INVESTIGATING WRITING CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY SAUDI EFL LEARNERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

INVESTIGANDO OS DESAFIOS DE ESCRITA ENCONTRADOS POR ALUNOS SAUDITAS DE EFL: IMPLICAÇÕES PARA A MELHORIA

INVESTIGACIÓN DE LOS DESAFÍOS DE ESCRITURA QUE ENCONTRARON LOS ESTUDIANTES SAUDÍES DE EFL: IMPLICACIONES PARA LA MEJORA

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Abstract
This study aimed at investigating the types of writing tasks produced by Saudi EFL learners. It also aimed at exploring the writing challenges encountered by those students. The sample of this study consists of (261) students enrolled in ENG (011). The students were randomly chosen from three different colleges: college of business, college of medicine, and college of engineering. The researcher used a questionnaire with (13) items asking about the challenges faced by the students during writing tasks. The results of this study revealed that the most frequently writing tasks produced by the students were essays for exams, synthesis, and reflection papers. The results also revealed that 'organizing paragraphs', 'using proper connections and transitions', and 'inability to keep writing flow' were the most frequent challenges of writing tasks reported by the students. The present study provided some recommendations and pedagogical implications for policymakers and curriculum designers to take action in an attempt to avoid or lessen these challenges.
Keywords: Writing; Writing Challenges'; Saudi EFL Learners.

Resumo
Este estudo teve como objetivo investigar os tipos de tarefas de escrita produzidas por aprendizes de EFL saudita. Também objetivou explorar os desafios de escrita encontrados por esses alunos. A amostra deste estudo foi composta por 261 alunos matriculados em ENG (011). Os alunos foram escolhidos aleatoriamente de três faculdades diferentes: faculdade de administração, faculdade de medicina e faculdade de engenharia. O pesquisador utilizou um questionário com 13 itens perguntando sobre os desafios enfrentados pelos alunos durante as tarefas de escrita. Os resultados revelaram que as tarefas escritas mais frequentemente produzidas pelos alunos foram redações para exames, sínteses e trabalhos de reflexão. Revelaram, ainda, que "organizar parágrafos", "usar conexões e transições adequadas" e "incapacidade de manter o fluxo de escrita" foram os desafios mais frequentes das tarefas de escrita relatados pelos alunos. O presente estudo forneceu algumas recomendações e implicações pedagógicas para os formuladores de políticas e designers de currículo tomarem medidas na tentativa de evitar ou diminuir esses desafios.
Palavras-chave: Escrita; Desafios de Redação; Alunos sauditas de EFL.

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Resumen

Este estudio tuvo como objetivo investigar los tipos de tareas de escritura producidas por estudiantes saudíes de inglés como lengua extranjera. También tuvo como objetivo explorar los desafíos de escritura encontrados por estos estudiantes. La muestra de este estudio estuvo constituida por 261 alumnos matriculados en ENG (011). Los estudiantes fueron elegidos al azar de tres facultades diferentes: facultad de negocios, facultad de medicina y facultad de ingeniería. El investigador utilizó un cuestionario de 13 ítems preguntando sobre los desafíos que enfrentan los estudiantes durante las tareas de escritura. Los resultados revelaron que las tareas escritas más frecuentemente realizadas por los estudiantes fueron ensayos para exámenes, resúmenes y trabajos de reflexión. También revelaron que "organizar párrafos", "usar conexiones y transiciones apropiadas" y "incapacidad para mantener el flujo de escritura" fueron los desafíos más frecuentes de las tareas de escritura informados por los estudiantes. El presente estudio ha brindado algunas recomendaciones e implicaciones pedagógicas para que los formuladores de políticas y los diseñadores de currículos tomen medidas en un intento de evitar o disminuir estos desafíos.

Palabras clave: Escritura; desafíos de escritura; Estudiantes saudíes de inglés como lengua extranjera

Introduction

Writing is one of the most challenging skills in learning a second language. It is strongly connected to the proper use of language with accuracy and communicative potential (Kellogg, 1990). The writing skill is one of the four basic micro-skills that learners are expected to learn. It is corollary to the other language skills (i.e., listening, reading, and speaking), thus, it cannot be learned in isolation. Learners are taught the principles of writing regardless of their study level. These principles would help them to achieve their needs and learning purposes (Ramos & Gatcho, 2020). Students have often experienced problems in learning writing skills due to proficiency level, learning level, and the status of English in their countries.

In the context of education, students are required to have good English language proficiency to successfully complete their studies. The university students are asked to complete various forms of writing such as essay exams, paragraphs, reports, assignments, and summaries. This could be evidence of the demanding need for students to be competent writers in both academic and professional careers (Tilahun, 2018). English is the medium of instruction in most of the academic majors in Saudi universities, writing is the main pillar for students' success in their academic life.

To achieve better writing, students should have positive attitudes towards writing. The previous research on this topic revealed that both writing skills and positive attitude are correlated (Hashemian & Heidari, 2013). In addition, learning motivation is strongly associated with good writing, students who have higher intrinsic motivation achieve better writing production (Graham et al., 2007). Adult learners encounter difficulties in

writing academic English since it needs grammar proficiency, good knowledge of writing mechanics, vocabulary, and sufficient knowledge of writing aspects and genres. The English language is taught as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia, teachers focus on improving the students' writing ability through a variety of techniques. However, the students' engagement in writing techniques is often neglected where it should be considered to improve the students' writing production. The previous literature showed a dearth of studies focusing on the writing problems experienced by Saudi EFL learners. Many of the studies focused on the difficulties, perceptions, and attitudes of learning English in general but not on specific language skills. Therefore, the present study aimed at exploring the difficulties experienced by Saudi EFL learners in writing. The study seeks to give answers to the following research questions:

1) What types of writing do Saudi EFL learners produce?
2) What are the writing difficulties encountered by Saudi EFL learners during the writing task?

Literature Review

Definition and Purpose of Writing

Writing is an essential skill in learning a second or a foreign language. Yule (2010) views writing as a symbolic representation of language through arranging or combining the symbols to form words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and essays. Fisher (2001) argues that it is hard to find a specific definition for writing that could cover all aspects of writing. Ben Aissa (2018) pointed out ten purposes of writing. First, to express opinions and thoughts where people can express themselves to their friends. Second, writing describes places, things, or people to provide readers with a mental image of their writing. Third, writing aims at thinking or reflecting on topics, and answering questions about certain topics. Fourth, entertainment writing is used to give jokes or to provide television scripts to entertain the audience.

Fifth, writing could take the forms of laboratory reports, articles in newspapers, or economic reports to convey information to readers. Sixth, writing is used for analyses (e.g., process analysis, cause/effect analysis, and synthesis. Seventh, writers may aim to convince readers or get them to believe or act in a particular way through argument

paragraphs. Eighth, it is used to convince readers about opinions and points of view, get knowledge about a subject, arguments, and logical thinking. Ninth, it is used to evaluate things, products, or people where a piece of evidence is needed for this purpose. Tenth, students write to obtain solutions for problems where they write a description for the problem, analyze, and reflect on it in a form of a short argument.

Approaches of Writing

The previous literature on writing showed three various approaches to teaching writing skills in the EFL context. These approaches include product, process, and genre approaches. The product approach concentrates on the final production of students' writing process. White (1988) explains three different phases in this approach. The first phase is to study the writing model, where learners analyze language rules such as grammatical rules and sentence structure. The second phase involves manipulating the elements of writing such as text rules and vocabulary. The last phase of this approach is to produce a similar text to the model studied. Hedge (1988) states that the product approach of writing involves seven aspects: correct use of grammar, correct use of vocabulary, correct use of conventions and punctuations, accurate spelling, linking ideas and information leading to topic development, and the correct structure of the content. Ben Aissa (2018) argues that the most important limitation of this approach is repetition. Students would feel bored because they do the same thing repeatedly and this could affect their creative writing.

The process approach deals with the stages that EFL learners follow to create their products. Brown (2000) mentions that writing is a combination of process and product, which involves a thinking process leading to final writing production. Nemouchi (2014) indicates four phases that EFL learners need to follow to process the production of their writing. The pre-writing is the first phase where learners gather information about the topic and brainstorm their ideas and knowledge about it. Next, the drafting stage helps learners to develop their knowledge and ideas to create an introduction about the topic through various drafts. Then comes the revising draft phase where learners can detect their mistakes and errors in the draft paper. Finally, the editing phase is where learners can correct the errors of their writing, which may include lexical errors, syntactic errors,

punctuation, and grammatical errors. Fisher (2001) points out that the process approach takes much time from the pre-writing phase to the final draft of writing production.

The third approach of writing is genre writing in which a written text serves for a specific purpose in society such as essays, novels, or poetry. Byram (2004) indicates that the genre approach requires a social context where reports, letters, or specific texts are created to achieve a specific goal. According to Dudley- Evans (1997), the genre approach involves three phases. The first phase introduces and analyzes a genre model to work on, the second phase requires the learners to perform exercises that tamper language forms, and the third phase includes text production. The genre approach is said to be imitation, and analysis of the texts given by the teacher, which is quite similar to the product approach (Dudley-Evans, 1997). Badger and White (2000) argue that the genre approach is not always appropriate for EFL learners, because it limits the students' creativity to figure out the hidden message of the text.

Common Writing Difficulties

The difficulty of writing refers to the challenges encountered by learners to one or more elements of the writing skill. These challenges may include the use of tenses, nouns, or spelling errors. Raimes (1983) states that writing is seen as a challenging task because it contains several language aspects such as syntax, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation. One of the most challenging elements of writing reported by learners in the previous literature is spelling. According to Jayousi (2011), spelling is defined as the correct form of words from letters, students who are unable to form words are more likely to produce a weak piece of writing.

Grammar is also a challenging element for students in writing and it is defined as the rules that structure the language to provide meaningful sentences, paragraphs, or essays. Harmer (2001) argues that grammar describes the people's ways in writing and speaking, in which these rules are changeable based on the different ways of people's communication. The learners of the English language consider vocabulary as the building block of any language. However, they face difficulties in selecting the appropriate word while writing a paragraph or an essay (Al-Zahrani, 2011). In a similar vein, Ra'uf (2020) argues that most of EFL learners face difficulties in communicating in the English

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language because of the limited vocabulary knowledge. The shallow size of vocabulary prevents learners to express their ideas and thoughts about a particular topic. Punctuation is defined as the marks used in writing to divide sentences, phrases, or paragraphs. Examples of punctuation marks are full stop (.), comma (,), and semi-colon (;). Murray and Hughes (2008) indicate that punctuation seems to be a difficult task because it needs much time to practice.

Causes of Writing Difficulties

The studies conducted on writing difficulties have revealed several causes of those difficulties. The causes included the nature of the writing process, lack of motivation, insufficient time of learning, lack of practice, negative feedback from instructors. Alfalki (2015) points out that the process of writing is generally a complex process where students need to master the usage of grammar, critical thinking, and elements of judgment. Al-Khairy (2013) supported the previous idea and he stated that the most challenges encountered by students in the writing process include but are not limited to grammatical devices, inappropriate word choice, incorrect spelling, and punctuation.

Lack of motivation is also one of the factors that cause writing problems among students. Silva (1997) emphasized motivating and encouraging students to write about different topics. The reason is that students might feel bored when it comes to writing about unfamiliar topics. Zamel (1985) argued that students should be free to select the topic they wish to write about. In doing so, the instructor gets better writing production and helps to improve the writing quality. On the other hand, Guantum and Chakraverty (2002) emphasized the time factor as an important predictor of learning writing skills. They mentioned that writing skills need plenty of time to be learned and mastered. Hedge (1988) indicated that students often pass the deadlines of writing tasks due to the lack of time. He justified that lack due to the need to brainstorm and organize ideas, draft, and revise the writing production.

Similarly, learning writing skills needs to be practiced because of the importance of practice in learning language skills. Alkhairy (2013) pointed out that learning writing skills never come instantly, but it is learned with effort and practice. The more students practice, the more they master the skills. They also manifested the important role of

instructor' feedback in improving the students' writing production. He stated that incompatible feedback given by teachers might lead to the lack of learners' confidence in their writing. In a similar vein, Zamel (1985) argued that some students would get frustrated because of the unclear feedback provided by their instructors.

Previous Studies

Several research works (Almahameed & Alajalein, 2021; Bulqiyah et.al., 2021; Hidayah et.al., 2021; Peter & Singaravelu, 2021) have been conducted to investigate the challenges of writing faced by EFL learners. Almahameed and Alajalein, (2021) investigated the academic writing difficulties encountering Jordanian EFL learning. The participants of this study included (20) undergraduate students who majored in English language and translation. The participants received explicit instruction about research writing skills, and then they were asked to write a problem statement needed for their project paper. The findings of this study depicted a lack of academic writing skills and they committed many writing errors such as grammatical errors. Hidayah et.al., (2021) examined the factors affecting Indonesian students' writing in procedure text. The sample of this study was (165) Indonesian school students chosen from six classes of ninth grade. The researchers of this study used both interviews and a writing test for data collection. The results showed that language features were the dominant factor affecting writing difficulties. These features included grammatical errors and word choice difficulties.

Bulqiyah et.al., (2021) explored the perspectives of Indonesian tertiary students on the difficulties of essay writing. The participants of this study were (21) undergraduate students enrolled in one of the private universities in Jember, Indonesia. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to obtain data from the participants. The findings of this study classified the students' problems into affective problems such as lecturers' and students' attitudes while learning essay writing, and cognitive problems such as writing viewpoint, language issues, and writing process difficulties.

Peter & Singaravelu, (2021) studied the challenges in acquiring writing skills of Indian high school students in the district of Tamil Nadu. The sample of this study contained (1200) students who received a descriptive survey to collect the data. The results of this study revealed different challenges related to writing skills acquisition such

as spelling, punctuation marks, grammar, syntactic errors, content redundancy, and first language interference.

Research Methodology

This section sheds light on the research design, participants of the study, data collection, and the methods of data analysis.

Research Design

The present study is quantitative, in which a questionnaire is used to collect data from the participants. The design of this study is a descriptive-analytical design to better understand the topic under investigation. Dulock (1993) argues that descriptive design is used to accurately describe the facts and/or characteristics of a given sample or research interest.

Participants

The population of this study comprised of students enrolled in (ENG011) course at King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. This course is compulsory for all students to fulfill the requirements of their study plan. The researcher has randomly chosen (261) students out of the target population. The participants were from three different colleges: College of Business (89) students, College of Engineering (87) students, and (85) students from the College of Medicine. These colleges were chosen due to the great importance of academic writing during their study. The participants were all males because it is very difficult to access female students in Saudi Arabia.

Data Collection

A survey questionnaire adapted from Ackaoglu (2011) was used to collect data from the participants of this study. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: the first section asks about the college that student belongs to, the second section asks about the writing tasks that students usually do during their study, and the last section contained 13 items asking about the challenges faced by students in their academic writing. The questionnaire has been sent to three reviewers who are specialists in this field to ensure

the validity of the research instrument. The researcher received some comments and suggestions from the reviewers and refinement has been made to the questionnaire accordingly. For reliability purposes, a preliminary study has been conducted on (20) participants who did not participate in the main study. Cronbach Alpha was used to indicate the reliability of the questionnaire and it was found to be (.88) and it is satisfactory value to proceed with the main study.

Data Analysis

The researcher used Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version (26) to analyze the data obtained from the participants. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, mean scores, and standard deviations have been applied to clearly explain and answer the questions of the present study. The next section presents the results obtained from this study followed by a discussion and comparison with the previous studies on this area of research.

Results and Discussion

The collected data have been organized, categorized, and tabulated to answer the questions of this study. The following table presents the results obtained to answer the first research question: *What types of writing do Saudi EFL learners produce?*

Table 1: Types of Writing Produced by Saudi EFL Learners

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Essay for Exams	80	30.7	30.7	30.7
	Synthesis	67	25.7	25.7	56.3
	Reflection Papers	39	14.9	14.9	71.3
	Summaries	38	14.6	14.6	85.8
	Group Assignments	37	14.2	14.2	100.0
	Total	261	100.0	100.0	

Source: Research data.

As shown in table (1) above, the students are requested to produce different writing tasks. The most frequently writing task reported by the students was 'Essay for Exams' (30.7%), followed by 'Synthesis' (25.7%), 'Reflection Papers' (14.9%),

'Summaries' (14.6%), and 'Group Assignments' (14.2%). The following section presents the results obtained to answer the second research question: *What are the writing difficulties encountered by Saudi EFL learners during the writing task?*

Table 2: Writing Difficulties Encountered by Saudi EFL Learners

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Organizing paragraphs	261	1.00	5.00	3.52	1.24
Using proper connections and transitions	261	1.00	5.00	3.50	1.25
Inability to keep writing flow	261	1.00	5.00	3.49	1.27
Word-Choice Selection	261	1.00	5.00	3.48	1.27
Developing ideas	261	1.00	5.00	3.45	1.29
Using proper mechanical conventions	261	1.00	5.00	3.34	1.36
Using correct punctuation and spelling	261	1.00	5.00	3.34	1.36
Drawing conclusions	261	1.00	5.00	3.32	1.37
Presenting ideas clearly	261	1.00	5.00	3.29	1.38
Lack of Vocabulary and Expressions	261	1.00	5.00	3.27	1.40
Organizing the whole text	261	1.00	5.00	3.25	1.31
Lack of Grammar Knowledge	261	1.00	5.00	3.22	1.36
Preparing an outline before start writing	261	1.00	5.00	3.21	1.38
Valid N (listwise)	261				

Source: Research data.

As revealed in table (2), the students reported (13) challenges they encounter during their writing tasks. 'Organizing paragraphs' (M= 3.52, Std. Deviation= 1.24) was the most frequently challenge reported by the students, followed by 'Using proper connections and transitions' (M= 3.50, Std. Deviation= 1.25), 'Inability to keep writing flow' (M= 3.49, Std. Deviation= 1.27), 'Word-choice selection' (M= 3.48, Std. Deviation= 1.27), 'Developing ideas' (M= 3.45, Std. Deviation= 1.29), 'Using proper mechanical conventions' (M= 3.34, Std. Deviation= 1.36), 'Using correct punctuation and spelling' (M= 3.34, Std. Deviation= 1.36), 'Drawing conclusions' (M= 3.32, Std. Deviation= 1.37), 'Presenting ideas clearly' (M= 3.29, Std. Deviation= 1.38), 'Lack of

vocabulary and expressions' (M= 3.27, Std. Deviation= 1.40), 'Organizing the whole text' (M= 3.25, Std. Deviation= 1.31), 'Lack of grammar knowledge' (M= 3.22, Std. Deviation= 1.36), and 'Preparing an outline before start writing' (M= 3.21, Std. Deviation= 1.38).

The results of this study revealed that most of the students reported writing essays for exams and synthesis. These writing tasks were found more frequent with students enrolled in the college of medicine. This result is partially consistent with the study of Ackaoglu (2011) who found that those writing tasks are more frequent with students enrolled in science colleges. Bridgeman and Carlson (1983) indicated that critical writing tasks are quite frequent for undergraduate students. Concerning writing challenges, the participants mentioned several challenges such as 'Organizing paragraphs', 'Using proper connections and transitions', and 'Inability to keep writing flow'. This result is in line with Bulqiyah et.al., (2021) study who found that writing challenges could be attributed to cognitive issues such as writing viewpoint and writing process difficulties.

In addition, 'word-choice selection' and 'lack of grammar knowledge' were among the writing challenges encountered by the participants. This result is also consistent with the findings revealed in Hidayah et.al., (2021) who showed several writing challenges encountered by Indonesian EFL learners; grammatical errors and word-choice selection were among the most frequent challenges. Interestingly, most of the students encounter less difficulty in outlining the major points of the writing task. This implies that students are aware of how, to begin with their writing tasks, but difficulties appear when they intend to write.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The present study investigated the types of writing tasks produced by Saudi EFL learners and the common challenges encountered by them. The results revealed that the participants produce several writing tasks, and they encounter some challenges when they write. The students showed a positive attitude towards writing in English and they show their willingness to learn how to write in the academic setting. Providing students with certain topics proves to assist students to write more successfully. This helps the students to brainstorm their ideas and organize them.

The results of the present study might be an important reference for Saudi EFL teachers. They could use the results to design English courses for academic purposes after examining the challenges and the student's needs for the English language. The curriculum designers could design a course that deals with writing for academic purposes, where teaching the types of writing tasks, grammar, transitions words, and thesis statement is the main focus. The present study is not void of limitations. Future research on this topic could use the triangulation method for data collection. This would provide more valid and in-depth details about the topic under investigation. It is also advisable to include more participants from different universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This helps to get a holistic picture of the challenges of writing in English and how to improve the students' level in this skill.

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