

College Instructors' Focus in the EFL Writing Classrooms: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

EFL is one of the two most liberally funded academic streams in Saudi Arabia after science and technology. Universities across the country are replete with faculty that boast of enviable national and global exposure. Even so, learner standards, especially in writing skills, are way below those expected which highlights the need for rigorous research into what it is that drives the EFL teachers' choices in the classrooms. This study carried out a systematic evaluation of teachers' focus in the writing classes at Qassim University, with four parameters isolated for data collection: (i) writing approaches; (ii) writing performance; (iii) writing strategies, and (iv) writing skills. The study tool is a survey with 46 teachers engaged from undergraduate to research studies at the University. The findings showed that writing approaches were the highest focused variable among the EFL faculty followed by writing performance, writing strategies and lastly, writing skills. The findings showed the tendency of EFL teachers to focus on areas that do not directly help in developing their learners' ability in writing and hence, EFL teachers/ instructors' need to focus on the practical side of the writing skills and providing adequate exposure to their learners in group, pair and individual tasks to master the writing skills. Finally, assessment needs to focus on measuring the practical side of the learners' knowledge rather than blindly testing them on their ability to reproduce their learning.

Keywords: approach, EFL faculty, parameters, performance, strategies, writing skills

1. Introduction

The biggest strength of the written word lies in its durability over time: It stays on even beyond the writer's life. The act of writing is a means for writers to convey their thoughts and ideas to others, while also preserving experiences and memories. In the context of learners, development of writing skills is akin to development of communicative and critical thinking abilities. It also enhances their ability to discuss and develop ideas with others as well as with oneself, which is beneficial for self-appraisal and improvement. Moreover, for learners, the ability to write well is a necessary component in effective communication.

Williams and Beam (2019) stated that learning to write is essential for being literate, and being able to communicate effectively is essential for scholastic success, employment, and advancement in the workplace. Most learners must receive purposeful training to learn to write and become proficient writers which is also an endeavor of educational settings.

However, one commonplace prevalent notion is that writers are 'gifted' with an inherent ability to write well, that effective writing is something that 'simply happens,' and that a majority of the writing process is inaccessible to both the writer and others who are not involved in the writing process. But this view is fundamentally erroneous since this talent is derived in part from the acquisition of certain abilities/ skills and from an understanding of the options accessible during the writing process, both of which are important factors (Smith, 2020). It is through writing that students get an awareness of how to express themselves through various types of communication. Subject and topic-specific literacies, as well as general literacy, may be developed and improved via writing (Prain & Hand, 2016).

From amongst the many studies conducted all the world over, and on the writing skills in the Saudi context (Ahmed & Bidin, 2016; Algamil et al., 2021; Al-Jarrah et al., 2019; Alkodimi & Al-Ahdal, 2021; Bin-Hady et al., 2020), a majority focused on either performance on the skills of writing (Algamil et al., 2021; Al-Jarrah et al., 2019;

Bin-Hady et al., 2020), or the approaches that instructors/teacher employed in the classrooms (Alkodimi & Al-Ahdal, 2021; Ahmed & Bidin, 2016; Baisov, 2021). There is still a need to investigate the perceptions in four parameters at the same time, i.e., approach, performance, strategy and skills. This study is motivated by this query and accordingly, proposes to conduct the current study and explore such dimensions.

2. Literature Review

Writing is the ability to document ideas and thoughts for humanity. Bacon says, writing makes "an exact man". It is because of writing we got acquaintance with the rich heritage and sciences of the early civilizations. Writing and language development are thought of as being closely related. One of the most important skills in learning the English language, according to Ariyanti (2016), is the ability to write fluently. Iftanti (2016) related the enhancement of writing skills to success in formal settings. In order to write even a simple composition, one would need a variety of abilities, including the ability to employ relevant vocabularies in grammatical constructions, the capacity to link sentences with appropriate conjunctions, and a command of proper punctuation. However, many EFL students find it difficult to learn to write since they have had little contact to the real language outside of the classroom.

Learning to write is one of the most challenging aspects of learning a foreign language for EFL students. This is why writing is an ongoing study topic in several fields. Studies have been focused on writing skills whether to figure out the problems that EFL learners face (Algamal et al., 2021; Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Yundayani et al., 2019), the effects of certain approaches, methods or strategy on boosting learners' abilities (Alkodimi & Al-Ahdal, 2021; Bin-Hady et al., 2020), or even the perceptions of instructors on the students' ability in writing, and the impact of certain methodology (Alkodimi & Al-Ahdal, 2021). Still others focused on the ways and means to assess or evaluate students' performance in the writing skills (Ezza, 2017; Zhao, 2014), and finally, the impact of technology on writing which emerged as a strong contender in the last two decades (Lee & Kim, 2013).

Initialing by reviewing some of the studies that explored the writing approaches, Ahmed and Bidin (2016) examined the influence of Task-Based Language teaching on the writing abilities of university undergraduates from EFL backgrounds who aspire to pursue further education in Malaysian universities. L2 performance metrics such L2 writing fluency, accuracy, and complexity improved in the experimental group when compared to the control group of learners. In addition, Bin-Hady et al. (2020) investigated the impact of teaching opinion essays to Yemeni EFL undergraduate students using the process-genre approach (PGA). The study used a semi-experimental design and interviews were conducted with some of the students. The study reported significant enhancement in the students' writing ability. Moreover, students reported satisfactions with being taught using PGA.

Students' performance in the writing skill has retained researchers' interest. Analyzing mistakes and figuring out where they come from is an important part of helping students improve their writing abilities. In a study in Thailand, Phuket and Othman (2015) concluded that EFL students' difficulties were manifested in frequent errors in using the English language especially with the translation of words from Thai, verb-tense choice, word choice, comma, and preposition. Using the article, incorrect word usage, and grammatical structure were the most common language difficulties cited by students. When it came to organizing paragraphs, there were issues with recognizing word classes, difficulty in developing a conclusion, and incorrect punctuation marks. This, however, was not all. Laziness, egoism, bad mood, and a mental block in starting to write were only some of the psychological obstacles that students encountered. One of the most important skills in learning the English language is writing, according to Ariyanti (2016). It's impossible to convey a message effectively without using passive English, even if we neglect the importance of active English use. When we write as a manner of exploring our passive English, we are not just describing any topic without any specific objective in mind, rather we undertake a defined aim in communication.

According to Iftanti (2016), formal education includes writing instruction since excellent writing talent is required in today's globalized society. The ability to write, on the other hand, may be more difficult to assess and measure. Numerous research studies have been undertaken to investigate the difficulties faced by EFL students in completing writing assignments, which fall into three main categories: psychological, linguistic, and cognitive (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017). According to Algamal et al. (2021) and Nasser (2018), non-native English learners' inability to express themselves in writing limits their inventiveness.

EFL students' struggles with writing have been linked to a variety of factors, including a lack of prior writing experience, a lack of fluency in the target language, and a lack of motivation (Yundayani et al., 2019). Conforming to this view, Hidayati (2018) stated that teaching English writing skills to students entails increasing their linguistic and communication competency, universally regarded as a difficult endeavor. As a result, EFL teachers in general face a variety of obstacles when it comes to teaching writing. However, employment of different teaching strategies may help students improve their writing skills.

Writing strategies have been investigated by some researchers (Al-Jarrah, 2019; Baisov, 2021; Kaur, 2015; Rababah & Melhem, 2015). Kaur (2015) studied the teaching strategies that EFL instructors employ while teaching the argumentative essay. Their study showed that they used pair/group work discussion, illustration and debate explanation in class, analyzing students' writing samples and providing students with the right inputs in writing depending on an understanding of their learning styles. Also, Al-Jarrah (2019) argued for both teaching with and for metacognition as important factors in the EFL classroom. When instructors educate for metacognition, students gain an understanding of what strategies are, how to use them, when and why to employ them, and therefore, develop the ability to govern their cognitive and constructivist processes in writing. Finally, Baisov (2021) concluded that guided instruction is critical for developing writing skills because it enables teachers to be aware of how students write a text, particularly their use of self-prompts, the coherence and cohesion of their transcription skills (grammatical order, handwriting, and spelling), and their ability to edit themselves through re-reading and revising.

2.1 Research Purpose

This study was guided by the spirit to understand as to where the Saudi university EFL teachers' focus lies in the writing classrooms with the larger purpose of identifying and filling teaching focus gaps to the best benefit of the Saudi EFL learners' writing proficiency improvement.

2.2 Research Questions

The current study strives to answer a fundamental research question:

Which of the prescribed writing parameters do Qassim University EFL instructors focus on?

3. Methodology

In this study, data were collected via a survey carried out to identify university EFL instructors' preferences in writing classrooms across four parameters summarized from ELT research papers published in Google Scholar and ERIC databases. Inclusion criteria were based on keywords search on the two identified databases. Thereafter, a sixteen item practices questionnaire was administered with internal consistency of items coming to 0.72 Cronbach's Alpha after the face validity was adjusted with feedback from three university teachers of EFL. The questionnaire sought responses across the five-point Likert Scale with feedback from Fully Disagree (1) to Fully Agree being quantified (5). All negative items were reverse marked in the analysis. The questionnaire was based upon previous studies already referred to (Google Scholar and ERIC databases).

The participants in this study were 46 EFL teachers at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. The sample was randomly picked from a total of 127 teachers employed at various colleges under the university aegis. The survey was administered via a WhatsApp (WA) invite sent to the teachers who then accessed the questionnaire and reverted over the researcher's email. The sample comprised 19 female and 27 male teachers. But for this, the other demographics were quite homogenous as far as the academic background, experience in teaching, and age of the respondents are concerned, since the researcher had specified the benchmarks on the WA group.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

Data were analyzed using descriptive analysis using SPSS. Percentages and frequencies were employed as recorded in figure 1 below, and the research question approached logically.

The participants in the study focus on any one of the four parameters, to the exclusion of the remaining three. Figure 1 shows the classification of the participants based upon the main thrust in their EFL writing classrooms, i.e., writing approaches, writing performance, writing skills and writing strategies. Of these, writing approaches was the most frequent choice of focus as a quarter (33%) of the participants in the study focused on writing approaches. Furthermore, twenty-eight percent of the participants focused on students' performance in writing skills. Similarly, writing strategies was the focus of 22% of the EFL teachers in the survey. Finally, just 17% of the teachers focused on writing skills.

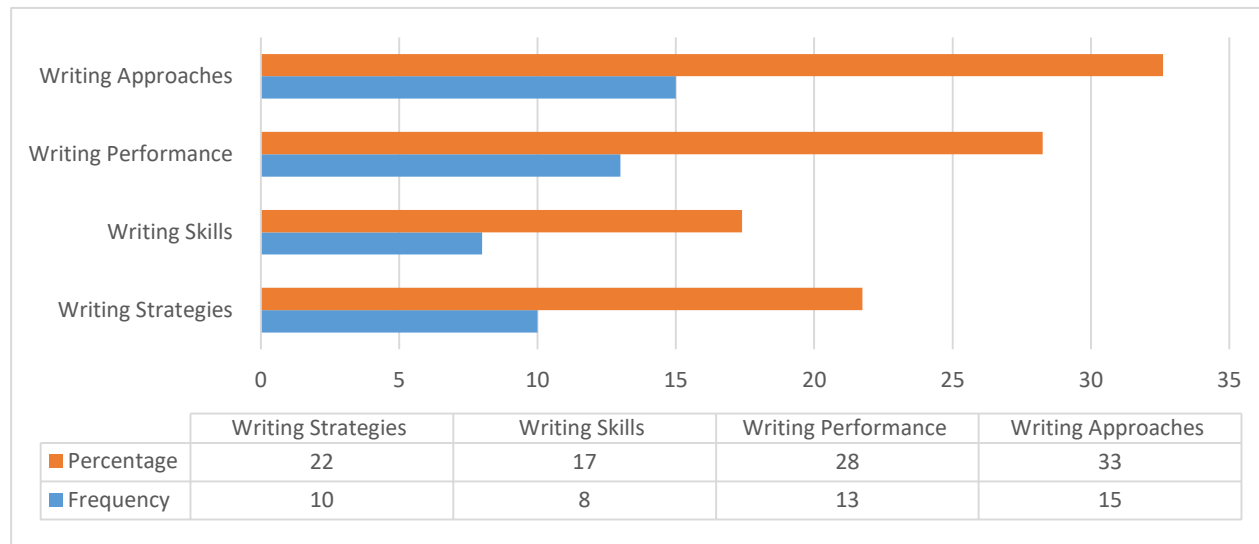


Figure 1. Distribution of the participants based on main thrust in writing classroom

As depicted in figure 1, writing approaches were recorded at the highest frequency (15 out of 46) followed by writing performance, writing strategies, and finally, writing skills, in that order.

5. Discussion

The study at hand explored Saudi EFL instructors' focus on parameters of the writing skills. The study found that Saudi instructors focused on all the four parameters associated with the writing skills differently. The highest focus was given to the writing approaches. This findings showed that there is a gap between the existing theoretical knowledge on the writing skills and its delivery to the students. This findings is in agreement with the contemporary tendency of research to focus on techniques or even approaches for the development of writing (Alkodimi & Al-Ahdal, 2021; Bin-Hady et al, 2020). Bin-Hady et al. (2020) investigated the effect of process-genre approach in developing Yemeni EFL students' ability in opinion essays. The study found significant improvement in the students' writing after ten weeks of intervention using the PGA. In a similar vein, Alkodimi and Al-Ahadal (2021) found that low writing skills among Saudi EFL students were mostly caused by ineffective teaching techniques and a scarcity of resources.

Before and after the writing intervention, prior research has shown that learners' instructional tactics improve by combining fuller writing descriptions that included sensory elements, figurative language, and vivid words (Yaacob & Suriyanti, 2016). In both our personal and professional life, writing plays an important role. It's a system that allows people to communicate with one another in a variety of ways, regardless of the language they use. Writing has taken on a significant role in determining academic achievement in the modern university. As the teaching of writing has evolved from focusing on students' finished products to focusing on the process of writing, feedback has become an important aspect of writing training. Students' competence levels, past learning experiences, expectations, and educational situations all impact the usefulness of written feedback on writing.

Furthermore, performance of students received the second focus in this study. The study reported that more than a quarter of the participants paid attention to students' performance. This finding is strongly related to the other parameters like the teaching approaches. These are often explored together in many studies. According to Ariyanti (2016), cultural differences between students' native tongue and English are the most significant obstacle to their writing's sounding correctly in the English-speaking world.

The study concluded that the third focus of the participants was on the writing strategies. It can be said that the participants' perceptions seem relatively associated. The current study showed that more than one-fifths of the participants viewed the importance of strategies in developing students' writing abilities. Writing strategies have been the area of research of many previous studies. Kaur (2015) found that teachers used pair/group work discussion, illustration and debate explanation in class, analyzing students' writings texts and providing students with their needs in writing. Also, Al-Jarrah (2019) argued for both teaching with and for metacognition as important factors in the

EFL classroom. Finally, Baisov (2021) concluded that guided instruction is critical for developing writing skills because it enables teachers to be aware of how students write a text, particularly their use of self-prompts, the coherence and cohesion of their transcription skills (grammatical order, handwriting, and spelling), and their ability to edit themselves through re-reading and revising.

The area that received the least focus of the EFL instructors in this study was writing skills. This finding established that the majority of instructors does not focus on the nature and importance of developing writing skills and students, consequently, learn little if they only receive theoretical inputs on the same. Instead they ought to be trained in transferring theoretical knowledge into the practical dimension of the skill.

Mohammad and Hazarika, (2016) stated that writing still remains an important component of EFL learners' language education and assessment, and indeed, one that they will need a great deal in their professional roles. Writers cannot deny that writing is a powerful instrument for generating new ideas and consolidating the language system when used for interactive purposes. When ideas are successfully transmitted from one person to another through the medium of text, it serves as a tremendous motivator for students to improve their writing abilities. It was also shown that students become discouraged since writing demands a thorough knowledge of their target language. Toba et al. (2019) came to the same conclusion. The lack of writing practice, writing dislike, anxiety, negative perception, and motivation, insufficient time given in the writing test, and inadequate teaching of the writing process by lecturers are just some of the reasons why students struggle with writing comparison and contrast essays. Teachers need information to support their classroom practice, whereas EFL students need effective writing instruction that deviates from the old method of teaching in which learners relied more on teacher evaluation than peer feedback. Feedback plays a central role in writing development. Thus, it is a key element in language learning.

EFL students are aware that in order to learn the language, they must be skilled in all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In previous studies, it has been shown that the capacity of an EFL student to employ listening and speaking skills is directly linked to the learner's ability to interpret written language and to generate written discourse (Belkhir & Benyelles, 2017; Fageeh, 2011). Teachers and students of English as a foreign language have several challenges while attempting to teach or learn how to write in another language. This includes a command of the language, as well as a thorough understanding of grammatical rules and conventions, so that you can convey your message in the most effective way possible. This is why it is important for writers to have some understanding of how texts work and how they might be used effectively in written communication. Teachers and scholars have worked tirelessly to help these students improve their essay writing skills, yet many EFL students still struggle to meet the standards expected of them in their academic assignments (Belkhir & Benyelles, 2017).

6. Conclusions

The primary finding of this study is that writing approach received the highest focused of Saudi EFL instructors, followed by students' performance and writing strategies. The writing skills parameter got the least focus of the EFL teachers. According to Kurt et al. (2020), writing skills take more time and are more sophisticated than other language abilities to acquire (Al-Ahdal et al., 2014). Additionally, while it is a productive talent, it may be difficult to master and teach. Students who are anxious about writing, who struggle with writing, and who have poor self-efficacy have significant difficulties with the writing process. Writing instruction in the traditional sense is mostly outmoded and simplistic, ignoring learners' higher order thinking abilities. Additionally, learners are confined by issues such as low competence levels and writing regulations, which degrade their writing abilities. As stated by Zhang (2019), as a result of the focus required for writing, it is the most vulnerable ability for language learners. Foreign language learners, on the other hand, need to strengthen their written communication abilities in order to flourish as individuals.

It is evident that language is an important tool in navigating reasonable communication between the speaker and the listener. The learning of English language is extremely beneficial to the English language learners in settings wherein English is a dominant language and acquired as the primary means of communication. However, it does not give the same impact for those learners who came from a non-English speaking country particularly the non-western countries. The present study reported the classroom focus of 46 EFL teachers at Qassim University in Saudi Arabia. Writing approaches were found to be the most focused of all in these classrooms, followed by writing performance and writing strategies, followed by writing skills which was found to attract the least focus of the EFL teachers.

It is noted that as they try to grasp difficulties in writing, teachers develop strategies so that the EFL learners enjoy the learning experience through the shifting of conventional method to technological strategies and interventions. Participants in the survey cited technology integration as a successful strategy for teaching and learning. Technology in the classroom allows students to actively engage and improves their writing skills as well as sociability with other

students.

7. Recommendations

To help students get a better understanding of essential concepts, teachers can adopt a variety of teaching strategies that are most beneficial for their students. Diverse instructional tactics may also aid learners in improving their writing abilities

Writing classrooms in EFL settings need to be more dynamic and multifaceted to engage the learners successfully in the learning process. All four parameters of the writing class should find equal representation to make the learning experience holistic. Curricular and pedagogical changes to ensure this should be the focus of institutions and teachers alike. The majority of available research on teachers' focus in the EFL writing classrooms is theory focused. Findings reached are often assumptions and need deeper reinvestigation. For the true measurement and development of skills like writing, there is a crucial need to embrace action research and evaluate students' performance in their writing production with due consideration of their perceptions or attitudes. Furthermore, a need for exploring students' performance when engaged in varied tasks in the classroom along with face-to-face feedback for their writing production are the need of the hour.

8. Limitations

The current study has some limitations. It depended only on one tool for data collection. Further studies are, therefore, recommended to investigate the four parameters using more than one tool to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Similarly, studies should focus on student-centred learning environments to make such research relevant to the current trends in education philosophy.

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