TESOL and Technology Studies
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Grammar Competence and Writing Performance: A Correlational Study in Higher Education

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Abstract: This research paper examined the relationship between grammar competence and writing performance among first year students studying in the second semester at Ibn Tofail University in Kenitra in Morocco. The main concern of this study is to investigate whether there is a correlation between grammar proficiency and writing. The researcher used two tests as instruments for the purpose of verifying the correlation between the two variables; one test was in grammar and the other was in writing. The participants were 37 male and female students at Ibn Tofail University who were chosen on the basis that they are in the same level of English language proficiency. They constituted an intact group. The results of the study indicated that there is a significant relationship between grammar and writing. It is also found that there is 14.7% of relationship between the two variables. These findings help university students to improve their writing skills and also assist teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to design their courses, choose their teaching materials, and teach and assess writing and grammar.

Keywords: Correlation; Grammar Competence; Writing Performance

1. Introduction

Writing is one of the most important skills that university students should develop during the academic studies. The majority of students who are learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are facing many difficulties while they are writing. In this regard, Marion (2012) argues that "writing is one of the most complex skills to be mastered" (p.1). Nunan (1989) also asserts that "it is easier to learn to speak than to write no matter if it is a first or second language" (p. 12). What's more, Grabe and Kaplan (1996) demonstrate that "probably half of the world's population does not know how to write adequately and effectively" (p.87). To illustrate, writing is considered as a complex skill and one of the most challenging tasks for many students at university because it requires doing many tasks at the same time. These tasks include concentrating, thinking, organizing, generating ideas, transforming those ideas into words, combining those words into phrases, those phrases into sentences, and those phrases into paragraph. Hence, most teachers have motivated students to make more efforts to develop their writing abilities if they want to succeed at the university. They also assume that helping university students to write effectively is one of the main difficulties that they encounter while they are teaching EFL since teaching somebody how to write is like teaching him/ her how to think. Hereof, Zinsser (1998) points out that "writing is thinking on paper" and "writing and learning and thinking are the same process" (p. 245). More importantly, it is assumed that the main causes of students' problem in writing can be explained by lack of understanding of the English writing system, the intervention between English and Arabic (mother tongue), some problems related to grammar competence and poor vocabulary in English. To argue for the last point, Kakul agha et.al, (2002) as cited in Sid (2016)

indicate that "English language learners have limited vocabulary. Therefore, students end up repeating the same words which hinder creativity. Students could not give voice to their thoughts because they lack the adequate stock of vocabulary" (p. 55).

Many factors can affect students English writing skills. These factors can be pedagogical or personal. The pedagogical factors may include the teaching method that teachers use during teaching writing and the program. Concerning the personal factors, they are mainly related to the social background of students, socioeconomic, cultural background, and the mother tongue. To argue for this point, according to Hasani (2016) as cited in Sarwat et al., (2021), there are a number of factors that may affect students' writing skills. These factors include "lack of learners' motivation, inadequate time for writing, lack of reading and writing practice, no proper feedback and comments on students' written work, lack of teaching resources and facilities, overcrowded classrooms, unproductive teaching methods, and students' social background" (p. 3081). Grammar can be also considered as another factor that can affect the development of learners English writing skills. To account for this, grammar knowledge is the elemental foundation for writing (Fearn & Farnan, 2007 as cited in Kho-Yar, Siok, & Bee Hoon, p. 10). In other words, while students are writing, they use elements of grammar in order to build and connect sentences and ideas. However, if students do not use the components of grammar appropriately in writing, the quality of their writings will be negatively affected. Thus, this study attempts to investigate if students' performance in writing is influenced by their competence in grammar. The study attempts to answer the following main question:

• Is there any relationship between grammar competence and writing performance among first year students studying in the second semester at Ibn Tofail University in Morocco?

The main concern of this research paper is to explore if there is a relationship between grammar proficiency and writing performance among first year students studying in the second semester at Ibn Tofail University. Although there have been previous studies on factors that affect the development of the learners writing skills, such studies are rare in Morocco or at least not published. That is why, the research hypothesis of this study should be stated as null, and it can be formulated as follows:

• There is no relationship between grammar proficiency and writing performance among students at Ibn Tofail university.

2. Literature Review

This study investigates the relationship between grammar proficiency and writing performance among first year students studying in the second semester at Ibn Tofail university in Morocco. It is believed that grammar and writing are interrelated. This means that there is a strong relationship between students' level in grammar and their level in writing. To put it differently, students' understanding of the grammar components can help them to write effectively. Others go further and claim that students' difficulties in writing directly result from the fact that students do not master grammar well. For the purpose of verifying the correlation between the two variables, two tests were used. One test is in grammar and the other one is in writing. In this paper, according to Evelyn Hatch and Ann Lazaraton (1991), grammar will be the independent variable and writing the dependent variable. This classification is fairly arbitrary, for we are not looking for the effect of an independent variable on a dependent variable. Rather, we are searching for the degree of relationship between the two.

What is meant by grammar in this paper is the set of grammatical rules that students used to produce correct language. Based on a discussion with some professors and a review of some academic writing

books including (Hinkel, 2004) and (Oshima & Hogue, 2007), the common grammatical elements suggested in these books incorporate tenses, agreement, sentence structure, fragment, coherence, cohesion, vocabulary and word order. The focus in this paper is on the elements of grammar that are assumed to have a direct impact on students' writings. These components are agreement, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, sentence structure, and word order. Therefore, the construction of the grammar test was inspired by critical analysis of these academic writing books. Concerning writing, it is about students' ability to communicate their ideas through written text. To express these ideas, students need to construct their texts appropriately and correctly using their grammar knowledge.

Different studies have been conducted worldwide to examine the correlation between grammar and writing, namely (Etfita, 2019; Hajana, 2006; Putri, Silvianti & Achmad, 2016; Rismasari, 2019; Septiani, 2014; Setyowati & Hardiastikna, 2019). In fact, the review of these empirical studies indicates that there is a significant correlation between grammar and writing. This conclusion, for example, was confirmed by Putri et al., (2016) who found that there is a correlation between the students' ability in mastering grammar and their competence in writing. Another study which is in line with the above conclusion is conducted by Rismasari (2019) who revealed that there is a significant correlation between grammar mastery and writing ability. This conclusion was also confirmed by Etfita (2019) who found that there is a significant correlation between students' mastery of grammar and news writing ability. However, other studies showed that there is no significant correlation between the two variables. (Septiani, 2014) and (Setyowati & Hardiastikna, 2019) can be cited as an example. Setyowati and Hardiastikna (2019), for instance, found that there is no correlation between students' writing ability and their grammar mastery. The other study which was conducted by Septiani (2014) revealed that there is a negative correlation between students' grammar mastery and writing ability. To put it differently, students who have minimum level of grammar does not necessarily mean that they are poor writers. Most of the reviewed studies, namely (Etfita, 2019; Putri et al., 2016; Rismasari, 2019; Septiani, 2014; Setyowati & Hardiastikna, 2019) analyzed their data quantitatively using correlational design, and they relied on tests as a research tool. To conclude, a deep analysis of the results of these reviewed empirical studies indicates that there are inconsistent results. This implies that more empirical research is needed to confirm or disconfirm the correlation between grammar competence and writing performance.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection method

This research paper is about the relationship between grammar competence and writing performance among first year students studying in the second semester at Ibn Tofail University (ITU). This study aims to investigate whether there is a correlation between the two variables (grammar and writing). The research hypothesis of this study claims that there is no relationship between the two variables. In order to test this hypothesis and verify the correlation between grammar proficiency and writing performance, two tests were used. One test is in grammar and the other one is in writing. The two tests were taken in the same time and under the same conditions to avoid any extra factors that can affect students' performance in writing or grammar. The participants were selected from Ibn Tofail university in Kenitra. They constitute an intact group. There are 37 students. Each student will sit for two tests. Then, students' papers will be corrected and scored. To test the research hypothesis and to answer the research question, Pearson Product Moment Correlation is used. This statistical test enables us to conclude if there is a link between grammar and writing. It also enables us to see how significant the relation between the two variables is.

3.2 Participants in the study

The participants of this study consist of 37 students who are first year university students studying in the second semester. Their ages are mainly between 19 to 21. The participants of this study are male and female students at IbnTofail University (ITU). The participating students have been studying English about five years. They have studied one year in the middle school and three years in high school. This means that they have been exposed to English for four years before they join university. Their native language is Arabic or Amazigh and their second foreign language is English. These students are assumed to be at the same level of English language proficiency. Concerning the sampling technique, a convenience sampling was used.

3.3. Description of the two tests

3.3.1 Grammar test

This test is used to test students on six points. These points include agreement, capitalization, word order, sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation. Students sat for this test in 45 minutes. They were motivated to take these two tests seriously.

3.3.2 Writing test

A written composition was used as a material in this study. The students were asked to write a paragraph about 150 words on one of two suggested topics. They were required to respond to one of two statements. Students sat for this test in one hour.

3.4 Reliability and validity of the research instrument

Before using the research instrument with our sample, it was piloted with 10 students and two experienced researchers. All the remarks that have been suggested were taken into account. To avoid any effect of extraneous variables on the internal validity of the study (Campbell and Stanley, 1963) and to make sure that students would take the tests under the same conditions, the tests were administered in class under the teacher's supervision after having an oral consent from the participants. Besides, two experienced teachers have corrected the students' writing paragraphs. After that, we added up the two scores and divided them by two. Last but not least, the researcher developed a detailed checklist for the teachers to use to correct and score students' writings. The checklist mainly focuses on the main elements and aspects of writing that are more likely affected by students' grammatical abilities. The reason behind adopting this checklist was to make the evaluation of students less subjective using analytical scoring. Another argument for adopting analytical scoring using rubrics is that this form of scoring has several benefits including increased consistency of scoring, the possibility to facilitate valid judgment of complex competencies, and promotion of learning (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007).

4. Results

The collected data was analyzed to investigate the issue of correlation between grammar competence and writing performance. The researcher uses Pearson's analysis for the two tests. The analysis demonstrates a correlation between grammar and writing. The correlation coefficient (r) is used to measure the relationship. In other words, this research is designed in such a way to determine whether the achievement in writing is affected by the level of achievement in grammar.

The research question addresses the relationship between grammar competence and writing performance. The study reveals a significant relationship between the two variables. The scores of the two tests reveal this correlation. These scores are drawn in Figure 1.
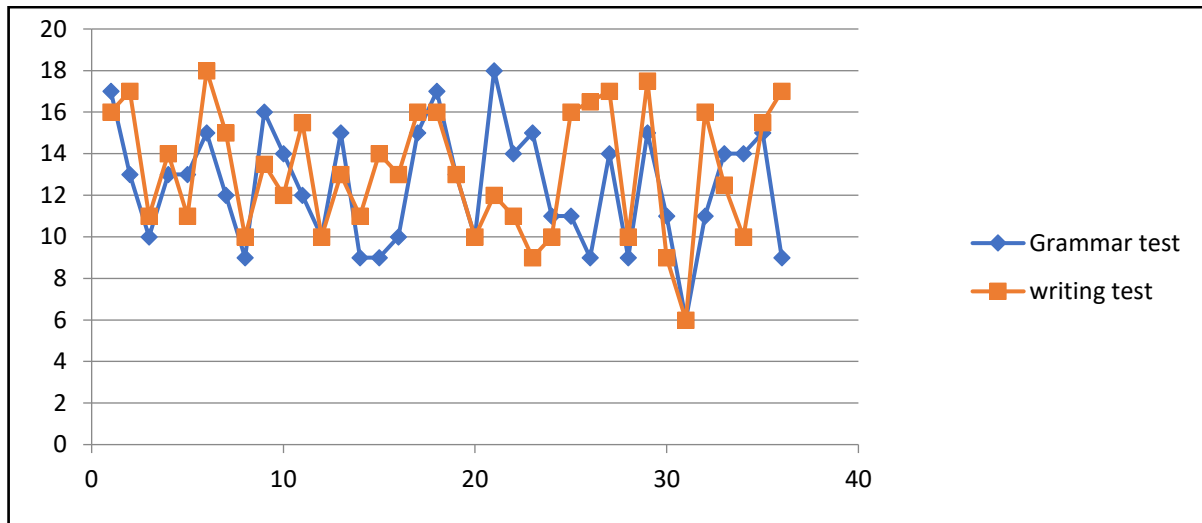

Figure 1. A Chart of Students' Raw Scores in the Grammar and Writing Tests

From the curve above we can notice that the majority of students who obtain good grades in grammar also do well in writing and vice versa. This implies that there is a link between grammar and writing among semester two students at ITU. It can also be noticed that students' achievements in their writing test is affected by their level in grammar. This means that students who master and understand grammar components write well. It has been shown that there is a correlation between grammar and writing. Now, the question that should be addressed: how significant is the relationship between the two variables? So as to determine the significant relationship between the two variables, table 1 will be discussed.

Table 1. Results of the Study

	df	R	p
Grammar test	35	0.38	.05
Writing test	35		

As shown in table 1, the results indicate that there is a significant correlation between grammar competence and writing performance among first year students studying in the second semester. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected in this study with confidence. When the null hypothesis is rejected, Hatch and Lazaraton (1991) state that the strength of association (r^2) can be calculated. After calculating the strength of association, it was found that there is 14.7% of relationship between the two variables.

5. Discussion

The study's main findings confirmed that there is a significant correlation between grammar competence and writing performance. They also concluded that there is a positive correlation between the two variables under investigation. It means that students' mastery of grammar can help them to

improve their writing. To put it bluntly, students who master grammar rules can transform and use this knowledge in writing.

The findings of the current study concur with Rismasari (2019), who found that there is a positive significant correlation between students' grammar mastery and students' writing ability. This implies that H0 was rejected and H1 was accepted. The results of the present study are also in line with Putri, Silvianti, and Achamd (2016), who confirmed that there is a significant correlation between the students' ability in mastering grammar and their competence in writing. Additionally, the findings of the current study agree with Etfita (2019), who found that there is a significant correlation between students' mastery of grammar and News writing ability.

However, the findings of this study disagree with Setyowati and Hardiastikna (2019), who concluded that the null hypothesis of their study was not rejected. This implies that there is no correlation between students' writing ability and their grammar mastery. Furthermore, the present findings disagree with Septiani (2014), who showed that there is a negative correlation between students' grammar mastery and writing ability. Besides, Septiani argued that students who have minimum level of grammar do not mean that they also get poor achievement in writing.

These controversies about the correlation between grammar and writing reveal that there is some ongoing debate about the issue. This can partially explain why researchers and educators disagree about (a) the need for explicit instruction of grammar (b) and a clear approach to teach writing. This calls for more research (quantitative and qualitative) to figure out the nature of relationship between the two variables and to explicitly how they do interact and affect each other.

6. Implications and recommendations

Based on the findings of the current study, there are some recommendations and implications we want to offer. The study reveals that there is a significant correlation between grammar and writing. Thus, teaching the components of grammar before writing is a pre-requisite since teaching grammar can support students' while writing. Grammar needs to be taught in a way that would help students perform their writing tasks effectively and properly. Besides, students should give much value to their grammar if they want to be successful writers. Syllabus designers, teachers, and decision makers are also recommended to integrate the components of grammar that have more effect on writing. What's more, teachers need to employ integrative language teaching approach in their classes to provide the learners with opportunities to practice their grammar competence in working on real-life writing tasks. Evaluations tasks and test should reflect the positive correlation between grammar competence and writing performance.

7. Limitations and directions for future research

The findings of this study cannot be safely generalized since randomization as a sampling technique was not feasible. Thus, it would have been better for future researchers to bear in mind randomization as a sampling technique in their future research. Additionally, this study probes into the correlation between grammar and writing without checking whether is an effect of grammar on writing. Hence, researchers are recommended to conduct experimental research to make sure whether there is an effect of grammar on writing. Another limitation of this study is that tests were used as the only research instrument to collect the data in this research paper. We believe that it would have been better to have used other research tools such as questionnaires and interviews. Diversifying the research tools can give us a clear image about the research gap under investigation. Besides, in the current study, we have

studied grammar as the only variable that may correlate with writing. However, there are other variables that may affect and correlate with writing. Therefore, researchers are recommended to study and examine those variables. Last but not least, although this study has confirmed that there is a positive relationship between the two variables, there is very limited knowledge and research about the nature of this relationship. This calls for empirical research on this issue to explore and understand how grammar affects writing.

8. Conclusion

In this paper, it has been concluded that there is a 14.7 % of correlation between the two variables. This implies that there are other factors that affect students' writings. That is to say, further study should be conducted in order to achieve better understanding of the issue under study. Furthermore, the number of students is limited in this study. Therefore, larger populations should be studied and randomly selected so that the findings can be generalized. Finally, personal and pedagogical factors should be taken into account in the study of writing. Thus, future research should be done to examine the factors that may affect the development of students' writings.

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