

## AUDIENCE AWARENESS IN THE WRITTEN DISCOURSE OF SUDANESE EFL UNIVERSITY LEARNERS

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**Abstract:** The study investigates the written discourse of the Sudanese EFL university learners to evaluate and assess their awareness of the audience to whom they write. The analytic descriptive approach is adopted to achieve the aims of the study. The subjects of the study consisted of 50 Sudanese EFL students drawn from Faculty of Arts at Alneelain university. Three tools were employed for data collection: a writing test, a questionnaire and an interview with the students. Results showed that the written discourse produced by Sudanese EFL students did not reveal an awareness of the audience with whom they communicate. The students did not succeed to make assumptions of what their audience already know and what they expect to find in the texts being written. They held fragmentary knowledge on the concept of audience awareness. Accordingly, the students were not able to prepare and edit texts which keep and stimulate their audience – they were not able to depend on lexical and structural variation to produce proper and effective writing. Furthermore, results indicated that students were not able to attach unity and coherence to the texts they produced. Their organizational skills were very poor. To help the students develop the concept they hold on audience awareness, writing instructors and syllabus designers need to put special emphasis on the importance of audience awareness as a factor which is essential for effective writing.

**Keywords:** audience awareness, communicative setting, language proficiency, discourse competence

### INTRODUCTION

Many theorists contend that the purpose of writing is to communicate with an audience, which can be defined as actual readers or as the writer himself. Scholars also seem to agree on another point: "no matter who/what the audience is (from real people to fictional construct), writers adjust their discourse to their audiences. In other words, writers do things to bring their readers into their

texts, to establish a community that includes themselves and their reader" (Wildeman, 1988). Audience awareness is a very important aspect in discourse intelligibility. Students need to have a thorough knowledge of their potential audience. To write to particular audience is far better than to write with no audience in mind. Writing to known audience means having a predisposed knowledge of who students wish to write

to. This gives the students an advantage when preparing the content of the message they wish to convey. Thereafter, students can adopt the strategies that enable them to produce a meaningful and comprehensive piece of writing. Sudanese EFL students have a little knowledge of the nature of the audience to whom they write. Accordingly, they fail to make the right lexical and grammatical choices to formulate the message they wish to convey. For this reason students' writing results in a vague and less comprehensive piece of writing which makes mutual understanding difficult, if not impossible.

Writing, as stated by Zemach and Islam (2006), is an important form of communication in day-to-day life. Writers put their ideas on paper to be read later by particular readers. One of the many things a writer needs to consider when completing a written task, according to Bull & Shurville (1999), is the requirements of the intended audience. Hinds (1987) assumes that the writer provides the information required by the intended audience and prepares the written task through dialogic construction. That is, the writer has to make assumptions of what the audience know and what they do not. This makes writing as one of the most difficult skills to master in both first language and a second/foreign language. Writing abilities are not naturally acquired (Lieberman and Liberman, 1990).

They must be culturally (rather than biologically) transmitted in every generation, whether in schools or in any other environments. Since the command of writing entails mastery of language, students need to be guided on how to view writing as a tool through which they communicate meaning to particular

audience. Taking account of readers as reported by Edwin & Grundy (1996) is an important factor in effective writing. So, as stated by Hyland (2003) the goal of writing instruction can never be just raising in explicitness and accuracy because written texts are always a response to a particular communicative setting. However, control over surface features is crucial and students need an understanding of how words, sentence and large discourse structures can shape and express the meaning they want to convey.

Writing programme should foster and enhance students' ability to generate ideas, organize and transmit information to the readers. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) contend that writing is usually undertaken to communicate with one or more readers for a variety of purposes. Even when writing for oneself, there is a likelihood that the writing will, at some point, be used to communicate with others. The teaching of writing needs to meet students' communicative needs. That is, students should be taught how to write for effective communication which means the goal of teaching writing is to develop students' communicative competence.

Cooper (1999), Faigley (1986), and Witte (1992) argue that writing can only be understood from the perspective of a social context and not as a product of a single individual. Writing instruction also needs to highlight the importance of the form of the message being transmitted to the audience. So, writing is not a process which puts emphasis only on the form of language, or the end product of a particular writing event. Writing is a process which emphasizes both form and function in order to convey a particular meaning to the intended readers. Hedge (1988) assumes

that knowing who the reader is provides the writer with a context without which it is difficult to know exactly what or how to write. And yet it is possible to find a writing task in one teaching material which does not specify a context to help the student.

Breiter and Scardamalia (1987) emphasize the need to develop a "reader-based" approach to writing in order to ensure the communicative power of the text. It is this reader-based approach that places special focus on the link between reading and writing - an approach that leads to producing a text that can be "read successfully". The writer needs to use the appropriate language content in order to help readers understand the intended meaning. The writer also needs to use a clear style and abide by the conventions of writing. In order to be successful in this enterprise, the writer must develop evaluation and reformulation strategies as part of the writing process that continually assesses the potential reader's position. Zakaria (2013) reported that Sudanese EFL students are unable to think of the readers while they are planning for the writing task. This makes them unable to think of the sort of the difficulties readers are likely to encounter when reading up the texts the students have produced.

Chang (2005) examined how two EFL college students represented their audience in the writing process and how they adopted their writing to assigned audience. The results indicated that the more proficient writer was more capable of analyzing and making inferences of the assigned audience than less proficient writer. Fontaine (1988) suggested that high school student writers were more apt than elementary students to adjust writing to meet

audience needs. Previous studies show that students only take their teachers as their potential readers. This is not surprising since writing is usually done in the classroom environment.

Britton (1975) found that the audience that students most frequently addressed in a school environment was the teacher. After accumulating almost 2,000 writing samples from British students comparable to fifth graders and above in American schools, Britton categorized the writing samples as addressing oneself, the teacher, a wider audience, or an unknown audience. A large majority of the scripts, 85 percent, were written for the teacher or the teacher as the examiner. Previous studies imply that appeal to particular audience is a very important factor in writing. If writers succeed to adapt their writing to suit their readers, this is an indicator of successful writing. Students need to be taught how to think of their potential audience while writing. Writing without having an audience in mind results in a type of writing where there is a large gap between students' knowledge and attitudes and those of the audience. This means, students produce writing in which they fail to guess what readers already know about the topic and what they expect to find in the texts being written.

## **METHOD**

The participants in this study included 50 EFL students who are taking English as their major at Alneelain University. The students belong to and represent different parts of Sudan. This means they can be taken as a sample for the Sudanese EFL University learners' community. The students represent the future practitioners of the English language in the Sudanese society. Investigating their learning habits is

believed to be with great value in the field of education. The participants are taught how to develop their writing skills which means they are equipped with the strategies necessary in a serious writing. They also study syntax and morphology which means these students are taught how to form words and structures in English. In addition, they are taught how to join structures together to create meaning.

Furthermore, the participants study semantics and this entails that the respondents are taught how to deal with the different kinds of meaning that a word or a sentence has. They also study the varied and complex relationship that holds between individual lexical items. Considering the nature and sort of the activities in which the participants engage during their learning life, one assumes that they must possess the knowledge that enables them to produce correct, meaningful and interpretable English. This suggests that the students are good enough to write on different topics in English.

However, research indicates inadequacy in their written language; and that their writing is less informative exhibiting a great deal of incorrect language forms. They even lack the techniques necessary for effective writing. Some researchers attribute this to the fact that the students learn English primarily through formal education and as a result, they have little opportunity to use English for communication outside the classroom. Some researchers emphasize assuming that the materials produced by the students seem to be invalid.

The data of this paper were collected through a test, a questionnaire, and an interview. Having a variety of tools for data collection helps the

researcher to get a comprehensive view on the responses provided by the respondents. What cannot be seen adopting one tool may be obvious adopting another tool dealing with students responses. Not all students usually admit that they have problems dealing with a particular aspect of language. Their responses to the questionnaire and the interview may be different from the fact obtained examining their actual written product. So, the reason of having these tools for data collection is to have reliable data that can yield reasonable results.

The test was prepared to collect the data that could be used to evaluate and assess students' actual writing. The students were given three topics and each student was to choose a topic to write a composition of about 200 hundred words. The students were given one hour to accomplish the task. The topics given to the students to write about are as follows:

- 1- Write to a pen friend telling him/her about the rainy season in your town. Tell him/her when the season begins and ends and how you prepare for it.
- 2- Tell your friends how you usually spend your holiday.
- 3- Describe the sort of the problems you encounter when communicating in English.

The questionnaire was prepared to obtain information about students' appraisal of the knowledge they hold on the concept of audience awareness. It was also prepared to collect information about students' ability to produce texts which could stimulate their audience and keep their attention. The questionnaire consists of five section. The first is about students' writing proficiency. The second section tackles students' knowledge of the nature of their audience. Section three

deals with discourse competence. The fourth section involves developing students' communicative competence. Section five is about students' strategies for effective writing.

The interview was conducted with the participants to reveal some of the facts about students' written performance which could not be obtained through the questionnaire or the writing test. The items of the interview are as follows: (1) How do you view writing? (2) What do you think of when you decide to write? (3) How do

you plan for your writing? (4) What do you know about your audience? (5) State the sort of the problems you think your audience will encounter interpreting your writing. (6) What strategies do you depend on to deal with these problems? (7) Do your audience know something about the topic you discuss in your writing? (8) What makes you think so? (9) What difference does this make in your writing? (10) Do you think that your writing stimulates your audience? (11) What makes you think so?

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Students' Evaluation of their own Writing Proficiency*

Table 1. *Students' Writing Proficiency*

| No | Item   | Often     | Always    | Sometimes | Rarely   | Never    | Median |
|----|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|----------|--------|
| 1  | I know that writing to particular audience is a complex process which requires conscious effort.                   | 12%<br>6  | 74%<br>37 | 8%<br>4   | 4%<br>2  | 2%<br>1  | 1      |
| 2  | I believe that writing to a reader requires a high language proficiency  | 14%<br>7  | 80%<br>40 | 6%<br>3   | -<br>-   | -<br>-   | 1      |
| 3  | Writing for effective communication entails the ability to weave words and structures into a meaningful discourse. | 20%<br>10 | 70%<br>35 | 8%<br>4   | -<br>0   | 20%<br>1 | 1      |
| 4  | I believe that effective writing implies a comprehensive knowledge of the discourse community.                     | 34%<br>17 | 46%<br>23 | 14%<br>7  | 6%<br>3  | -<br>-   | 1      |
| 5  | I am aware of the techniques necessary for the production of effective writing.                                    | 48%<br>24 | 16%<br>8  | 16%<br>8  | 10%<br>5 | 10%<br>5 | 2      |
| 6  | I know that writing with audience in mind requires a high cognitive ability.                                       | -<br>-    | 98%<br>49 | -<br>-    | -<br>1   | 2%<br>-  | 1      |

Statistical analysis shows that most of the Sudanese university students were aware of the complexity associated with writing for particular audience and that this process requires a conscious effort. 86% of the students claim that they take writing as a process that

requires conscious effort. Nearly all students 94% report that it is important to be knowledgeable about writing in order to communicate effectively with readers. 90% of the students state that writing implies the ability to produce different linguistic patterns which result

in meaningful discourse. The students also report that it is very crucial to know the nature of the discourse community in which one performs. 64% of the students contend that they are aware of the techniques required for the production of effective written discourse.

The students also report that they view writing as a highly cognitive process. Examining students' writing, one will find that the results obtained analyzing the questionnaire and that of the interview are different. The result of the interview coincides with that of the questionnaire in the sense that the students assume that they are able to produce writing which entails the ability to anticipate their readers' needs and expectations. But their writing is poor to the extent that it is difficult to believe that it is done for particular audience.

This can be illustrated by the following sample of students' writing:

**Extract 1**

*Dear Ali, how are you and How are your family I want to tell you about my holiday. How I spend it and How I enjoy with it. I spend it with some friend in field. We favond their more interesting places. I had spend "3" weeks with them and I sorry I becom deprst I cant compleat.*

The extract above does not reveal the proficiency that students claimed to possess. The students also reported that they knew the techniques required for the production of effective discourse. This also is not likely to be observed in the above extract.

*Students' Assessment of their Audience Awareness*

Table 2. *Knowledge of the Nature of the Audience*

| No | Item  | Always    | Often     | Sometimes | Rarely   | Never    | Median |
|----|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|----------|--------|
| 7  | I am taught how to write with audience in mind.   | 30%<br>15 | 46%<br>23 | 16%<br>8  | -<br>-   | 8%<br>4  | 1      |
| 8  | I know the nature of the audience to whom I write.  | 34%<br>17 | 36%<br>18 | 14%<br>7  | 10%<br>5 | 6%<br>3  | 1      |
| 9  | I prepare my writing with necessary assumptions about my audience.                                    | 40%<br>20 | 14%<br>7  | 26%<br>13 | 8%<br>4  | 12%<br>6 | 2      |
| 10 | I guess the sort of the problems my audience are likely to encounter interpreting the text I produce. | 36%<br>18 | 40%<br>20 | 14%<br>7  | 6%<br>3  | 4%<br>2  | 1      |
| 11 | I find it easy to guess how my audience will react to my writing.                                     | 36%<br>18 | 28%<br>14 | 18%<br>9  | 14%<br>7 | 4%<br>2  | 2      |
| 12 | I know that my writing stimulates my audience.  | 80%<br>40 | 6%<br>3   | 6%<br>3   | 8%<br>4  | -<br>-   | 1      |
| 13 | I know what my audience already know about the topic on which I am writing.                           | 74%<br>37 | 12%<br>6  | 4%<br>2   | 6%<br>3  | 4%<br>2  | 1      |

The table above shows that the students were taught how to write with audience in mind; and that they knew what these audiences expect to find in

any piece of written discourse. 54% of the students reported that they developed necessary assumptions about their audience before getting started to

write. Results in the table 2 state that 76% of the students thought of the sort of the problems their readers were likely to encounter when dealing with the students' writing. 64% of the respondents mentioned that they knew how their audience react to the discourse these students produce. 86% of the subjects assumed that their writing could certainly stimulate readers/their audience. 86% of the students under study stated that their audience experienced no problem when dealing with the discourse the students produced.

This is because the students already know the degree and depth of the knowledge their audience possess. The results obtained from the questionnaire and the interview revealed that the students knew the nature of the audience to whom they wrote. But

analyzing students' actual writing makes it obvious that the students do not know what their audience wish to get dealing with the texts being written. It seems that the students write with no audience in mind. This can be seen in the following sample of students' writing.

**Extract 2**

*As you my friend these days we are witnessing a very rainy season, which rains daily in a variety degree. By the way the season starts from the first of autumn and last to four monthes without stopings. So we always when the season starts we preper for it, by manting the roofs of our houses and mak the walls very thik as not to fall in the rain. Actually we do enjoy the season very much Because if brings life for all the univers as well human and animals.*

*Students' Appraisal of their own Discourse Competence*

Table 3. *Students' Discourse Competence*

| No | Item  | Always    | Often     | Sometimes | Rarely  | Never   | Median |
|----|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|---------|---------|--------|
| 14 | I organise my writing in such a way that makes understanding easier for my audience.                          | 90%<br>45 | 10%<br>5  | -<br>-    | -<br>-  | -<br>-  | 1      |
| 15 | I adopt different strategies to produce more effective written discourse.                                     | 60%<br>30 | 12%<br>6  | 14%<br>7  | 8%<br>4 | 6%<br>3 | 1      |
| 16 | I spend a considerable time thinking of the nature of the topic I wish to write about before getting started. | 64%<br>32 | 20%<br>10 | 10%<br>5  | -<br>-  | 6%<br>3 | 1      |
| 17 | I think of the content I am likely to use in my writing.  | 82%<br>41 | 12%<br>6  | 2%<br>1   | 2%<br>1 | 2%<br>1 | 1      |
| 18 | I think carefully of the first sentence I use to address my audience.   | 96%<br>48 | 4%<br>2   | -<br>-    | -<br>-  | -<br>-  | 1      |

Data analysis reveals that all the students adopted a style which made understanding easier for their audience. The way they prepared their writing helped their audience interpret the message conveyed by the students

through their writing. 72% of the respondents claimed that in order to produce more effective written discourse, they adopted different writing strategies. For example, 84% of the students assumed that they spent a considerable

time thinking about the nature of the topic they wish to write about. 94% of the students mentioned that they thought of the content of their writing. All the students reported that they thought carefully of how to initiate their writing. The same claim is made by students in their response to the interview. But examining their written samples, it is obvious that the students do not have any organizational strategies. That is, their writing is very poor. Their writing makes it clear that the students do not spend much time

thinking of their audience, the content of the topic being discussed or how texts have to be produced. This is revealed in the following sample of students' writing.

**Extract 3**

*When I was in bara, the cloudy start to collect and soon the Raain Pegain to full, befor three hours the street became full of water. Usually we prepare to rainy seasons by buing a sitable clouthes.*

*Assessment of the Students' Communicative Competence*

Table 4. *Developing Students' Communicative Competence*

| No | Item  | Always    | Often    | Sometimes | Rarely  | Never   | Median |
|----|---|-----------|----------|-----------|---------|---------|--------|
| 19 | I read a lot of authentic materials to be familiar with the culture of the discourse community.                                 | 70%<br>35 | 14%<br>7 | 8%<br>4   | 8%<br>4 | -<br>-  | 1      |
| 20 | My reading results in having an insight into what is socially and culturally accepted by the native and other users of English. | 88%<br>44 | 4%<br>2  | 2%<br>1   | 6%<br>3 | -<br>-  | 1      |
| 21 | My knowledge of the world enables me to guess what my readers expect.   | 76%<br>38 | 12%<br>6 | 6%<br>3   | 2%<br>1 | 4%<br>2 | 1      |
| 22 | Reading authentic materials provides me with insights into the skills necessary for effective writing.                          | 90%<br>45 | 8%<br>4  | -<br>-    | 2%<br>1 | -<br>-  | 1      |
| 23 | I write to pen friends to improve communicative writing abilities.  | 14%       | 42%      | 20%       | 16%     | 8%      | 2      |

Almost all the subjects 84% claimed that they read a lot of authentic materials to acquaint themselves with the culture of the target language discourse community. The reason behind this is, of course, to produce a sort of discourse which is likely to be accepted by the native speakers and other users of the target language. A discourse which is communicative in

nature. 92% of the students contended that their reading results in having a clear and deep image of the kind of writing that matches with the culture of the target language discourse community. 88% of the students assumed that their knowledge of the world made it easier for them to speculate what their audience expect to find when treating the message woven



in the students' writing. 98% of the subjects claimed that reading authentic materials equipped them with the skills needed to be involved in effective written communication. To improve and develop these skills, 56% of the students assumed that they often wrote to pen friends. The results in the table above state that the students had the ability to

produce texts which are effective and communicative in nature. The students also reported in the interview that their writing was proper enough to stimulate their audience. But result obtained from their actual writing did not reveal this claim.

*Evaluation of Students' Strategies for Effective Writing*

Table 5. *Strategies for Effective Writing*

| No | Item  | Always | Often | Sometimes | Rarely | Never | Median |
|----|---|--------|-------|-----------|--------|-------|--------|
| 24 | I assess and reassess my writing to make it clear for my audience.                                    | 84%    | 12%   | 4%        | -      | -     | 1      |
|    |   | 42     | 6     | 2         | -      | -     |        |
| 25 | I compare my writing with that of my peers to see how well I write.                                   | 24%    | 50%   | 14%       | 4%     | 8%    | 1      |
|    |   | 12     | 25    | 7         | 2      | 4     |        |
| 26 | I support the claims I make with effective data to help my audience grasp what I weave in my writing. | 62%    | 18%   | 12%       | -      | 8%    | 1      |
|    |   | 31     | 9     | 6         | -      | 4     | 4      |
| 27 | I depend on lexical variation to write in an affective style.   | 94%    | 4%    | 2%        | -      | -     | -      |
|    |   | 47     | 2     | 1         | -      | -     | -      |
| 28 | I use different grammatical patterns in my writing to make it more stimulating.                       | 100%   | -     | -         | -      | -     | -      |
|    |   | 50     | -     | -         | -      | -     | -      |
| 29 | I abide by the social rules while writing to produce an accepted piece of writing.                    | 98%    | 2%    | -         | -      | -     | -      |
|    |   | 49     | 1     | -         | -      | -     | -      |
| 30 | I view writing as a social process for negotiating meaning to particular audience.                    | 60%    | 28%   | 6%        | -      | 6%    | 6%     |
|    |   | 30     | 14    | 3         | -      | 3     | 3      |

Results in the table 5 reveal that 96% of the students kept assessing and reassessing their writing to make it much easier for their audience. 74% of the target subjects stated that they compared their writing with that of their peers to see how well they perform. When it was necessary for any modification, the students did it immediately. In order to make their

writing more effective and appropriate, 80% of the students reported that they supported the claim they made by effective data. 98% of the subjects contended that they depended on lexical variation to make their writing appear more stimulating. All the subjects 100% assumed to use different grammatical patterns in their writing to produce an accepted piece of written discourse. 88%

of the respondents stated that they viewed writing as a social process dedicated for the transmission of meaning to particular audience. The results obtained from the interview show that the students assessed their writing before editing the final version. But examining the actual written performance of the students reveal that this is not true. The following students' actual writing makes this point very clear.

#### **Extract 4**

*Dear my friend I hope that you are here because the season is unpleivable The manson is coming after a weks you don't know how is the vilige. The season start at april and The Land covered by green wods so the wather is very beutiful evry thing is beutiful. In the season people work at the farms and it is the season at merige.*

#### **CONCLUSION**

The results of the study showed that the written discourse of the Sudanese EFL learners did not reveal an awareness of the audience with whom they communicate. The students did not show the ability to make assumptions of what their audience already know and what they expect to find as new. The students held fragmentary knowledge on the concept of audience awareness. Accordingly, the students did not manage to produce the texts that could help them keep and stimulate their audience. They were not able to employ the strategies of writing to produce proper and effective writing. Furthermore, results indicated that students were not able to attach unity and coherence to the texts they produced. Their organizational skills the students possess were very poor. To help the students develop the concept they hold on audience awareness,

writing instructors and syllabus designers need to put special emphasis on the importance of audience awareness as a factor which is essential for effective writing. They need to motivate the students to produce texts which address a wide range of audience and not restrict their writing to teachers as their potential audience. This can help students to be acquainted with the different sorts of writing genre.

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