in English has made them to commit such an error due to the incomprehensibility of the question word order.

### Prepositions

Errors in the use of prepositions were also the problems of students in writing in English language. The most closely related studies have emphasized the difficulty of English prepositions for learners. In Scott's study preposition errors ranked second only to verbs, although in Mukattash's (1981) found out that they ranked fourth among general grammatical errors. They are, therefore, a particular area of difficulty for learners, mainly because of mother tongue interference. The following sentences contain examples of errors in the use of prepositions in students' paragraphs:

- You should be kept of environmental air...(no preposition is needed)
- So dirty mixed from human drink water...(to)
- Human being to cut the plant.( zero preposition)
- Environment is affected on the nature of human being.(by)
- Our environment is to pollute by burning of trees ....( zero preposition)
- Pollution is to follow many problems on human being.( zero preposition)
- I write for causes of environmental pollution. (zero preposition)
- Peoples are to the cutting of plants and other resources of environment.(zero preposition)

When we compare the prepositional uses in students' mother and English, we find prepositions in English are not equivalents in mother tongue. There are not structures that are equivalent in both languages. Another possible explanation for the occurrence of the errors above is ignorance of rule restrictions. The learners tend to make analogy of what they have learnt and apply it in new situations. Lakkis and Malak (2000) agree with Henning (1978) and with this study that simple prepositions were incorrectly used very frequently by the learners due to the lack of knowledge in English prepositional.

### Articles

One of the most difficult structural elements for EFL learners is the English article system: definite and indefinite articles. Surprisingly, the English articles a, an, the, and zero are quite difficult to acquire not only for ESL/EFL learners but also for children learning English as a first language. Articles are believed to be a source of difficulty for learners and teachers of English as a second/foreign language, especially for those whose native languages do not have articles or do have articles or article-like morphemes which are used in ways that differ from English articles (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999). In this study, article use is another frequent problem in students' texts. The following sentences contain examples of errors in the use of articles in students' paragraphs:

- It is one of a factor that affects air condition. (the)

- ...a collection of a pieces of dirty materials....(zero article)
- ...it is a very good (zero article)
- It is a difficult and a very broad time (zero article)
- The sun light have a power (the)
- When the people burn a large landmasses area ....(the)
- Peoples are to the cutting of plants and other resources of environment. (zero article)

When students' use of articles is analyzed, in the first sentence article 'a' is not allowed to use here rather article 'the' should be used. In the phrase 'a pieces of dirty materials', the article 'a' was used unnecessary instead article 'the' should be used. This again explains over-generalization of the rule. Mother tongue does not have an equivalent form of articles that go before the noun. Concerning the deletion of the definite and indefinite articles, some students may not know when to use them. This failure to learn and understand the use of the articles explains that the students' excessive use of the articles in other situations. It is quite clear that there is a problem with the students' linguistic competence in this regard. The lack of mother tongue language system of the definite and indefinite articles might have a negative effect on the students' wrong use of the articles in the target language. The lack of equivalent definite and indefinite articles in the mother tongue might be the cause of students' difficulty in the use of these articles in English language. English language has defined or definite article 'the' and the undefined or indefinite articles 'a' and 'an' clearly. It is possible that participants may have forgotten sometimes to use articles due to the interference from their first language and this explains the occurrence of interlingual errors.

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### Plurality

A noun is defined as a word that is used to name any person, animal, thing, idea, state, or quality (Russell, 19193). In this study, the percentage of errors in plurality is relatively low as compared to other types of grammatical errors in the students' texts. The following sentences contain examples of errors in the use of plurality in the students' paragraphs.

- The smoking comes from industries can cause many disease like cancer ... (many diseases)
- They should do some hobby (hobbies)
- Many child are suffering due to pollution (children)
- ... with all this advices...(pieces of advice)

A possible explanation of dropping (s), students may not realize that determiners such as some and many require plural nouns and due to the lack of training or incomprehensibility of the rule such errors may occur. Students in general confuse between regular and irregular plural nouns. They tend to keep the irregular plural as singular when it is plural as the case in the example (many child). They also incline to add (s) to uncountable as in the example (advices). A possible explanation for this is that students try to over-generalize the rule where (s) is added to all plurals. Some researchers such as Jain (1974) and Tan (1987) have attributed morphological errors like the above to over generalization and a simplification strategy on the learners' part. This means that in order to simplify things, learners often sub-categorize certain countable nouns could probably be due to a subconscious learning strategy employed by them to lighten their memory load when managing new English data input. While some respondents are inclined to leave out the (s) morpheme in plural countable nouns, others have an affinity for inserting the (s) morpheme in singular countable nouns as well as uncountable nouns.

### Spelling of words

Spelling difficulty is the most problem of the students in writing paragraph in English language. The following examples of sentences /phrases/ are directly taken from students' paragraph:

- Environmental pollution causes fiman ... (famine)
- The causes of deisess, for example, tyhioid, malry, etc. (disease, typhoid, malaria)
- The human beings one plant cuating of tree ten plants of poting of the earth (cutting, putting)
- Any person to fale different dirty things (fall)

- Pollution causes deses (disease)
- Aire in enviroment pollution... (air, environment)
- There is no trivs, there is no soll (trees, soil)
- No agrimet of social life (agreement)
- This is very dangiriesdeases (dangerous, disease)
- Industrial fiules burning....(fuels)
- Decrizing of ozine lyear(decreasing of ozone layer)
- Sun will be burned or incrzinghote (increase, hot)
- There are defferent disagreements in the quation...(different, disagreements,question)
- Unuses of dolit (toilet)
- Environmental pollution are earth qiuqe, feir, cating...(quake, fire, cutting)
- Deancreas of water...(decrease)
- Environmental pollution is erosen of the earth (erosion)
- To deacrizing for this cause to use...(decreasing)
- In everywere to become environmental pollution...(everywhere)
- Ganirally this are causes of environmental poulution (generally, pollution)
- Dide animals (dead)

As it is indicated in the above samples, the students did not write the spelling of the words correctly. They wrote meaningless words that do not have any sense. This problem might be occurred due to the lack of daily practice of writing skill in English language. Moreover, there was teaching methodology problem at lower grades that students became poor in vocabulary knowledge.

## Results

Taking into account the data obtained from the responses of the students in the questionnaire, it has been found that a considerable number of students (71.1%) reported that methods of teaching plays a role in their weakness in writing skill. Traditional methods in teaching processes are not appropriate for students to practice writing skill effectively. When looking at the data collected from instructors' responses to the open-ended questions, it can be understood that teachers in schools are still stick to old methods in teaching. First teachers did not prepare lesson plan to teach writing skill. They escaped the writing lesson in the actual classroom when they deliver the lesson. In line with this, learning situations where students' exposure to the foreign language is confined to a few periods in formal classroom instruction (Mahmoud, 2000). Moreover, the learners were not motivated to attend and learn the writing skill. As it was revealed (Table-1), 71.1% of the students reported that they were not motivated to develop writing skill in English language. As a result, they get bored and did not participate actively to do tasks.

All of the instructors agreed that the teachers need to adopt new techniques in teaching the English writing skill. It can be concluded that effective classroom teaching methods play an essential role in developing the students writing skill and traditional teaching methods can be a source of errors in students' writings. A review of the literature revealed several solutions to improving the writing skills of the students. These solutions included a positive attitude towards writing, providing writing experiences and developing lessons that will target specific writing weaknesses. All teachers experienced that student hesitation to write at one time or another (Reeves, 1997). Motivation and success complement one another (Burns, 1999). Whatever a student does poorly, or believes they do poorly, will be avoided. Thus, if students do not think they are good at writing, they will not choose to write, and become less capable because of avoiding the experience. Poor writers' fear makes mistakes (Temple and Gillet, 1990).

Lack of writing activities lead to weakness in the writing skill as a result a lot of errors in students' paragraphs occurred. Based on the data obtained from the questionnaires, a large number of students (86.6%) showed that the lack of writing activities and homework is always responsible for their weakness in writing skill (Table-1). A lot of students (75.6%) also mentioned that the school text book is to be blamed for the cause of their errors in their writing. 66.7%of teachers (Table-2) accepted that the writing drills in the school curriculum are not satisfying and hence the students never practiced writing on a daily basis. It can be concluded that lack of continuous writing activities lead to committing more errors in the writing process. Learning to write well requires time (Arter, 2000). Students are not given opportunity to write. Students are only given a small blank space to give an answer which makes it very difficult to write in depth, creative answer (Lamme, 1987).As it was analyzed above (Table-1), the majority of the students (73.3%) reported that they do not have sufficient knowledge about English grammar rules. Their grammar knowledge problem was also seen in their paragraphs practically. Many students did not write sentences correctly in the paragraphs. Generally, students are poor at grammar. On the other hand, the instructors reported that they concentrate on the grammar while teaching writing lessons to their students. As it was showed (Table-3), all the instructors (100%) agreed that they focused on the grammar knowledge when they delivered writing lessons in actual classroom.

Almost all students reported they did not practiced writing skill in lower grade levels. As it was presented (Table-1, 86.7%of students reported that they never got the opportunities to exercise writing skill in English language. This might cause students difficulty in writing skill. In line with this, the instructors have also reported that the college students suffer from writing skill because they did not practice writing skill in lower grades. Lack of writing activities led to weakness in writing skill as a result a lot of errors in students essays occurred. Based on the data obtained from the questionnaires, 57.7% of the students (Table-1) agreed that the lack of sufficient writing activities and homework is always responsible for their weakness in writing skill. However, as Holaday (1997), the way to become a better writer is to write. She remarks students who feel incompetent at writing avoid writing. They do not practice. They do not get better. They the lack of practice made students poor in writing skill.

Students also accepted that they have difficulty of mechanics of writing. 73.4% of students agreed (Table-1) that they have the lack of the knowledge spelling of English words. As it was analyzed on students' paragraphs, almost all students have made errors in spelling. Moreover, 57.8% of students believed (Table-1) that they did not have enough knowledge on the capitalization and punctuation. This poor knowledge of mechanics made them to get difficulty in writing composition in English language. On the contrary to students' report, the instructors focused on mechanics (table-3) while teaching the college student. As it was stated on the analysis (Table 3), 100% of the instructors agreed that they gave due attention on spelling, capitalization and punctuation marks during teaching writing skill in English language. According to the evidence obtained from questionnaire, the instructors emphasized on mechanics in teaching writing. Similarly, Burns (1999 states that teachers should focus on the mechanics of writing: spelling, punctuation and sentence structure to create good writers. Teacher who has a wide of strategies can coordinate the modes of instruction to teach students to produce coherent pieces of writing.

Based on the findings, students make many grammatical errors due to many reasons that have been obtained earlier. The data obtained from the instructors' responses in the questionnaire showed that 100% of the instructors (Table-2) remarked there is always an evidence of lack of basic writing skill. All the instructors agreed that the students whom they teach always make errors of different types in their compositions. On the other hand, when the instructors were asked about the reasons why students get difficulty in English writing skills, they replied that the lack of vocabulary, motivation, writing activities and teaching methods (at lower grades) are among the reasons for the weakness of students in English writing skill. Based on the analysis of students' paragraphs, the responses of instructors and students, the researcher realized that students made many errors of various types particularly grammar errors and consequently their writing is poor. The most serious problems of the students in writing paragraphs were words spelt wrongly and the sentences/paragraphs lack senses /meanings/.

### **Recommendations**

School textbooks should include more free and guided writing exercises that would help improve students writing abilities. On the other hand teachers should vary their teaching methods in order to facilitate and enable their students to write competently.

Teachers should increase the number of assignments that students would have to do a lot of writing during their free time; hence they would be reading a lot of English material and thinking in English. In addition, if teachers implement team work in class and get the students to work in groups on their projects, students will have the chance to practice together to develop their writing skill.

English language teachers should be a good model of the target language. The learners should be encouraged to think in the target language rather than in their native language when writing. Moreover, students should be encouraged to read more in order to familiarize themselves with the correct usage of English language. They should also be encouraged to use the target language as much as possible. Teacher-student feedback should be carried out more often when correcting students' compositions. Grammar rules should be taught implicitly rather than explicitly. Teaching writing is not only the job of the English department alone because writing is an essential tool for all departments. Thus, all department teachers should take responsibility to correct their students' errors across their subject areas. Let students should know that you value good writing. Stress the importance of clear and thoughtful writing. All the teachers should remind students that they must make their best effort in expressing themselves on paper. Tell students that writing is a way of learning, not an end in itself.

The students should take responsibility to their own learning of writing skill. That is, they should have a commitment to correct their errors based on the feedbacks the teachers give to them. Moreover, they should develop independent learning because writing is a productive skill. This study dealt with a limited number of the linguistic aspects involved in writing due to the complication of the area. Therefore, there is a great deal of work to be done to make learners effective.

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