

Investigating the Challenges Saudi University Students Face in Academic English Writing Tasks

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Abstract

This study explored writing tasks created by Saudi students and the challenges they face. The study intends to explore the difficulties faced when writing. The study included 270 students who are taking the ENG011 course at King Khalid University. Data were collected from participants in this study using a questionnaire, which consisted of three sections. The study found that participants created multiple writing tasks and faced several challenges while writing. The results also showed that students had positive perspectives towards writing in English and a will to learn writing in an academic environment. The study also revealed that providing specific topics helps students write better. The study recommended exploring this topic using different methods for data collection. The study also recommends investigating other challenges students face when learning English language.

Keywords: writing tasks, writing challenges, EFL students, types of writing.

Writing is a challenging skill in learning a second language, which is associated with correct use of accurate and communicative language (Cheng & Fox, 2008). As one of the four basic skills, writing accommodates the learning of the other skills in any language, listening, reading, and speaking. However, learning writing does not occur in isolation from the other skills. Writing is taught at different stages of the learners' lives, where each level has its own skills and principles, which help meet their needs and learning goals (McDonough & Crawford, 2018). Students often struggle to acquire writing skills because of their levels in language proficiency and abilities, and the nature of their home country's English. The lack of practicing the different skills in English language

is a big challenge among students. The only chance to practice writing is almost inside the classrooms.

Good English proficiency is a prerequisite for training in order to complete the course. University students are required to perform several tasks in English writing, including writing essays in exams, reports, papers and assignments. Therefore, students need to master the skills of writing in its different forms to increase their performance in their academic or professional lives (Tilahun, 2018). Different departments in Saudi universities use English as the language of instruction, writing is a major pillar of student academic success. In order to be good at writing, students should generate positives attitudes towards writing. This topic

has shown that both writing skills and positive attitudes are connected together (Cheng & Fox, 2008). Moreover, motivation to learn is strongly related to better writing skills, with students with high self-motivation achieving better writing (Graham et al., 2007). Learners at university levels face challenges in performing their academic writing tasks. It requires knowledge of grammar, sufficient background on the writing process, good vocabulary reserve, and a good background on genres of writing (Akcaoglu, 2011).

Students in Saudi Arabia learn English as a foreign language and instructors and teachers rely on several methods to help students enhance their levels in writing skills. However, when it comes to improving student writing skills, student exposure to writing skills is often neglected. The literature so far indicates a lack of research that focuses on the writing problems faced by her EFL learners in Saudi Arabia (Almahameed & Alajalein, 2021). Much of the research has focused on challenges, perspectives, and attitudes in learning English. However, not all studies focused on specific language skills. Thus, this study suggests that EFL learners in Saudi Arabia face several difficulties in performing the writing tasks in English language. The study intends to explore the difficulties faced when writing and aims to provide answers to the following questions:

- 1) What are the writing tasks required by Saudi EFL learners in classrooms?
- 2) What are the writing difficulties faced by Saudi EFL learners?

Literature Review

The skill of writing is very important in second language learning. In any language, the alphabets are symbolic representations of language, which can be arranged to create different words, phrases, and sentences (Yule, 2010). Ben Aissa (2018) argued that there are ten objectives of writing. First, expressing thoughts and opinions in a place where a person can

express them to friends. Second, the text can provide descriptions to people, objects, or places to give the reader a mental image of the text. Thirdly, writing is intended to reflect or reflect problems and answer questions related to a particular topic. Fourth, popular fiction is used to tell jokes for audience entertainment. Fifth, the text can take the form of lab reports, newspaper articles, or reports in different fields to deliver information to the reader. Sixth, writing can be used to analyze. Seventh, through argument paragraphs, authors can aim to persuade readers, or to behave in a particular way. Eighth, writing is also used in persuasion of others regarding the opinions and ideas of the writer and to acquire knowledge of subjects, arguments, and reasoning. The student writes to obtain a solution to the problem by writing a description of the problem, analyzing it, and considering it in the form of a short argumentative structure.

So far, teaching writing entails the existence of three different approaches to teaching writing skills when learning a foreign language, which include process, product, and genre. The product approach focuses on the outputs of the student's writing process. This approach consists of several stages. In the first phase, learners need to learn a writing model that analyzes the grammar rules and sentence structure in the language. In the second stage, the students learn about the basic components of writing such as the paragraph, the text structure and putting vocabulary together. The final step is to create a text that resembles the model under investigation. Hedge (1988) describes his seven dimensions to the product approach to writing. These dimensions include using grammar correctly, using vocabulary correctly, proper use of punctuation, correct spelling, skills of connecting ideas and information, and correct structure of content, which all contribute to building a better structure for any text. The major limitation of such approach is the process of repetition, as students become bored with repeating the same thing over and over, which can hinder creative writing (Ben Aissa, 2018).

The process approach addresses the steps an EFL learner goes through to create a product. Brown (2000) states that writing is a set of processes and deliverables, including thought processes that lead to the final production of writing. Nemouchi (2014) points out her four stages that EFL learners must follow to process their writing. Prescription is the first stage in which a learner gathers information and ideas about the subject. Then, the design stage allows learners to develop ideas and information for creating topic introductions through different designs. Then comes the revising the draft, as students can find the mistakes and errors they make. Finally, during the editing phase, students can correct the errors they have found in the first draft, such as vocabulary errors, punctuation, syntactical errors, and grammatical errors. A procedural approach from the stage before writing to the final draft of the written work takes a long time (Fisher, 2001).

Genre is the third approach to writing, where the written text is formed to serve a specific purpose. Examples of genres are either an essay, novel, or poem. Byram (2004) points out that a genre approach requires a social context in which a report, letter, or particular text is formed to achieve a particular goal. The genre approach consists of three phases. The first stage is the introduction and analysis of the genre model. The second stage asks the learner to practice manipulating utterance forms, and the third stage is the construction of the text (Dudley-Evans, 1997).

Writing difficulty can be seen in the challenges students have with aspects of their writing skills. Such challenges could involve the use of nouns, tenses, or misspellings. The process of writing is considered a difficult task because it involves multiple linguistic parts such as the syntactic structure, using vocabulary, spelling and punctuation (Raimes, 1983). Spelling is among of the most difficult parts of writing learners have reported so far. Spelling is the correct use of form of words from letters, and

students who cannot form words are more likely to produce poor sentences (Jayousi, 2011).

Grammar is another noticeable difficulty that students have in the process of writing. The main concept of grammar is to use rules to create correct structures that are meaningful, whether at the level of sentences, paragraphs or texts. Harmer (2001) argues that grammars describe how individuals write and speak, and that these rules are changeable because people communicate differently. English learners think of vocabulary as the pillars of any language. However, choosing the right words when writing a paragraph or essay can be difficult (Al-Zahrani, 2011). Similarly, Ra'uf (2020) believes that many students have difficulty communicating in English because of the limitation in vocabulary capacity. Due to the small vocabulary, learners are unable to express their thoughts and ideas on certain topics.

The literature on writing challenges have identified several causes for these difficulties. These causes are part of the writing process itself, the less motivation students have, lack of time to study, lack of practice, and the negative feedback from teachers. The writing process in general is a complex process requiring students to have better use of grammar, thinking and judgment (Alfalki, 2015). Al-Khairy (2013) supports earlier ideas, stating that the main challenges students face in his writing process include grammatical ingenuity, poor word choice, spelling errors, and punctuation. It states that it is not limited to these.

Another important factor is the Lack of motivation, which leads students to have problems in their writings. Motivating students to write on different topics is very helpful (Silva, 1997). Students can become bored when they just write about unfamiliar topics. Students should have the freedom to select the topics they want to write about. This makes teachers more productive in writing and improves the quality of their writing. Quantum and Chakraverty (2002), on the other hand, highlight the time factor a very important indicator of writing skill acquisition.

You said that learning and mastering writing skills takes a lot of time. Hedge (1988) points out that students often overtime their assignments due to lack of time. He justified this flaw because of the need to collect and organize ideas, design and modify written works.

Similarly, learning writing skills requires practice, as practice is important when learning language skills. It is important to recognize that writing skills are not acquired quickly, but can be acquired with effort and practice (Alkhairy, 2013). They also showed that teacher feedback plays an important role in enhancing students' writing skills. He explained that conflicting feedback from teachers can cause learners to lose confidence in their writing.

2.5 Previous Studies

Al-Khairy (2013) analyzed Saudi English-most important undergraduates at Taif University to pick out the kinds of educational writing at English departments. To gather information for this purpose, 32 senior school individuals have been interviewed and a answered a questionnaire. The findings of this take a look at monitor that Saudi English-most important undergraduates are very susceptible in writing competencies and dedicate masses of mistakes of their educational writings and are normally engaged in sentence-stage or on the most at paragraph-stage educational writing and that they do now no longer take into account it crucial at this stage to jot down distinct sorts of essays.

RahmtAllah (2020) examined the consistency of English essays produced by 46 female Saudi students at the Unaizah College of Science and Arts, Qasim University. The study reviewed several essays the students produce. The main questions of the study were 1.) How coherent can EFL students write? Students were asked to produce two essays (a written test containing two essay questions). The results have shown that learners fail to achieve consistency in writing tasks. Recommendations are provided in light of these results. The findings also recommend further research

investigating coherence and behavioral studies to improve this critical skill among Saudi undergraduate students.

Ali and Zayid. (2022) examined the challenges students face when writing proposals and research projects. The sample included final-year students from Al-Namas College of Science and Arts, Bisha University, Saudi Arabia. The study included 60 students, who majored in the English and Computer Science departments and have conducted research projects in English. The instruments of the study included questionnaires and informal interviews with target groups of students and teachers. The results of this study clearly show that writing or conducting research papers in English is among the most important difficulties for about 70% of the participants. About 50% prefer to do research in L1.

Alkhalaf (2020) explored the attitudes of female EFL learners in Saudi Arabia towards group writing and the problems students face while performing the activity. The study used the quantitative approach and was applied to 50 Saudi students, who completed a questionnaire about writing together and the problems they faced during the activity. The findings indicate that students have a good opinion about working together to write. However, there were some problems with how students behaved, how their progress was evaluated, and how they managed their time. These findings suggest that it would be beneficial for writing teachers to use this technique in their classrooms. Moreover, the findings suggest that teachers and researchers should focus on the problems mentioned in the study.

Research Methodology

This study is quantitative and uses questionnaires to gather data from participants. The study relied on the descriptive analysis design to answer the research subject. Dulock (1993) mentioned that descriptive designs are used for facts description or the characteristics of a particular sample or study subject accurately.

Sampling

The study population consisted of students who are participating in a course (ENG011) at King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. This ENG 011 course is mandatory for all students to meet the curriculum requirements. Researchers randomly selected (270) students from the target population. Participants he came from three different universities.

Instrument

Data were collected from participants in this study using a questionnaire, which included three parts. The first part covered university the student is attending, the second section asks about the writing tasks that the student typically performs during their studies, and the last section asks about the challenges students face in academic writing. Contains 13 items to do. To

ensure the validity of the research instrument, a questionnaire was sent to her three peer reviewers with expertise in this area. The researchers received several comments and suggestions from the reviewers and refined the questionnaire accordingly. A pilot study was conducted with 20 students from outside the original sample of the study. Cronbach Alpha was used to indicate the reliability of the questionnaire and was found to be (0.88), a sufficient value to proceed with the main study.

Results and Discussion

To answer the first question of the study, the percentages, mean scores and standard deviations of the students' responses were calculated, as shown in the following tables.

Table (1): The tasks students produced intaking the English language course

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Writing essays	81	31.5	31.7	31.7
Synthesis	68	25.7	25.7	56.3
Reflection essays	40	15.3	15.3	72.2
Summarizing	39	14.6	14.6	85.8
Group Assignments	38	14.2	14.2	100.0
Total	266	101.3	101.5	

The table (1) above shows that the students produce several writing tasks during their study. Students reported that writing essays was one of the most challenging writing tasks they face with a frequency of (31.5%), followed by 'Synthesis' (25.7%), 'Reflection essays' (15.3%),

'Summarizing' (14.6%), and 'Group Assignments' (14.2%).

The following tables show the results on the second research question: What are the writing difficulties faced by Saudi EFL learners?

Table (2): Writing challenges faced by Saudi university Learners

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Paragraph organization	270	3.58	1.33
connections and transitions	270	3.54	1.27
can't keep up with the flow of text	270	3.44	1.27
Word-Choice Selection	270	3.41	1.27
Developing ideas	270	3.46	1.30
Using mechanical conventions	270	3.37	1.35
Using correct punctuation and spelling	270	3.37	1.35
Concluding ideas	270	3.33	1.36
Presentation of ideas	270	3.28	1.37
low Vocabulary and Expressions	270	3.25	1.39

Text organization	270	3.23	1.29
Little grammatical knowledge	270	3.21	1.38
Outlining skill	270	3.20	1.40

Table (2) revealed that there are (13) challenges students encounter in their academic writing. The challenge paragraph organization got the highest mean score of 3.58, with a standard deviation of 1.33. the least challenge students had was the outlining skill, as it got a mean score of 3.20, with a standard deviation of 1.40.

This study showed that most students expressed that writing essays for exams and summaries are challenging tasks. Students who major in medical specializations shared common concerns about the challenge to produce written essays for their courses. Bridgeman and Carlson (1983) pointed out that critical writing is very common among undergraduates. In terms of writing challenges, students identified different challenges such as 'structuring paragraphs', 'using appropriate connections and transitions', and 'inability to maintain sentence flow'. This result is consistent with Al-Khairy (2013), which found that writing problems can be traced back to cognitive problems such as difficulties with writing vision and the writing process.

Also included in the writing challenges faced by the participants were 'choice of words' and 'lack of knowledge of grammar'. This result is also consistent with that of RahmtAllah (2020) presented some writing challenges faced by students in Indonesia. In addition, students revealed that grammar errors and choosing appropriate words were part of the common challenges. However, many students can easily explain the main theme of the writing task. This means that students were able to start a writing task, but face difficulties when trying to write. This issue is common among many students who learn English as a second language. They have problems with retrieving the words stored in their memories about the topic they handling. Therefore, choosing the appropriate words while writing is a serious issue that requires practice

and reading different sources to form a good vocabulary reservoir for any student.

Conclusion

This study explored the writing tasks created by Saudi students and the challenges they face. As a result, we found that participants created multiple writing tasks and faced several challenges while writing. Students revealed positive attitudes towards writing in English and a willingness to learn to write in an academic environment. The results have found that providing specific topics helps students write better. This allows students to collect and organize their ideas. The study found that the more students practice their writing tasks the better their level becomes. Students reported the challenges in producing essay tasks, which requires mastery of grammar and sufficient reservoir of vocabulary in different fields. Teachers require students to produce written texts regardless of the students' levels, which becomes a burden on many students. Therefore, the study revealed that understanding the students' levels is very important to inform teachers and instructors on the best procedures to choose the right types of questions. These steps will reduce the risk of students falling into the challenge of discarding learning new skills. The role of the teacher here is very important in choosing the appropriate writing tasks that match the students' needs, levels and interests.

The results of this study may be beneficial to educators regarding the process of teaching writing to students in the Saudi context. After researching students' challenges and needs in English, educators can rely on the results for a better design of English language courses that fit the students' levels and serve their needs. Curriculum designers can design courses that treat writing within the academic context by focusing on the kinds of writing tasks,

grammatical rules, word transitions, and dissertation explanations as the main focus. is not free from restrictions. It is also recommended to include more participants from various universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This will help you get an overall picture of the challenges of writing in English and how you can improve your students' level of this skill. The study also recommended conducting other

research using different methodologies and with different samples, which could yield different results.

Acknowledgments

The authors extend their appreciation to the Deanship of Scientific Research at King Khalid University for funding this work through Large Research Groups under grant number (RGP.2 / 110/45).

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