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**Challenges Libyan college students Face When Learning Writing Skills in  
EFL Context:**

**(A Case Study of English Language learners in a Faculty of Education in  
Gasser Ben Gashir)**

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## Chapter 1 : Introduction

### 1.1. Introduction:

Writing is a form of expression, in addition to its being 'a way of transferring information'. Ever since the realization of the concept of time, our ancestors transcribed what they had witnessed and known as a way to preserve their knowledge and experience. Written manuscripts helped pass on information from one generation to the next (Perin and Graham, 2007:1), thus, writing represents human civilization and the human legacy in the sense that history is written down, and this shows how significant the writing skill is compared to other skills. In the same sense, in the context of learning and teaching a foreign or a second language, there is a necessity to the mastery of the writing skill, for learners to be able to preserve thoughts and communicate ideas in the written form. As opposed to speaking, which can be acquired and is informal in most settings (Harmer, 2014), writing skills require a certain academic and formal level of linguistic competence and knowledge. The aforementioned knowledge is of linguistic elements and the manners of using these elements appropriately. Such elements in their most basic definitions are vocabulary and grammar.

Vocabulary is the flesh of the language and grammar is the skeleton (Harmer, 2007 cited in Suchankova, 2014), both are of equal importance. However, learners' ability to convey meanings using a foreign language relies heavily on what vocabulary they know and how these vocabularies are used, on the other hand, the cohesion, clarity of the text's ideas and its readability are dependent on proper grammar (Husnia, 2021). This presents a challenge to teachers regarding what areas to prioritize when teaching and assessing students' writings. The processes of teaching and assessing students writing intertwine often due to the fact that assessment is an integral part of writing processes whether it was students editing and self assessing or teachers' feedback.

In literature on the writing skill there have been attempts at creating assessment criteria that are inclusive and quantifiable. Writing assessment can be done in a number of ways and research is still taking place in the area of developing assessment scales for the writing skill (Nimehchisalem, 2010). Jacob's et al., (1981) rubric of writing assessment represents a cohesive overview into EFL learners' common errors in their writing. According to Jacob's et al. ESL composition rubric, there are five main areas of errors in EFL learners' writings (1981). These areas are content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. To elaborate on the mentioned elements, content is about how ideas are relevant to the topic, while organization is about assessing clarity of expressed ideas. Vocabulary is regarding correct use of

word form and range of lexis. The last two criteria areas are language use, which focuses on correct grammar, while mechanics is about assessing punctuation, spelling and paragraphing.

Jacob's et al., shows the types of errors expected from students learning how to write. This study investigates the problems that lead to learners making these errors. The current research sampled 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> semester students, which are one semester away from graduation. This will help shed a light on the various difficulties the sample faced throughout their college study when composing in English, and the reasons behind sample's lack of mastery of the aforementioned elements.

### 1.2. Research question:

1- What are the prevalent challenges in learning how to write/compose in English among Libyan EFL college students?

2- What are the causes of the difficulties and challenges faced by the sample when learning how to write?

### 1.3. Objectives of the study

This study will attempt to identify the challenges faced by advanced learners in the faculty of education in GBG when learning writing. The diagnosis of challenging aspects and their causes are the aims of the study.

### 1.4. The significance of the study

The purpose of this study is to identify the challenges and their causes as this could lead to solutions. The significance of the writing skill for EFL faculty learners is undeniable, as well as its level of difficulty and the stress and anxiety it induces in learners (Jawas,2019). Therefore, rigorous investigation needs to take place within the faculty itself and within the university as a whole. It is noteworthy that the teaching/learning of the writing skills at the university level has not been extensively explored. This is not just in Libya, but ELT literature is still attempting to conceptualize and theorize the teaching/learning/assessing of the writing skills for EFL learners (Graham and Perin, 2007). This particular research is done on the hopes that it could guide future studies to build on the results and recommendations, and to add to the published literature on Libyan EFL college level learners.

## Chapter 2: Literature view

### 2.1. Background:

#### 2.1.1 Productive skills and the importance of writing skill

Learning how to speak English indicates that the English language learners have established themselves as members of the community using *the lingua franca*, meaning that they can use the English language communicatively (Richards and Rogers, 2003). Written language, although it is also a means of communication, is more sophisticated as it requires a specific level of knowledge about language (literacy). Literacy is basically the ability to read and write; reading is the ability to decode a text, understand, and voice it, while writing demonstrates the ability to compose and organize the person's own ideas. Spoken language can be acquired while literacy competence needs to be taught and learnt in formal settings (Javed et al., 2013; Perin and Graham, 2007).

The emphasis of the current study is placed on writing as it is more complex and at a higher degree of difficulty than reading and speaking; for EFL learners. Writing is "a difficult and an anxiety filled activity" (Raimes, 1994:164 cited in Frantzi and Melissourgou, 2015), which results in psychological strains and pressure on learners which could raise their effective filter and lower their confidence in the classroom. Writing is one of the most important skills that students are supposed to master during their college study, especially learners specialized in teaching English language. For second or foreign language learners, learning how to write is an indicator of their ability to utilize their linguistic knowledge in academic contexts, which is the ultimate goal of English language teaching programs.

#### 2.1.2. Teaching Writing skill

Teaching writing was not exactly the main point of focus in traditional teaching methods (CLT, Audio-lingual, direct method..) as it had always been the speaking and achievement of fluency that is the aim of English lessons (Richards and Rogers, 2003). However, scholars developed approaches specifically to the teaching of the writing skill which are product oriented method and process oriented approach.

Product oriented is considered the traditional method, it relies on presenting a model for learners to follow, then manipulate elements of lexicon and syntax to produce a parallel text (Kadmiry, 2021). This approach faced resistance as it overlooks the fact that writing is autonomous and learners need to prepare, organize and draft their thoughts to create a unique passage. Another disadvantage of product oriented is that it focuses on the accuracy of sentences and disregards the content (Sun and Feng, 2009). Accuracy of the

end product is indeed important, nonetheless, writing is not only about the final piece presented, but also about what thought process do writers follow to produce an authentic piece.

Process oriented approach was a reaction to the shortcomings of product oriented method; as process oriented approach focuses on what steps do writers take to produce an authentic text. Process approach states the steps writers take to produce the final product (written text for submission). The steps are mainly planning which is the prewriting stage, rehearsing or drafting, finalized draft, editing, submission of final version for teacher's feedback (Manzanares and Gonzales, 2013).

Here assessment is a key step when learning composition because the processes of writing are mainly self-assessment (drafting, editing) and teacher's assessment (feedback) of the final version.

The processes of planning, drafting, editing, final version, and re-editing are all autonomous. However, post submission the teacher assesses the written work of their students and the teacher's assessment helps learners develop their writing by re-editing based on the teacher's feedback. In order for learners to recognize shortcomings in their writing the assessment criteria need to be detailed and clear.

Composing adequate pieces of writing such as essays and research papers can be quite challenging, especially for EFL students (Shukri 2014; Alsied and Ibrahim, 2017). Understandably, before learners master the skill of writing they make several common mistakes such as spelling, grammar (verb tense, word form, prepositions, collocation), punctuation, and vocabulary. The following section discusses challenges faced by EFL learners during the composition of written pieces which lead to learners committing the aforementioned mistakes.

### 2.3. Difficulties faced by EFL students learning writing

Some of the difficulties EFL students face while learning the conventions of writing in English can actually be attributed to several factors. Studies suggest that such factors can be the lack of resources and practice (Bakir 2013; Alsied and Ibrahim, 2017), L1 (native tongue) interference, and faulty spelling systems of the target language where spelling does not correspond to pronunciation (Farroq et al., 2020). According to a study by Javid et al. (2013) the lack of exposure to L2 and lack of practice are factors that hinder the acquisition of the writing skill. Therefore, scholars have emphasized providing the learners with more opportunities to practice their skills in English (cited in Barzanji, 2016). Limited class time, limited numbers of lectures, and large numbers of students within each class can be hypothesized as obstacles that face writing learners.

According to a study by Barzanjin(2016) on Saudi students, the origins of the sample's writing problems were linked to the possibility that EFL settings provided inadequate resources for practicing the target skill. Moreover, L1 interference, social resistance, lack of motivation, the nature of syllabus, traditional restricted approaches of instruction, and rote memorization were all considered as main challenges that EFL learners are faced with when they attempt writing in English, and which prevented them from producing their own writing. This agrees, in part, with the challenges concluded on a study done on Pakistani EFL learners (Farooq et al., 2020) where the researcher cites that L1 interference, teaching approaches, memorization and rote learning are some of the challenges that hinder the development of learners' writing skills. This study intends to explore the difficulties faced by Libyan EFL learners and the results will compare results with the cited studies.

### 2.3.1. Non-native speakers learning to write in English

The level of difficulty of learning writing varies between native speakers who think in the language used, and non-native speakers who think in their own native language. While writing, non-native speakers have to memorize and think of all of the rules they need to apply or use in their writing (Farooq et al, 2020), which are rules that native speakers are expected to have acquired automatically. This is a disadvantage that non-native learners need to overcome prior to composing adequate pieces of writing in English. This in part leads to learners' committing errors due to their L1 interference, different grammar between L1 and L2, insufficient lexicon repertoire.

The following section discusses the particulars of the research and it attempts to compare results with the cited studies above to reach a better comprehension on the causes of the errors made by EFL learners during their writing classes.



## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.1. Methodology of study

The current research is a quantitative study that utilized quantitative data collection methods (questionnaires) to answer the research question. Quantitative research is about testing hypotheses and objective numerical data as it involves quantifying data and applying statistical data collection methods e.g. questionnaires, surveys ( Apuke, 2017).

### 3.2. Data Collection methods

#### **Instruments:**

Two questionnaires were utilized for the purposes of the study:

- 1- The first questionnaire is yes or no set of questions (close ended), which has been adapted from the ESLP 28 Questionnaire: “Self – Assessment of English Writing Skills and use of Writing strategies”. The questionnaire was obtained from the website of Marquette University (appendix 1).
- 2- The second questionnaire is MCQ questions and is adapted from a study conducted by Manzanares and Gonzalez (2013) (appendix 2).

For the purposes of this study, 23 points were adapted from the 1<sup>st</sup> questionnaire about problems that the sample faces during writing in English. The second questionnaire is constituted of (8) points and it aims to measure in which facet of their learning of writing was the most challenging. 5 points were adapted from the questionnaire due to their relevance to the current research, additionally, other points were already cited in the 1<sup>st</sup> questionnaire.

The questionnaires have been referenced in a number of studies (Moheb and Bagheri, 2013; Hussain,20121; Aini et al., 2022) and this serves as a guarantee to their reliability.

### 3.3. Characteristics of participants

Sample size is 45 participants of both genders (12 males and 33 females), ages ranged between 22-23.

### 3.4. Sample and Sampling method

45 students were chosen based on their study level. In the faculty students study for 8 semesters before graduation. Students study writing subjects throughout the 8 semesters. For the 1st four semesters students enroll in writing 1, 2,3,4 subjects respectively. For the final 4 semesters students enroll in academic writing and project writing classes. Therefore, the sample was students who are about to graduate (7th semester) and students in their graduate year (8semester); as they have studied all the writing subjects within the department.

### **3.5. Procedure**

The data was obtained in a single episode of data of collection, 45 students were asked to answer the questionnaires. 5 of the obtained questionnaires were excluded due to unclear answers and unanswered questions. The students were chosen from the seventh and eighth semester from English department in faculty of education GBG. The analysis of the data was done though descriptive analysis using SPSS software.

### **3.6. Limitation**

The researchers are aware that there is a multitude of factors that could influence learners' writing level and acquisition of the skill. However, the researchers chose to frame their research based on other studies done on this area in different contexts. The studies cited have reached a partial consensus (literature review section) on some of the problems that learners face, and it is of interest to the researchers to see if the same issues are faced by the sampled learners. Another limitation is generalizability of results, as the results will only be generalizable to the population of the sample (the Faculty of Education in Gasser Bin Gheshir English learners). However, the results of this research can be compared to results of future studies in the same area to reach a consensus among Libyan researchers on the reoccurring problems facing EFL learners with their writing skills.

## Chapter 4: Results analysis and interpretation

This section discusses students' answers to the questionnaires' items, and the analysis will pinpoint trends and instances of unanimity.

The table (figure 1) shows students' answers to the 1st questionnaire, the ESLP 28 Questionnaire: “Self – Assessment of English Writing Skills and Use of Writing strategies”.

No	ESLP Questionnaire Items	Yes	No	N
1	Do you find difficulties when writing in English?	87%	13%	40
2	Do you write outside the class?	60%	40%	40
3	Do you think teaching writing during four academic years is sufficient to train you in the writing skill?	74%	26%	40
4	I can use appropriate vocabulary and word forms to effectively communicate with the reader.	47%	53%	40
5	I make plans and notes in my native language before writing.	60%	40%	40
6	I use a grammar book to check things I am not sure about before I write.	33%	67%	40
7	I brainstorm and write down ideas before I begin to write.	87%	13%	40

8	I can write an outline to logically organize my ideas before writing.	67%	33%	40
9	I like to write a draft in my native language first and then translate it into English.	60%	40%	40
10	If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	67%	33%	40
11	I go back to my writing to revise the content and make my ideas clearer.	94%	6%	40
12	I pay more attention to the content (e.g., ideas, organization) than the language (spelling, grammar, vocabulary).	60%	40%	40
13	I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English when I am writing.	73%	26%	40
14	I use a dictionary to check things I am not sure about when I write.	94%	7%	40
15	I use a grammar book after I finish writing a draft.	20%	80%	40
16	Do you feel relaxed when expressing your ideas and thoughts in writing?	94%	6%	40
17	Do you think that writing in a comfortable, quiet place can help you to concentrate and manage your ideas?	80%	20%	40
18	I record the types of errors I have made so I do not keep making the same types of errors.	54%	46%	40
19	I discuss my work with my teacher to get feedback on how I can improve it.	87%	13%	40
20	I discuss my work with other students to get feedback on how I can improve it.	60%	40%	40

21	If I do not understand a comment when getting feedback, I ask the person to explain it to me.	74%	26%	40
22	I read the feedback from my previous writing and use this feedback in my next writing	74%	26%	40

Figure (1)

### Discussion of the questionnaire's results (figure 1)

The majority of the sampled students found difficulties when writing in English (87%). However, when asked if writing is a relaxing activity 94% agreed that it is. The majority of the sample students in the final semesters (7th and 8th) agree that 4 years of college study is a sufficient time frame to learn how to write (74%). More than half of the sample recognize their lack of knowledge of using vocabulary and word forms effectively (53%).

**Students' use of writing processes:** the processes are plan, draft, edit, redraft, submit, feedback and use of feedback to improve the writing.

60% of respondents said they plan and take notes before starting to write. 87% of participants agreed to brainstorming their ideas before they start writing. In addition, 60% of sampled students said they write an outline to logically organize their ideas.

The last point shows that learners are more concerned about the content of their writing rather than the accuracy of their writing (grammar and word forms). Coherence of their writing is prominent over other aspects for instance 94% said they use a dictionary to check vocabulary they are not sure about, while 80% said they do not resort to grammar books to learn new rules or check their grammar.

### **Their views on assessment and feedback:**

54% of the sampled students agree that keeping a record of errors helps them avoid making the same errors in the future. When it comes to feedback students seem to value their teachers' feedback (87%) more than their peers' feedback to their writing (60%).

### **L1 interference:**

Although learners say that they plan, take notes, brainstorm, and write an outline to guarantee the coherence of their writing, they do this in their native tongue. This drives us to assume that learners will be bound to make errors due to the literal translation from L1 to L2.

## Discussion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> questionnaire answers

At the start, students were asked to assess what level they thought they are at; 47% answered that they thought their level is average. The following represents their answers to the adapted items of the questionnaire.

Q1) Indicate which of the following four skills is the most difficult one?

(1 most difficult to 4 less difficult)

a- Listening                  b-Speaking                  c- Reading                  d-Writing

When it comes to skills they find difficult to master, the answers show that learners struggle with productive skills (speaking and writing) - 47% answered writing while another 47% answered speaking.

Q2) which of these you find more challenging:

*a- Writing 1    b- writing 2    c-writing 4 (creative)    d- Academic writing?*

53% of the sample find academic writing to be the most difficult subject among writing subjects.

Q3) Do you find difficulties in writing due to your inadequate mastery of:

*a. Vocabulary    b. Grammar    c. Style    d. Content    e. Coherence/ cohesion    f. Punctuation/ spelling?*

47% of the sample find grammar to be the most challenging aspect of language when writing.

Q4) Where do you find difficulties when writing in English? At the level of:

*a. Sentence                  b. Paragraph                  c. Essay?*

87% of the participants state that producing an essay is at a more difficult level than writing sentences and paragraphs.

Q5) Your weaknesses in writing are due to the;

*a. Teachers    b. Lack of practice    d. Lack of motivation in writing    e. Lack of good approach to teaching writing    f. Lack of reading?*

87% of the same sample attributed their weaknesses in writing to their lack of practice.

## Chapter 5 : Discussion of Results and Conclusion

### 5.1. Discussion of results

In the literature review section, it has been established that writing is about what processes learners follow to organize their thoughts and produce a text. The processes of writing are pre-writing (planning), drafting, and editing according to feedback from teachers or peers. Libyan EFL learners follow the processes; however they prepare for their writing and draft in their native tongue before translating their writing into L2. This could lead to problems related to their L1 interference. When it comes to assessment, as assessment is an important step in learning how to write, the sample values their teachers' feedback and prefer it to their peers' correction.

Writing essays is challenging for EFL learners (Shukri, 2014; Alseid and Ibrahim, 2017), and Libyan EFL learners are not an exception. The sampled learners found that writing on an essay level is more challenging than writing paragraphs or sentences.

The most common errors the sample make according to their answers are grammar mistakes and the misuse of word forms and vocabulary.

In addition, the results of this study agree with the previously cited studies (Bakir, 2013; Alseid and Ibrahim, 2017; Farooq et al., 2020; Javid, et al, 2013) on the challenges faced by learners when learning to write. These challenges are lack of practice, lack of exposure to L2, and L1 interference.

### 5.2. Conclusion

To answer the research questions, the most prevalent challenges when EFL Libyan learners attempt to compose in English are incorrect use of grammar and incorrect use vocabulary and word forms. These can be attributed to learners' lack of practice and their lack of exposure to L2, in addition to L1 interference.





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## Appendix1:

### QUESTIONNAIR

**Name**.....

**Gender (female/ male)**

**Age**.....

**Semester**.....

This questionnaire will be used provide the necessary information for the kinds of problems that face students which lead them to commit errors in their writing at faculty of education Gasir Bin Gashir, We would be grateful if you could complete the questionnaire below.

Q1. Check YES or NO for each:

Do you feel relaxed when expressing your ideas and thoughts in writing?	Yes	No
Do you find difficulties when writing in English?	Yes	No
Do you write outside the class?	Yes	No
Do you think teaching written expression during four academic years sufficient to train you in the writing skill?	Yes	No
I brainstorm and write down ideas before I begin to write.	Yes	No
I make plans and notes in my native language before writing.	Yes	No
I use a dictionary to check things I am not sure about before I write.	Yes	No
I use a grammar book to check things I am not sure about before I write.	Yes	No