

Gender Differences in English Writing among Saudi EFL Diploma Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the gender differences regarding the perceived difficulties faced by Saudi university students in English writing in Saudi Arabia. Data was collected through administering surveys to 288 students (143 males and 145 females) and conducting interviews with four teachers (two males and two females). Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics and t-test to examine the gender differences. Qualitative data was analysed through thematic analysis. The results showed that correctly spelling English words is the most challenging assignment, while accurately employing English articles is the least difficult. Most importantly, the findings revealed no significant difference between male and female learners in their perceptions of English writing difficulties at the sentence level. While the student questionnaires revealed that students have moderate difficulty with sentence-level issues when writing in English, the teacher interviews revealed that students have high difficulty with all the sentence-level issues. Additionally, the teachers mentioned that one of the factors contributing to the difficulties students have with their English writing is a lack of practice. The limitations and implications of the current study are presented.

Keywords: EFL, English writing difficulties, gender differences, sentence-level issues

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1. Introduction

Saudi Arabia is a member of the Group of Twenty (G20), which comprises the countries with the largest economies in the world. Also, Saudi Arabia has Vision 2030, which is centred on a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation. Saudi universities and educational institutions are implementing diploma programmes to meet the labour market's needs. An essential requirement in the labour market is for workers to have effective communication skills in written English. Having effective EFL writing skills would help individuals in terms of professional growth and access to employment opportunities worldwide.

Writing is a crucial form of communication that enables language learners to successfully convey their thoughts, ideas, and views in English. Mastering L2 writing abilities allows learners to effectively communicate via written correspondence, including emails, letters, reports, and essays, enabling interaction with English speakers in personal, academic, and professional environments (Hinkle, 2020). As far as EFL diploma students are concerned, written communication is required for professional development. Economic companies in Saudi Arabia favour candidates who have good written communication, enabling them to express their ideas concisely and proficiently.

Generally, each piece of English writing consists of paragraphs. Each paragraph should have a topic sentence that identifies the main idea of the paragraph, supported by details that offer pertinent evidence, examples, or justifications. The paragraph should be organised coherently in terms of maintaining consistency within the paragraph and arranging the sentences logically to ensure the main message is conveyed and understood correctly.

Moreover, sentence-level issues such as grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation would help learners create clear and cohesive sentences, enabling them to successfully express their thoughts and communicate clearly.

However, writing is the last language skill to master. English writing is difficult, even for native speakers. For EFL learners, writing seems to be more difficult and challenging (Cooze, 2017). Learning English is difficult for foreign language learners due to a number of contributing factors, such as the complexity of English grammar, vocabulary acquisition, spelling and pronunciation challenges, cultural differences, writing conventions, limited exposure and practice, and the fear of making mistakes. Do the EFL Saudi learners of English encounter difficulties in English writing?

2. Research Problem

EFL Saudi students encounter difficulties with English writing. Several researchers in the Saudi context agree that students face difficulties in writing and struggle to master it (Al-Seghayer, 2019; Alsalmi, 2022). In the latest published IELTS assessment, which was in 2022, Saudi students were ranked as the lowest performing nationality out of 36 countries in terms of English writing skills. This ranking suggests that Saudi EFL students have major issues with English writing. Despite studying for twelve years, from elementary to secondary school in Saudi Arabia, Saudi students seem to encounter numerous challenges in writing. According to Al-Seghayer (2019), mastering second language writing is the most challenging aspect of language learning for EFL Saudi students. AlTameemy, Daradkeh (2019), and Alsalami (2022) note that Saudi students struggle with composing concise

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sentences, let alone paragraphs and essays. Multiple studies have identified issues in grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation among Saudi EFL students (Al-Seghayer, 2019; Alhaisoni, Al-Zoud, and Gaudel, 2015; Farooqui, 2023). These challenges could be further compounded when considering the variables of gender differences, which may influence language learning strategies, outcomes, and teaching pedagogies.

Based on the university teaching experiences of the researcher of the present study, diploma students face many challenges in English writing at the sentence level. Basic elements of good writing are sentence structure, grammatical correctness, and syntactic complexity (Hinkle, 2020); nonetheless, little is known about the possible differences in these areas between male and female EFL diploma students in Saudi Arabia. Gender disparities in acquiring a second language allow educators to tailor lessons to cater to the needs and preferences of students of both genders (Huang, 2023). Identifying gender-specific obstacles will enable teachers to better assist students facing challenges in specific language acquisition areas (Dinsa, 2023). Interestingly, education is segregated in Saudi Arabia. This may require a specific educational curriculum for each gender. In essence, developing a deeper understanding of sentence-level challenges related to gender might support the development of evaluation instruments, teaching resources, and specific instructional strategies intended to improve the writing abilities of EFL students and cater to the varied linguistic requirements of male and female learners.

3. Research Question

Are there any significant differences between male and female diploma students regarding their difficulties with sentence-level issues when writing in English?

4. Literature Review

4.1 English writing difficulties

It is not unexpected that EFL students have issues with English writing. The Saudi learners of English are not exceptional. For example, Alsalmi (2022) investigated the writing errors of EFL Saudi 122 undergraduate students and found the students have problems distinguishing between active and passive voice and using conjunctions, punctuation, quantifiers, and appropriate auxiliary verbs. Alsalmi claims that students did not obtain sufficient writing skills practice, whether at the pre-university level or after joining the English language departments at the university. Alkodimi & Al-Ahdal (2021) investigated 100 EFL teachers' perceptions of the most problematic area faced by their undergraduate students and perceived that limited lexis, irregular sentences, and orthographical differences with the mother tongue are the most challenging areas. The authors attributed the reasons to inadequate English resources and inefficient teaching methods, which are, in general, the main causes of poor writing skills. Nuruzzaman, M.; Islam, A. B. M.; and Shuchi, I (2018) investigated the writing errors of ninety Saudi non-English major undergraduate students. They found grammar has been observed as the most error-prone area where students commit errors the most. The findings of the above-mentioned recent studies showed that EFL Saudi students have challenges when writing in English. What

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about the differences between EFL male and female students regarding their issues with English writing?

4.2 Gender and EFL writing

Some debate exists regarding whether males or females are better suited for foreign language learning. As is to be expected, different studies yield varying results, and some can be dissected into specific components of language learning at which one gender may excel over the other. Concerning sentence-level issues in English writing, a number of studies have indicated that males are better than females in EFL learning in such areas as language vocabulary (Alonso, 2013), grammar (AlTameemy and Daradkeh, 2019; Faezeh and Asghar, 2013), spelling (Alhaisoni, Al-Zoud, and Gaudel, 2015), and punctuation (Almusharraf and Alotaibi, 2020).

Regarding vocabulary, Alonso (2013) discovered that male EFL secondary school Spanish learners of English outperformed females in receptive vocabulary knowledge. Boys can identify a greater number of word estimations compared to their female counterparts. According to Singh (2008), male speech is characterized by a larger vocabulary and longer words. While male-dominated languages tend to employ longer, more complex sentences, female-dominated languages tend to utilise shorter, more dynamic verbs, nouns, and pronouns interchangeably (Singh, 2008).

A consistent pattern is observed in studies on the proficiency of grammar among EFL learners. Faezeh and Asghar (2013) found that EFL Iranians have difficulties with grammar, although they are advanced learners. They found that male students committed fewer errors with grammar than females. This pattern is consistent with

research by Alahmadi and Lahlali (2019), who discovered that EFL Saudi male students outperformed female students in language learning, exhibiting more precise language use and making fewer mistakes. AlTameemy and Daradkeh (2019) provide additional evidence in favour of this tendency, noting that EFL Saudi male students made fewer errors than females in grammar. AlTameemy and Daradkeh ascribed the explanation to the frequency of exposure to and utilisation of English both within and outside the classroom, as well as the different teachers' methods.

In their 2020 study, Almusharraf and Alotaibi scrutinised the gender gap in EFL Saudi students' writing. To evaluate the students' composition, the study used two approaches: human evaluation and computer-aided error analysis (CEA). The written samples collected from 197 students were used to compile a dataset of 90,753 words. The 98 males and 99 females who participated were all full-time students at a private Saudi Arabian institution, where they were either first- or second-years. The results showed that the male and female students made different types of mistakes. Male students made more mistakes with subject-verb agreement, article/determiner, preposition, spelling, verb form, and word choice than female students did with capitalization, run-on sentences, and sentence fragments. These results imply that male students' English language proficiency is not necessarily superior to that of their female counterparts.

Several studies found females are better than males in learning English. In vocabulary (Bataineh, Al-Hamad and Al-Jamal, 2018), in grammar (Furtina, Fata, and Fitrisia, 2016; Moghimi & Khalaji, 2016), in prepositions (Furtina, Fata, and Fitrisia, 2016), in punctuation (Hamadi and Khalaf, 2020), and in

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spelling (Al-Mahdawi, 2018; Allred, 2015). Regarding vocabulary, Bataineh, Al-Hamad, and Al-Jamal (2021) noted that Jordanian secondary school female students excel over male students in writing vocabulary. The instructions were delivered over WhatsApp. The author claimed that female students excel because they might use the internet for serious academic pursuits and interpersonal interactions, while male students use it more for fun and games.

In 2016, Furtina, Fata, and Fitriasia observed that female students made fewer mistakes than male students in many aspects of grammar such as subject-verb agreements, verb form, singular/plural form, prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns, and articles. They attributed the superiority of females to the language techniques they utilise. The authors claimed that female students are more aware of the importance of language learning and are better prepared to use language learning strategies. They believed that female students might excel in language acquisition owing to variables including greater verbal intelligence, high aptitude, increased motivation, social role modelling, supportive communication, and engagement in activities that include verbal contact. Al-Mahdawi (2018) provided the rationale for the superior linguistic abilities of females compared to males. Females exhibit earlier acquisition of complete phrases and vocabulary compared to males. Females demonstrate superior reading comprehension, articulate speech, and excel over males in spelling and grammar assessments (Al-Mahdawi, 2018).

According to research by Nghi, Thang, and Phuc (2021), Vietnamese female college students have superior proficiency in the use of English prepositions compared to their male peers. One

possible rationale that might support this claim is that, in comparison to male students, female students prefer verbal expression. Because of it, they will see prepositions more frequently in their writing. Compared to men, women are better at learning English via the application of social orientation and oral learning procedures (Nghi, Thang, and Phuc, 2021).

Maulina (2018) claims that females may exhibit higher language development due to the earlier maturity of the left cerebral hemisphere, which is responsible for certain speech processes. Early maturity in females may account for their tendency to begin speaking sooner and their increased participation in English schools compared to boys. Moreover, variations in brain architecture between males and girls might be shaped by unique prenatal hormonal conditions. According to research by Burman, Bitan, and Booth (2008), females' brains showed more overall activity during language learning than boys' brains did. If this is the case, then while learning a new language, females' brains are more actively involved in processing and connecting than boys' brains. However, is there always a difference between males and females regarding their learning of the English language?

Although several studies have identified variations between males and females in EFL learning, some research has shown no significant gender differences in vocabulary (Lee, 2020; Montero-SaizAja, 2021), grammar (Alsalamy, 2022), punctuation and capitalization (Salmani, Farrah, Zahida, and Zaru, 2016), prepositions (Phuc, Thang, and Nghi, 2023), or spelling (AlTameemy and Daradkeh, 2019). However, these studies investigated students' errors in writing samples. What about students' perceptions?

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While gender's effect on language learning has been exhibited thus far in numerous studies as related to students' writing errors, its effect on perceptions may prove even more powerful. Gender has previously been determined to have an effect on perceptions of various components of language learning (Javid, Farooq & Umer, 2013; Hussain, Albeshar, and Farid, 2020; Al-Mekhlafi, 2011; Lloyd's & Bernat, 2007).

As far as the Saudi context is concerned, Javid et al. (2013) administered questionnaires to 108 Saudi male EFL learners and 86 Saudi female EFL learners. The findings revealed no statistically significant differences between EFL male and female Saudi students regarding their English writing difficulties. These findings are supported by the perceptions of teachers, who believe that there are no differences between males and females in their English writing. This is presented in Hussain, Albeshar, and Farid (2020), who investigated the methods used to address errors while teaching English to Saudi students in Saudi Arabia. Interviews were conducted with a small sample of thirty-six male and twenty-four female instructors. The authors found no significant differences between male and female instructors in their appraisal of students' errors, the reasons and methods for correcting those errors, and their understanding of the impact of error correction on students. The authors did not provide a plausible explanation for the absence of any noticeable differentiation.

However, a possible reason for no significant differences between genders in the use of vocabulary is because the students in the same form are exposed to the learning of the same vocabulary throughout their EFL courses (Montero-SaizAja, 2021). It could be because of the same backgrounds, the same curriculum, and similar

teaching methods. Almainan (2022) claims that a possible reason for spelling difficulties, for example, is because many EFL instructors in Saudi Arabia are not familiar with English spelling challenges, which affect both themselves and their students. Some instructors continue to believe that English spelling is not crucial, despite the existing research demonstrating a positive correlation between spelling, reading, and writing.

While teachers believe students have difficulties with writing issues, their teaching strategies could be one of the reasons behind that. This assumption is supported by AlTameemy and Daradkeh (2019), who found significant differences between university male and female students in grammar errors in paragraph writing. Male students favoured female encounters. AlTameemy and Daradkeh (2019) and Aldossary (2024) attributed the reason to the extent of exposure and use of English inside and outside of classrooms and teachers' teaching practices.

These abovementioned studies attributed the English writing problems faced by EFL Saudi students to the teaching methodologies. Many EFL teachers tend to use traditional methods focusing on memorising grammatical rules (Hinkle, 2019) and words in isolated terms (Cooze, 2017) rather than practicing them in different communicative functions (Hyland & Hyland, 2019, 199). It means that having knowledge of grammar and memorising words are not enough to use them meaningfully in different real-life situations.

In summary, the previous reviewed studies were limited in scope due to methodology. Some of them used a single method. Others used a small size. Most of the studies used only error analysis. To date, few studies have examined perceived gender

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differences regarding sentence-level issues in writing. In the Saudi context, to the best researcher's knowledge, no mixed-methods study has been carried out to examine gender differences regarding the perceived challenges in sentence-level issues when writing in English. Such research will advance language educators' understanding of the EFL challenges in mastering sentence-level issues and could lend to more specific pedagogical interventions for L2 writing.

5. Methodology

5.1 Sample

The sample of this study is 288 diploma students (143 males and 145 females). Students were chosen randomly. The participating students study different diplomas such as Accounting, Marketing, Finance and Information Technology. They nearly have the same background. They study the same 34 English hours in their diploma studies.

5.2 Questionnaire validity

The instruments were validated by two experts with PhDs in TESOL who work at a Saudi university. They proceeded to evaluate the questionnaire items based on their content and face validity. Improvements were implemented based on their feedback. Additionally, certain questions and instructions were revised to be more straightforward and easily understood. The researcher carried out a pilot study involving four students to assess the clarity of the question items.

5.3 Data collection procedure

Students were required to complete an online survey via Google Forms, with the guarantee of confidentiality and the use of codes instead of their names in the research. The students were provided with the questionnaire in Arabic to ensure comprehension. A total of 288 students completed it. He also contacted two teachers via email to seek their approval to participate in the interviews and to determine the most suitable time and location for them. They all agreed to be interviewed via phone. An English version of the interview questions was provided.

5.4 Data analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS to analyse the questionnaire descriptively using the percentages for central tendency. The means \pm and standard deviation (SD) were used to describe summary statistics for quantitative data. Also, t-test was used to examine the perceived gender differences of the English writing challenges at the sentence level. The study employed a significance level of 5% for hypothesis testing, which was applied to all statistical tests. Regarding the qualitative data, the interviews were analysed thematically.

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6. Results

Table 1: Frequencies, percentages, mean, and standard deviation for the questionnaire items.

No.	Questions		Very Difficult	Difficult	Moderate	Easy	Very Easy	Mean	Std Deviation	Rank
1	When I write in English, using correct grammar rules in different contexts is...	N	16	49	135	49	39	3.16	1.040	6
		%	5.6%	17%	46.9%	17%	13.5%			
2	When I write in English, using the appropriate words correctly in different contexts is...	N	11	52	127	58	40	3.22	1.022	4
		%	3.8%	18.1%	44.1%	20.1%	13.9%			
3	When I write in English, using the correct verb tenses in different contexts is...	N	16	55	113	62	42	3.20	1.083	5
		%	5.6%	19.1%	39.2%	21.5%	14.6%			
4	When I write in English, using the correct preposition is...	N	12	44	101	78	53	3.40	1.081	3
		%	4.2%	15.3%	35.1%	27.1%	18.4%			

5	When I write in English, using the correct articles (a, an, and the) is...	N	7	28	80	87	86	3.75	1.062	1
		%	2.4%	9.7%	27.8%	30.2%	29.9%			
6	When I write in English, using the correct punctuations such as a comma and a semicolon, is...	N	13	39	91	65	80	3.56	1.161	2
		%	4.5%	13.5%	31.6%	22.6%	27.8%			
7	When I write in English, spelling words correctly is...	N	31	69	96	55	37	2.99	1.175	7
		%	10.8%	24%	33.3%	19.1%	12.8%			
Overall								3.3274	0.87518	

The data presented in Table 1 indicates that the aggregate effect on the participants' perceptions of the English writing challenges was moderately significant (3.3274). The mean ratings for each variable were considered in ascending order. The majority of participants found it easy to use the English articles (a, an, and the) in their writing, with a mean score of 3.75 indicating that they did so. Punctuation and prepositions followed, with mean scores of 3.56 and 3.40, respectively. The use of suitable terminology and verb tenses in different settings is the subject of the fourth and fifth concerns, which received mean scores of (3.22) and (3.20), respectively. However, the most difficult areas observed by

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students while writing in English are correctly using English grammar rules in varied contexts (mean score 3.16) and correctly spelling English words (mean score 2.99). Overall, the results show that correctly spelling English words is the most challenging assignment, while accurately employing English articles is the least difficult.

Table 2: Independent sample t-test. Results on gender and the questionnaire items.

Variables		N	Mean	Std Deviation	Levene's p-value	t	df	p-value
Overall	Male	143	3.2997	0.91698	.300	-0.532	286	0.595
	Female	145	3.3547	0.83420				

Afterwards, an independent t-test was utilised to examine any disparities in the responses of different genders to the overall questions in the questionnaire. Levene's test is used to assess the equality of variances between the male and female groups. The results (Levene's, $p = .300$) provide support for the conclusion that the premise of equal variances is satisfied. The results demonstrate that the p-value (.595) surpasses the 0.05 criterion of significance. Thus, there is no statistically significant difference between the male and female respondents' overall mean scores. Specifically, the mean score for males was 3.2997, while the mean score for females

was 3.3547 (see Table 2 for the nearly identical descriptive data for the two sexes). Essentially, there is no statistically significant difference between the perceptions of males and females regarding English writing challenges at the sentence level.

7. Discussion

The t-test results confirm the general conclusion, indicating that there is no statistically significant disparity in the average difficulty ratings between male and female participants regarding their English writing challenges at the sentence level. Consequently, although people may have different experiences when learning a language, it does not seem that gender is a major factor in determining how difficult it is to grasp certain parts of English writing at the sentence level. These findings indicate that linguistic obstacles are not fundamentally gender-specific, emphasising the need to take into account individual variations and variables such as motivation and anxiety other than gender when addressing language acquisition issues.

Despite the difference between the context of the current study and the other reviewed study, the results of the current study align with previous research that found no gender differences in vocabulary (Lee, 2020; Montero-SaizAja, 2021), grammar (Alsalamy, 2022), punctuation and capitalization (Salmani, Farrah, Zahida, and Zaru, 2016), preposition usage (Phuc, Thang, and Nghi, 2023), and spelling (AlTameemy and Daradkeh, 2019). However, the present study contradicts previous research that claimed one gender to be superior to the other in certain language matters. Examples of these studies are Almusharraf and Alotaibi (2020) and Bataineh, Al-Hamad, and Al-Jamal (2018).

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As mentioned above, the findings of the current study showed that there are no significant differences between female and male students regarding their perceived difficulties with sentence-level issues when writing in English. This could be attributed to a similar educational background and context. Although the classroom is segregated, the students have the same textbooks and the same policy. This explanation aligns with Montero-SaizAja's (2021) findings, which indicate that there are no significant gender disparities in vocabulary usage because students are in the same form and spend their entire EFL education acquiring the same vocabulary.

Also, all the interviewed teachers in the current study indicated that they follow the same model for formative and summative assessment of language skills. This finding aligns with the research conducted by Al-Seghayer (2019), who highlights that teachers adhere to the regulations set by the Saudi Ministry of Education. Teachers should adhere to the policy set by the Ministry of Education. Therefore, teachers cannot be held accountable for this situation, as they are obligated to adhere to the regulations set by the Ministry. So, in this study, both male and female students are taught the same textbooks, and their language skills are assessed in the same way. Thus, it is no surprise that there are no significant differences between genders in their perceived English writing difficulties at the sentence level.

It should be noted that there is a discrepancy between the perceptions of the participating students and the interviewed teachers regarding the difficulties encountered by the students in their English writing. All the interviewed teachers perceived that their students often face difficulties when writing in English. They

attributed the reason to the lack of practice. For example, it seems spelling is ignored, and the students rarely practice spelling the target words. Teacher 2 mentioned, “We don’t focus on spelling because the textbook does not, and we have no time for that.”. It is possible that this lack of awareness of spelling is because all examinations are multiple-choice, necessitating students to select the correct answer. Consequently, there is no necessity to engage in spelling practice. Also, all the interviewed teachers in the current study attributed the lack of practice to the fact that the classroom is crowded. Teacher 4 indicated that “we have many students and a short time, so we cannot give feedback. It is hard to follow every student and give feedback.”.

According to the teachers who participated in the interview, students hardly ever practice English writing. However, the results of the students’ questionnaire show moderate perceived difficulty with sentence-level issues in writing. The students may believe that some issues are easy or of average difficulty, but in reality, they could be different. This is supported by teacher 1, who indicated that “students have many problems with writing.”. Teacher 3 added, “Students always have challenges, especially in grammar and word choice.”. A possible explanation for the contradiction between perceptions of the students and teachers regarding the difficulties faced by EFL Saudi students when writing in English is that students may have real problems in writing, but they perceive they don’t. This is why having writing samples was necessary to compare their perceptions to their real writings.

8. Implications of the study

The results of this study may assist foreign language educators in understanding the complexity of the factors related to

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L2 writing. Considering the most problematic areas, such as spelling, syllabus designers and material developers can prepare systematic syllabuses and provide remedial material for learners. Lack of practice seems to be the main reason behind the perceived challenges faced by students in their English writing, so policymakers need to specify time for giving students the chance to practice spelling; also, teachers need to provide alternative ways to encourage students to practice spelling outside the classroom. For example, teachers may encourage students to play games online to practice spelling. They can also increase the employment of group work and pair work to help students practice writing and give feedback to each other. Teachers need to manage class time so that they can provide male and female learners with appropriate assistance to facilitate learning. Another implication of the current study is that finding no significant differences between EFL Saudi males and females in their English writing challenges would raise a question: what other factors affect learning English generally and writing skills specifically? Are they affective factors, such as motivation and anxiety, or cognitive ones, such as language learning strategies? Therefore, researchers, policymakers, curriculum designers, and teachers need to investigate other factors that are relevant to students' challenges in learning the English language.

9. Limitations of the study

Several limitations of the study should be considered in future investigations. To begin with, the scope of this research was restricted to diploma students, thereby constraining the generalizability of the findings. Further research could incorporate participants with varying levels of proficiency in order to validate

the results. Second, the study was limited to students' perceptions of difficulties in English writing; it would be intriguing to examine and compare their actual writing with these perceptions. Lastly, the study was limited to sentence-level concerns; a more comprehensive examination of paragraph-level concerns would have been more fruitful. Further research could employ more exhaustive evaluations to gauge proficiency in written English.

Appendix A: Student questionnaire

N o.	Questions	Very Difficult	Diffi cult	Mode rate	Ea sy	Very Easy
1	When I write in English, using correct grammar rules in different contexts is...					
2	When I write in English, using the appropriate words correctly in different contexts is...					
3	When I write in English, using the correct verb tenses in different contexts is...					
4	When I write in English, using the correct preposition is...					

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5	When I write in English, using the correct articles (a, an, and the) is...					
6	When I write in English, using the correct punctuations such as a comma and a semicolon, is...					
7	When I write in English, spelling words correctly is...					

Appendix B: Teacher interview questions

Do you think your students have challenges with English writing at the sentence level? why/why not?

Do you believe that there are any differences between genders regarding their English writing challenges? why/why not?

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