

## Original Paper

# Focus Group Discussions to Explore Learner Issues When Writing

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### **Abstract**

*Writing is the most essential skill and all learners must develop regardless of the professions they aspire to pursue. Writing is a big challenge for both native and non-native students especially in the advancement of technology. It is the biggest challenge to the students of English as a foreign language. Using qualitative research methodologies in the classroom teaching and student learning experiences in higher education gains an in-depth understanding of the learners' issues. The aims of the study were to implement Focus Group Discussions to explore learner issues when writing. The students of a Preparatory year Program of a Public University of Saudi Arabia were selected for this study and their issues of writing English were focused. The research data were collected through questionnaires, interviews and collaborative formative assessment. The data collected through the research tools were then analyzed using descriptive statistics and comparative methods. The findings reveal that the major problems in EFL learners' writing are insufficient linguistic proficiency in general, organization of weak structures, L1 influence, writing anxiety, lack of ideas, problems in grammar, vocabulary and syntax in particular. The study also sheds light on the remedial measures such as using online applications, vocabulary practice and innovative teaching methods.*

### **Keywords**

*focus Group Discussion, descriptive analysis, writing habits, writing attitude, difficulty in writing*

### **1. Introduction**

In the trend of globalization that happens worldwide, English occupies the dominant position as it is the "Lingua franca" widely used for all international transactions. Among the four English skills of language learning (listening, speaking, reading and writing), writing is a very important skill but commonly known as the most difficult and the most ignored skill although it plays a crucial role in language production.

Writing is the least favorite skill of the learners and the success in improving writing skills depends on the success of the other language skills like listening, speaking and reading. A learner must focus on both productive and receptive skills. Speaking and writing are productive skills where listening and reading are receptive skills. In the EFL curriculum of English, writing is the most important skill to obtain for the learners' academic achievement and for their future career development. Browker (2007) talks about the importance of writing skills and he argues that writing skill is the most required in many contexts throughout life. Hyland (2003) believes that performance in language development is subject to improvement in writing skills. Brown (2000) says, "In school, writing is the most crucial part and the way of life with which learners pass the course; without some ability to express themselves in writing, they don't pass the course" (p. 339) Kellogg (2001) believes that writing is a cognitive process that tests memory, thinking ability and verbal command to successfully express the ideas; because proficient composition of a text indicates successful learning of a second language. Nunan (2003) defines: "Writing is both a physical and a mental act. Though students write emails and text messages to their friends, writing is the most difficult task for the learners and there is no exception for learners who learn English as a foreign language. As compared to the other three communicative skills, Hedge (1988) says that "a writing activity often requires many factors such as a good ability to develop ideas and information, high level of accuracy to help readers avoid misunderstandings, the use of diversified grammatical structures, syntax, and vocabulary." Organization of these linguistic competences helps to create a particular writing style in accordance with the theme and purpose of writing to the target readers. Nunan (1989) mentioned that, "writing is the most complex and difficult-to-learn skill for those who learn English as a foreign language because writing is an extremely complex, cognitive activity where the writer is required to demonstrate control of a number of variables like lexis, grammar and word order simultaneously". Fareed, Ashraf, and Bilal (2016) argue that "A text of an effective ESL writer must be cohesive, logical, clearly structured, interesting and properly organized with a wide range of vocabulary and mastery of conventions in mechanics".

Normally the EFL learners have the habit of thinking in their mother tongue then translating word by word into English, in spite of the repeated instructions of the EFL teachers insisting the learners to think and write in English as much as possible. The investigator has observed that the EFL learners face many challenges in writing due to the lack of linguistic competence like vocabulary and grammar knowledge and she has concluded that writing appears problematic to the learners. Hence the investigator has decided to conduct focus group discussions exploring learner's issues when writing.

### *1.1 Rationale*

The purpose of this study is to look into the challenges the students encounter when learning to write English, and identify factors hindering their writing skills. This research focuses on analyzing students' problems and difficulties in writing and obtaining flexible and proper recommendations for improving their writing skills. This study aims to find out the EFL learners issues in writing and discuss possible solutions to minimize and remove the issues. The researcher has used focus group discussions in

exploring EFL learners' issues when writing.

### *1.2 Research Questions*

This qualitative research was conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. What difficulties do EFL learners have in writing English?
2. What causes these difficulties in writing English?
3. What are the ways and means to overcome these difficulties?
4. What are the recommendations for improving students' English writing skills?

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

Writing is an important skill in language production. It is a developmental process that can be observed and encouraged. Writing skill which is one of the four major language skills, has been given emphasis based on the prescribed syllabus designed by my University of Saudi Arabia. In the EFL context, students of level 2 face many challenges in writing and they consider this writing skill as a difficult one. Students lack knowledge of appropriate vocabulary. They also have difficulties in grammar and syntax. They make mistakes in subject-verb agreement, tenses, articles, pronouns, prepositions, and basic sentence structures. The investigator would like to focus on encouraging the learners who have these problems in writing paragraphs through focus group discussions. Therefore the present study is designed as a Focus group discussion to investigate the problems in writing paragraphs and encourage them to improve the skill of writing paragraphs in general and obtain good scores in the writing part of their exams in particular.

## **3. Focus Group Discussion**

"Focus group discussion in qualitative research refers to a data collection method that focuses on discussing and exchanging opinions and experiences with the participants and in this method, the researcher can observe the participants' interactions with each other and talk to them, thus covering the various issues that have emerged during the conversation and using them for further analysis." (Barbour, 2010) According to Bader and Rossi (2002) a focus group is the label given to a special type of group interview and discussions that are structured to gather detailed opinions and knowledge about a particular topic from selected participants. Pinter (2006) claims that there is no effective formula to teach young children writing, not even the ones who have English as their mother tongue (L1) or those how to have English as a second language (L2). Whether writing is introduced in the child's curriculum depends on many factors such as the age of the kids, the level of exposure to English, and their ability to write in their first language. The process of learning the task of how to write in English is a complex one and usually takes a long time and a continuous practice to acquire.

A focus group discussion method is selected as a tool for this classroom research. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) is one of the best research tools to gather opinions, ideas and thoughts of a group of students who belong to similar experiences and to discuss a specific topic of interest. The group of

participants is guided by the researcher who introduces the topic of discussion and helps the group to participate in a lively and natural way amongst themselves. FGD relies on helping the participants by providing an insight into how a group thinks about an issue or a common problem, providing a range of opinions and ideas and to agree or disagree with others to gain views and opinions of the topic of interest. My target students are those who have problems in writing paragraphs.

### *3.1 Description of Learners*

The preparatory year program is a one year study plan in the first year of all undergraduate students which consists of two levels and each level is a semester. There are two tracks followed in the preparatory English courses: general and academic. The preparatory year program is established to provide students with the vocabulary and grammatical structures needed for their university education and everyday living. This program provides the English language learner the opportunity to grasp the academic, social and cultural aspects of the English language through the teaching of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Participants are from a general English class of level 2. (Track 102-CEFR A2) The learners are between the ages of 18-21. This is a monolingual mixed ability class. 40% of the students are stronger than the rest of the class therefore they find the course book too easy. With regards to motivation, all students feel that learning English is necessary for the betterment of their lives and for the improvement of their educational prospects here in my college. All of the learners in this class are highly motivated and enjoy tasks however some students feel shy and avoid participation.

The general weakness of the class is that they have limited proficiency in English and limited vocabulary and they understand simple comments and instructions.

A few of the below average students are repeaters and they are mostly discouraged. They have difficulty working in pairs and also have difficulty in independent work. Sometimes they ‘turn off’ to listening and classroom participation.

- Sample of an above average student:

Student xxxxxx is very confident and has a good level of fluency. She is very active in the class. She catches up on concepts very quickly and shows enthusiasm in the classroom participation. She is very smart and a regular student in the class. She is a very independent worker and she shows deep subject interest.

- Sample of an average student:

Student xxxxx has a satisfactory level of fluency in English but she makes spelling and grammar mistakes in writing. She takes leave frequently.

- Sample of a below average student:

Student xxxxx is very shy. Avoidant and feel very shy and stressed to participate in the class. She is able to express ideas but often confuses learning concepts. Special care and attention are required for this student. She too takes leave frequently. She has very poor handwriting and spelling. She has trouble finding key concepts.

### 3.1.1 Length of the Focus Group Discussion

To fully explore the discussion topic it was set to have 45 minutes to one hour for each discussion every day conducted for two weeks.

### 3.1.2 Selection of Participants

The study examined 8 Saudi female students who were studying their preparatory year in the English Language Institute (ELI) of a public University of Saudi Arabia. The learners are between the age of 18 and 21 years. The participants were studying level 102 that is equivalent to the pre-intermediate level in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) The sampling used for this research is the convenience sampling strategy of the Non-Probability sampling. The participants were selected who have problems in writing and homogeneity was maintained in this group. Before starting the research, the writing ability of the selected students was analyzed from their progress test 1 and mid-semester exams.

### 3.1.3 Preparing for the Focus Group Discussion

At the beginning of the focus group discussion, the researcher has created a thoughtful and permissive atmosphere, explaining the rules and expectations and setting the tone of the discussion. Students were explained about the discussion and they were given a consent form to sign on participating in this focus group discussion. It was ensured that everyone felt comfortable in expressing their opinions and sharing their ideas.

## 4. Data Collection Tools

### 4.1 Questionnaire

In the first group discussion, students' discussed their difficulties in writing a paragraph. A questionnaire consisting of 14 questions was used to locate their difficulties in writing a paragraph. On the follow up day of discussion, their inabilities in writing a paragraph were analyzed personally on one to one basis and ideas were given to improve their writing in English in general and writing paragraphs in particular. The third discussion was a one to one discussion where students' ideas and opinions about writing a paragraph overcoming their difficulties in writing were analyzed.

### 4.2 Interview

An interview was conducted using 10 major open-ended questions to discuss their ideas about writing. A natural conversation emerged from the students based on the prompts given by me like how to write a good sentence, how to choose vocabulary, how to use prepositions, articles and linkers, how to correct and change punctuations, how to edit a paragraph etc. Participants talked about their own difficulties, feelings and opinions about writing in English.

### 4.3 Collaborative Formative Assessment

Collaborative formative assessment procedures were conducted during the research process in order to improve students' achievement of intended outcomes. It typically involved qualitative feedback rather than scores that focused on the details of the content. This assessment technique was followed by peer correction where participants corrected their peers' writings in the process of focus group discussion.

A pre-survey was conducted with another set of students for the consolidation of the questions. Experts' opinions were gathered for the final consolidation of questions. With their opinion, few questions were corrected and added. The data collected during the survey were computerized and analyzed using descriptive statistics and comparative methods. Along with the research questions, the writing part of the mid-term test was also considered in accordance with the analysis criteria.

## **5. Discussions and Findings**

### *5.1 Focus Group Discussion*

To open the discussion, the group was asked what their general concerns about writing a paragraph. All eight participants who took part in the focus group discussion stated that they do not have a practice of writing in English in general and they did not write in English outside of their classroom or in the examination. They said that they tried to write in English in the English classrooms, while participating in the classroom activities and during examinations. Few students of the group said that they use English outside the classrooms through messaging, sending emails etc. But the majority of the students agreed that they never tried to practice writing.

The first question from the questionnaire is "Can you write a good paragraph?" and this question was asked to the students. Few students replied that they could write a good paragraph. Two of them strongly disagreed that they couldn't write a paragraph. After that every question from the questionnaire was asked one by one and the participants answered accordingly. All agreed that they could start the beginning of a paragraph using the given information or instructions to write a paragraph, but they agreed that they have problems in using proper vocabulary and using proper tenses, prepositions and other linkers. They said that they practice writing only in the classrooms when writing tasks were given to them in the classroom. Apart from the classroom practice they never tried writing in English at home or outside the classrooms. In general, all participants strongly agreed that they do not show any interest in writing English outside the classroom.

In regard to teacher's feedback and peer correction in the classroom works, most of them agreed that they were useful to identify their errors. Participants were asked whether technology helps them to increase their writing ability. All participants agreed that it is difficult for them to write their ideas on paper but they are interested in using Whatsapp, emails, twitter, blogs and other electronic media. They liked pre-writing and post-writing activities in the class which helps them to practice writing and this activity is very useful for their exam-oriented preparations. A few of them agreed that they have problems in using linkers and vocabulary and three of them strongly agreed that they have major problems in using linkers and proper vocabulary. Five of them agreed that they have difficulties in using a variety of sentence patterns and in using different tenses. All agreed that they have major problems in spelling and punctuation.

### 5.2 Interview

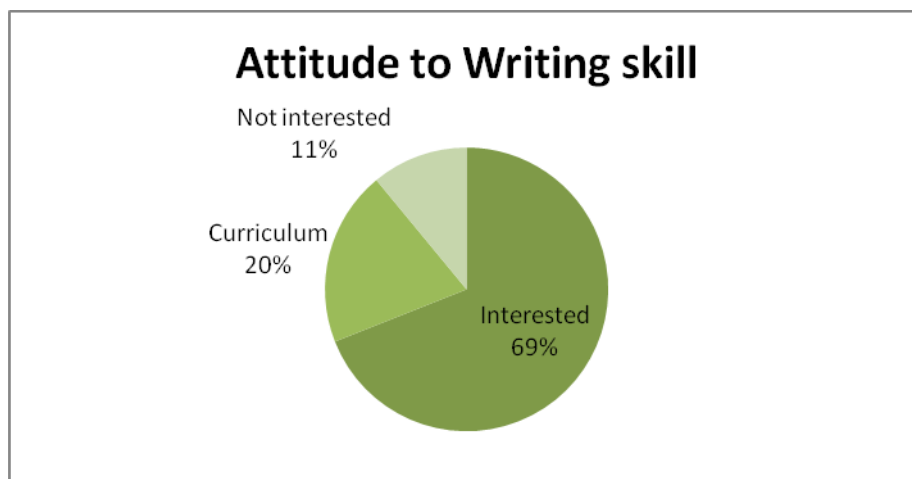
In the one to one interviews, all participants agreed that writing in English is very important for them to communicate with others, for their higher studies and to use technology but they said that they have problems in bringing quality in a piece of writing. The disappointments they have had in writing a paragraph are their low self-confidence, insufficient writing practice and language difficulties. They wanted to improve areas like tenses, articles, prepositions and using connectors. They really wanted to improve their vocabulary. They agreed that they have problems in subject-verb agreement, using adjectives, adverbs and conditional sentences, using since and for, confusions in using prepositions and articles. They said that they mix up the present simple and the past perfect.

### 5.3 Collaborative Formative Assessment

Participants exchanged their pieces of writing and corrected for all expected outcomes. Participants expressed their appreciation of this particular writing practice because they would provide “more chances to get feedback and more chances to do better” as expressed by one of the participants.

### 5.4 Students' Attitude in Writing

In general, students' attitudes towards writing have a significant impact on their achievement. English is taught at all stages of the educational system starting from the primary classes but students learn English as a foreign language keeping it at a distance, despite their exposure to English at the early stages. Erkan and Saban (2001) argues, “Success with writing in a foreign language may be related to attitudes towards writing, apprehension about writing, and self- efficacy in writing.” (p. 168)



**Figure 1. Students' Attitude Towards Writing**

Graham, Harris, and Mason (2005) stated that writing attitude is “an affective disposition involving how the act of writing makes the author feel, ranging from happy to unhappy” (p. 518). Among the participants, few of them showed negative attitudes towards writing. They fear making mistakes and they do not have confidence to express their thoughts through writing as it is challenging and beyond their capability. When a question was asked to them about the importance of writing, all of them agreed

that writing is a part of their language curriculum. 69% of the participants showed their interest in learning writing skills. 20% of the participants expressed that they write because it is a part of their curriculum. 11% of the participants mentioned that they do not like writing.

### 5.5 Students Writing Habits

In one of the discussions, participants' writing habits were analyzed using a questionnaire. 72% of the participants agreed that they write the piece of writing in their mother tongue and translate it in English. Sometimes they use online translators. 46% of the students have the habit of following the writing steps like writing a rough draft and fair draft. 58% of the students have the habit of writing only in the exams as it is part of a curriculum. But they expressed their interest in texting messages online. 32% of the students are good at writing and they use compound and complex sentences in writing. 59% of the students refer to online sources and check for a sample pieces of writings.

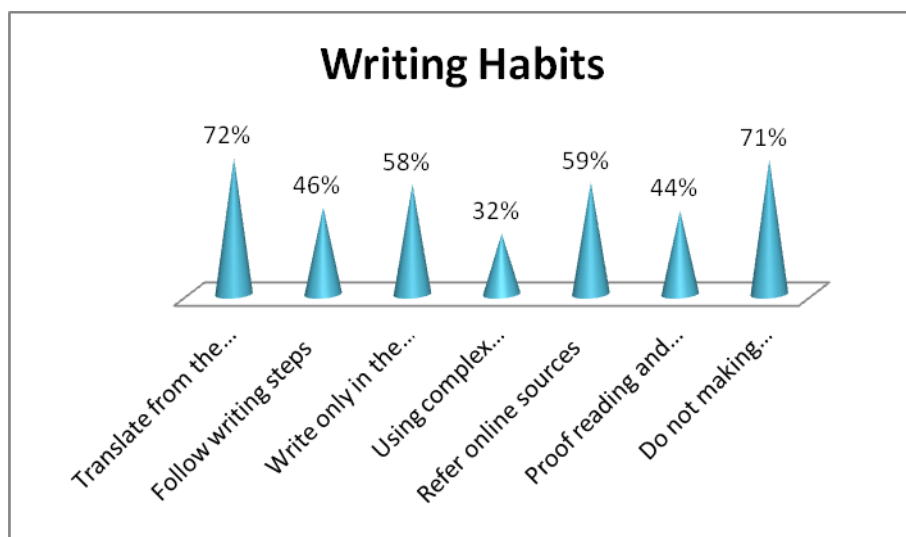


Figure 2. Students' Writing Habits

44% of the students do proofreading and correction to checking grammar and spelling mistakes. 71% of the students do not make outlines for writing. It is worth mentioning that almost all the participants are interested in using Whatsapp, Instagram and Twitter using short terms and grammar free sentences and they do not actively practice writing at home unless otherwise insisted by the instructor.

### 5.6 Range of Difficulty in Writing

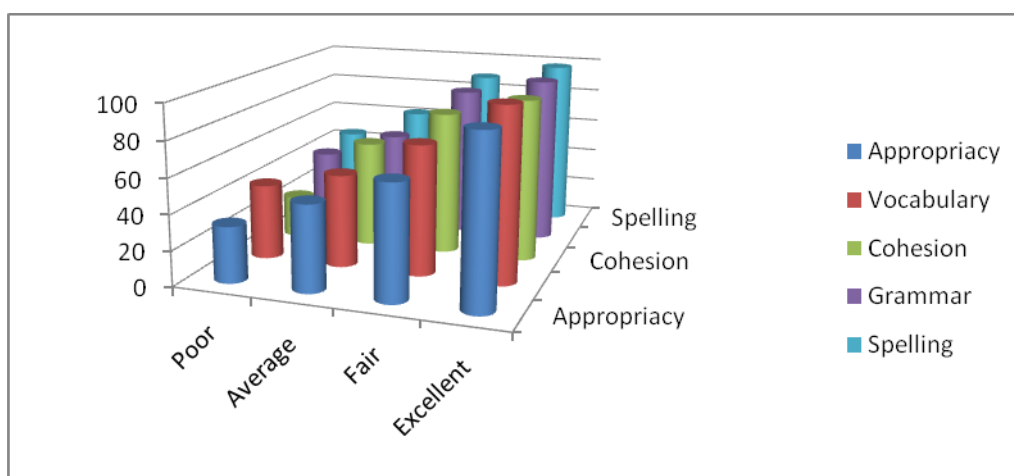
In fact, participants encountered a lot of difficulties in writing to meet the criteria of a good piece of writing. The preparatory year students learn English from their primary level and they have favorable conditions in learning English. But they have great trouble in writing. To analyze their difficulty in writing, the researcher has administered two essay writing tests, one from their course book and the other from their topic of interest. The participants' range of difficulty in writing was analyzed from these two essays. Writing appropriacy, usage of vocabulary, cohesion, grammar and spelling were



focused and the range was derived in terms of percentage. A percentage score below 35 is considered as poor, the range up to 50 is considered as average. Above 50 to below 75 is fair and above 75 is considered excellent. The following table and the bar diagram shows the range of difficulty in writing.

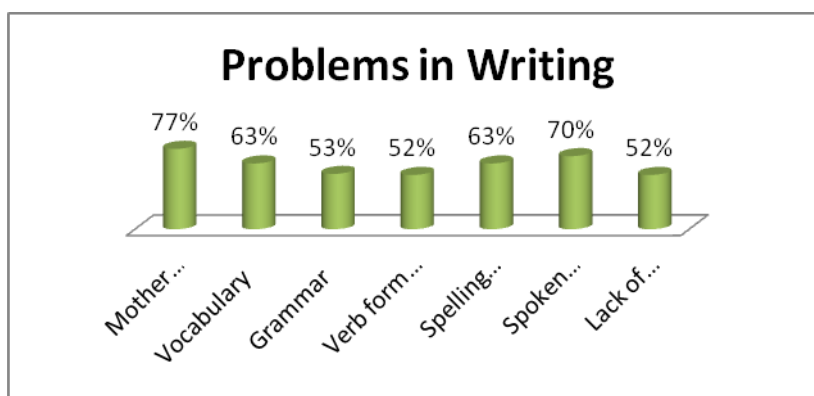
**Table 1. Participants Range of Difficulty in Writing**

	Appropriacy	Vocabulary	Cohesion	Grammar	Spelling
<b>Poor</b>	32	43	24	41	45
<b>Average</b>	49	53	61	56	62
<b>Fair</b>	65	74	82	87	89
<b>Excellent</b>	95	99	93	96	98



**Figure 3. Difficulty of Writing in Terms of Percentage**

*5.7 Problems in Writing*



**Figure 4. Problems in Writing**

The ESL learners' problems in writing were analyzed from the sample essays under 7 categories. It is evident that the learners make 77% of errors that occur due to the influence of mother tongue writing styles, which made the development of English writing skills much more difficult. Students agreed that they lack knowledge of appropriate vocabulary. They also shared the fact that they use translators to get a correct and equivalent English word. 63% of the mistakes happen due to this problem. 53% of the mistakes occurred due to grammar issues. They have issues in verb forms and word order and 52% of the errors caused due to this problem. Spelling and punctuation errors were also there up to 63%. As this newest generation Z uses chatting applications like Whatsapp, Signal, Telegram and so on in abundance and they are practiced in using, "captions, hash tags and short forms." Students use these short forms in their formal writing also unconsciously and 70% of the errors occur due to this issue. In the formative and summative assessments, objective scoring is followed for the other three skills like listening, speaking and reading, whereas subjectivity is used for writing. This restriction causes students to encounter many difficulties and often make mistakes in writing, making them feel a lack of confidence and motivation in the subject. 52% of the errors occur due to this reason.

## **6. Analysis of Implications of the Findings**

There are several factors hindering the development of writing skills of EFL learners. Writing is not given much more importance and students write only in the examinations for the sake of passing the course. Most of the students expressed their love for writing in English and only 11% of the students stated that they were not interested in writing. Negative attitudes of the learners make the writing more demanding and challenging. Students' writing habits shape their proficiency in writing. Students shared about their habit of translating word by word using online translation applications and they copy and paste the original translation without checking the content. Mother tongue influence is their major problem in writing. It is worth mentioning that students take their cultural aspects into consideration while writing. They have insufficient linguistic proficiency and they have problems in using proper vocabulary, grammar, spelling, syntax and punctuation. They do not have the habit of writing outlines and they lack motivation in writing. They use captions, hash tags and unofficial contractions in writing due to their poor texting habits on mobile phones. Students write matters in chunks and cohesiveness is missing in their writing. Poor linguistic competence of the EFL students and the availability of time for practice writing in the classrooms are other reasons.

### *6.1 Reflection*

The researcher has strongly believed that the classroom project would be a wonderful opportunity for helping her students and gain one more research experience in the classrooms. It was a good experience that the participants discussed more on writing which is always a challenging task for them being EFL students. The participants became more motivated about their writing and openly and wholeheartedly discussed their inabilities to write and they freely discussed their problems in writing in English. The participants realized that focus group discussion is an appropriate technique that encourages learners and

teachers to openly talk about issues in writing that they may have which makes them more aware and encouraged to work on these areas. This technique can stimulate the students to openly discuss their individual problems and get ideas to overcome the difficulties of writing. Moreover, students can propose their ideas orally and be accustomed to speaking up freely within the group. This technique can improve the self-confidence of students.

While discussing grammar mistakes in writing, the researcher has applied two interesting techniques called collaborative learning and peer correction. To do these, participants worked in pairs with another participant and exchanged their piece of writing in order to check other partner's errors. Then the investigator rechecked their writing and asked them to write one or two sentences to practice writing and make sure it was free of grammar and punctuation mistakes. Participants were interested and motivated to write when they were asked to write about a popular person and a place in their country, describing their dream houses and their future life after five years. This method worked really well on that day of discussion. All participants agreed that this skill of writing needs to be refined and practiced constantly and regularly. Focus group discussion is the best technique to deal with the shortage of time for in-class writing.

The researcher had a great understanding of the difficulties of her participants in writing and helped them by giving valuable measures to improve the same. It's also worth mentioning that focus group discussion can be used as a quantitative data gathering method, something seen as very valuable to researchers to discuss and find out the actual opinions of the participants.

## 7. Conclusion

"There are numerous reasons for writing to be the last acquired domain of learning English, one being that a more detailed and analyzed knowledge of a language is needed to write it than to understand it" (Bialystok & Ryan, 1985). Students have very little interest in writing which is not sufficient to fulfill their educational requirements. The researcher has diagnosed several shortcomings in the writing of her students which have included mistakes in spelling, grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, articles, preposition, tenses, sentence construction and paragraphing. Benjamin Franklin famously said that he taught himself to write by memorizing essays by Addison and Steele, the paragons of those days and practice writing them out, writing slowly one sentence at a time until he got them perfectly memorized but in this 21<sup>st</sup> century of technology, EFL students have much more interesting and motivating factors spread around to acquire a perfect writing skill. To make writing interesting and efficient, learners need to be involved in most of the writing activities.

- ❖ It's a powerful technique to have students write about something they like, they have read or seen like watching a movie and write about it.
- ❖ Learners need to be motivated to write their own dairy.
- ❖ Students can be encouraged to write poems and short interesting stories or incidents and get it published in the classroom.

- ❖ They must be encouraged to start writing in any way they can.
- ❖ It's like a fun game and the best ones can be posted in the classroom bulletin and the class can get a chance to criticize and analyze the written text. This technique encourages learners to participate confidently.
- ❖ Students must be given more practice to write paragraphs in a classroom environment and review them on the spot to highlight areas that need improvements.
- ❖ Very close guidance of a teacher is vital in ensuring their progress.
- ❖ Students can be encouraged to improve their English vocabulary through an internet search or google translate to find out meaning, synonyms, antonyms, grammar, sentence constructions etc.
- ❖ Extensive reading in English is an important activity in learning to write well.
- ❖ Students can be given opportunities to read more English books including reading aloud.
- ❖ Sentence translation both to and from the native language is a better practice to improve writing.
- ❖ Teachers should conduct continuous sessions to involve students in a series of writing assignments and writing exercises.

Teachers should choose appropriate writing tasks and proper writing courses that match students' needs and interests and to perform with their language level. Grabe and Kaplan (1997) say that writing course should engage students in the writing process at each stage of writing like pre writing, drafting and revising. They also write that writing course should incorporate cooperative learning activities which are based on relevant and interesting topics to learners. Most of the Saudi universities use "Blackboard" as their official learning management system and there are a lot of scopes to encourage students to write. Teachers can use blended learning methods like using "Google Classroom, MOODLE" and so on. Cao (2015) says, "the application of MOODLE-based online teaching to writing skills play an important role in improving students' writing skills." Teaching writing skills can be problematic to learners who hate writing. It is the responsibility of every English teacher to find suitable ways to teach writing. There are "n" number of online applications available to teach writing. Few such apps are "icanwrite, Sentence Builder, Clean Writer, iDeas for Writing, Writing Prompts, Popplet, Story Builder, Toontastic, etc.". Using these apps, teachers can encourage freelance writing. It will promote students' creativity and imagination. Sharing writing structures is another way of encouraging students to write. Group writing and Peer-Review are other best ideas to encourage students for writing. The combined learning method of traditional and online learning not only helps increase the imagination and efficiency of the subject but also gives students the opportunity to study outside the classroom.

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