

# 15 Mechanical Writing Errors in English

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This study is about mechanical writing errors. Mechanical writing can be understood in two ways: first, it can be understood to refer to physical aspects of writing such as the grip on the pen. Second, mechanical writing can also be understood to refer to all aspects of writing apart from content. These would include punctuation, spelling and capitalization. Mechanical writing is an extremely important skill in the early stages of writing and problems which are not identified and corrected at that stage can continue to hinder children's writing for a long time. I have noticed that many of my young learners have serious problems in mechanical writing and the purpose of this study is to help me to deepen my understanding of these problems.

## 2 LEARNING TO WRITE

### 2.1 Mechanical Writing Errors

Teachers of young learners need to bear in mind the factors which may affect learners' writing when they are first introduced to the writing skill. These are the way learners sit, how they use their arms and how they hold their pens. Sassoon (1995:16) discusses these issues under the heading of handwriting posture. She says that the hand, indeed the whole body, needs to be well positioned so that it can function at its best for writing. Good posture needs to be learned from the beginning so that later in life the hand can work freely and without pain to produce fast, legible handwriting.

A number of factors may influence children's posture when writing. The furniture should be appropriate (e.g. unstable desks should be avoided). The position of the paper is also important as learners very often have the paper in the wrong place. The selection of pens and pencils is also a factor. Finally, we need to

ensure that there is adequate light so that learners can see their writing clearly.

## **2.2 Arabic and English Writing Systems**

According to Sassoon (1995), there are five rules that govern English writing and it is important for teachers to be aware of these. First, the direction of writing is from left to right which is the opposite of the Arabic script. This is a major problem for many Omani children learning English. Second is the movement or direction of the letters. Latin alphabets have conventional points of entry and direction of the strokes that make up the letters. For example, with the letter c the starting point of writing it is the top, but what I always see with my most of my learners is that they start forming this letter from the bottom. The third issue is height differentials and proportions. Clear writing depends on the correct height differentials among letters. Fourthly, there are small and capital letters in English; in some cases the capital and small form of a letter are very different and this can cause learners difficulty. The fifth rule for writing English relates to the spacing between letters. This is another issue my learners have difficulty with.

## **2.3 Error Analysis**

According to Ellis (1994) an error takes place when deviation arises as a result of lack of knowledge. Error analysis is the process of identifying and understanding errors and Jordan (1999) suggests a number of stages in this process. First, samples of learner language must be collected. Then, errors must be identified and distinguished from mistakes (which are slips which are not the result of a lack of knowledge). The third step is the description of errors. This will also include providing information about the number of times that learners have committed different errors. The next stage is explaining errors i.e. trying to establish their source.

# **3 METHODOLOGY**

## **3.1 Research Questions**

The overall questions addressed by this study were: What types of mechanical writing errors do Omani learners make at the age of ten to eleven? And why? More specifically I wanted to find out about the following issues:

- Do the learners make similar errors in their L1? If there are any kinds of similarities, what are they?
- Do Omani learners transfer their writing skills from their L1 scripts?

## **3.2 Participants**

The research took place in a Basic Education Cycle 2 School in Muscat. I selected three learners from one of my Grade 5 classes as participants in this study. All learners were of average ability in English and came from monolingual family backgrounds. In Grade 5 learners have to complete writing activities in the English for Me Skills Book and I used these activities in collecting material for this study.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

#### **3.3.1 Observation**

First, I prepared a field observation sheet. I used this to make notes about the writing activities the learners did, about their posture in preparing to write, and about the nature of the writing they produced (using the five rules for English mentioned above as criteria). As I observed the learners I entered a tick (✓) into the grid when correct writing behaviours were observed and a cross (x) when they were not. I also added field notes about other observations I made during the writing activities.

#### **3.3.2 Interviews**

Before the observations, I did a short interview with the three participants to learn about their family background. After the observations I interviewed the participants again. I drew on an idea from Ellis & Sinclair (1989) who suggest that it can be useful to encourage learners to reflect on the strategies which might assist them in becoming effective writers. I asked the learners the following questions:

1. How do you feel about writing?
2. Do you know the English alphabet letters?
3. Do you have problems in reading and writing any of the alphabet letters?
4. Do you like to use a table to write and why?
5. Do you need to build your confidence while writing?

I also spoke to the learners' Arabic and Science teachers. I asked them these questions:

1. Do the participants make a lot of movements when preparing to write?
2. Do any of them use their laps/floor to write?
3. Have they already mastered their fine motor skills in Arabic script?
4. Do they finish writing their daily class work in Arabic and Science on time?

## **4 FINDINGS**

### **4.1 Observations**

#### **4.1.1 Physical Mechanical Errors**

The observations showed that all three participants made very similar errors both from a physical point of view as well as in forming letters. Table 1 lists the physical errors, comments on these and suggests their sources.

*Table 1: Physical mechanical writing errors and their sources*

Mechanical Error	Comment	Source
Contextual	Asking permission to sharpen pencil	Children have so much energy that they cannot sit still; they have short attention span for writing
Using lap to write instead of desk	Maybe they are not used to sitting on the chair at home	Cultural awareness; Omani living room – sit on carpet; Maybe poor family, maybe do not have furniture.
Sitting on the floor and putting the book on the floor to write	Maybe they are not used to sitting on the chair at home	Cultural awareness
Body language before and while writing	Their movements before writing are different from those while writing	Movements in preparing to write suggest a lack of confidence; Movements while writing suggest they lack sufficient fine motor skills
Pain in hand/arm	The participants complained about muscle pain while writing	Their fine motor skills need more practice
The sitting position (head near the book)	Bad posture affects writing	The learners were not taught correct posture in the early stage of writing
Facial expressions indicate dislike of writing	The learners looked unhappy before writing	Learners' previous experiences of writing may have been negative; maybe they feel writing is hard work

### 4.1.2 Non-Content Mechanical Errors

Table 2 presents the non-content mechanical errors observed. Again, these are listed and suggested sources given.

Table 2: Non-content mechanical writing errors and their sources

Mechanical Error	Comment	Source
Direction of writing letters, from right to left	Writing from right to left instead of left to right	Transfer skill from L1 script (Arabic)
Movement of letters entry & exit points	The learners cannot give a reason for doing it that way	Lack of world knowledge concerning the correct movement of alphabet letters and their entry and exit points; transfer the skill form L1
Set of letters	The learners know the letters but make mistakes	Learners have difficulty in using their knowledge in production
Height differentials	The learners know the letters have height differential but they forgot to apply the rule	Learners have difficulty in using their knowledge in production
Punctuation	Omission of full stops or replacing a capital letter in sentence. The learners know the correct rule but use it inconsistently	Learners have difficulty in using their knowledge in production
Spelling	The learners cannot give any account of why a particular form is chosen	The learners find spelling is difficult to learn and use in production
Spacing	The learners are unable to write with adequate spacing of letters and words	The learners find it difficult to use adequate space in production
Position of ascending and descending patterns	The learners do not know why they wrote incorrectly	The learners find writing position of ascending letters and descending patterns difficult
Omissions of letters or words	The learners know the correct rule but leave words out	The learners find it difficult to apply their knowledge in production
Different sizes of letters	The learners are unaware of why they write some small letters and some big	Lack of world knowledge and of well prepared motor skills
Letter formation	The learners are unable to give reasons why the wrote letters incorrectly	Lack of world knowledge and skills to practice and form letters correctly
Capitalization	The learners know the capital letters but make mistakes	The learners find capitals difficult to use in production

## **4.2 Interviews**

### **4.2.1 Learners**

In the interviews all three participants said they found writing difficult or boring. They did not like writing. One strategy they used during writing activities is to find other activities to do like leaving the classroom and getting up to sharpen their pencil. They want to do something else when it is time for writing. The participants also had poor preparation for the physical aspects of writing in English, such as the way they sit, pen/pencil grip and paper position. So they tried to transfer their L1 writing skills to writing in English.

### **4.2.2 Teachers**

The interviews with the Arabic and Science teachers indicated that in their lessons the learners I studied here are not negative about writing. They concentrate while writing and complete their writing work well and on time. This suggests that the problems the learners experience during English classes are related to writing English and not writing generally. It also suggests that they have mastered the basics of writing in Arabic.

## **5 DISCUSSION**

### **5.1 Physical Mechanical Writing Errors**

The many physical errors observed in the writing of these learners of English suggests that they lack the basic mechanical skills to write in English. They do not find English writing enjoyable and this is at least partly related to the fact that they do not have correct posture. The muscle pain the learners referred to during writing activities may be related to bad posture, though it also suggests that the learners had not done enough pre-writing activities in earlier classes which would have allowed their bodies to prepare for writing. They were distracted during writing work and sought other activities to do such as sharpening their pencils. These learners did not benefit from the basic instruction in writing they would have received in Basic Education Cycle 1. The learners also wrote on their laps rather than on their desks. There seems to be a cultural influence here given that in many Omani homes it is customary to sit on the floor (e.g. on mats and cushions) rather than at a table.

### **5.2 Non-Content Mechanical Errors**

All learners had problems with the direction of writing. They wrote from right to left as in Arabic. They faced difficulty in forming letters and in using capital letters too. They had problems with height and spacing, and with punctuation, especially in the use of full stops and initial capitals in sentences. Most of these errors seem to be caused by the transfer of their L1 writing skills. Additionally, the learners did not have sufficient knowledge of English writing, and/or limited skill in applying this knowledge to written production.

### 5.3 Limitations of the Study

This is a small scale study which applies only to the three learners studied here. The focus here was also only one aspect of writing – mechanical errors – rather than on important areas such as meaning and organization. These too deserve research attention. Another limitation here is my reliance on observation. It was often difficult to observe the learners while I was teaching. My analysis would have also been improved if I had analyzed more systematically examples of their writing.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Developing learners' writing skills in English has been a concern in Omani schools since the introduction of Basic Education in 1998. This study suggests though that even learners who have completed Cycle 1 of Basic Education (Grades 1-4) may still lack the basic mechanical skills needed to write in English. It is thus important for Cycle 1 teachers to ensure that learners acquire good writing habits as early as possible, especially with regard to posture and letter formation. Learners need explicit instruction in how to hold a pencil, to sit, and to position their paper. In addition they need frequent practice in applying their knowledge to actual writing. I believe that this combination of explicit instruction and regular practice at an early age will allow Omani learners to develop more effectively as writers of English.

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