



Difficulties Faced by Jordanian Undergraduate EFL Students in Writing Research Problem Statement

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Abstract: The current study aims at investigating the difficulties encountering Jordanian EFL students in the writing problem statement section. The study grouped those difficulties into two main categories, namely academic skills difficulties and language skills difficulties. It has been noticed that undergraduate and postgraduate students lack the required skills enabling them to conduct a well-constructed research article, which sparkles the idea of this study. In addition, no previous study has examined the challenges encountered by Jordanian EFL students when conducting a research paper in general and the problem statement section in particular. To collect the required data of the present study, twenty Jordanian EFL students had a teaching program about research writing skills. They were introduced thoroughly to all sections of the research article, with special emphasis on the research problem, section which is the main concern of this study. The participants were given a month to accomplish their research papers before submission. The study results reveal that the participants lack the academic skills enabling them to conduct a well-constructed problem statement section. More specifically, the vast majority of the participants fail to provide an overview of their topics and to identify their research gap within the current literature. The study also shows that the participants face serious grammatical errors when writing the research problem section. It could be concluded that conducting a scholarly research article in general and problem statement, in particular, is a demanding issue and need to be further highlighted by researchers and academicians to identify the challenges facing learners.

Keywords: *EFL students, problem statement, research skills, language skills*

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INTRODUCTION

Research plays a substantial role in human's life as all advancements made by man during the past period of time are built primarily on research, whether theoretical or empirical. However, the process of conducting a scholarly research article is always challenging and demanding for postgraduate students and even for their professors because it requires implementing several processes simultaneously such as, preparing research instruments, finding the appropriate sample, data collection, data analysis and finally, the actual process of writing (Cuevas et al., 2016; Klein & Boscolo, 2016). In addition to referring to suitable resources, identifying a research problem, finding the research gap and fitting it into literature, analyzing the results of the study, explaining and justifying the research results. Implementing a research paper is the toughest experience the students may have to get a university degree as it consumes lots of time and requires great effort. This is in line with Alsied and Ibrahim (2017) who state that conducting a research is not a simple task because it needs hard work, insight into the subject under investigation, desire to carry out research and motivation.

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The difficulties encountering researchers in conducting a scholarly research paper are explained by [Phothongsunan \(2016\)](#), who subcategorized them into three main types, namely 1- discursive difficulties, 2- non-discursive difficulties and 3- other difficulties. Discursive difficulties are those that have to do with the language, including a poor command of the target language, misuse of vocabulary, violating rules of grammar, bad referencing and citation. This problem is reported by [Okamura \(2006\)](#) and [Fahy \(2008\)](#), who contend that language challenges in research writing is manifested by poor vocabulary, mother tongue interference, the problem of writing coherent paragraph and establishing well-constructed introduction, body and conclusion. According to [Al Fadda \(2012\)](#), the vast majority of challenges that non-native speakers of English encounter, especially Chinese, when writing in English are procedural challenges related to rhetorical patterning and genres, textual organization and writing the literature review.

Non-discursive difficulties refer to elusive factors comprising plagiarism, motivation, emotional and psychological factors. [Canagarajah \(2002\)](#) and [Salager \(2008\)](#) report some more non-discursive factors such as lack of resources, tight budget, weak internet connection, undependable mail service and lack of support from colleagues and supervisors. This is consistent with [Alsied and Ibrahim \(2017\)](#), who report that non-discursive challenges for Libyan researchers encompass lack of resources in the library, lack of training in research, the need for support from supervisors, and poor internet connection. Other obstacles of research writing are related to publication and the peer-review process. Despite the aforementioned challenges, carrying out a research article is indispensable and considered a privilege for the author ([Lonka et al., 2014](#)). In addition, implementing research papers open the door for the exchange of ideas and sharing the results and conclusion of research based on foundational knowledge in specific field.

Many attempts have been made to reach a working definition of research. According to [Pandey and Mishra \(2015\)](#), research is a two-word combination of "re" and "search" which indicates searching more and more. [Krause \(2020\)](#) provides a working definition of research writing as the process of utilizing evidence from journals, books, magazines, the internet and specialists to convince the readers about a specific subject. Research is also defined as "a process of enquiry and investigation; it is systematic, methodical and ethical; research can help solve practical problems and increase knowledge." ([Neville, 2007](#)). Research is reported as a manner of thinking and exploring several fields of knowledge in order to understand the specific issue and develop and test theories with the aim of making progress and advancement in the profession ([Kumar, 2016](#)). As stated by [Bocar \(2013\)](#), research is the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation and testing the applicability of the findings.

The process of writing a research paper is supposed to be systematic, well-structured and conform with the steps of research writing. According to Hourglass Model, as cited by [Swales \(1993\)](#), a research article is comprised of several components, including the title, abstract, introduction, body, discussion and references. Each section of the research paper is further divided into sub-sections. The introduction starts out with a broad discussion of the topic and narrows down to the specific topic of research. The introduction is composed of three sections.

1. Establish a territory: This section aims at providing the reader with a general background of the topic under investigation and view current studies on the topic.
2. Establish a niche: This section aims at showing the research problem and fitting the research gap within the current literature. The section also reveals research questions and assumptions.
3. Occupy the niche: This section presents the thesis statement of the research and outlines the structure of the paper ([Swales, 1993](#)).

The body section of a research paper describes the methods that have been utilized to answer the research questions and specify the problem mentioned in the introduction. This section includes parts such as the population of the study, the sample of the study and research instruments. The body helps answer questions such as how was the research questions addressed? And what was found ([Peat, Elliott, Baur, & Keena, 2002](#))? On the other hand, the discussion section generally presents background information about the topic, recaps the results of the study with special emphasis on explaining and justifying the results. This section also compares the results of the current study with previous literature and ends with a conclusion drawn from the results of the study.

In writing research, one of the most important parts that constitute a great troublesome for EFL in general is defining the research problem. More specifically, some researchers find it difficult to determine the exact problem to be addressed in the research, making him/her fail to fulfil the objectives of the study. [Ifeoma \(2019\)](#) argues that both undergraduate and postgraduate students encounter difficulty in identifying the problem of research. The problem

of the research is defined as the subject that the researcher intends to examine and explore, whether descriptively or experimentally. It is the focal and core point of the research, or in other words, it is the issue or the challenge that the researcher struggles with within the research article (Boudah, 2011).

It is crucial that the researcher starts out with his personal experience when determining the research problem to be addressed. Strictly speaking, the researcher is supposed to research topics that he has a genuine interest in because if he is not interested, it will be hard to complete the research. Another important point that needs to be considered when writing a research problem is narrowing down the emphasis of the research. A broad problem is featured as unclear and vague so that narrowing down the problem help identifying and addressing that problem and, in turn, designing good research questions (Boudah, 2011). When writing a research problem, three main elements need to be taken into consideration: First, the general overview of the focus topic to be investigated in the study. Second, explanation and justification of the problem: presenting logical reasons for the significance of addressing the problem, which can be attained through providing evidence from literature, recommending further research to be implemented or drawn from the researcher personal experience. Third, the research gap shows how the current study is different from previous studies within the research field. The research gap reveals that the problem has not been examined by past literature, and the current study attempts to bridge that gap. As it has been mentioned previously that a research problem illustrates the main topic or phenomenon to be explored in the study. A working definition of the research problem is advanced by Bryman (2007), who states that it is “a statement about an area of concern, a condition to be improved upon, a difficulty to be eliminated, or a troubling question that exists in theory or in practice that points to the need for meaningful understanding and deliberate investigation”. It is of paramount importance for the research problem to be direct, specific and clear and well-defined, otherwise the researcher will find himself lost, addressing a problem that does not exist. Problem statement is usually located in the end of introduction section, literature review or as a separate section following the introduction.

It has been noticed that researchers, postgraduate and undergraduate students find difficulty defining their research problem, in that the problem either too broadly or too narrowly defined (Ifeoma, 2019). This is consistent with Kombo and Tromp (2011), who argue that one of the basic challenges facing researchers is stating the problem unclearly, making them unable to choose the right methodology and fail to fulfil the objectives of the study. One more challenge with the research problem is that researchers struggle with determining the research gap and locating it into the existing literature.

Within the context of the present study, a considerable body of research has examined the challenges that confront researchers when writing scholarly articles (Alsied & Ibrahim, 2017; Cheung, 2013; Ifeoma, 2019; Pardede, 2018; Phothongsunan, 2016; Qasem & Zayid, 2019). The vast majority of these research place emphasis on general challenges and obstacles of research, excluding Pardede (2018), who explored the problem statement section. Lack of studies in this regard indicates that there is an urgent need to highlight the hindrances facing researchers and language learners when implementing a research study, especially the research problem section, which is the main concern of this study. Based on the aforesaid background, the present study aims at investigating the challenges encountering English foreign language learners EFL in the writing "research problem" section. Thus, the present study aims at answering the following questions:

1. Do Jordanian EFL students confront difficulties related to the lack of academic skills in the writing research problem section?
2. Do Jordanian EFL students confront difficulties related to the lack of language skills in the writing research problem section?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A considerable body of research has investigated the challenges of encountering learners as well as researchers in writing research. Those studies come up with a general consensus that there are lots of persistent difficulties pertinent to research writing, in the sense that some of the difficulties related to the researcher himself; lack of knowledge on research writing, while other difficulties related to lack of resources that help conduct research (Al-Khairiy, 2013).

As it has been mentioned previously, previous literature elucidated the sources of difficulties in conducting a research paper, grouped them into two types; first, discursive difficulties which are pertinent to having poor skills of language such as misuse of vocabulary, violating rules of grammar, bad referencing and citation. Second, non-discursive

difficulties, which are related to plagiarism, motivation, emotional and psychological factors. Below are some of the studies that discussed the difficulties encountered by researchers (Negari, 2011).

Cheung (2013) examines the difficulties encountering first-year undergraduates when writing the discussion of the results section. The study also looks into the extent to which the students perceive the difficulties in writing research. The data for the purpose of the study is collected from a 12-week compulsory course entitled ALS 101 Academic Discourse Skills, offered in the first year of the undergraduate program. The researcher interviews eighteen undergraduate students in order to gain insight into the difficulties they experience in writing the discussion section. The results of the study indicate that the English language, including grammar and vocabulary, constitutes a challenge for the participants. The study also found that the students lack the required knowledge for writing the academic discussion section, where some unnecessary details were mentioned, and important findings ignored.

Sharing the same idea of examining lecturers' challenges when writing a research article, Phothongsunan (2016) interviews eighteen academics from two universities in Thailand. The interviews are made primarily to gain information on the issues that face the participants when writing academic papers for publication and how they tackle them. The findings of the study reveal that the participants in the study confront hindrances related to English language use comprising grammar, choice of vocabulary, organization of sentences and tone. The study also reveals that the participants face difficulties related to time constraints and lack of funding.

Komba (2016) explores the obstacles that postgraduate Tanzanian students struggle with when writing theses and dissertations. In addition, the study seeks to find a remedial solution in order to overcome those challenges. For the purpose of the study, the researcher reviews 39 theses and 64 dissertations from three universities in Tanzania. The findings of the study exhibit that half of the postgraduate students, whose theses and dissertations are reviewed, face various difficulties in writing research, including unsuitable presentation of chapters and having poor academic writing skills. The researcher concludes that research method courses taught at universities have to be revised with respect to their content. In line with Claudius, study, Alsied and Ibrahim (2017) examine the problems that Libyan EFL students face in research writing. In addition, the study investigates the attitudes of instructors regarding their students' skills in research. The sample of the study consists of 42 students and 4 instructors at Sebha University. The results of the study display that the participants face difficulties in writing research exhibited in the field of interest, choice of subject, developing a research problem, review of related literature, and reporting the results of the study. The results also reveal that the instructors look at the students' work negatively due to many reasons, including inadequate motivation and library resources, lack of background information and the need to offer more courses related to research writing.

In a newly issued study, Qasem and Zayid (2019) attempt at understanding the problems that encounter students in writing research projects in English. A total of 60 undergraduate students take part in the study at the University of Bisha. With the aim of collecting the needed data, a questionnaire is utilized, and interviews with teachers and students are done. The results of the study indicate that approximately 70% of the participants face English language-related issues. The study uncovers difficulties relevant to determining the research topic, insufficient background information about the topic, poor methodology and lack of references.

The aforementioned studies have clearly indicated various challenges that researchers encounter when carrying out a research study. Those studies reveal that the difficulties are either internal related to the researcher himself, such as lack of academic skills and having a poor command of the English language or external factors resulting from the unavailability of resources needed for research such as inadequacy of funding and resource books and bad internet connection. The vast majority of studies covering the internal challenges of research writing place emphases on obstacles in writing all sections of the research articles, while an important part, which is the problem statement section, is either totally neglected or swiftly covered. The research problem is the chief topic that a researcher seeks to investigate or the key issue a researcher is concerned to tackle. Thus, this study is implemented to bridge a gap in the literature by highlighting the problem statement section in order to understand the internal difficulties related to academic skills and language use.

METHODOLOGY

This section presents the methods used in collecting the required data to provide satisfactory answers to the research questions. The section includes two sub-sections, namely the sample of the study and instruments of the study.

Design of the Study

Research design is known as “how the researchers plan their studies so that they can obtain answers to the stated research questions using systematic approaches” (Rezai, 2016). The present study adopts a qualitative method for the purpose of answering the research questions, which is best exhibited by analyzing some research papers written by the participants in the study, with special emphasis on the problem statement section.

Sample of the Study

The sample of the study is comprised of twenty Jordanian EFL students pursuing their bachelor degree in English language and translation. The participants were third and fourth-year students enrolled in a research writing course in the summer semester in the academic year 2019/2020. All the participants are non-native speakers of English, and Arabic is their native language so that they are expected to have similar exposure to English, and the variation between them is not sharp.

Instruments of the Study

In collecting the data required for the present study, the participants are instructed to write a research paper about any topic related to language teaching, language learning or translation. Firstly, the participants subjected to a teaching program extended for two months, in that they were introduced to all details relevant to research writing. Strictly speaking, the students are presented with the steps of writing all research sections including title, abstract, introduction, problem statement, research questions, literature review, data collection, data analysis, results and conclusions. The process of writing each section was explained in details in order to get insight into writing a scholarly paper. Secondly, having introduced a particular section of research, the students were instructed to write a sample section within a specified period of time in order to verify the progress they have made. More specifically, when introducing, for instance, the research questions section, all details about this section are presented, such as the characteristics of a good research question and a bad research questions with illustrative examples and then the students were asked to apply what they have learned. Thirdly, after the end of the teaching program, the students were asked to choose a topic related to their major and start writing a research paper. They were given a period of no less than a month to write the paper. The vast majority of the students submitted their research papers on time, and then the papers were read and analyzed carefully by the researcher in order to explore their progress in research writing, especially the research problem section.

RESULTS

This section seeks to reveal the results of the study with reference to the two research questions that the study raised. To begin with, the section reveals the results pertinent to research question one, then displays the results of research question two. The question is formulated as:

Q1- Do Jordanian EFL students confront difficulties related to the lack of academic skills in the writing research problem section?

To answer this research question, the responses of students regarding writing a problem statement section is divided into three categories, according to the three elements of the research problem.

Table 1 *Academic Skills Pertinent to the Research Problem Section*

	Overview of the Problem	Justification of the Problem	Research Gap
Percentage of response	35%	60%	5%
Frequency of response	7	12	1

As it has been mentioned previously that the section of the research problem is comprised of three main components so that when a researcher misses one of those components, the research problem will not be identified, determined and addressed well, which results in making the problem too broad, failure to justify the importance of the problem and inability to locate the study within the current literature. Strictly speaking, the lack of academic skills needed to write the research problem leads to serious deficiencies in the research study as a whole and in turn, keeps the

research questions partially or totally unanswered. Table 1 above includes the responses of the participants with respect to providing the three main components of a research problem when writing the research problem section, namely, Overview of the problem, Justification of the problem and Research gap. The results indicate that 35% of the participants overviewed and provided background information of the topic to be investigated, with a frequency of 7 participants out of 20. Table 1 also shows that 60% of the participants in the study provided satisfactory justifications for the topic under investigation, with a frequency of 12 out of 20. In addition, Table 1 displays that only 5% of the participants attempted to locate their study within the current studies or to mention the research gap that their study is supposed to bridge. To be more specific, only 1 participant out of 20 tried to fit his study within the present literature. To gain further insight into the results of question one, it is important to consider pie Figure 1 below.

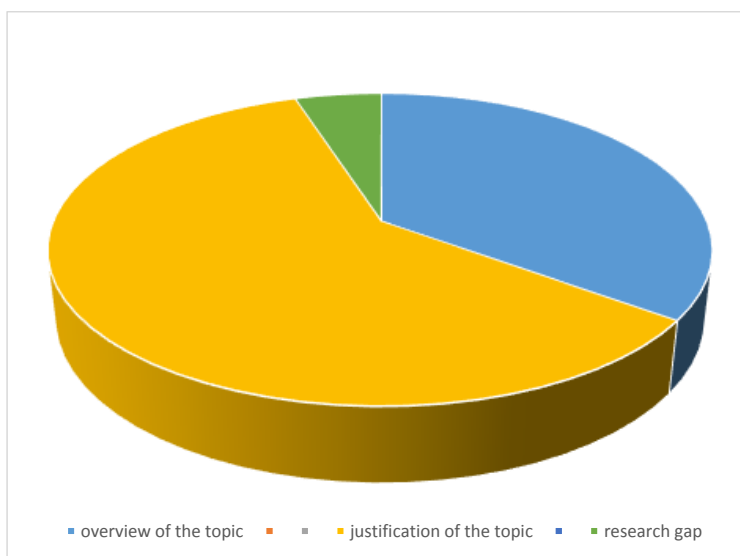


Figure 1 *The Proportion of Academic Skills Pertinent to the Research Problem Section*

It is obvious from Figure 1 that the biggest proportion of the chart is devoted to justification of the topic component, followed by an overview of the topic component, while the smallest proportion of the chart is for the research gap component. Those results indicate that the participants confront serious problems in identifying the research gap when writing the research problem section. The difficulties seem still existing when writing an overview of the topic, while little obstacles encountered by the participants in writing justification of the problem section. To sum up, it is evident that Jordanian EFL students lack the required knowledge of identifying the research problem in writing a research paper. The results of the research question two are depicted in Table 2 below. Question two is formulated as follows; Q2: Do Jordanian EFL students confront difficulties related to the lack of language skills in the writing research problem section?

To answer this research question, the errors related to language use committed by the participants are divided into two categories, namely grammatical errors and semantic errors. Grammatical errors include error relevant to the use of tense, order of words, agreement and determiners system. Semantic errors comprise errors pertinent to the choice and meaning of words and bigger units like phrases and clauses. Table 2 below depicts the results of the research question two.

Table 2 *Grammatical and Semantic Errors Pertinent to the Research Problem Section*

	Percentage of Errors	Frequency of Errors
Grammatical errors	94%	74
Semantic errors	6%	6

A close look at Table 2 above indicates that grammatical errors account for 94% of the total number of errors committed by the participants in the writing research problem section. The results also show that the frequency of grammatical errors is 74 errors. It is also apparent from Table 2 that semantic errors account only for 6% of total errors with a frequency of 6 errors. For an in-depth analysis of participant's errors related to language use, it is fitting to consider pie Figure 2 below.

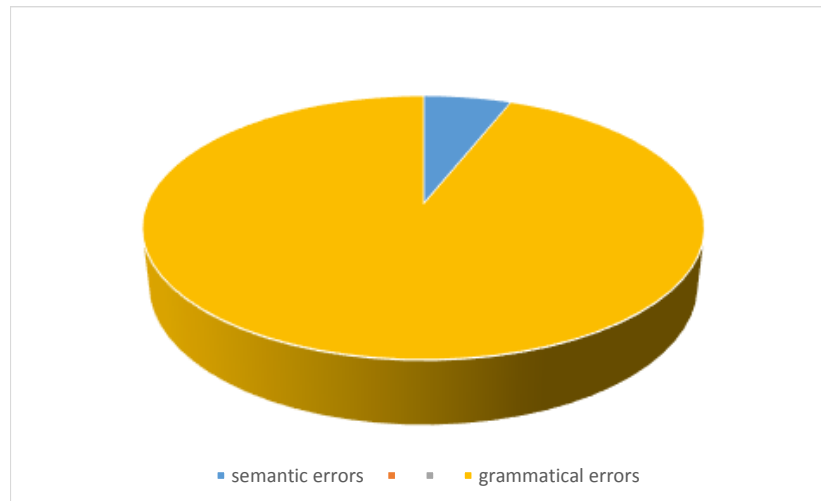


Figure 2 The Proportion of Grammatical and Semantic Errors Pertinent to the Research Problem Section

It is evident from Figure 2 that the biggest portion of errors related to language use in the writing research problem section is ascribed to grammatical errors. In contrast, a small portion of errors can be attributed to semantic errors. Those results clearly denote that the difficulties that the participants confront are grammar-related rather than semantic-related difficulties.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study clearly indicate that Jordanian EFL students encounter serious difficulties in conducting the research problem section. Strictly speaking, only 35% of the participants in the study managed to present an overview or background information of the topic under investigation. 60% of the participants justified their research problem clearly and correctly, while only 5% of the participants were able to determine their research gap. This result is consistent with the results of some previous studies, indicating that EFL students, in general, face serious challenges in research writing (Cheung, 2013; Komba, 2016; Phothongsunan, 2016; Qasem & Zayid, 2019). The results also depict that the great majority of language errors made by the participants are grammatical in nature, while very scant errors are semantic. This result goes with the findings of some studies, which reveal that English is a challenge for the participants when producing any piece of writing (Almahameed, 2017; Qasem & Zayid, 2019). To gain a thorough insight into the nature of difficulties and errors made by Jordanian EFL researchers in the writing research problem section, it is of paramount importance to analyze and discuss those difficulties with illustrative examples.

Difficulties Encountering Jordanian EFL students in Writing Research Problem Section

Having analyzed the research written by the participants, difficulties encountered by them can be grouped into two main categories.

Academic skills difficulties: The following is a sample of the problem statement section written by one of the participants in the study.

“Statement of the problem: In Jordan learning English is still challenging (Abdul Haq, 1982). Wahba, (1998) stated that problems of learning English in Jordanian educational courses (Zughoul and Taminian, 1984). Mostly in making errors in writing, lexis, syntax, and pronunciation. EFL students have many problems in all the language skills such as speaking, reading, listening, and writing. Rababah, (2003) stated that there have been a lot of weakness in English among school students who join the universities as English language majors. In fact, a lot of first-year university courses spent on English grammar vocabulary, oral skill, language use, and writing. Students are accepted in university programs without taking any international standardized tests such as TOEFL, IELTS but they had to take

locally designed tests of English which lack of reliability.”

A close look at the research problem above indicates that the writer clearly and abundantly justifies this research problem in that Jordanian EFL students face serious challenges in learning English as a second language. The researcher supports his justification and explanation of the problem with the results of previous research. However, it is evident that the researcher did not provide a general overview of the nature of the topic to be investigated or the challenges confronted by learners. In addition, the researcher has not stated the position of his study within the current literature. More specifically, the researcher did not indicate whether his study contributes actively to the field of investigation, and nothing is said about the gap that the study is supposed to bridge in literature. One more sample of the research problem section written by the participants is below.

“Statement of the problem: Translating the news generally from English into Arabic can be a problematic matter for Arab translators due to the cultural differences between the two languages, Arabic and English, also Psychological problems and lack of self-confidence have a major role in the success or failure of the translation process. Simultaneous translation difficulties from English into Arabic representing by many aspects, including listening, understanding, analysis and reporting the message at a very specific time. Also, the interpreter faces the listener who receives the message from him.”

Analyzing the problem statement section above shows that the researcher describes the challenges that translators face when translating news, and he elaborates on the reasons beyond such difficulty. However, in-depth analysis and overview of the problem is needed, in the sense that the researcher is required to state more details with examples about the nature of problems in translation in order to enhance the understanding of the reader. The researcher is also needed to cite references that support his viewpoint. Furthermore, nothing is mentioned about the gap that the researcher’s study attempts to bridge or to fit the study within the present literature.

Language use difficulties: Those difficulties can be either grammatical or semantic. Below are a few examples on the grammatical errors committed by the participants in the writing research problem section.

“Tense study include studying the structure, parts of speech also ”

Two errors are committed in the above sentence. The first one is a subject-verb agreement, in which no final "s" is added to the verb following the singular subject. In addition, the conjunction "and" is missing and should be added to connect the parts of the sentence above. The following is another example of grammatical errors taken from student’s research.

“Grammar necessary in order to understand languages linguistic system”

In the above sentence, the verb is missing in that the verb to be "is" is required to make the sentence grammatical. The above-mentioned sentences are examples of grammatical difficulties that the participants encounter in the writing research problem section. That is to say, writing a problem statement section is demanding and needs professional skills to be accomplished well.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The sample of the current study is limited to Jordanian EFL students at Amman Arab University. The study is also limited to investigating the problem statement section, while other research sections beyond the scope of this study. It is recommended that future studies expand the scope of the investigation to other sections of a scholarly research paper, such as the literature review section and the results section. It is also recommended that future studies broaden the sample of the study to include postgraduate students.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined the challenges that Jordanian EFL students confront when implementing the research problem section. A total of twenty English majored students participated in the study. They were instructed to conduct a research article on a language-related topic after being presented to the main components and sections of the research article. Having analyzed the research papers written by the participants, it was found that the participants were unable to overview their research problem and to determine their research gap correctly. In addition, the study revealed that the participants committed a considerable amount of grammatical errors. It is recommended that more emphasis and teaching programs are allocated for teaching research writing skills in general and the problem statement section in particular.

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