

The Effect of Wh-Questions on the Quantity and Quality of Low-Level Achieving Students' Paragraph Writing At the University Level

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ABSTRACT

Jordanian undergraduate students who learn English as a foreign language face many problems when learning the language especially in writing. This study investigates the effect of using Wh-question on the quantity and quality of low-level achieving students in writing. One hundred thirty students from different colleges took the introductory English course for beginners and wrote two paragraphs based on one of the units of the course, before and after they studied the unit. During the second writing task the students were provided with a set of wh-questions that they had to answer in order to make the paragraph. The results of the study showed that wh-question were more helpful in the qualitative aspects of writing than in the quantitative aspect.

Keywords: Wh-questions, Paragraph Writing, Achievement, Tertiary Level.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the major purposes of foreign language teaching is to enable learners to communicate in the target language effectively and clearly. In order to achieve such a goal, language teachers implement a wide range of strategies and techniques for teaching the discrete language skills and components separately or they sometimes integrate them and teach the language as a whole. Research studies reveal that many researchers, educators, and teachers have come to some consensus upon many principles concerning some aspects of language teaching and learning while some other issues have not been agreed upon, yet. One aspect that has some consensus among researchers is that learning to write is not an easy process (Carpenter and Hunter, 1981; Mukattash, 1986; Raimes, 1985; Zamel, 1985). Therefore, teaching and learning how to write in the foreign language became one of the most investigated issues in this regard.

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed many changes concerning the teaching of writing in both the first language (L1) and the second language (L2). Until the 1970s, the dominant approach for teaching writing was the writing as product, and then came the

movement of writing as a process. A third stand of writing came during the 1980s as the social contexts in which students learn to write in different contexts and for different purposes (Freedman, Dyson, Flower, and Chafe, 1987). In Jordan, studies conducted on writing during the same period of time had been affected by the same changes and trends that took place in the west. Therefore, the focus of research on writing in Jordan was mainly directed to technical problems, error analysis, contrastive analysis, and difficulties of writing. Some of these studies used the school students as subjects (Ababneh, 1987; Abu Jaleel, 2001; Abu Shihab, 1986) while others focused on post-secondary students (Ababneh, 1996; Al-Sharah, 1988; Ibrahim, 1978; Masadeh, 1995; Mukattash, 1986).

Kailani (1995) described the situation of learning English in Jordan by indicating that after eight years of learning English, the graduate of secondary schools in Jordan, leaves the school without being able to use the language as required. He emphasized the fact that,

...pupils rarely ask questions or express a point of view or talk about the things that interest them most, or indeed practice the language communicatively... The whole learning task is seen as one of mastering lexical items and different structural patterns of the grammatical system, rather than the use of language in life like situations. (p. 334).

Consequently, when those students go to the university, they will inevitably face more serious

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problems in speaking, listening, reading and writing because they are required to do various oral and/or written assignments on weekly or even daily bases. However, it should be indicated that university professors and faculty assume that those students should have been trained to be able to use the language at school and it is not the university to start doing that.

Almost all of the studies that tackled the writing skill for both school and university levels revealed that the Jordanian students suffer from serious problems when writing English (Khuwaileh and Shoumali, 2000). One major problem that university students face is how to generate a sufficient and acceptable content that meets the requirements of their university instructors. This problem is a serious one for the students who are required to write short essays or term papers in the various fields of the knowledge. Therefore, the University of Jordan offers two introductory core courses for all students regardless of their field of study to help them improve their communication skills in general and writing in particular.

The regulations of the University of Jordan require all freshmen students to set for an English language entrance exam as a part of their admission to the university. Students who pass this entrance exam register for two courses called *English Language Communication Skills 101* and later *English Language Communication Skills 102* consequently. Those who could not pass the entrance exam are required to register for *English Language and Communication: The Basics 99*, a very general English language course for beginners that helps the learners to master some of the basics of the English language skills. Students have to pass this course during the first year; otherwise, they cannot register any other course during the next year. Students who pass the entrance exam with a score of 80% or above are waived of the *English Language Communication Skills 101* course and automatically register for the *English Language Communication Skills 102*.

English Language and Communication: The Basics is a short textbook authored by Majdoubeh, et al. (2001) to serve as the textbook for *English Language and Communication Skills 99* course. The authors of the textbook explain its purpose by stating that,

“This book is, essentially, for students whose English suffers from serious shortcomings, resulting from their lack of mastery of the basics (fundamental matters pertaining to grammar, spelling, punctuation, sentence

structure, etc.). These students are by no means new to English. They have taken English for many years, prior to joining the university. One could even venture to say that they have taken a great deal of English. Nevertheless, what they have taken does not seem to have worked for them, at least not in a satisfactory way (p. 4).

In other words, as the authors of the textbook stated, this course was designed for students who are admitted to the university but “are unable to produce one simple grammatical sentence”. This means that the book is addressing the concept of “English for survival”. That is to say, the aim of the book is not to help students become fluent or eloquent; rather, it is to build their confidence and raise their performance to that level which enables them to lessen their errors, produce small error-free paragraphs and short error-free presentations, and understand simple written or spoken passages. By the end of this course, students will be able to pursue further studies in the English language and communication (i.e., the standard English 101 and 102) with less difficulty than they would have, had they not taken this course.

Statement of the Problem

The researcher, as an instructor of English as a foreign language (EFL) for about 25 years in both schools and at the university level, believes that those students need a special type of help that enables them to generate their ideas. Read (1990) indicates that university students need help in content and knowledge in order to be able to generate enough thoughts to finish writing their assignments. He suggested three different writing tasks (i.e., converting a table of information into a written essay, making notes on a topic they have read, or reading different articles on the topic) that stimulate the students’ abilities to generate more content for the written tasks. In this study, the researcher assumed that one way of helping the students to generate more appropriate content was to provide them with a set of questions that work as stimuli. Such questions were by no means considered exclusive but a kind of help that might generate as much content as possible. Hashimoto (1985) mentioned that several specialists and researchers gave different names and purposes for what is called the guided or helping questions. Sometimes they are called “structured heuristic procedures” or “tagmemic questions.” Some of the functions of such questions mentioned by such researchers are to help students to be able to invent, pre-

write, limit a subject, explore, enhance, focus, stimulate, generate, and come up with every possible idea that helps them in writing. Nevertheless, many of these claims have been called optimistic and not all of them have been validated with different types and levels of students.

Purpose and Questions of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of using Wh-questions on the achievement in paragraph writing of Jordanian undergraduate students. Specifically, the study aimed at finding whether such effect might increase the quality and/or quantity of low-level achieving students' writing. In doing so, two questions were formulated:

1. Do wh-questions improve the quality of paragraph writing of low-level achieving students?
2. Do wh-questions increase the quantity of paragraph writing of low-level achieving students?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing in EEL/ESL is seen as a major aspect of the language literacy in spite of the many problems, mistakes and errors that students make while writing. Such problems, mistakes, errors and processes are seen as rich and helpful fields for researchers to investigate in order to develop students' abilities in writing. However, research studies that deal with the role or effect of wh-question in order to develop the students' writing are almost rare in the field of EFL, specially with Arab learners; therefore, the literature review section will focus on studies that dealt with problems and difficulties that EFL students face when encountered with different tasks and function of writing, specially at the tertiary level.

One of the studies that investigated the writing process of Jordanian students was Ababneh's (1987) study in which he aimed at examining and describing the composing processes and behaviors of the students in the third secondary classes (grade 12) in Jordan. The subjects were asked to compose in both English (the foreign language) and Arabic (the native language). The findings of the study revealed several problems that students encountered during the pre-writing, writing and revising stages in both Arabic and English. As for English, some of these problems were that students did not make any plan in order to organize their thought at the pre-writing stage. As for the writing stage, the subjects demonstrated lack of vocabulary items; lack of social, cultural and

linguistic rules of English; and that they did not revise what they had written. However, the study did not show the seriousness of how bad these compositions were.

Community college students majoring in English were also the subjects of Al-Nimri's (1990) study in which she investigated the effectiveness of the linguistic pre-writing class activities method compared with the traditional method on improving the writing skills of such students. Three functions: description, narration and seeking and giving information by asking and answering questions were used to collect data. Students in the experimental group using the linguistic pre-writing class activities discussed these activities; however, the control group used the traditional method. The two groups sat for a post-test in writing three compositions comprising the above-mentioned functions. The results of the study showed that there was a statistically significant difference ($\alpha=0.0001$) between the mean scores of both groups in favor of the experimental group. This difference was attributed to the effect of the linguistic prewriting activities method implemented in the study.

As for university students, Hizam (2000) was one of the researchers who investigated the students' written discourse competence at Taiz University in Yemen. The sample of the study consisted of 103 compositions written by freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior students in the English department. The students were given five days to write about a given topic. Students were asked to write these compositions at home and they were given the freedom to use dictionaries and grammar books. The results of the study showed that the students could not develop a satisfactorily amount of discourse competence during their years of study. In other words, the students encountered problems and difficulties that form the features of good writing as unity, clarity, organizations, coherence, cohesion, and conclusion. This shows that university students have problems not only quantitatively but also qualitatively.

Khuwaileh and Al Shoumali (2000) investigated the errors committed by university students when writing in Arabic and English, that is their native language as well as English as a foreign language. One hundred and fifty sophomore students (males and females) from various departments and colleges participated in the study and wrote an essay in Arabic and another in English with a gap of three months between the two sessions. Every one of the essays was about 250 words. The results of the study showed that the participants' essays contained

different types of errors in both languages. More specifically, the results showed that the most serious and frequent errors that the students committed were related to the lack of cohesion, coherence and tense.

Al-Sharah (1988) investigated the problems of discourse in English majors' composition at Yarmouk University in Jordan. The sample of the study consisted of 89 junior students (45 males and 44 females) majoring in English at Yarmouk University. The results of the study showed that while coherence was the most problematic to the students, unity was the least problematic. It was also found out that the irregularities and mistakes in the students' compositions at the discursal level were due to the cultural and language differences between L1 and L2 and the lack of sample written tasks which showed the difference between English and Arabic.

Mukattash (1986) conducted a study in which he investigated the role and significance of systematic error correction and explicit grammatical explanations in adult foreign-language education. Another purpose of the study was to investigate the type and nature of certain grammatical errors that students commit while writing. The tests, which the study was based on, were not language tests but content/information texts, so the students were expected to reflect real language performance on them. Eighty fourth-year students in the Department of English Language and Literature participated in the study. The participants of the study sat for two exams that were considered a part of an advanced course in contrastive linguistics and error analysis. The essays were marked and major error-types were listed and compared to the errors in both tests. The results of the study revealed that a great number of errors that appeared in Test I reoccurred in Test II and that some other errors that occurred in Test II did not occur in Test I or any other previous study conducted on Arab university students. The researcher classified the errors into the following types: 1) Verbal errors (tense, phase, aspect, voice, and *BE-Deletion*), 2) Relative clauses (relative pronoun deletion, pronominal reflexes, relative pronoun replacement, and non-restrictive clauses), 3) New Types of errors (the complementizer *that*, sentence structure, and *which-deletion*). The researcher concluded that most types of such errors are due to the interference of L1. Although this study revealed the types and nature of errors committed by Jordanian university students, it failed to give us a better picture of the number and

frequency of such errors and whether such errors affected the whole understanding of such essays or not.

Another study was conducted by Doushaq (1986) in which he investigated the actual difficulties facing Jordanian university students with written English through a thorough inspection of their writings. Another goal of the study was to specify the sources of these difficulties. Four groups of 96 students were randomly selected. These groups included students of different levels (freshmen, sophomore, and senior students) from different specialization (science, English, Arabic). The students were asked to write in both languages about the same topic, so they wrote 174 compositions (seventy-eight in English and ninety-six in Arabic). The compositions were corrected and marked according to a scale that focuses on different stylistic and rhetorical elements used in academic writing. The results of the study indicated that the students' level of performance in English and Arabic composition was not satisfactory and that the types of difficulties in writing were at the sentence level, the paragraph level, and problems of content. These errors were grouped into three main categories: problems at the sentence level, problems at the paragraph level, and problems of content. That is to say, the students' difficulties can be partially attributed to the learners' poor mastery of the writing skill in both languages because of mechanical, stylistic and rhetorical causes. Another finding of the study concerning the students' weakness was the students' failure to match language functions with language expressions. This involves selecting appropriate expressions and devices to convey a message. However, selecting isolated ideas and expressions is not enough because such ideas and expressions should be related to each other to produce a coherent text.

Lexical errors that university students make when they write in classroom settings were the focus of Zughoul's (1991) study. The sample of the study consisted of 128 university students enrolled in two composition courses at Yarmouk University, Jordan. Although every student wrote about ten to fifteen essays during the semester, only three essays were selected for each participant for extensive analysis. The topics of the essays varied across courses and across sections. The findings of the study showed that the students committed a total of 691 lexical deviations that the researcher was able to categorize into thirteen types. While the highest frequency and percentage of lexical errors was of the

assumed synonymity type (163 errors; 23,5%) the lowest frequency and percentage was of the overuse of some lexical terms (21 errors; 3%). The results of the study showed that first language interference is a major variable in lexical choice. The researcher recommended the use of problematic word lists that might help the learner to adopt practical strategies for improving his/her semantic competence.

Ababneh (1996) conducted a study in which she investigated the problems facing EFL Jordanian university students in expository writing in Arabic and English errors. The sample of the study consisted of fifty students chosen randomly from four available sections at the Department of English at Yarmouk University. Data consisted of fifty pieces of writing in English and fifty parallel pieces in Arabic. The students were asked to write within class time a piece of expository writing in English, and in the next class they were asked to write on the same topic in their Arabic native language. To guarantee the students' seriousness, they were told that their writings would be part of the course requirements. Moreover, in both types of writing, attention was given to topic sentence, relevance, cohesion, coherence, unity and formal accuracy. The compositions in both languages were corrected by specialists in teaching English according to a checklist for writing evaluation. The results of the study revealed that the students overall performance in expository writing in English and Arabic (in thesis statement, topic sentence, text unity, and exposition) was poor. Moreover, the study revealed that there were no significant differences between the students' achievement in both languages except for the aspect of formal accuracy where the students did better in Arabic than in English.

The previous studies show that the focus of research concerning writing in Jordan was mirroring the contrastive analysis movement around the world in which researchers identify errors, compare between L1 and L2 writing process, or try to expect L1 interference. Therefore, this study came to fill the gap in which it focuses on a specific way of helping students to generate ideas rather than just seeing what errors or mistakes they make when they write.

3. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Participants of the Study

One hundred thirty first-year students (100 males and

30 females) from different departments and colleges (Law, Education, Arts, and Humanities) participated in this study. Those students were enrolled at the University of Jordan during the second semester of 2007/2008. The participants had had an average of nine years of formal instruction in English as a foreign language (EFL), eight years at school and one year at the university level. All participants were native speakers of Arabic, and at the time of administration of this study their ages ranged between 18 and 19 years.

Because the participants of the study could not pass the English language entrance exam, they were required to register for the introductory English language course *English Language and Communication: The Basics* during the first semester. However, because they could not pass this course they were required to take it again during the second semester (i.e. during the time of the experiment).

Procedures of the Study and Data Collection

This study took place during the second semester of the academic year 2007/2008. Before the experiment started, the subjects had studied three units in addition to a preview one. While studying these units, the students engaged in several writing assignments and activities. This means that the students had practiced several writing tasks earlier to the administration of the study. A writing pretest was administered before the students started the target unit. The pretest was very close to the theme of the title of the target unit "A Visit to the Dentist". The students were asked to write an essay describing any health problem that they personally had or they know someone else has had during which a visit to a doctor was made. During this writing session –the pretest session– the students were not provided with any kind of help except for answering their general questions about some grammatical issues or providing them with the translation of some Arabic words into English. The students took one 45-minute session to complete the task.

After the completion of the pretest task, the students started reading the target unit. The unit consisted of a reading passage, comprehension exercises, vocabulary exercises, a listening activity, language use exercises, dictionary tasks, a speaking activity, a spelling task, and the writing exercises. It took the students two weeks to finish the unit (three 45-minutes sessions per week). When the unit was finished, they sat for the posttest. The posttest was administered under the same exact

conditions of the pretest except for the additional set of questions provided for helping the students generate more ideas about the topic they were writing about (Reid and Kroll, 1995). These questions were designed based upon the health problem they studied in the unit, and prepared in a way to be asked about any other health problem in general.

Data Analysis

In order to avoid the effect of handwriting on the evaluators, and to protect the students' anonymity, the first and the second written tasks were typed on the computer using *Microsoft Word*. Therefore, the students were given anonymous numbers rather than using their real names on the typed writing tasks. These numbers were not arranged orderly; so, the evaluators did not know whether they were correcting the pretest or the posttest of the same group of students.

A scale for scoring the essays was adopted from Khwaileh's (1991) study. The scale covers the major characteristics for scoring a qualitative written task such as appropriateness of topic sentence, adequacy and appropriateness of supporting sentences and ideas, sequence of information, in addition to mechanics and structure (See these elements in Table 1). The other instrument was designed by the researcher and consisted of a table that recorded all the quantitative elements of the written tasks of the students (See these elements in Table 2). The paired sample t-test was used to test the effect of the Wh-questions on low-level student's writing in regards to quality and/or quantity.

Validity and Reliability of Instruments

As mentioned above, the researcher used two instruments for analyzing the written tasks: The scoring scale instrument and the quantitative data analysis instrument. To obtain face and content validity for the instruments, a panel of 6 experts judged them and made some recommendations and changes that were taken into account before the analysis started.

Two English language teachers who were teaching *English Language and Communication Skills: The Basics* for five years volunteered to participate in the study in order to analyze, score, and evaluate the written tasks. The researcher explained the purpose of the study for the two evaluators and instructed them how to

analyze, score, and evaluate the written tasks. More specifically, the researcher trained them on how to count the words, sentences, spelling and grammatical mistakes, number of corrected words, number of punctuation marks, etc.

A pilot study was conducted on other twenty written tasks that were not a part of the study in order to gain reliability between the evaluators on both the scoring scale and the quantitative data analysis instrument. A training session for the evaluators was conducted by the researcher. The evaluators rated the written tasks on a scale of 100% distributed on six categories with maximum weight ranges from 10% and 15% for some items to 20% and 35% for other items. Inter-rater coefficient reliability between the two raters for the scoring scale and the quantitative data analysis instruments were calculated and found to be 0.92 and 0.84 respectively, which were considered satisfactory.

Moreover, the panel of experts approved the suitability of the topic that the students were supposed to write about and considered it appropriate because it was based on a unit from the students' book and it was close to their own experiences (*A Visit to the dentist*). The researcher chose this type of narrative writing because it had been used before with these students in the previous units. The target unit was also close to the end of the semester.

4. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The results of the study showed that the use of Wh-questions did affect the students' writing in terms of quality. Table 1 shows that the results of four of the six items in the evaluation sheet that determined the quality of the written assignment were statistically significant which means that there was some improvement in regards to such elements. This indicates that the students showed some improvement in regards to the topic sentence, supporting sentences and ideas, sequence of information, and finally punctuation marks and mechanics of writing. The two areas that the students did not show any qualitative improvement were structure in addition to connectors and linking words. On the whole, the total score of all of the writing assignments was also significant.

Table 1. Paired sample t-test for the effect of wh-questions on students' qualitative achievement

Item	Pretest		Pretest		t	P-Value
	Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev		
1- Topic Sentence	3.32	6.23	4.83	8.81	-1.97	0.049*
2- Supporting Sentences and Ideas	9.49	18.43	13.03	24.44	-2.10	0.036*
3- Sequence of Information	5.39	10.48	7.59	14.24	-2.42	0.016*
4- Punctuations and Mechanics	2.50	4.69	3.23	6.04	-2.25	0.024*
5- Connectors and Linking words	2.28	4.44	3.79	7.81	-1.44	0.151
6- Structure	3.19	6.05	3.71	6.92	-1.19	0.234
Total score	26.17	50.13	36.18	67.41	-2.33	0.020*

* Significant at $\alpha \leq 0.05$.

As for the quantitative part of the students' writing, the results of the study revealed that only three of the twelve elements used to judge the improvement of the quantitative aspect of the writings were significant. As Table 2 shows, out of the twelve items that constitutes the quantitative scale, only three (the number of

grammatical mistakes committed, the number of punctuation marks used, and the number of wrong punctuation marks committed) were statistically significant. The other nine items in the table were not statistically significant although some improvement occurred in some of them.

Table 2. Paired sample t-test for the effect of wh-questions on students' quantitative achievement

Item	Pretest		Pretest		T	P- Value
	Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev		
1- No. of sentences in every paragraph	1.81	1.47	2.19	1.64	-0.77	0.441
2- No. of correct sentences	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.000
3- Total no. of words in every paragraph	61.63	38.61	66.13	51.85	-0.27	0.790
4- Average no. of words in every sentence	39.81	31.19	30.56	19.80	-0.73	0.463
5- No. of Ideas in paragraph	4.19	2.48	3.38	2.87	-1.45	0.148
6- No. of spelling mistakes	13.75	8.21	10.00	9.02	-1.76	0.078
7- No. of grammar mistakes	4.50	3.03	6.38	4.44	-2.29	0.022*
8- No. of words corrected	1.25	1.77	1.75	1.88	-1.19	0.232
9- No. of crossed words	5.44	5.45	5.88	6.61	-0.56	0.574
10- No. of punctuation marks	11.06	7.44	6.56	6.48	-3.13	0.002*
11- No. of wrong punctuation marks	6.00	5.06	4.31	4.19	-2.21	0.027*
12- No. of Arabic words	0.63	1.59	0.81	2.29	-0.82	0.414

* Significant at $\alpha \leq 0.05$.

5. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Do wh-questions improve the quality of paragraph writing of low-level achieving students?

The results of the study showed that students achieved some improvement in regard to *the topic sentence*, easily because the topic sentence they wrote about in the posttest was an answer for one of the thirteen questions that were asked to help the students develop their writing. Reid and Kroll (1995) indicated that students need help to be able to generate content for their writing. To do so,

generating a good topic sentence is one of the things that students needed to be helped with in order to generate this content. Thus, as the results show, when such group of students was provided with the required help they became able to improve some of their writing elements. In other words, this could also mean that while the students were not sure how to start their writings in the pretest, they just answered the questions in the post test, and by so doing they become able to develop the topic sentence for their writing tasks.

In the same way, the same assumption could be drawn

on the *supporting sentences and ideas*. In the pretest, the students seemed to be puzzled with the idea of what to write about and how to develop a coherent paragraph. However, they did not have the same problem in the posttest because the sum of the supporting sentences for the paragraph they had to write was to be achieved by answering the rest of the thirteen questions. In Leki and Carson's (1997) study, writing without a source text was considered one of the major problems that face ESL students in university courses, whether this source text is a set of questions or any other type. So, in this study, the process of answering the wh-question was reflected on the development of the students' writing in terms of having better supporting sentences and ideas when compared with the results of the pretest. This assumption is supported by the statistical point of view because the results of the study in regard to this point showed that the use of wh-question was statistically significant.

Also, the logic in the sequence of information of the students' writing was mainly obtained from the same logic and sequence of the questions. None of the students changed the order or the organization of written sentences to make them different from the order of the provided wh-questions. This means that when the students answered the questions one by one, they indirectly achieved one of the elements of writing which is the sequence of information. Nevertheless, sequence of information seemed to be a real problem for this group of students in the pretest. This finding was also indicated by Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ružić (1983) and Leki and Carson (1997) who indicated that EFL students find it difficult to attain the sequence and organization of information when writing in the second language.

The results of the study also indicated that the use of wh-question affected the students' use of punctuation and mechanics of writing. Students know that when they start a sentence they have to use a capital letter and that when they finish it they have to use a period. The use of separate questions made the students aware of these roles as the results indicated. However, it was clear that the extensive use of punctuation marks and mechanics of writing was almost limited to the period, comma and the capital letter. Other punctuation marks were not noticed in all of the writings. This indicates that the students were heavily dependent on just answering the question in the short and simple sentences rather than creating and developing more compound and complex sentences.

However, in this study, the students were supposed to

develop a paragraph by answering the wh-questions. Instead of doing this, they produced a kind of dichotomous sentences that lacked coherence and cohesion. For this reason, the students did not achieve any progress in regard to the use of connectors and linking words. Another reason for this disadvantage was that the students did not have any type of training in regards to linking words or connectors during the course because that was not one of the objectives of the units or the experiment.

Nevertheless, the results of the study showed that structure was not improved by the help of wh-questions. This result is accepted for the reason that such a group of students was learning English for along time and it was almost impossible for them to improve their English structure in such a short time. In other words, knowing grammar is one thing and using it in meaningful and correct sentences is something else. Several studies indicated that structure is one of the major problems for Arab learners (Ibrahim, 1978; Mukattash, 1986; Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ružić, 1983). However, it should be mentioned here that it was not the aim of the study to teach students something and then to test its effect on their achievement rather than testing the effect of using Wh-question on students writing achievement without having any previous training.

In the same way, students did not show any improvement in using the connectors and linking words because they were not trained on using them. Therefore, it seemed that when they answered the questions they did not pay attention to the connectors and linking words that join the different sentences together. Instead, they just got involved in answering the questions in a separate manner rather than developing a paragraph by combining these answers together in order to form one coherent and cohesive paragraph.

Generally speaking, the results of the study showed that the general score of the students on the qualitative part of evaluation was significant. As Table 1 shows, the mean scores of the students in the posttest were more than the mean scores in the pretest. This means that the students' achievement in writing was improved.

Do wh-questions increase the quantity of paragraph writing of low-level achieving students?

The results of the study indicted that only three items of the quantitative evaluation instrument were significant (number of grammatical mistakes, number of punctuation

marks, and the number of wrong use of punctuation marks). These results do not necessarily mean that the students' writing achievement really improved. In fact, Table 2 shows that the total mean score of the students' grammatical mistakes increased from 4.50 in the pretest to 6.38 in the posttest. This undesired increase in the number of grammatical mistakes means several things. First, the students did not pay attention to the correctness of what they were writing rather than they got involved in just answering the questions. That is to say, they forgot the main purpose of the task -writing a paragraph- and thought of it as a question and answer activity, instead. Second, since the level of such a group of students was considered low, it was very natural for them to make more mistakes when they write more. The results of the study indicate that the total number of words written by the students increased from 9860 in the pretest to 10580 in the posttest. This increase in the number of words made an inevitable increase in the number of mistakes in grammar. The results of this study agree with what Farghal (1992) indicated that "until recently the mechanics of grammar were in the forefront; thus, L2 learners were trained and urged to write errorless compositions no matter how disintegrated they were because grammatical accuracy was the major objective of writing. As a corollary, L2 learners writing were evaluated in terms of the number of errors they had rather than the meaning or logic they embraced" (p.45).

The other significant results were the decrease in both mean scores for the number of punctuation marks as well as the number of wrong usage of such punctuation marks. These results seem logical when we assume that the students used the punctuation marks in the pretest simultaneously. That is to say, the students used punctuation marks unwisely in the pretest and in most cases without knowing the appropriate use of such punctuations. However, in the posttest, the students used most of the punctuations more wisely and when needed. That is not to say that the students became knowledgeable about the usage of such punctuations, rather than following the task of answering the questions and ending every answer with a period, and to start every sentence with a capital letter. Therefore, the decrease in the number and the correct use of punctuation marks in the posttest was a sign of improvement when compared with the increased number and wrong use of such punctuation marks in the pretest.

However, the results of the study showed that the

other nine aspects in the quantitative evaluation sheet were not significant. These items are:

1. The number of sentences in every paragraph.
2. The number of correct sentences.
3. The total number of words in every paragraph.
4. The average number of words in every sentence.
5. The number of ideas in every paragraph.
6. The number of spelling mistakes.
7. The number of words corrected.
8. The number of crossed words.
9. The number of Arabic words used.

As Table 2 shows, nine of the total 12 items were not significant. This result indicates by no means that there was no change or improvement in the students' writings; rather, it means that the improvement or change was not statistically significant. For example, the mean score of the number of sentences (item 1) as well as the number of words in every paragraph (item 3) increased but not to the level that makes this increase statistically significant. Sullivan (1980) mentioned that the paragraph is usually composed of a group of sentences expressing one central idea. The length of the paragraph varies according to its place, purpose as well as idea. In most cases, a paragraph is approximately eight to twelve sentences long (p. 1). However, in this study, such things did not exist, and the mean score for the average length of sentences in the paragraph was 1.81 and 2.19 in both the pretest and post test, respectively. However, it should be noticed that an increase in the number of words or sentences or even paragraphs in a piece of writing does not always mean a piece of better qualities. It is assumed that the reason for the increase of sentences as well as words in the paragraphs was due to the fact that the questions that the students answered were helpful for them to find something to write about. This opportunity was reflected on the students' abilities to have at least the main and general ideas to start with and to develop their paragraphs about. Major ideas were like the skeletons and the students had to put the flesh on them. That is what many researchers indicated that ESL writers have a real problem when it comes to generating ideas (Raimes, 1985). Nevertheless, none of these sentences were correct because the students' competence in syntax was so low to the level that the students were unable to produce one single correct sentence whether in the pre or posttest. As mentioned earlier, the students were so weak in structure, and it is not the aim of this study to discuss the reasons behind this weakness.

On the other hand, the results of the study show that although the mean score for the total number of words in the paragraph increased, the mean score for the average number of words in every sentence decreased from 39.81 words in the pretest to 30.56 words in the posttest, however, that difference was not significant. This decrease means that the students viewed the activity of writing the paragraph as a task of answering the questions only rather than considering these questions as a starter for developing more ideas and generating other thoughts and related ideas. This exact behavior was also done concerning the number of ideas in every paragraph. That is to say, the number of ideas in the written tasks was limited to the number of questions that were supposed to help the students rather than limiting their writing quantitatively. This means that the purpose of the wh-questions was mistakenly understood by the students. Therefore, the number of words in every sentence as well as the number of ideas in every paragraph became limited to the answers of the questions.

Beck (1979) indicated that spelling errors constituted the single most common error found in a study of freshman compositions at the University of Petroleum and Minerals in Saudi Arabia. In the same way, Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ružić (1983) indicated that spelling errors were so pervasive that ninety-eight percent of all paragraphs examined contained at least one spelling error, with the majority containing many more. In this study, as Table 2 shows, the mean score for the number of spelling mistakes decreased in the post test than in the pretest. The major reason behind this decrease was that the students depended on the words available in the wh-questions. This means that the students got direct help from the wh-questions by copying the difficult words that they did not know how to spell. Moreover, the students were exposed to many vocabulary items when they read the target unit which was related to the topic they were writing about. In other words, the students became familiar with many of the words they needed in their writing; and that was the reason behind the decrease in their spelling mistakes. Although this decrease was a good sign of improvement, it was not statistically significant.

Another feature of the students' writing was the increase in the mean scores of both the number of words corrected and the number of words crossed out. This result shows that the students became aware of what they were writing in general, and maybe knowledgeable about

some of the mistakes they were making because they had a kind of reference to go back to which is the wh-questions. Thus, the students started to correct some of the words that they felt were wrong because they started to compare what they write with what they see in the wh-questions. In other words, this means that the students were writing and revising at the same time. However, in cases when the students were not very sure of what they were doing, they started to cross out the words that they were not sure about. Consequently, the number of words that was crossed out increased in the posttest than in the pretest.

Finally, one of the strategies mentioned by Raimes (1985) was that unskilled ESL writers use their native language when writing in the second language. In the same way, some of the students in this study used some vocabularies of their native language when writing in the target language. The mean score for native language words used in second language writing increased in the posttest than of the mean score of those in the pretest. The reason for such increase could be that the students felt that they had something more to say but their deficiency in the English language mastery could not enable them to find the words they needed in English, so they borrowed words from their first language, instead.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the study, the following conclusions and recommendations have been made:

1. The prompts that students use to write about are very important because they are the starters that encourage and enable students to write. Brand (1992) indicated that the faculty members have the right to expect competent writing but they cannot expect competent writing when the prompts themselves are carelessly prepared. They cannot expect writing to be an accurate reflection of content knowledge or of higher-order thinking when the written assignments lack essential information or provide too much, are unclear or contradictory, are vague or picayune (p. 157). Therefore, ESL assignments, at least for beginners, should be carefully selected and designed and should be based on accessible content and related to the existing background knowledge of the student-writers so that they can link old knowledge with the new one (Reid and Kroll, 1995).
2. There was evidence that the use of wh-questions

helped the students to improve their writing, especially in the qualitative aspect of writing. This means that students need help in how to write in addition to what to write about. English language instructors need to develop ways in which students really can use and implement in their actual writing rather than just answering exercises and filling gaps as the main writing tasks.

3. The results of the study showed that the students in the present study lacked the ability to generate enough content and ideas in spite of the helping questions that were designed to help them do so. This, of course, does not have to do with the students' fear to make mistakes because some of them wrote in their native language when they felt stuck or did not know the word in English. One interpretation for such a situation might be that those students have reached what Silva, Leki, and Carson (1997) called "fossilization" in which they stop progressing toward proficiency in the second language despite continuing access to the target language. Therefore, when such a group of students reach this level of deficiency in language learning, a major interesting question might arise: What else can be done to such a group of students when they consciously and unconsciously cannot develop new avenues for learning the target language and in particular, writing in this target language. Traditional strategies for developing writing may not be able to help students of low-level achievement. Such groups of students need extra help with special programs designed based on needs assessment taught by expert instructors in teaching writing and not just English as a second or foreign language; preferably those who are bilingual.
4. Another reason for the writing deficiency of those students was that they did not deal seriously with

learning English in general and with writing in particular. Therefore, when they were asked to do so, they just did it to satisfy the requirements of their institutions and may never again need to write, or perhaps even to read a single word in their second language for the rest of their lifetimes (Silva, Leki, and Carson, 1997). So, in order to make such groups of students learn more and better, specially in writing, educators and instructors have to convince them first of the importance and the need for such kind of skill in their life in general and their future profession in particular. This importance should be based on practical and authentic examples and not just theoretical talking.

5. Although the authors of the textbook indicated that it is designed for "students whose English suffers from serious shortcomings, resulting from their lack of mastery of the basics (fundamental matters pertaining to grammar, spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, etc." (Majdoubeh, et al., 2001, p. 4), a quick look at the textbook one can see how frivolous that book is in dealing with teaching English, and in particular in teaching writing. Zamel (1987) indicated that "the textbooks that continue to proliferate also give us an indication of the assumptions about writing that are being promoted, for textbooks seem to influence and reflect practice. These texts indicate ... [that] the extent to which the traditional paradigm is still very much with us." This result has been concluded by other researchers as well like Spack (1984) and Raimes (1986).
6. Such group of students should be placed in a special remedial writing class rather than in a general English course. Knudson (1998) indicates that in the US, approximately 76% of higher education institutions that enroll freshmen offer remedial writing courses.

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أثر الأسئلة الإستفهامية (Wh-questions) على التحصيل الكمي والنوعي لكتابة الفقرة من قبل طلبة الجامعة منخفضي التحصيل

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ملخص

يواجه طلبة الجامعات الاردنية الذين يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية العديد من المشاكل في تعلم هذه اللغة وخاصة في مهارة الكتابة. لذلك جاءت هذه الدراسة لبحث هذا الموضوع ودراسة أثر استخدام الاسئلة الإستفهامية (Wh-questions) على التحصيل الكمي والنوعي لكتابة الفقرة من قبل طلبة الجامعة منخفضي التحصيل في اللغة الإنجليزية. وتكونت عينة الدراسة من 130 طالباً وطالبة من مختلف الكليات في الجامعة الأردنية حيث كانوا قد درسوا المساق التحضيري للمبتدئين في اللغة الإنجليزية. وقام الطلبة بكتابة موضوعين في اللغة الإنجليزية (كإختبار قبلي وبعدي) إستناداً الى إحدى الوحدات في الكتاب المقرر. وبعد كتابة الموضوع الأول قام الباحث بتزويد الطلبة بالعديد من الأسئلة الإستفهامية (Wh-questions) والتي كان من المفروض أن تشكل النواة الأساسية للفقرة التي يكتبونها من خلال الإجابة على تلك الأسئلة كإحدى الوسائل المساعدة للكتابة. أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن الأسئلة الإستفهامية (Wh-questions) كانت أكثر عوناً ومساعدة للطلبة من الناحية النوعية منها من الناحية الكمية.

الكلمات الدالة: الأسئلة الاستفهامية (Wh-questions)، كتابة الفقرة، التحصيل، المستوى الجامعي.

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