هيئة تَحرير المجلة

Contextual factors affecting university students' English writing performance: A comparative study

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Abstract

The current study aimed at investigating the contextual factors affecting university Saudi students' writing performance in different teaching/learning contexts, diagnosing writing difficulties from their own perceptions and reflections, ensuring real existence of those difficulties, and then providing suggested practical solutions. The instruments of the study were (1) a questionnaire for identifying the writing difficulties related to cognitive, linguistic, situational, social, and psychological factors, and (2) a writing performance test for ensuring whether the writing difficulties are reflected in their real performance. Having applied the study instruments to two groups: six Preparatory Year Students at AlBaha University (PYSBU) and six Language Center Saudi Students at Illinois University (LCSSIU), the data were collected and treated statistically. The results revealed that PYSBU exhibited writing difficulties/problems due to the lack of being exposed to the target language in its homeland, to the contrary of the LCSSIU who feel at ease and perform well in writing classes. Also, there is a positive correlation between the study groups' perceptions about the contextual factors in writing classes and their writing performance. The study provided some practical recommendations and some suggestions for further research.

Keywords: contextual factors, Saudi university students, English writing performance

Introduction

Writing is not a natural skill, but an acquired one. It is a physical and mental act. It is also a process of thinking that takes time and effort. Besides, it is usually practiced and learned via being exposed to a set of processes involving finding ideas, caring about mechanics of writing and composing sentences and short texts. As the time goes on, writing skills involve using writing in different modes of discourse: descriptive, narrative, expository and argumentative. The act of finding ideas and composing in such modes and some other factors may constitute a difficulty for ESL learners, especially in academic contexts at the university level. University students- like other ESL learners all over the world are required to pay much effort and do much practice to compose, develop and analyze ideas only if appropriate contexts are there. They are also required to write accurate proficient English on research topics of different areas. Proficient teachers, writing workshops, new teaching approaches and strategies, academic communities, various educational and instructional tools – side by side with ESL awareness raising – can even do little in ESL learners' target language acquisition while being in their native homeland. Those learners will still suffer from some difficulties in case they are away from the target real environment.

Some researchers (e.g., Ahmed, 2010; Al-Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2014, Castro, 2004; Chen, 1994; Fareed et al., 2016; Lee, 2003; Myles, 2002; Nik, Hamza, and Rafidee (2010a); Nik, Sani, Wan Clik, Jusoff, Hasbollah (2010b); Sajid & Siddfiqui, 2015) reported factors affecting ESL learners' language acquisition in general and writing skills in particular. Nik et al, (2010a) put writing skill in focus for university students. They emphasize that good academic writing fulfills three objectives: (1) strengthening vocabulary, idioms, and grammar, (2) reflecting on what has been learnt and how it causes further effects, and (3) developing different language

skills for communicating meanings and messages to others in a good way. Therefore, those objectives cannot be well accomplished without "hard work" as Emmons (2003) believes. This is because writing necessitates many skills beginning with writing readiness passing by mastery of vocabulary, grammatical structures, idioms, mechanics of writing, and ending by writing proficiently and effectively.

I. Literature Review
A. Writing Performance

For many students, be they native English speakers or EFL learners, writing seems to be the hardest language skill to practice and consequently to master since it requires thought and organization, (Kelly, 1999). Writing – according to Badrawy (1994), entails conscious mental effort involving the communication of a message to a reader who is not to present and sometimes unknown to the writer. In a similar stream of thought, but in some detail, Cortazzi (2007) specifies some difficulties writers face: (1) writing takes time to plan, review and revise, (2) it is generally read and reread many times since it is a permanent graphic message form, (3) it is not shared immediately after it has been produced, (4) it tends to be formal, the case that makes writers more aware of how to be more accurate and concise, and (5) it tends to have a wider variety of words that needs a knowledgeable writer to offer.

In their study, Nik et al. (2010a) concluded that exposure to English language improved the Diploma students' writing performance as well as their writing proficiency. This view seems to go in parallel with Hedge's (1990) belief that " extensive reading and exposure to the language can help improve students' writing performance"(p. 110).

B. Contextual factors affecting English writing

Researchers see factors affecting writing performance from different perspectives. Nik et al. (2010a), – for example –, tackled demographic factors that are only related to gender and qualifications. They found that females outperformed males in all the criteria of the ESL Composition Profile including vocabulary, content organization, mechanics and language use. They also found that English language qualification is not enough for appropriate and effective writing performance.

In terms of the contextual factors affecting university students' writing performance, a number of researchers (e.g., Afrin, 2016; Ahmed, 2010; Al-Nasser, 2015; Fareh, 2010; Khairy, 2013; Myles, 2002; Rahman, 2013; Sultan, 2003) surveyed and examined some of those factors. For example, students find difficulty in cognitive aspects such as finding the appropriate vocabulary, organizing ideas and using grammar structures (Efrin, 2016). Al-Murshidi (2014) reported the students' problem of not reading in the topic before they write on it. Al Fadda (2013), Abdulkarim (2013), and Bacha (2012) stressed the social and situational factors that might constitute difficulty in writing, while Casanave & Hubbard (1992) put different modes of discourse in focus.

One important aspect that is clearly related to the situational factors is what Wilson-Strydom (2010) calls " traversing the chasm". It means that the gap existing is due to the transition from school to university. In school life, students are tied to a specific educational teacher-centered system, rote learning is prevailing, studying for exam to get high scores is the ultimate goal, and nearly all classroom actions and interactions are prescribed and stereotyped. Therefore, they show low level of English language proficiency though English is one of the core courses at the intermediate and secondary stages . While in the university life, English is a medium of instruction in many colleges and a means of communication. There, students are

asked to meet specific requirements where higher order thinking skills are demanded, classes are student-centered, and there is a room for developing language skills as well as study skills. Moreover, language activities and assignments are always reasoned.

Teaching writing skills in Saudi Arabia – like in many other developing countries e.g., Oman, Yemen, Pakistan and Egypt – is not an exception. There is a gap between what happens in the school life and that in the university life as for teaching ESL. This view is supported by many researchers (e.g., Ahmed, 2010; Al-Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2014; Fareed et al., 2016; Gonye et al., 2012; Haider, 2012; Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007; Pinetch, 2013; Rico, 2014; Sajid & Siddiqui, 2015). Due to such a gap, writing is one of the most neglected skills in both Saudi schools and Saudi universities, although controlled writing and guided writing are dominant in intermediate and secondary schools while free writing is supposed to be practiced in university classes. Although Saudi universities devote a preparation year to some specializations in some colleges in order to bridge the gap referred to before, there are still some problems. Teaching approaches, methods and techniques that are used for language learners cannot solve language problems including writing.

Another situational aspect that is to be considered is the multicultural teaching – where a variety of non- native university teachers are recruited to teach English courses in Saudi universities. They – hopefully – expect their students to show an advanced level in writing, but their expectations always vanish.

C. Recent research on factors affecting writing performance

Mohammad (2010) conducted a study investigating the effect of electronic portfolios on student teachers' writing performance, reflective thinking and writing apprehension. Having developed

two writing performance tests, a reflective thinking test and a writing apprehension scale, 30 EFL student teachers participated in the study in two groups (the control group , n=15, followed the regular way of teaching, while the experimental group, n=15, was exposed to e-portfolios using digital essays for 3 months). The data collected were treated statistically and the results revealed that the use of e-portfolios had a significant effect on improving EFL student teachers' writing performance and reflective thinking, but could not reduce their writing apprehension.

The aim of El-Sakka's (2011) study was to examine the effect of a proposed program based on blended process writing approach with web logs to develop EFL prospective teachers' writing performance and critical reading. 50 participants constituted the sample of her study (Control=25, Experimental=25). Two instruments were developed in order to achieve the aim of the study: a writing performance test and a critical reading test. The web-logged process writing program (WBWP) constituted the material of the study. Having finished the pretests, the intervention and the posttests, data were collected and then statistically processed. The results showed significant differences between the pre and posttests of writing performance of both control and experimental groups, while no significant differences between the pre and the post tests of critical reading of both groups. The researcher concluded her study that the WBWP had high effect on writing performance and no correlation existed between writing performance and critical reading.

Departing from the premise that second language learners face cognitive and social challenges in second language acquisition, Myles (2002) explored the relationship between writing errors and theories of the writing process. She focused on how language proficiency and language competence are affected by teaching strategy and linguistic development of the learners. In addition.

she stressed the writing process as a pedagogical tool in order to help ESL learners overcome their writing difficulties and handle their errors constructively.

The main purpose of Ahmed's (2010) study was to investigate the difficulties the university Egyptian students face in essay writing. He delimited his study to socio-political and socio-cultural challenges. Three study instruments were used to collect data. The results of the study revealed that the participants had difficulties in writing as a process such as planning, composing, revising, cohesion, coherence, and mechanics. On the other hand, negligence of students' voice in writing, stereotyped topics and clichés and lack of competitive writing environment that negatively affected the participants' writing development were main results also shown in the Egyptian context.

Nik et al. (2010a) had a research paper aiming at investigating the actual writing performance and the perceptions that the undergraduates in the university of Technology Mara, Terengganu, Malaysia have about good writing skills. The researchers who were writing lectures compared the Diploma Programme students with the Matriculation students. Although the Diploma students outperformed the Matriculation students in content, vocabulary, organization, language use and mechanics, they were all still in need to improve their language use. The findings of the study revealed that all the participant ESL students need to learn the syntactic structure, the idioms of the new language, have time and opportunity and care to practice that language lessening the interference of the mother tongue in learning the target language.

Nik et al. (2010b) administered a comparative study on the factors affecting the writing performance of the ESL undergraduates in the Diploma Program. In order to ensure how extensive exposure to the target language positively affect that language acquisition, the researchers compared the Diploma Program students who had had been exposed to literacy skills for

more tears than the Matriculation students. The results revealed that although writing skills are difficult and demanding, the frequent exposure to reading and writing in the target language improved the writing performance freely and fluently.

Tuzlukova and Al Seyabi (2014) examined the gaps existing in EFL teaching and learning between Omani secondary schools and three Omani universities. The gaps revolved around the problems that EFL secondary school students (n=1114) and university students (n=317) encounter in writing as well as the strategies followed to tackle those problems. The participants of the study were drawn from three post-basic education of different educational directorates (Muscat, Batinah South, Dhakeleya) and three different foundation programs of different Omani universities (Sultan Qaboos University, Sohar University Nizwa University). Data were collected by a questionnaire administered to both sectors of the study sample. Results revealed that Omani school and university students have difficulties in the cognitive aspect related to lexis and vocabulary, i.e., they have problems in brain storming to get the right ideas for the topic assigned as well as organizing them in a cohesive way. As for the study participants' perceptions about the strategies used to overcome the problems faced, school students delimited themselves to grammatical structures whereas the university students focused on brain storming as a writing strategy to develop their writing performance. The study recommended that much more focus should be on how to get ideas and how to develop them, how to find and use the appropriate vocabulary in an appropriate way critically and creatively.

In another, Sajid and Siddiqui's (2015) to identify the causes of Pakistani EFL post graduates' lack of academic writing skills, to identify the negative effects of those causes on their academic/educational performance, and to suggest some remedies for the linguistic problems that they encounter. Data were collected from error analysis of diction and expression in

different texts of different genres produced by novice post graduate writers in Pakistan. The study recommended that English language courses should be tailored to match the EAP curriculum, written texts by English native speakers should be assigned to the Pakistani students to identify how the target language is written in its homeland , and content-based and task-based academic writing should be highly focused in order to increase students' motivation and attitude towards learning English in general, and writing in English in particular.

Fareed et al. (2016) conducted a study aiming at examining the problems that the Pakistani undergraduates face in English writing skills, the surrounding factors that affect those students' writing skills and then proposing practical solutions for those problems. Focus group interviews as well as thematic analysis constituted the study instruments. The participants of the study (11 students and 10 teachers) were interviewed four times, while writing samples of 30 undergraduates were analyzed. Having collected and analyzed data, the study results revealed that the participants had lack of ideas, cohesion and coherence, vocabulary, syntax and grammar. Besides, L1 influence, repetition of ideas and some minor problems were also revealed. The results also uncovered some factors that negatively affect writing skills: little importance paid to writing, lack of writing motivation, the examination system that ignores critical and analytical thinking and creative writing, writing anxiety, ineffective teaching strategies , the divorce between receptive an d productive skills represented by writing, lack of writing practice , lack of ideas and concentration. Some potential factors were also revealed: large classes and threatening learning contexts. In light of the problems and factors aforementioned, the researchers provided some suggestions that might improve the writing skills of the Pakistani undergraduates. Among them are: enriching vocabulary via much reading, giving more opportunities for practicing writing, intensive continual writing

practice, employing trained writing teachers, and holding writing competitions.

Younes and AlBalwi (2015) conducted a study exploring the writing problems that English and Translation major sophomore female students at Tabuk University face. The study participants were forty females enrolled in a writing course who were provided a questionnaire in order to determine the most common writing problems , and a written interview in order to provide suggestions for overcoming their weaknesses in writing skills. The results showed that the main problems in writing were in grammar, punctuation and spelling for which the study provided some recommendations: increasing writing time, handling writing anxiety in a positive, nonthreatening atmosphere, and a positive feedback and guidance.

AlBadi (2015) explored the writing problems facing the multinational ESL learners in an Australian university. They were postgraduates enrolled in a Graduate Course in TEFL (n=20). They were given two questionnaires (Q1 closed-ended + Q2 open-ended). The main writing difficulties revealed were: (1) lack of linguistic knowledge, coherence and cohesion,(2) difficulty in finding significant topics and relevant references, (3) lack of self confidence in expressing one's own voice , (4) difficulty in paraphrasing, referencing and citations. The study recommend that student writing needs to be analyzed , and writing difficulties should be diagnosed, highlighting the importance of the writing process, introducing effective writing strategies assisting students how to find relevant references, how to use in text citations, and how to paraphrase others' ideas.

Afrin (2016) conducted a study on 89 non-English majors at Stanford University in Bangladesh aiming at identifying the writing problems they face. The study participants were of different specializations who have completed two courses namely English Fundamentals and English Composition. The instruments of the study were document collection that depended

on analyzing writing samples of the participants, a questionnaire for identifying those participants' attitudes towards writing, their writing problems, their opinions and how their writing motivation can be increased. A semi-structured interview was conducted on 12 teachers in order to identify their perceptions on their students' writing problems. The main findings were related to vocabulary, grammar, mechanics of writing organizing ideas, cohesion and coherence. The study ended by a group of suggestions that can be easily put into practice. Among them are: more opportunities should be devoted for writing practice, teaching strategies should consider writing as a process as well as a product, enriching the target language vocabulary via the effective use of mono lingual dictionaries of that target language, and providing positive, constructive feedback in writing classes.

II.   Method
A. Rationale of the study

Since academic writing is a critical component in the university learning process, English writing performance becomes a requirement that both university teachers and learners should consider. Teachers have a burden to bear in investigating contextual factors affecting their students' writing performance, diagnosing writing difficulties, and then providing their students with the required knowledge and skills before starting a new academic specialization.

B. Delimitations of the study
The current study was delimited to:
- Six female students from the preparatory year at AlBaha University, Saudi Arabia, and six other female students studying at the Center for English as a second Language at Southern Illinois, USA.

- Academic writing as a main feature of university learning process in general and an integral part of English learning process in particular.
- Five contextual factors that might affect English writing performance, namely: cognitive, linguistic, situational, social, and psychological.

C. Questions of the study

1. What are the contextual factors affecting English writing performance as perceived by the preparatory year students at AlBaha University (PYSBU) ?
2. How far do the PYSBU's reflections on contextual factors match their actual English performance?
3. What are the contextual factors affecting English writing performance as perceived by Language Center Saudi Students at Illinois University (LCSSIU)?
4. How far do the LCSSIU's reflections on contextual factors match their actual English performance?
5. How can writing performance deficiency discovered be remedied?

D. Study participants

The study participants consisted of 6 female students (3 randomly drawn from College of Education, and other 3 ones were also randomly drawn from College of Medicine) enrolled in the preparatory year at AlBaha University, Saudi Arabia, and 6 other female ones studying at level one in the Center for English as a second Language at Southern Illinois, Carbondale, Illinois, USA. The whole number of the participants was 12.

E. Data collection

Data were collected from two sources:

1. Contextual Factors Affecting Writing Performance Questionnaire. It was first consisted of 66 statements representing 5 main dimensions: Cognitive= 12 items, Social= 7 items, Psychological = 7 items, Situational = 22 items, and Linguistic = 18 items, (Appendix A). It was forwarded to a jury in the field of Applied Linguistics for validation who recommended that the same dimensions should be represented but in a new sequence, besides the number of items should be lessened in number to be 25 ones, 5 for each dimension. Both groups of the study were to respond to this questionnaire in order to identify their perceptions and reflections as for the factors affecting their writing performance, and whether those reflections are really reflected in their actual writing performance.

2. Writing Performance Test. Its objective was to assess the writing skills of both groups of the study. It reads: Write an essay of about 600 words about: Life in Saudi Arabia versus life in America. Though the topic seems easy and conventional or even stereotyped, students might use different modes of discourse in isolation or in combination: expository, narrative, descriptive and argumentative. Both Saudi students who are at Al-Baha University and those who have admitted to Illinois University must have the repertoire and the words to talk about the topic assigned to them.

F. Procedures

Having validated the instruments of the study, the researcher applied the questionnaire and the writing test to six female students studying at the College of Medicine and enrolled in the preparatory year at AlBaha University, Saudi

Arabia. Then, he travelled to the USA where he could meet six female Saudi students studying at level one in the Center for English as a second Language at Southern Illinois, Carbondale, Illinois, USA. There, the researcher had a semi-structured interview with the Saudi candidates and explained his study objectives, and then he applied the questionnaire and the test to them. The appropriate way – as the researcher thinks – was to get the weighted means of the agreement level on the items provided in each dimension. Each participant had to respond to only one option, where Very untrue of me=1, Untrue of me=2, Neutral=3, True of me=4, Very true of me=5. The data of both questionnaires were collected and treated statistically using qualitative comparative analysis.

As for the writing test, the participants in both groups had to write the essay assigned in an hour and a half. Their writings were assessed according to a rubric of four aspects: purpose (comprehending the topic assigned and covering its main points), structure (providing clear structure for the essay having an introduction, a body of three paragraphs at least, and a conclusion), research (providing proper evidenced information and correct referenced sources in good paraphrasing and synthesis) and sentences (writing a range of grammatically and semantically correct sentences in good spelling). Each aspect had to be assessed out of 5 scores to total 20 scores for the whole test.

III.   Results & Discussion

Having collected the data from the two sources, the questionnaire and the writing test, the researcher analyzed them statistically using the weighted means and correlation. Table 1 shows the comparison between the PYSBU and LCSSIU.

Table 1. Weighted Means of the Contextual Factors Affecting Writing Performance of PYSBU and LCSSIU*

No	Statements	DD	Weighted Means	
			PYSBU	LCSSIU
1	The writing topics are not novel, but stereotyped.	Cognitive (5 items)	4.66	1.33
2	We write on topics that we haven't spoken about.		4.33	1.66
3	We find difficulty to collect ideas.		4.50	2.33
4	When I find ideas, I lack words and phrases relevant to the topic.		4.33	2.00
5	We are used to receiving guiding words.		4.16	1.66
Mean of total weighted means of the cognitive factors			**4.39**	**1.79**
6	My intellectual and linguistic skills hinder me to improve my writing.	Linguistic (5items)	4.50	2.00
7	We are accustomed to one or two types of writing.		2.83	1.50
8	We lack the ability of organizing ideas.		3.50	1.66
9	We cannot use different types of sentences.		3.83	1.50
10	We are asked to present our writing once without drafting or revising.		4.16	1.00
Mean of total weighted means of the linguistic factors			**3.67**	**1.28**
11	We download articles from the internet instead of practicing writing.	Situational (5items)	4.16	1.50
12	There is not enough time devoted for practicing writing.		3.83	1.33
13	We are only taught to write for exams.		4.66	1.50
14	Writing does not receive the instructor's care.		4.66	1.33
15	We resort to our mother tongue to express our ideas when failing to communicate graphically in the target language.		4.16	1.66

No	Statements	DD	Weighted Means	
			PYSBU	LCSSIU
Mean of total weighted means of the situational factors			4.29	1.46
16	We are not encouraged for thought expression.	Social (5 items)	3.83	2.00
17	The instructor does not give enough time for writing.		3.83	1.50
18	I fear of having my ideas stolen by mates.		3.83	2.16
19	We are forced to write on certain topics of the English instructor's choice.		4.50	1.16
20	We are not allowed to express our opinions freely.		4.50	1.33
Mean of total weighted means of the social factors			4.09	1.63
21	I lack motivation for writing.	Psychological (5items)	4.33	1.56
22	Reading for widening our scope of knowledge is not encouraged.		4.50	2.33
23	I am afraid of making mistakes.		3.16	1.33
24	I lack self-confidence in my writing skills.		4.50	1.50
25	I have fear of frustration when failing writing.		4.33	1.66
Mean of total weighted means of the psychological factors			4.16	1.66
Total weighted means			4.13	1.64

Notes:

- PYSBU = Preparatory Year Students at AlBaha University
- LCSSIU = Language Center Saudi Students at Illinois University
- DD= Difficulty Dimension

As table 1 shows, the cognitive factors were perceived to be the most common ones constituting difficulties/problems in writing classes for the PYSBU, since the weighted means of those difficulties ranged from 3.67 to 4.39, while such factors do not constitute difficulties/ problems for LCSSIU   as for having novel writing topics, not stereotyped ones. And since they write on topics that they have spoken bout, they find no difficulty to collect ideas. Once happened, they find words and phrases to express the ideas collected with no need for guiding words. On the other hand, PYSBU are seen to encounter cognitive factors that passively affect their writing performance. They reported that the writing topics are not novel, but stereotyped. Writing on new topics is not preceded by speaking on those topics. Therefore, collecting ideas and finding words to express the ideas will be a difficulty. Such a result may be due to the opportunity given in the teaching/learning context helping ESL learners cognitively to improve their writing performance.

As for the linguistic factors, the PYSBU responses show that their intellectual and linguistic skills do not improve their writing. This is because they are accustomed to using one or two types of writing, lacking organizing ideas and delimiting to specific sentences. Having done this, they are deprived of having their writing revised. LCSSIU seem to be more fortunate for being in a native speaking country and lively exposed to the target language authentically. Their intellectual and linguistic skills, therefore, help them to improve their writing. Variety of modes of discourse   provide them with an opportunity to organize ideas and variate types of sentences. Moreover, revising their writings has an effective role in writing correct English. This view is supported by some studies (e.g., Al-Shumaimeri, 2003; Bach, 2002; Chou, 2011 ; Tang & Tithecott, 1999).

Analysis of PYSBU students' responses on situational factors (WM = 4.29) stresses that the prevailing trend of teaching in developing writing – including Saudi Arabia – is for exams. It,

therefore, does not receive its due care and time from the part of writing teachers. What ESL students can do is to resort to Arabic, their mother tongue – in order to finish their writing task or to the internet in order to download articles on the topic assigned to them. While in an English native speaking context, the situation is different. ESL learners – LCSSIU in our case (WM = 1.46) - are not in need to download articles from the internet since their teachers devote enough time for them to practice writing , and learning the target language is the ultimate goal regardless of the final exams. And due to the teacher's care about writing classes, students are not forced to use their mother tongue but are intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to use the target language. Such a result is supported by many studies (e.g., Al-Nasser, 2015; Bacha, 2002; Ismail, 1991; Khan, 2011; Nik et al., 2010a; Rahman, 2009).

Another more serious concern for the PYSBU students is the social factors (WM = 4.33) reflected in their inability to think and air their opinions freely, but they are forced to write on certain topics. Even when they get new ideas, they fear of having them stolen by their mates stressing that the ideas of writing for exams are prevailing. As the LCSSIU students are living and receiving language training in an English speaking country, they do not seem to have clichés, and that free thought expression might not be a problem, and personal ideas are for all (WM = 1.63). This means that the better the social impact of writing teachers, the better the writing performance of their students, (Al-Murshidi, 2014).

As for the psychological factors when examining the weighted means of PYSBU (WM = 4.03) and LCSSIU (WM = 1.63) students, it is clear that the PYSBU ones lack motivation for writing because only stereotyped topics are assigned for exams, the time and the instructor's care about and encouragement for writing are not there. Consequently, fear of frustration exists due to failing writing. The other side of the picture seems optimistic

where LCSSIU students' perceptions and reflections as for psychological factors affecting their writing performance are positive. Students seem to be at ease when practicing writing in a safe, non-threatening atmosphere, the matter that helps them to have self-confidence to attain their goals.

One of the aims of the study was to try to investigate whether or not there is some sort of alignment between the study participants' reflections on the contextual factors in their ESL classes and their actual writing performance. In order to meet that aim, the researcher treated the scores of the writing performance test of both groups statistically. Table 2 and Table 3 show the results.

Table 2. Correlation between the contextual factors questionnaire and the writing performance of PYSBU

		Cognitive	Linguistic	Situational	Social	Psycho.	Total
Purpose	Corr	.851	.712	.000	-.581	.706	.490
	Sig	.032	.112	1.000	.226	.117	.324
	N	6	6	6	6	6	6
Structure	Corr	-.436	-.183	-.333	.626	-.671	-.223
	Sig	.387	.729	.519	.184	.145	.672
	N	6	6	6	6	6	6
Research	Corr	.231	.194	-.354	-.443	-.079	-.112
	Sig	.659	.713	.492	.379	.882	.832
	N	6	6	6	6	6	6
Sentences	Corr	-.463	-.581	-.707	.032	-.316	-.551
	Sig	.355	.227	.116	.953	.541	.257
	N	6	6	6	6	6	6
Total	Corr	.159	.066	-.728	-.282	-.027	-.177
	Sig	.764	.901	.101	.588	.959	.737
	N	6	6	6	6	6	6

Table 3 . Correlation between the contextual factors questionnaire and the writing performance of LCSSIU

			Cognitive	Linguistic	Situational	Social	Psycho	Total
Purpose		Corr	.000	-.337	-.302	.496	-.900	-.781
		Sig	1.000	.514	.560	.317	.014	.067
		N	6	6	6	6	6	6
Structure		Corr	.000	-.471	-.502	.823	-.698	-.594
		Sig	1.000	.346	.311	.044	.123	.214
		N	6	6	6	6	6	6
Research		Corr	.866	-.533	-.657	.588	.158	.353
		Sig	.026	.276	.156	.219	.765	.493
		N	6	6	6	6	6	6
Sentences		Corr	-.548	.135	.302	-.372	-.200	-.474
		Sig	.261	.799	.560	.468	.704	.342
		N	6	6	6	6	6	6
Total		Corr	.108	-.506	-.508	.735	-.751	-.651
		Sig	.838	.305	.304	.096	.085	.162
		N	6	6	6	6	6	6

As Table 2 shows, there is a direct positive correlation represented by significant differences between what PYSBU students have reflected on contextual factors and what they really did in their writing class. This means that the five problematic areas are cognitive, linguistic, situational, social and psychological, while the same areas do not seem problematic for the LCSSIU ones who outperformed their counterparts as Table 3 shows. This might be attributed to the fact that learning English writing is best done in its native country where direct contact with native speakers, motivating instructors, a variety of topics and opinions from multi nationalities, triggering intrinsic motivation and responsible teachers are some of the main

features of the teaching/learning context. Moreover, when the target language is practiced and integrated in the surrounding community, instrumental motivation and interest take place. That's why ESL proficiency is cognitively flourishing in an authentic language context.

IV. Conclusions

Based on the study results, one can conclude that the direct and extensive exposure to ESL in its native environment enhances writing performance of university students. The more exposure to ESL, the more cognitive, linguistic, situational, social, and psychological factors are improved for acquiring the target language skills including writing. On the other hand, delimiting teaching writing to specific topics in certain modes of discourse for the sake of final exams paying little or no care about the writers' mistakes and voices tend to demotivate students to have self-confidence to write effectively, and therefore they get frustrated.

V. Recommendations

In the light of the study results and conclusions, the researcher recommends the following:

1. Using web logs and e-portfolios to develop writing performance of Saudi university students since they tend to overuse their technical devices in their daily life as well as their academic life.

2. Employing university staff from English native countries (USA, GB, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) for teaching English courses, for the teaching staff from Asian or Arab countries tend to keep pace with the Arabic context. And instead of enforcing Saudi students to communicate in English, they try to satisfy their own needs and communicate in colloquial broken Arabic. Consequently,

Saudi students will be still lip-locked and tongue-tied using the target language.

3. Giving ESL students time to work individually and in peers along the three stages of writing helps them to discover and share new ideas.

4. Tolerance with students' writing mistakes can motivate them to cooperate and collaborate sharing ideas, testing and extending them. And writing in a second language, will therefore be reinforced.

5. Keeping ESL students' reading interest provides them with an opportunity to generate new ideas, organize them in a consistent way following different writing models, and consequently, cause the writing objective untended to be achieved.

6. Writing teachers should consider their students' needs, motivations and interests in order to achieve some sort of writing proficiency in a satisfactory way.

7. Holding writing workshops for training students on writing skills from the very beginning to the advanced level bridging the gap between what had been taught and how in school, and what is being taught and how in the university.

8. Preparing for student teacher writing conferences that might break the ice between them paving the way for students to practice writing in a non-threatening atmosphere.

VI. Limitations & Future Research

The current study was conducted on a small sample where only six female Saudi students in AlBaha University and six other female Saudi ones in Southern Illinois University constituted the study participants. If more students were involved in more English speaking countries and more Saudi universities, it could provide more sound results and more reliable conclusions. Another limitation of this study is that the cultural

aspect was not researched among the contextual factors affecting English writing performance. The reason is that both groups were Saudis and have nearly the same cultural background. Both of them may find it easy and tend to use the mother tongue (Arabic) when facing a writing problem related to the vocabulary cultural items. Therefore, the cultural differences between Arabic and English are shared by both, and Arabic interference, consequently, might cause problems for Arabic speaking learners in their English writing performance whether in their home country (Saudi Arabia) or in an English speaking country (USA in our case) but at different levels. A third limitation is that the study has not tackled the main linguistic problems manifested in the participants' writings. Future research of the aforementioned limitations seems crucial in revealing the real concealed factors that really stand behind the deficiency in Saudi university students' writing performance.

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