From Instructed Writing to Free-Writing: A Study of EFL Learners

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Abstract

Writing is an intricate process that encompasses various factors and is a key skill for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. Thus, writing assignments are vital for any curriculum. One of the essential aspects of effective writing includes good grammar knowledge. Advocates of process writing argue that a free-writing journal is a practical approach to teaching EFL students writing. This study is intended to examine the impact of the free-writing journal on EFL learners. This study was conducted on 80 students from a writing course at the University. Thirty-five students were randomly selected to join the free-writing program—the experimental group—and 45 students were kept in their regular structured writing program—the control group. The experimental group selected topics of interest to them and was encouraged to write in English freely without concern for errors, whereas the control group followed a regular structured writing program where the topics were selected for them and they wrote following a clear guideline. Five major areas were investigated to evaluate students' progress: the number of words written, spelling, capitalization, subject-verb agreement, and punctuation. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 students of the experimental group to elicit their perception of the free-writing program. According to the analysis, students in the free-writing program acquired better grammar acquisition than the control group. The researcher also observed students' perception of free-writing at the end of the study and found that free-writing improved their writing skills.

Keywords
EFL students, free-writing, instructed writing, academic settings

Introduction

Because the English language is the warehouse of world knowledge, it is recognized as the means of instruction for higher learning globally, including the Gulf region where English is a foreign language. Mastering writing is the utmost complex task for EFL students. Learning a foreign language needs consistent effort as it is a challenging task. EFL learners face challenges in creating and organizing ideas as well as in deciphering ideas into comprehensible texts (Nourdad & Aghayi, 2016). As a result, Williams (2001) views foreign learners to face more problems with writing, which detract their essay content and also damage the harmony and esthetic of their writing. Unlike native students, second language and foreign language learners face critical issues in areas including spelling and grammatical errors, ineffectiveness, vocabulary misuse, and writing fluency. Notably, the key to writing development and writing fluency involves motivating EFL students to write as much and as often as possible (Eshghinejad, 2016). Brown (2000) also argues that English language learners are required to be adequately exposed to the fundamental language skills, including listening, reading, writing, and speaking to have mastery of the English language. Language instructors must, therefore, create conducive environments where learners can frequently write on topics of their own interests through instructors’ guidance and have feedback given to learners to aid improvement.

There are three primary levels in the writing process: the resource, process, and control level (Chenoweth & Hayes, 2001). Free-writing of journals consists of all three levels. In the beginning, the general and linguistic skills and knowledge of the learners develop, which activates the writing process. This level then interacts with the student's activities, thus controlling his or her writing. This form of writing gives students more control of their own writing and inspires them to write freely without fear of being criticized. Ferris (2014) strongly backs personal essays and journal writing as essential activities that can encourage learners to write freely.

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Various studies have investigated how EFL students can improve their writing skills. Haynes (2007) observed that foreign language students could only become effective writers through the generation of “comprehensible output.” Extensive journal writing is one way of achieving comprehensible output. Journal writing involves writing regularly about ideas such as daily experiences and recording observations and thoughts on various topics. Allen and Enz (1987) encourage the use of creative writing techniques when writing journals. Dymant and O’Connell (2007) also encourage students to use instruments such as maps, poetry/songs, and drawings to augment their journal entries to make them more fun.

The Arab World and the Challenges of EFL Writing

During the past few years of teaching at different levels, various researchers discovered that writing was the skill that posed the greatest challenge to Saudi EFL learners. Writing is an essential skill in the foreign language learning process. Writing is the second most sought out skill after speaking in the EFL context. Tribble (1997) points out that writing is very important, especially because English is a global language, and those who desire to be part of the global market, must have English writing skills. Proficiency in writing requires the ability to master grammar, spelling, and punctuation, among other skills. These aspects are very important in written language, and any error in these aspects can affect the written information and may lead to misunderstandings. Experiencing these areas of writing as the most vulnerable in Saudi EFL learners, the researcher planned the project to expose them to free-writing and monitor their performance to learn writing in a congenial, novel, and friendly environment where they do not fear being hunted for their errors. This is based on Hamp and Heasley’s (2006) view that practicing “how to write” is the most effective way to improve writing skills.

English language teaching (ELT) has been strongly rooted in the Arab nation during the past few decades. Al-Seghayer (2011) relates various studies conducted in the gulf region to English teaching and its subfields. Although Arab countries have made tremendous efforts to improve English teaching as reflected by increased ELT funding, various studies indicate that Arab EFL learners including the Saudi students suffer from serious challenges including low proficiency level and poor performance in the target language (Alharthi, 2020; Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2014; Alqahtani, 2018; Alrabai, 2018; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Ashraf, 2018; Javid & Al-Malki, 2018; Moskovsky, 2018). Elyas and Picard (2018) suggest that the challenge could be a result of the failure to motivate learners to improve their writing. The Cambridge Examination Center published a report in 2009 about Saudi students’ English proficiency level. The report ranked Saudi students at 39 out of the 40 countries that participated in both general training and academic tests (Hafiz et al., 2018). The dismal performance of Arab students has been strongly confirmed by the studies conducted on Saudi students to evaluate their writing skills (Gawi, 2012; Hakim, 2019; Mustafa, 2012). These studies reveal an average performance of 4.8 out of 9 in writing skills.

Studies that have been conducted on Saudi EFL learners’ writing problems found that despite making English a compulsory subject for Saudi students for 6 years before they join college, only a few demonstrate satisfactory performance in the college entrance exams (Gawi, 2012). Saudi students’ writing errors primarily fall in the category of grammar and syntax. In this study, the free-writing journal technique was used to expose the students to the experience of writing. In this way, the researcher was able to check the efficacy of free-writing journals as a tool to promote writing skills among Saudi EFL learners. Second, the research also provided the learners as well as teachers with the opportunity to monitor their mistakes and improve performance through the consistent activity of free-writing journals.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of the study is to identify the effects of free-writing journals on Saudi EFL learners. Additional areas include the following:

1. Understanding the problems EFL learners face in writing.
2. To help overcome these problems by introducing the free-writing journal technique.
3. To develop writing habits in students and self-monitor their performance through free-writing.
4. To promote free-writing journals as a viable technique for writing improvements in EFL students.

Significance of the Study

Various researchers have noticed that the majority of researches in the field of writing errors or problems are conducted through a quantitative method. It cannot be discounted that there are studies regarding linguistic interpretations and identifications of the root causes of errors that EFL learners make in writing. This research was motivated by errors Saudi EFL learners make when learning English. The study could be used as a reference to future research in this field. The study could also benefit the textbook writers and curriculum designers in the Arab nation including Saudi Arabia to write textbooks and design syllabi accordingly.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions to arrive at the above objectives:
**Research Question 1 (RQ1):** To what extent do free-writing journals help reduce the mistakes of academic writing?

**Research Question 2 (RQ2):** What are the major writing issues that Saudi EFL students encounter when conducting a free-writing journal?

**Research Question 3 (RQ3):** What are the students’ perceptions of free-writing?

**The Study Context**

This study explored the impact of the free-writing journal method on Saudi EFL learners. The study was conducted at the English department of Majmaah University. The courses taught at the College’s Department of English are multidimensional, comprehensive, and specially tailored to meet the needs of Saudi EFL learners. The department focuses on pedagogic practices, ELT, linguistics, and skills in language and grants the bachelor’s degree in arts and education. The first three semesters focus on teaching students different language courses to help them enhance their skills in the English language. The researcher selected two groups to teach writing: one with the regular instructional method and the other through the free-writing journal technique. Two strategies were utilized in data collection: interviews and questionnaires to determine the students’ perception of the free-writing journal practice. Results of both groups were compared, and perceptions of the students toward the free-writing journal writing technique were noted.

**Literature Review**

Various studies related to academic free-writing and learning strategies have been reviewed to give a critical overview of problems facing Saudi EFL students. The researcher narrowed down the studies chosen for review based on the following criteria: both old and latest studies with reasonable ground-breaking results and studies conducted in the Arab world.

English acquisition is a difficult task among EFL learners, particularly Arabic students (Al-Mahrooqi, 2014). Various researchers have found that learners face challenges to write meritoriously because they view writing as a difficult language skill to master (Burns & Richards, 2018; Marzec-Stawierska, 2014; Szyszka, 2016). As compared with speaking, writing is a more standardized system that learners must acquire through special instructions. Mastery of the system is a critical prerequisite of educational and cultural participation.

**The Significance of Improving Writing Skills**

Writing skills are a key element of literacy. Learners should be adept writers to contribute to a literate society. Schutz (2011) argues that there are increasing society literacy requirements which are expected to continue rising in the next decades. The National Council of Teachers (1996) report states, “Changes in technology and society have altered and will continue to alter how we use language to communicate and to think. Students must be prepared to meet these demands” (p. 2). In the article “Writing as a Mode of Learning,” published on the University of Delaware website, Emig (1977) suggests that “writing is a unique mode of learning” that involves active brain participation (para. 2). Various scholars have concluded that writing improves students’ intellectual skills and written language develops cognitive functions of the brain (Cer, 2019; Mehl, 2001; Obler & Gjerlow, 1999). According to Emig, effective writing occurs through reinforcement of learning using the brain, eye, and hand. Emig’s article exemplifies the implication of developing student’s writing competencies, which supports the thesis of this study.

**Factors Causing Low Achievement Levels for L2 Students in Saudi Arabia**

Low skills in the English language among Saudi learners are an intricate and multidimensional phenomenon. To seek a practical solution and address key problems, it is critical to first deal with the problems’ underlying factors. The low achievement among the learners can be ascribed to various interconnected factors ranging from sociocultural factors such as religion, culture, society, and influence of the first language to learner-related variables such as anxiety, motivation, and gender. Besides, EFL instruction variables such as teaching method, the curriculum, and teacher behavior and practices as well as other factors within the Saudi educational system such as inadequate technology, the lack of teacher training, and overcrowded classes may cause dismal EFL achievement.

Lightbown and Spada (2013) conducted a study on learner individual variables. The study findings showed that the complex interaction of both external and internal factors is the primary cause of the dismal performance in foreign language learning. For instance, an aggressive and controlling English instructor is an external factor that adversely impacts students’ achievement. Wentzel and Brophy (2014) supported this by arguing that students attend schools with enthusiasm and motivation; however, when they start encountering certain external activities, such as taking tests, completing their assignments, responding to instructors’ questions and having close monitoring, grading, and reporting of their performances to parents, they may start to find school psychologically threatening and anxiety-provoking.

Siddiqui (2015) performed a study on female students from Saudi Arabia’s Bisha University to determine the source of Saudi students’ errors in writing, which contribute to their low performance. Siddiqui found that students’ errors in writing primarily fall in two categories: grammar and syntax. Journal and Alqhtani (2018) reviewed and analyzed...
syntactic errors of Saudi EFL students and determined that
Saudi students’ errors can be classified into seven syntactic
subcategories: sentence structure, adverbial clauses, relative
classes, conjunctions, articles, verbs, and prepositions.
Alqhtani (2018) also conducted another study in 2018 that
reinforced their previous study. The study showed that Arab
EFL students’ writing errors are syntactical, particularly
prepositions.
Concerning Saudi university undergraduate problems,
Alhamdan (2014) conducted an investigative study to deter-
mine problems faced by Saudi university undergraduates.
Alhamdan determined that these students faced various
problems in spelling, capitalization, wrong use of suffixes
and prefixes, inappropriate vocabulary, doubling of subjects,
and phoneme clusters as a result of first language preference.
Fareh (2014) also conducted a study on Arab EFL learners’
theses to determine errors Arabic English learners commit. He
found grammatical errors such as punctuation mistakes,
correct language structure, and spelling mistakes.

Addressing Problems Faced by Saudi EFL Learners
Developing writing competence for foreign language learn-
ers entails teaching students various subskills ranging from
sentence and discourse skills to mechanisms of writing. EFL
learners usually develop a proper grammatical competence
without equal pragmatic and discourse competences (Fareh,
2014). Acquiring writing skills is an intricate and challeng-
ing process in learning a foreign language. Researchers have
established that Saudi EFL students emphasize more on bet-
ter scores instead of learning the language, and they have the
habit of memorizing passages without understanding lexical
items and grammatical rules. One important way to address
these problems includes a free-writing journal.

Free-writing journal. Several types of research talk about the
effectiveness of free-writing journals as a viable technique to
enhance writing skills. These pieces of research discuss the
benefits of journal writing technique that facilitates the learn-
ers to reflect, collect, and compose their ideas in sentences to
give vent to their personal feelings and thoughts. Journal
writing can be used inside the class and outside the class.
Casanave (2011) proposes that regular writing leads to
improvement. Free-writing journal writing is a particularly
important technique in this regard. Filewych (2019) defines
free-writing as the writing of any thoughts or ideas that come
to mind at a specific time without stopping.
The general characteristics of free-writing may vary based
on contexts such as giving a specific topic or changing the
allowed amount of time. In case there is no specific writing
topic, it is self-sponsored (unguided) free-writing whereas
focused (guided) free-writing occurs when there is a speci-
fied topic (Belanoff et al., 1991). The researcher also encour-
ages the students to refrain from other activities while doing
free-writing because the primary feature of free-writing is
that it is non-editing. The rule to keep writing without editing
helps EFL learners to improve their writing articulacy by
couraging them to generate texts from their consciousness
without distractions from already produced texts. Researchers
such as Cumming (2012) are apprehensive that emphasis on
fluency could adversely impact writing quality; nonetheless,
writing quality is not considered as an issue of importance in
free-writing.

According to the researchers that favor free-writing jour-
nals, there are more benefits related to both guided and
unguided free-writing than just improving writing coherence
and embracing a non-editing habit while writing. Upon anal-
ysis of more than 200, 10-min, self-sponsored free-writing
samples he collected when he was a teacher, Thomas Lee
Hilgers (1980) recounted that practicing self-sponsored free-
writing caused his class to undergo a bottom-up process
meaning that learners started to disengage from individual
experiences to abstract. Belanoff et al. (1991) reinforced this
finding by stating that self-sponsored free-writing enables
learners to understand the language by encouraging them to
write a topic of their choice.

Albeit the primary benefits of unguided/self-sponsored
free-writing journals are considered to enhance writing flu-
ency and enabling EFL learners to find their self-concept, a
guided/teacher-sponsored free-writing journal is key to get-
ting started on the actual writing. Belanoff et al. (1991) con-
sider guided free-writing to complicate the writing process.
However, the researchers view free-writing to enable stu-
dents to gain deeper insights into specific topics because it
allows them to think inductively rather than making hasty
generalizations. The researchers also claimed that teacher-
sponsored free-writing assists students in identifying all
available points of view or arguments and concludes from
first thoughts toward new insights. Belanoff et al. (1991) also
opined that nonjudgmental feedback from teachers such as
having discussions or sharing the writing could help EFL
learners to fortify their thoughts and yield further insights.

Stages of Free-Writing and Their Effectiveness in
Improving Students’ Language Competence
Prewriting. The stage of prewriting focuses on thought-pro-
voking the creativity of students and helping them to think
about the topic to write and the best approach to writing. To
assist in the implementation of this stage effectively, Aliotta
(2018) proposes that teachers should remind students of the
two crucial things: the significance of their writings and their
target audience. Students must keep in mind their intended
audience and the content of their texts when making outlines
for their writing. Abdollahzadeh (2010) provides various
classroom activities to help students in the prewriting stage.
These activities include brainstorming, listening, cluster-
ing, extensive reading of passages, and skimming. Accord-
ing to Abdollahzadeh, these activities can assist learners in
generating ideas about a topic and encouraging them to start writing informally. Kroll (2012) advises teachers to employ these activities due to their practicality. These activities also do not require the preparation of additional materials from teachers and students and are easy to practice without wasting much time. While giving students chances to practice all prewriting activities, Kroll advises teachers to encourage learners to select the most effective techniques for them.

**Drafting.** Students cannot transition from planning to actual writing easily. Nonetheless, at some point, students need to transform plans into temporary text. In this respect, Slorach et al. (2015) present various activities to assist students in transitioning from idea generation to drafting. These activities include associating the theme with something else, defining the theme, applying the idea, describing the idea, comparing the idea with something else, arguing for or against it, and narrating the history of the development of the subject. In drafting, learners are encouraged to focus on getting ideas on paper without worrying about mechanical and grammatical errors. Concerning this, Harper (2011) urges that students and teachers should not expect error-free, first drafts. Teachers should focus on more global issues (subject, evidence, and organization) while overlooking surface problems (wordiness, punctuation, and spelling). The majority of surface problems are handled in the subsequent drafts.

**Revising.** In this free-writing stage, learners decide how to enhance their writing skills by considering their writing from different perspectives. Instructors should allow learners to know that revision does not concern correcting minor grammatical errors but concentrating on the organization and content of the text. Raynauld (2019) states that learners have the opportunity to refine their texts during the revision stage. Raynauld also argues that in the revision stage, learners not only polish their work but also develop and integrate new ideas. Instructors should provide students with revision guidelines through peer-correction, self-correction, and teacher-initiated comments. Teachers should also provide feedback on the first draft to help the students with revision. Instructors should be more concerned with major content-related errors but not minor grammatical errors within the paragraphs. They should comment on the structural organization and general thesis, awkward word choices, and suggest better expressions and word choices. The primary goal is to provide adequate feedback on the first draft to help students revise appropriately.

**Editing.** In this stage, learners are required to proofread their work or peers’ writing carefully to correct grammatical and technical errors. Before the editing stage, the primary concern of learners has not been grammatical or technical errors but rather content. However, going to this stage, learners eventually have the opportunity to polish their work by correcting spelling and local errors. Mort (2017) states that editing checklists can assist learners to focus on specific points, and teachers should prepare these checklists based on learners’ needs and ability levels. Given that editing is the last stage in free-writing, learners should rigorously focus on correcting local errors. Editing is considered more important in EFL writing classrooms than L1 classrooms because L2 learners cannot be free from test situations. Regarding evaluating students’ writing, EFL teachers should focus on linguistic accuracy instead of fluency. To achieve this, instructors should strive to give learners more writing opportunities without worrying about grammatical errors until the editing stage. Mort says that it is necessary to provide mini-grammar lessons in the editing stage to help learners improve their accuracy of writing.

**Method**

The study sought at investigating the impact of the free-writing journal method on Saudi EFL learners.

**Participants**

The subjects of the study were 80 male students aged between 20 and 25 years old who were majoring in an English language program at the university level. The students were selected from freshmen (beginners), sophomore (intermediate), and advanced EFL classes. Although age was not an independent variable, it should be pointed out that the mean age among the beginners in the control group was 19.4 years ($SD = 0.89$ years) and the mean age among the beginners in the counter-part, experimental group, was 19.3 years ($SD = 1.03$ years). In the same respect, the mean age among the intermediate in the control group was 20.2 years ($SD = 0.96$ years), and the mean age among intermediate in the counter-part, experimental group, was 20 years ($SD = 0.70$ years). In addition, the mean age among the advanced in the control group was 22.1 years ($SD = 0.87$ years), and the mean age among advanced in the counter-part, experimental group, was 22 years ($SD = 1.05$ years). The inclusion criteria were that the first language of the participants had to be the Arabic language, and they should have not been exposed to the English language in an English as a second language (ESL) setting, that is, have lived abroad in an English-speaking country. All the participants signed a consent form to show their unforced agreement to volunteer as subjects of the study.

**Data Collection**

The researcher used primary sources for this study. Students from the university were used as subjects for collecting data with questionnaires and interviews being the primary sources for gathering information. Demographic information, which included the English proficiency level, language background, and age of each participant, was gathered. Besides the
questionnaires, the researcher also collected behavioral information, including participants’ writing strategies to allow researchers to determine the topics that students would write about. The division of students was based on their writing courses they were enrolled in, that is, beginner (Writing 1), intermediate (Writing 2), and advance (Writing 3). The researcher used semi-structured interviews with the experimental group to determine their insights into the free-writing program. The researcher typed the participants’ writing samples into the computer to eradicate biases in their writing skills.

Petrić and Czárl’s (2003) writing strategies questionnaire was adopted to determine the participants’ writing proficiencies. The questionnaire aided the investigation of the relevance and usefulness of strategies concerning assignments and tests related to the course. The questionnaire items were organized based on the writing process structure, consisting of prewriting and post-writing phases. The researcher used descriptive statistics to ascertain the English proficiency level of the students.

**Experimental Group**

In total, 35 students voluntarily agreed to join the free-writing journal program. From Week 3 to Week 8, these students had the choice to choose topics they were willing to write about. Each session involved 45 min to 1 hr of essay writing. The tests were scored using four raters’ analytic approach, which included one freshman English academic writing instructor and three expert English academic writing instructors. Two raters were native Arabic speakers, whereas the other two were non-Arabic speakers. The participants were also asked at the end of the study to take a writing test by writing about academic topics of their choice. The first test was dubbed pretest, and the last test was dubbed posttest, which were both set to analyze the impact of the free-writing program. The researcher measured results based on the number of words, subject-verb agreement, and punctuations with special attention to the use of a full stop.

Both experimental and control groups had the same amount of time as instructional writing courses offered to their students. The instructed writing period lasted 13 weeks. From Week 3 to Week 8, the experimental group was pulled out of their classes during the instructed writing sessions to be part of the free-writing program. While the control group received the regular instructed writing, the experimental group received both instructed and free-writing sessions during the same time.

**Control Group**

In total, 45 students agreed to be part of this study as regular students of the regular writing courses. Each course meeting happened twice a week for 2.5 hr. The first meeting lasted for 1 hr and 40 min, whereas the second meeting lasted for 50 min. The primary goal of the meeting was to teach participants how to write a four-paragraph essay and beyond, based on their language level and courses they are enrolled in. The main focus of the essays included an introduction, a two-paragraph body with supporting ideas, and a conclusion. In addition, the class aimed at teaching the students an essay and paragraph construction, the general process of writing, including outlining, brainstorming, draft writing, editing of drafts, and giving peer feedback. Approximately 30% of the class was to teach grammar, including spelling, capitalization, subject-verb agreement, and punctuations. The rating criteria adopted for the control group were identical to the experimental group.

**Writing Tests**

The researcher developed two writing tests, the pretest, and posttest from the study. In both tests, the students were asked to describe their best friend and favorite meals, respectively. As guidance to enable the students to write about similar aspects of their essays, the researcher developed a list of elements and questions. The students were tested to compose approximately one page (250 words) in each essay. The primary goal of the pretest was to establish whether the participants’ writing performance was homogeneous. Grouping students into three levels (i.e., beginners, intermediate, and advanced) was not done randomly. It was based on the students’ performance in the pretest where students who scored 35 and below were labeled as beginners, students who scored 35 to 70 were considered to be intermediate and those who scored 70 and above were classified as advanced.

**Rating Scale**

The researcher adopted Holly L. Jacobs’ (1981) rating scale to evaluate the students’ writing scores. Expert English academic writing instructor was selected to rate the students’ writing prompts. After that, a discussion between the researcher and the participants happened to allow the students to express their feelings about the tests. Students’ expressions were audio-recorded using Sony ICD-ux560 Audio Recorder and transcribed.

**Inter-Rater Reliability**

To be sure about the inter-rater reliability of the assignments and tests, the two raters (Raters 1 and 2) scored the students’ writing answer sheets based on the same scoring scheme. The researcher then used the procedure for Pearson Product-Moment correlation coefficient to the writing scores. Tables 1 to 6 represent the results produced for inter-rater reliability of the pretest and posttest writings for beginners,
intermediate, and advanced students. The tables show a strong and significant coefficient between overall writing raters and all writing scale subcategories for all classes of students. At the culmination of this research, to compare the mean scores of the experimental and the control groups in pretest and posttests concerning each subcategory of the scoring scale and the overall writing performance, the researcher analyzed the obtained data using an independent sample t-test. SPPS Version 23 was used to analyze the statistical tests.

Table 1. Pretest Inter-Rater Reliability Coefficients Between Two Raters for Beginners.

| Language skills | N | Words2 | SV2 | SP2 | CAP2 | PUNC2 |
|----------------|---|--------|-----|-----|------|-------|
| Number of word | 5 | .026** |     |     |      |       |
| Subject-verb agreement | 5 | .304** |     |     |      |       |
| Spelling | 5 | .133** |     |     |      |       |
| Capitalization | 5 | .015** |     |     |      |       |
| Punctuation | 5 | .668** |     |     |      |       |

Note. 1 = Rater 1; 2 = Rater 2; SV = subject-verb; SP = spelling; CAP = Capitalization; PUNC = Punctuation.
**p < .01.

Table 2. Pretest Inter-Rater Reliability Coefficients Between Two Raters for Intermediate Students.

| Language skills | N | Words2 | SV2 | SP2 | CAP2 | PUNC2 |
|----------------|---|--------|-----|-----|------|-------|
| Number of word | 13 | .089** |     |     |      |       |
| Subject-verb agreement | 13 | .846** |     |     |      |       |
| Spelling | 13 | .456** |     |     |      |       |
| Capitalization | 13 | .0176** |     |     |      |       |
| Punctuation | 13 | .137** |     |     |      |       |

Note. 1 = Rater 1; 2 = Rater 2; SV = subject-verb; SP = spelling; CAP = Capitalization; PUNC = Punctuation.
**p < .01.

Table 3. Pretest Inter-Rater Reliability Coefficients Between Two Raters for Advanced Students.

| Language skills | N | Words2 | SV2 | SP2 | CAP2 | PUNC2 |
|----------------|---|--------|-----|-----|------|-------|
| Number of word | 17 | .071** |     |     |      |       |
| Subject-verb agreement | 17 | .303** |     |     |      |       |
| Spelling | 17 | .172** |     |     |      |       |
| Capitalization | 17 | .285** |     |     |      |       |
| Punctuation | 17 | .403** |     |     |      |       |

Note. 1 = Rater 1; 2 = Rater 2; SV = subject-verb; SP = spelling; CAP = Capitalization; PUNC = Punctuation.
**p < .01.

Table 4. Posttest Inter-Rater Reliability Coefficients Between Two Raters for Beginners.

| Language skills | N | Words2 | SV2 | SP2 | CAP2 | PUNC2 |
|----------------|---|--------|-----|-----|------|-------|
| Number of word | 5 | .323** |     |     |      |       |
| Subject-verb agreement | 5 | 1** |     |     |      |       |
| Spelling | 5 | .693** |     |     |      |       |
| Capitalization | 5 | .557** |     |     |      |       |
| Punctuation | 5 | 1** |     |     |      |       |

Note. 1 = Rater 1; 2 = Rater 2; SV = subject-verb; SP = spelling; CAP = Capitalization; PUNC = Punctuation.
**p < .01.

Results

Descriptive statistics were used in data analysis. First, central tendencies and measures of dispersion were calculated for different student levels’ writing proficiencies. The central tendencies and the measures of dispersions for the students’ writing proficiency scores between the control and experimental groups across all writing proficiency levels are reported in Tables 7, 8, and 9.
Based on the received median writing scores, the researcher classified students into two classes to denote the two English writing proficiency levels (Low,  \( n = 71 \) vs. High,  \( n = 92 \)). Besides, an independent  \( t \) test was used to compare between writing proficiencies of the learners who achieved high writing scores and those who attained low scores. It was established that the average score (i.e., mean) for Writing Assignments 1, 2, and 3 (WPA1, WPA2, WPA3) and the midterm test and final exam (WPMTE, WPFE) was high across the experimental groups for all three proficiency levels (i.e., beginners, intermediate, and advanced). Moreover, the average score (i.e., mean) for the control groups was relatively low, as it is shown in Tables 10, 11, and 12.

On keen scrutiny of the mean values, it is clear that the experimental group possess a fairly high proficiency level of English writing. This is also demonstrated by the fact that the beginners scored fairly high scores in both assignments and tests. The advanced students' category possesses the highest level of English proficiency with the highest mean of 90.8 and standard deviation of 2.32 (Table 9).

The students who exhibited a high English writing proficiency level stood at 37.5% and 92.3% in W1, 41.7% and...
100% in W2, and 29.4% and 100% in W3 for control and experimental groups, respectively. The percentage scores show that the experimental group outperformed those in the control group with all students in the intermediate and advanced classes scoring C+ and above in assignments, tests, and the final exam. The percentages of the participants’ performances in writing have been presented in Tables 13, 14, and 15. A close analysis of the tables shows that the majority of students (more than 58%) in either class who did not attend the writing program scored low marks at the end.

**Table 10. Descriptive Statistics for Beginner Student’s Writing Proficiencies.**

| Assessment tools | Control group | Experimental group |
|------------------|---------------|--------------------|
|                  | N  | Max. score | M  | STDEV | N  | Max. score | M  | STDEV |
| WPA1             | 16 | 5          | 4.5 | 0.5    | 13 | 5          | 4.8 | 0.4    |
| WPA2             | 16 | 5          | 4.8 | 0.2    | 13 | 5          | 5   | 0      |
| WPA3             | 16 | 10         | 6.75| 1.5    | 13 | 10         | 8.5 | 1.2    |
| WPMTE            | 16 | 20         | 13.5| 2.5    | 13 | 20         | 17.4| 2.5    |
| WPFE             | 16 | 60         | 40  | 13     | 13 | 60         | 49.5| 7.6    |

*Note. WPA1 = Writing Proficiency Score on Assignment 1; WPA2 = Writing Proficiency Score on Assignment 2; WPA3 = Writing Proficiency Score on Assignment 3; WPMTE = Writing Proficiency Score on Mid-Term Exam; WPFE = Writing Proficiency Score on the Final Exam.*

**Table 11. Descriptive Statistics for Intermediate Student’s Writing Proficiencies.**

| Assessment tools | Control group | Experimental group |
|------------------|---------------|--------------------|
|                  | N  | Max. score | M  | STDEV | N  | Max. score | M  | STDEV |
| WPA1             | 12 | 5          | 4.4 | 0.5    | 5  | 5          | 4.8 | 0.4    |
| WPA2             | 12 | 5          | 4.6 | 0.5    | 5  | 5          | 4.8 | 0.4    |
| WPA3             | 12 | 10         | 6.75| 1.8    | 5  | 10         | 8   | 0.6    |
| WPMTE            | 12 | 20         | 13.6| 1.9    | 5  | 20         | 18.2| 0.7    |
| WPFE             | 12 | 60         | 43.5| 8.2    | 5  | 60         | 55  | 2.1    |

*Note. WPA1 = Writing Proficiency Score on Assignment 1; WPA2 = Writing Proficiency Score on Assignment 2; WPA3 = Writing Proficiency Score on Assignment 3; WPMTE = Writing Proficiency Score on Mid-Term Exam; WPFE = Writing Proficiency Score on the Final Exam.*

**Table 12. Descriptive Statistics for Advanced Student’s Writing Proficiencies.**

| Assessment tools | Control group | Experimental group |
|------------------|---------------|--------------------|
|                  | N  | Max. score | M  | STDEV | N  | Max. score | M  | STDEV |
| WPA1             | 17 | 5          | 4.5 | 0.5    | 17 | 5          | 4.7 | 0.5    |
| WPA2             | 17 | 5          | 4.8 | 0.4    | 17 | 5          | 5   | 0      |
| WPA3             | 17 | 10         | 6.6 | 1.4    | 17 | 10         | 8.3 | 1.2    |
| WPMTE            | 17 | 20         | 15  | 2.2    | 17 | 20         | 17.6| 2.3    |
| WPFE             | 17 | 60         | 39  | 7.7    | 17 | 60         | 51.9| 7.2    |

*Note. WPA1 = Writing Proficiency Score on Assignment 1; WPA2 = Writing Proficiency Score on Assignment 2; WPA3 = Writing Proficiency Score on Assignment 3; WPMTE = Writing Proficiency Score on Mid-Term Exam; WPFE = Writing Proficiency Score on the Final Exam.*

**Table 13. Percentages of the Beginner Students’ Writing Performances.**

| Performance validity | Control group | Experimental group |
|----------------------|---------------|--------------------|
|                      | N  | %    | N  | %    |
| Valid                |     |      |     |      |
| Low (C and below)    | 10  | 62.5 | 1   | 7.7  |
| High (C+ and above)  | 6   | 37.5 | 12  | 92.3 |
| Total                | 16  | 100  | 13  | 100  |
of the program with the advanced class recording the highest failure of 70.6%.

When the students’ writing performances were grouped and evaluated, 35 students attended the writing program. Among those in the experimental group, 97% showed high achievement. Conversely, for the 45 students in the control group, 64% showed low performance whereas 36% recorded high scores.

**Test Scoring Analysis of the Study**

To probe whether free-writing increases writing subcategories and writing performance of EFL students, the researcher applied an independent *t* test to the posttest writing scores. Tables 16, 17, and 18 summarize the independent *t* test results for the mean of the posttest writing scores for beginners, intermediate, and advanced students, respectively. A close observation of the tables indicates that a free-writing journal improves all subcategories in all student classes. As Tables 16, 17, and 18 depict, the mean difference between the experimental and the control groups in the posttest was statistically significant in the participants’ overall writing performance.

**Students’ Perception of Free-Writing**

Concerning RQ3 of the experimental group on free-writing, the researcher adopted semi-structured interviews to determine the students’ attitudes toward free-writing. A semi-structured interview was chosen because it is a flexible technique for a small scale study. The researcher also chose a semi-structured interview due to its potential for obtaining more useful information. This research involved acquiring information from the participants who practiced free-writing.

To improve the quality of students’ responses, the researcher adopted three semi-structured interview techniques. Rapport-building was the first technique used. The researcher spent considerable time building rapport with the participants. This involved sharing common experiences and common ground at the start of the interview sessions. This technique helped the researcher to gain perspectives and counter-perspectives on the theme of the study. The second technique involved thought-provoking interjections. Understandably, the format of research interviews is not strictly journalistic; therefore, the researcher is encouraged and allowed to use thought-provoking interjections to get more information from the interviewees. This approach helped the researcher to gain more insight into the issues under scrutiny.

The third technique was critical event analysis. The researcher understood that abstract thinking and abstraction replies might not be useful in some interview instances. Therefore, he encouraged the students to describe critical events during free-writing and talk about them. Students’ interview responses indicated a positive influence of free-writing journals on their language acquisition and writing skills.

The researcher distributed structured questionnaires to 35 students in the experimental group as a means of generating confirmatory results for the interviews. The researcher sought to obtain consensus and consistency in the students’ interview responses about their perception of free-writing journals. The questionnaire responses are summarized in Table 19.

Both the questionnaire results and interview responses were consistent. This underscored the reliability of both tools in collecting data for this study.

**Discussion**

The study investigated the effect of the free-writing journal on EFL learners. More specifically, the study scrutinized the impact of the free-writing journal on the writing subcomponents. Results indicated a substantial difference between the experimental and the control groups in terms of subcategory components (number of words, subject-verb agreement, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation). These statistical differences are shown in Tables 16 through 18. Results supported Mona Tahseldar’s (2018) study, which concluded that regular writing practice could enhance the quality of EFL learners’ writing performance. Three essential features of the free-writing journal including the individual feedback through discourse given by the teacher, writing in a
stress-free environment, and the freedom to choose the topic to write about helped the EFL learners to improve their writing performance (Peyton & Mlynarczyk, 1999).

Results that showed improvement in writing subcategories were consistent with Steven O’Brien’s study on “the minimum word count on writing tasks” and Mohamad and Tahseldar’s (2018) study on “The Impact of Journal Writing on Cycle Two EFL Students Writing Achievement.” According to O’Brien, free-writing gives students the freedom to choose a topic they can adequately write. This allows them to pick the words selectively to express ideas properly (O’Brien, 2013). They can arrange these words to form meaningful sentences and paragraphs; therefore, students who participated in the free-writing program were able to write significantly more words. Mohamad and Tahseldar found in their study that free-writing encourages students to improve their grammar and punctuation because they understand what they write; thus, they write papers free from syntaxes. In other words, free-writing allows students to write without mental struggles and with different ideas about the topic. Learners in the experimental group could reflect their ideas, form them into meaningful and accurate frames, and double-check the conflicting ones. Due to this, they were able to enhance the quality of their writing, which was reflected in test performances, as presented in Tables 13, 14, and 15.

Table 16. Posttest Independent Sample t Test and Group Statistics for Beginners.

| Subcategory       | t     | DF | p value (two-tailed) | Mean difference | SE difference |
|-------------------|-------|----|----------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Number of words   | -1.05 | 8  | .323**               | 3.8             | 0.4          |
| Subject-verb agreement | 0    | 0  | 1**                 | 0               | 0            |
| Spelling         | -0.408 | 8  | .694**               | 0.4             | 0.867        |
| Capitalization   | -0.612 | 8  | .557**               | 0.6             | 0.877        |
| Punctuation      | 0     | 8  | 1**                 | 0               | 0.925        |

**p < .05.

Table 17. Posttest Independent Sample t Test and Group Statistics for Intermediate Students.

| Subcategory       | t     | DF | p value (two-tailed) | Mean difference | SE difference |
|-------------------|-------|----|----------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Number of words   | -1.548 | 24 | .135**               | 2.07            | 0.59          |
| Subject-verb agreement | -3.079 | 24 | .105**               | 2.85            | 0.888        |
| Spelling         | -0.591 | 24 | .559**               | 0.7             | 0.622        |
| Capitalization   | -1.008 | 24 | .323**               | -0.690          | 0.659        |
| Punctuation      | -0.316 | 24 | .754**               | -0.230          | 0.698        |

**p < .05.

Table 18. Posttest Independent Sample t Test and Group Statistics for Advanced Students.

| Subcategory       | t     | DF | p value (two-tailed) | Mean difference | SE difference |
|-------------------|-------|----|----------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Number of words   | -0.976 | 32 | .336**               | 3.060           | 0.322        |
| Subject-verb agreement | -1.42  | 32 | .165**               | -0.300          | 0.490        |
| Spelling         | -0.739 | 32 | .465**               | 1.1             | 0.790        |
| Capitalization   | -0.474 | 32 | .638**               | -0.590          | 0.491        |
| Punctuation      | -1.036 | 32 | .307**               | 0.410           | 0.384        |

**p < .05.
Obtaining students’ perception of free-writing was critical for the study. According to Pietriková (2015), the participants’ response system can assist the researcher in maintaining a positive outlook of the study. In total, 30 students indicated that free-writing helped them improve their writing skills. The students’ responses were consistent with the findings of Filewych (2019), which suggests that free-writing can help students improve their spelling and grammar mistakes and achieve the highest level of writing competence. In total, 33 students indicated that they feel comfortable writing after free-writing. The students’ revelations were also consistent with Muller’s (2014) findings that free-writing helps students discover their potential as committed writers, drive their inspiration, and build their confidence. On the other hand, students indicated that free-writing increased their writing fluency, expressing thoughts, and enhancing their writing habits. This was obvious during the interview as well. Jaber, a participant in the experimental group of the advanced level stated as follows: “The free-writing program helped me a lot to express my thoughts in written form. It also boosted my grades in the writing course as well as other English courses that I am studying this semester.” Another participant in the experimental group but from the beginners level stated that,

Even though the early stages of the program were very tough on me and were a bit challenging, the final results of the program were outstanding. I used to write only one paragraph, but now I can write at least one whole page with a little bit of struggle. I am actually proud of myself.

These responses are also consistent with Muller’s finding that free-writing helps students develop their writing abilities, memory muscles, and promote the writing process.

The gaps that follow from the findings of this research on the free-writing journal method could benefit from further research. This study was limited in its scope in the sense that it targeted only Saudi Arabian EFL learners whose first language is Arabic, and it did not broaden its scope to include other learners of other varieties or dialects of Arabic. Results might look different than what this study yielded if it were pursued on Jordanian EFL students, for example.

In addition, gender was a significant limiting factor because this study was only conducted on males due to accessibility constraints. Free-writing journal practices should also be researched across both genders. Applying the same study on female EFL students, and then on a mix of male and female students could perhaps yield more accurate results because it would denote the gender barriers from the study.

Moreover, future investigation is needed to test the impact of free-writing on other age groups. Because the age gap of the individuals in the research was very low, it would be interesting to see how the free-writing technique could yield results spanning across primary school students all the way to graduate students perhaps. Further research could identify if the free-writing journal technique could be a better option for primary school students because younger students are more eager to catch on with newer techniques. Building writing skills from early stages could potentially help improve the writing levels of EFL students which could aid in preparing them for their journey to higher education. The writing proficiency levels of primary school students to graduate students are extremely different. Therefore, conducting a free-writing journal experiment with different age ranges could produce better results that can be used to measure how efficient the free-writing journal practice is. This could also help

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Table 19. Questionnaire Responses.

| No | Question                                                                 | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 1  | Journal Writing Program is a good idea.                                  | 8              | 23    | 4       |          |                   |
| 2  | Journal Writing Program was an enjoyable and pleasant experience.        | 14             | 8     | 9       | 3        | 1                 |
| 3  | Now I feel comfortable while writing.                                    | 15             | 18    | 2       |          |                   |
| 4  | It has removed my fear of writing long paragraphs.                       | 18             | 16    | 1       |          |                   |
| 5  | Different topics aroused my interest in observation and writing.         | 14             | 10    | 11      |          |                   |
| 6  | After every session, I could evaluate my improved performance in terms of quantity and quality. | 20             | 15    |          |          |                   |
| 7  | Teachers’ evaluations helped me improve my writing.                      | 13             | 16    | 5       |          |                   |
| 8  | This program has improved my habit of writing.                           | 17             | 18    |          |          |                   |
| 9  | I will continue to write journals and express my thoughts.               | 24             | 11    |          |          |                   |
| 10 | Now I can express my ideas in a better and fluent way.                   | 15             | 16    | 4       |          |                   |
| 11 | My writing output has increased.                                         | 14             | 15    | 4       | 2        |                   |
| 12 | Now I’ve a better understanding where I need to improve.                | 16             | 14    | 3       | 2        |                   |
| 13 | Now I am more fluent (ability to relate thoughts and words) than before. | 11             | 16    | 5       | 1        | 2                 |
| 14 | Now I can write more in less time.                                       | 16             | 12    | 2       | 3        | 2                 |
curriculum writers understand the significance, depending on the results, and incorporate them into the countries writing programs and syllabi. It would be interesting to see how this study could execute across all levels of education and measure its results simultaneously to observe how well the free-writing practice occurs in each age range.

**Conclusion**

The study provided empirical evidence that free-writing journals can improve students’ writing performance based on the number of words, subject-verb agreement, capitalization, spelling, and punctuation. The study findings reveal the significance of free-writing journals for Saudi EFL learners. The Saudi Ministry of Education should restructure the education system to include free-writing journals in EFL writing instruction. Free-writing provides an orderly writing practice that enables EFL learners to make connections to their ideas through writing on topics of their choice. Repeated practice of free-writing can help learners to identify their mistakes and improve their writing performance.

The study has demonstrated that free-writing is a crucial prewriting technique that helps students to overcome expression barriers. Students revealed that free-writing improved their writing competence, removed the fear of writing in a foreign language, and encouraged them to write fluently. Upon completing the study, students were able to pay attention to instructions and engage in an organized writing process. They were also able to write long paragraphs with minimum effort.

Writing skills are not the first thing that EFL students prefer to work on due to its intimidating process; however, writing is a necessary skill that needs to be mastered. This study has demonstrated that free-writing encouraged students to write without concern because they were asked to write in their minds first before they put it all on paper. Free-writing has proven to be useful in decreasing the average number of spelling mistakes. It prompted the students to pay attention to the writing conventions of capitalizations and the differences between proper and common nouns in the English language. Moreover, the free-writing program encouraged the students to be aware of the writing conventions in terms of punctuations such as avoiding run-ons, comma places in different types of sentences, that is, compound sentences, compound-complex sentences, and dependent and independent clauses.

The study results present two primary implications. First, Saudi curriculum designers and material developers should emphasize the free-writing journal method in writing course syllabi and writing instruction materials to assist students to write in a stress-free environment. Second, writing instructors should include free-writing journals as a learning practice to promote students’ written language, particularly the use of learned vocabularies in meaningful contexts.

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