

Writing Proficiency Levels Among Arabic and English Language Student Teachers and their Perceptions of Challenges in Writing Skill

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were to compare the writing proficiency levels between Arabic and EFL student teachers, measure the differences in the perceptions of both parties of challenges concerning writing skills, and identify the most common types of writing mistakes made by both of them. The study was based on a sample of 72 Arabic (n=40) and EFL (n= 32) Saudi student teachers. A mixed quantitative and qualitative approach was used in this study, where the analysis of writing proficiency levels was based on the participants' written samples and information on the perceptions of challenges concerning writing skills was collected using a five Likert-scale ranked questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The results of a Mann-Whitney U Test revealed a statistically significant difference between Arabic and EFL student teachers in the content, grammar and sentence structure of written materials, legibility, organisation, and overall writing skill proficiency levels in favour of the EFL student teachers. No statistically significant difference was found between the two groups regarding spelling and punctuation proficiency levels. Regarding perceptions of challenges concerning writing skills and subskills, the results revealed a statistically significant difference in favour of EFL student teachers. The replies to the open-ended question revealed writing challenges faced by both Arabic and EFL student teachers. The results of the semi-structured interviews showed that that both Arabic and EFL student teachers made some common types of mistakes while writing on the board or designing activities at home. The study concludes with some practical implications, recommendations, and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Writing Proficiency, Arabic & English Student Teacher, Perceptions, Writing Challenges, Common Writing Mistakes

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1. Introduction

All the language skills are equally important for learning and communication, but writing becomes more important in academic disciplines because it is one of the main methods used to examine the performance of students in their fields of study (Mohammad & Hazarika, 2016). Flynn and Stainthorp (2006) refer to writing as "a highly complex task that requires the orchestration of a number of different activities simultaneously and thereby places great demands on the cognitive system" (p.54). They added that writing also makes considerable demands upon [students'] limited processing capacity (p.61). Richards and Schmidt (2010) relate this complexity to the mix of different writing processes of planning, drafting, reviewing and revising that students are required to go through. Richards and Schmidt describe the writing process as "the strategies, procedures, and decision-making employed by writers as they write" (p.640). Generally, teachers need to teach students to use these strategies and procedures effectively when they are writing in their first, second, or a foreign language. Nation (2009) relates the difficulty of writing skill to its essential seven sub-processes, namely; (1) setting the goals; (2) having a model; (3) gathering ideas; (4) organising ideas; (5) turning ideas into written text; (6) reviewing; and (7) editing (p.114). Nation (2009) also highlights the fact that the writing sub-processes play a vital role in helping students improve their writing skills and helping teachers to locate sources of writing difficulties.

Although writing has long been considered as the major medium of language, in recent years there has been an increasing interest in oral language skills and great importance is being placed on the ability to speak accurately and fluently (Fati, 2013). Although, as described by Blikstad-Balas, Roe, and Klette (2018), being able to write well is considered a key aspect of educational success and lack of writing skill is a matter of considerable concern; hence, there is an increasing need to improve students' writing abilities leading to high expectations within schools. Sparks, Song, Brantley, and Liu (2014) reported that students' ability to write proficiently is particularly important in higher education and is considered a critical student-learning outcome (p.1). When students write down their thoughts, they will be able to examine their ideas, reconsider them, change them if necessary, and become more proficient in writing.

According to Sparks et al. (2014), writing proficiency is "the intersection of social, conceptual, and

linguistic processes in the writing process, providing a comprehensive view of what skilled written communication involves, which can be used to obtain more complete evidence of students' proficiency with various aspects of writing" (p.45). There is evidence that many students do not feel sufficiently proficient to cope with the demands of university learning. In their study, [Bacon and Anderson \(2004\)](#) found that students' written skills do not improve substantially throughout four years of college. Therefore, students' writing proficiency needs to be enhanced and improved thoroughly. [Jahin and Idrees \(2012\)](#) indicate that, despite being exposed to instruction for a long time at different levels, university students show very low levels of writing proficiency. In spite of the time and effort they spend on trying to improve their writing skills, students cannot go beyond the basics and have difficulty developing their language writing proficiency. [Sultan \(2013\)](#) highlights the problem of poor writing skill in many secondary schools in the UK. [Sultan](#) claims that the problem is ongoing for teachers, as well as students. Hence, he calls for an urgent change of the educational policy and a recognition of the importance of academic writing. For [Liao \(2016\)](#), writing skill helps students convey their thoughts in fluent, correct, and coherent texts. [Morgana \(2017\)](#) found that the language proficiency of Arab university students is not due to the nature of the Arabic language, but to the methods of teaching the Arabic language. [Morgana](#) adds that students' language proficiency should not be measured in terms of stored linguistic knowledge, but through the ability to produce, understand and distinguish the written word in various communicative situations. Moreover, it is insufficient to focus on linguistic performance systems (form-use content) to achieve writing proficiency; university students should be able to conduct linguistic discourse analysis, use language resources and any supportive electronic media.

Several studies have documented the problems and challenges presented by writing skills in different contexts ([Ahmed & Myhill, 2016](#); [Al-Jarrah & Al-Ahmad, 2013](#); [Bakry & Alsamadani, 2015](#); [McMullen, 2009](#); [Mohammad & Hazarika, 2016](#)). While researching writing subskills, [Al-zuoud and Kabilan \(2013\)](#) examined four types of spelling mistakes made by students in written composition. The results indicate that most spelling errors made are substitution and omission errors. A study conducted by [Khasawneh \(2013\)](#) found that poor spelling continues to be a major weakness among Arabic language teachers. Their results showed that Arabic language student teachers still face problems in spelling and need to practice and improve their performance before they start to teach. The results of a study conducted by [Subhi and Yasin \(2015\)](#) indicate a high percentage of spelling errors in Iraqi students' writing compositions, specifically omissions, insertions, and wrong use of vowels in multi-syllabic words.

With regard to punctuation, [Benzer \(2010\)](#) reports that Turkish university students struggle with punctuation in their native language. Students stress that they know the rules regarding punctuation but are out of practice. [Hirvela, Nussbaum, and Pierson \(2012\)](#) report that, although university students have a positive attitude toward punctuation, they expressed some issues when using punctuation in the writing context.

With regard to handwriting, [Erdogan and Erdogan \(2012\)](#) analysed the cursive handwriting of school teachers from the perspective of legibility. Their results indicate that school teachers have some issues when it comes to writing the letters f, g, h, j, l, r, s and y, the size of the letters, the spaces between letters, observation of lines, and spacing between words.

With regard to grammar, [Afshunpour and Memari \(2014\)](#) investigated how Iranian university students use knowledge of the native language to produce idiomatic expressions in sentence writing. The results show that the participants used knowledge of their first language and some of them chose the literal meaning of the idioms.

[Ahmed \(2019\)](#) indicated that Saudi students commit errors of unity and coherence, and that their written performance is characterised by ineffective organisation of ideas, lack of transitional markers and the misuse of cohesive markers. He added that the students' written paragraphs are characterised by an inconsistency in tense, omission of linking words, and the wrong selection of pronouns. [Ahmed](#) reported that EFL students' problems with writing coherent and unified paragraphs are attributed to (a) insufficient knowledge about techniques of coherence and unity of paragraph writing; (b) lack of motivation; (c) interference of mother tongue; and (d) inappropriate teaching of writing skills.

[Al-Zubaidi \(2012\)](#) argues that, nowadays, there is no room for the traditional educational systems of Arab countries that typically utilise exam-based education and tend to ignore the importance of innovative learning strategies in writing such as oral presentations, graphic organisers and brainstorming. Because of traditional educational systems, Arab students have serious writing proficiency issues including an inability to choose a topic, develop a research idea, and design an inquiry or project ([Al-Zubaidi, 2012](#)). Moreover, they face many linguistic difficulties when it comes to summarising papers, paraphrasing and using correct grammar. Students often express their fear of criticism and interaction with their classmates or teachers during writing classes (*ibid*).

In light of the writing skills deficiencies highlighted above it appears to be necessary to increase the opportunity for teaching-learning writing practices in the classroom. For example, integrating speaking, listening and reading to contribute to the development of writing ([Moss, 2002](#)); using mind mapping to help students plan and organise their ideas for writing tasks ([Al-Naqbi, 2011](#)) and using self-assessment techniques such as reflective writing exercises to help university students to become better writers ([Lawrence, 2013](#)). Classroom

activities based on practical and real-life situations are also recommended (Mohammad & Hazarika, 2016).

Koster, Bouwer, and Bergh (2017) write that, in the Netherlands and many other countries, concerns have been raised about the writing proficiency of language student teachers in terms of teaching students to “[be] able to write coherent texts, with a simple linear structure on various familiar topics; the text includes an introduction, body, and ending” (p.1). Koster et al. (2017) specified two reasons for the shortcomings of language student teachers: (1) lack of suitable teaching materials, and (2) lack of the necessary skills and knowledge to teach writing effectively (p.2). Teacher educators in preparation programmes often do not explain how student teachers should approach a writing task, discuss it, and provide constructive feedback. Nor do they encourage re-reading and revising drills for practice. Thus, according to the authors, not only do the writing teaching materials need to be improved, but also the skills and knowledge of language student teachers need to be extended to improve writing instruction. Similarly, in the Saudi system, much more attention has been paid to the needs of students learning to write correctly than to those of teachers learning to teach competently. In Saudi teacher preparation programmes, the time allotted to developing writing skill is usually very limited; student teachers are expected to acquire writing proficiency and knowledge autonomously through practical experience. During their training programme, language student teachers have to do a great deal of writing but, due to lack of time, inadequate supervision and resources, they hardly ever receive feedback on their writing.

Ibrahim (2013) described the practicum practice as an essential component in the process of learning to teach. He added that it might lead to deep personal and professional knowledge and development of student teachers and ease their future induction. Jiang (2017) states that the practicum may help student teachers to transition smoothly from their academic programme to teaching in schools. However, as described by Kızılaslan (2011), student teachers do not possess all the writing competencies required by the Ministry of Education and require further training. Lewis and Sanchez (2017) state that, when student teachers lack confidence as writers, they are not able to teach writing and guide their students to become skillful writers. As many language student teachers have reported, they are often not ready to teach writing to their students when they find themselves in the real classroom during the practicum (Larsen, 2016).

During the process of the literature review, only a few studies were found that investigate the writing proficiency of language student teachers and their perceptions of the challenges concerning writing skills and subskills. The results of a study conducted by Alkhodairy (2002) reveal that the writing performance of Arabic student teachers during the practicum was poor. According to Alkhodairy, this result confirms that the graduates of the Arabic Language Department have weak writing skills even when they have completed the general, specialised and educational courses in their preparation programmes. The study highlights the importance of implementing well-designed practical writing activities to evoke student teachers’ positive participation and interaction. Manna’a (2007) found that the lowest performance of Arabic student teachers was in writing skill, more specifically in spelling and punctuation. The results also confirmed that this may be due to the low level of teacher preparation programmes and inappropriately implemented teaching methods.

González (2008) explored how language student teachers developed their English language writing skills in a Colombian context. He collected data from written materials and a questionnaire. The participants reported that their poor writing skills dated back to elementary and secondary education. They added that most of their teachers instructed them using the controlled or guided composition that pertained to the traditional teaching method. Moreover, they reported a lack of emphasis on writing learning strategies such as taking notes, handling grammar, and structuring paragraphs.

Ismail (2011) investigated students’ perceptions of an academic writing course and writing in general. A questionnaire and a focus-group interview were used to gather data. The results demonstrated that the students held positive views on the writing course in particular and writing in general. The findings indicated that students were aware of writing requirements and their shortcomings. Jahin and Idrees (2012) explored student teachers’ writing proficiency and their attitudes to learning English. The results showed that 46% of the participants had a low writing proficiency level and more than two-thirds of participants (86%) held positive attitudes to learning English.

Saeed (2012) recommends that more attention be paid to Arabic teacher preparation programmes. He calls for an urgent shift of focus in the design of teacher preparation programmes from memorisation for tests to practice for mastery of required skills. Arslan (2013) investigated the extent to which the writing course contributes to the acquisition of basic conventions of written discourse when EFL student teachers are involved in extensive writing practices. The results suggest that exposing EFL student teachers to various genres by involving them in extensive writing practice positively enhances their writing proficiency in terms of text organisation, including relevant content, using appropriate language, producing correct grammar, and choosing related vocabulary.

Fati (2013) investigated the relationship between writing proficiency and the type of errors made by Moroccan students. The results indicated that students still did not use punctuation adequately. There was a problem with the use of the question mark, the period and the comma in both L1 and L2. Moreover, they did not

know how to use a capital letter in L2 and ran into difficulties with English grammar, especially the correct use of tense. They misspelled some words due to the interference of their mother tongue. They also wrongly used the definite and indefinite articles, used improper prepositions and chose inappropriate words.

Ahmedou (2016) contributed to the literature on Arabic writing skills when he revealed that the writing skills of Arabic students in higher institutions are very weak due to the inadequate vision of Arabic pedagogical instruction. He adds that they produce incoherent written texts because they lack critical writing and thinking skills which reflect their inability to convey their thoughts clearly.

2. Statement of problem

Within the Saudi educational system, student teachers are usually graduate students from different colleges who have enrolled in the Educational Diploma Programme (EDP) to qualify as teachers. Students who enrol in the Arabic and EFL student teacher programme must be graduates of the Arabic and English Departments of the College of Arts and Humanities at Taibah University. The courses offered by their respective departments cover all the language skills and language aspects. By the time, students who graduate and obtain their Bachelor's degree, they are expected to be experts in the Arabic and/or English language. The EDP then focuses on teacher training aspects; in other words, no language courses are offered in the programme.

As teacher educators in the EDP, the authors of this study have taught student teachers for many years. Moreover, they have been assigned to supervise and monitor language student teachers in the field. One of the issues that they have noted is that many student teachers came to the EDP with different levels of writing proficiency and different views on where their problems with writing lie. The practicum has often highlighted these problems. In class, they often commit grammar, spelling, and punctuation mistakes. They also write illegibly on the board. Furthermore, in some situations, Arabic and EFL student teachers have problems with structuring correct and meaningful sentences. The researchers have noted similar mistakes in the students' lesson planning handouts, their activities worksheets, quizzes, and other in-class task sheets.

Although the researchers, as supervisors, usually discuss these problems with the language teachers in the follow-up meetings, both Arabic and EFL student teachers face critical issues with respect to writing skills, which in turn, embarrass them in front of their young students, schoolteachers, and university supervisors.

In response to the above situation, the researchers decided to conduct a preliminary study to find out if the Arabic and EFL student teachers were aware of their writing skills deficiencies especially when teaching in schools. The researchers designed a self-evaluation sheet on which the students could rate their writing proficiency. In response to the first three-point Likert closed question, "How would you rate your writing proficiency level?" 27 Arabic student teachers and 21 EFL student teachers rated their writing proficiency 'moderate' with mean scores 2.11 and 1.71 respectively. In response to the second question, "On a scale from 1 to 10, how do you rate the importance of writing skills to your academic study?", both Arabic and EFL student teachers rated highly the importance of writing skills for their academic professions with mean scores 7.22 and 7.19 respectively. The result of the third three-point Likert closed question, "Do you believe in the importance of writing proficiency for your future profession as a language teacher?" emphasised the fact that Arabic and EFL student teachers believe that writing proficiency is highly important for their future profession, with mean scores of 2.96 and 2.76 respectively.

The responses to the open-ended question regarding the reasons other than their writing deficiency were treated as qualitative data, analysed and the results arranged in ascending frequency. Both the Arabic and EFL student teachers mentioned reasons such as lack of practice of writing skills, lack of reading skill that affected writing, and lack of self-improvement in writing skills. Further reasons that were mentioned were the low level of motivation to practice writing, high dependence on software that corrects mistakes when writing, the limited number of writing courses at university, the heavy use of multiple-choice tests in place of essay questions, anxiety and fear of making mistakes, and lack of self-confidence. The Arabic student teachers found that the heavy use of local Arabic (different accents), especially in social media, adds to writing difficulties. The EFL student teachers identified limited use of English in academic classes and the influence of the mother tongue as added hindrances to improving their writing skills.

The results of the preliminary study indicated a need to construct a better understanding of why language student teachers in Saudi teacher education programmes lack writing proficiency. Studies on writing proficiency in the context of teacher education are limited (Alagözülü, 2016; Ellis, Chong, & Choy, 2013; Larsen, 2016; Salski & Szubko-sitarek, 2016). As indicated by Lee (2010), most of the studies on first or foreign writing skills focus on the needs of the students learning to write more than on the needs of the teachers learning to teach. Hence, this study aims to (a) compare the writing proficiency levels between Arabic and EFL student teachers; (b) measure the differences in the perceptions of both parties of challenges concerning writing skills and (c) identify the most common types of writing mistakes made by student teachers when writing on the board and designing classroom activities, worksheets, and short quizzes.

3. Research questions

1. What are the differences between Arabic and EFL student teachers with regard to writing proficiency levels in the following subskills: content, spelling, grammar, punctuation, legibility, and text organisation?
2. What are the differences between Arabic and EFL student teachers with regard to their perceptions of challenges concerning writing skills and subskills?
3. What are the most common types of writing mistakes made by both Arabic and EFL student teachers: (a) when writing on the board; and (b) when designing classroom activities, worksheets, and short quizzes?

4. Statements of hypotheses

1. H_{01} . There is no significant difference at a 0.05 level between the mean scores of Arabic and EFL student teachers with regard to their writing proficiency levels.
2. H_{01} . There is no significant difference at a 0.05 level between the mean scores of Arabic and EFL student teachers with regard to their perceptions of the challenges concerning writing skills and subskills.

5. Research methodology

In this study, data is gathered using a mix of quantitative (an analysis of the written descriptive reports and the perception questionnaire) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews) methods to explore the writing proficiency levels and perceptions of both Arabic and EFL student teachers to writing challenges.

5.1 Population and sample of the study

In this study, the population comprises all the language students enrolled in the DEP (n=160) at Taibah University, Saudi Arabia during the second semester of the 2018 academic year; that is, 81 Arabic student teachers and 79 EFL student teachers. The study sample comprised 40 Arabic student teachers (49.38%) and 32 EFL student teachers (40.51%). The participants were assigned to teach in schools as a part of their teaching practicum period and they were observed by the researchers. Moreover, the researchers were also the teachers of the Practicum Courses of both majoring sections.

5.2 Instrumentation

To reach the research objectives, three data collection instruments were used, namely: a rubric to assess the written descriptive report, a questionnaire and semi-instructed interviews.

The primary instrument of data collection in this study is a three-point scale holistic scoring rubric. As explained by [Wahlstrom \(2010\)](#) and others ([Arslan, 2013](#); [Bielinska-Kwapisz, 2015](#); [Coombe, 2010](#)), the holistic scoring rubric was designed to focus on the following key elements: content, spelling, punctuation, grammar and sentence structure, legibility, and organisation. Additionally, each section in the holistic scoring rubric included the writing subskills to be measured. The rating scale ranged from “High Proficiency =36-42” to “Moderate Proficiency =29-35”, and “Limited Proficiency =less than 29”. The final version of the scoring rubric was translated into Arabic to fit the Arabic written texts. The rubric was explained and made available to the students in both groups. Students were encouraged to refer to the rubric while working on writing assignments.

The rubric was used to subjectively correct and assess the written texts that student teachers were instructed to write in the form of an individual descriptive report about the language textbooks that they had been using to teach in schools. The student teachers were required to write exactly 500 words that included personal views on the textbooks used by students in the third level of secondary school. They had to provide a detailed description of the textbook objectives, topics and sub-topics, language skills, language aspects, instructional activities, organisation and layout, and any supportive materials provided to teachers and/or learners. Participants were instructed to, as far as possible, use correct spelling, clear handwriting, good grammar, good paragraphing, correct punctuation, and linking words.

The second instrument was used to collect data from students through a questionnaire that aimed to identify the perceptions of Arabic and EFL student teachers of the challenges concerning writing skills at the end of their practicum. A 33-item, five-point Likert ranked questionnaire was especially designed based on the reviewed literature ([Al-Zubaidi, 2012](#); [Arslan, 2013](#); [Ghani et al., 2011](#); [Sağlamel & Kayaoğlu, 2015](#)). The close-ended questionnaire comprised of two sections covering perceptions of challenges concerning overall writing skill (13 items) and writing subskills (20 items). In order to ensure more reliable responses, the questionnaire was translated into Arabic. An open-ended question was also included to try and elicit other writing challenges. The free responses could yield insights, increase the validity of the questionnaire items and offer further suggestions.

Since qualitative data strengthens statistical findings, a semi-structured interview was used as a third research instrument to support the qualitative data. The questions were adapted from [Chaaban and Du \(2017\)](#), [Kamil, \(2011\)](#), and [Naqbi \(2011\)](#). These semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather further insight into Arabic and EFL student teachers' viewpoints and in-depth interpretations of the most common types of writing mistakes that both types of teachers do when writing on the board and designing classroom activities, worksheets,

and short quizzes in both languages.

To ensure that the structure of the holistic scoring rubric and the content of the questionnaire were valid, they were verified by several experts in language teaching who thoroughly reviewed all the items to ensure their relevance, clarity, and coherence. Two experts revised the Arabic versions and another two revised the English versions. Changes were made to both instruments based on the reviewers' recommendations and suggestions.

Cronbach's alpha was employed to measure the internal consistency of all items contained in the holistic scoring rubric and perception questionnaire used in the study. The results indicated a high level of internal consistency and reliability between the 14 items covering the writing proficiency scale ($\alpha=0.833$), and the 33 items covered in the perception questionnaire ($\alpha=0.915$).

5.3 Procedures

The researchers planned that the written descriptive report be submitted after sufficient time had passed (a) for the students to have gained practical teaching experience, and (b) to allow the researchers, who were the teachers of the Practicum Courses, to establish a good rapport with their students. By the time the report had to be written, it was evident that the students had had a satisfactory experience and had sufficient knowledge on how to teach language skills in schools.

In week 5 of the semester, the researchers assigned the students to write an individual written report of 500 words describing the language textbooks the student teachers had been using to teach in schools. The researchers instructed the student teachers clearly on the required length and quality of the report and scoring criteria. As scheduled, the participants submitted the written reports during week 11. The researchers set a correction session where they corrected five samples together to be certain that they were both correcting the assignments according to the scoring rubric. The researchers took three weeks to correct and analyse the participants' written samples in both Arabic and English. The scores were then analysed further using various statistical processes.

During week 13, each researcher introduced and encouraged her students to share their perceptions regarding the challenges they faced with regard to writing skills as language teachers. Then, they were asked to fill in the five-point Likert-type perception questionnaire anonymously. The quantitative responses were registered for later use in the comparative analysis. The semi-structured interviews were carried out in the remainder of the semester.

5.4 Data collection

The researchers collected 32 samples from EFL student teachers and 40 samples from Arabic student teachers during week 11 of the semester. A similar number of the perception questionnaire was collected from both Arabic and EFL student teachers. The qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were collected through meetings with both groups. Each interview lasted approximately 5 to 7 minutes and was conducted in either Arabic or English, according to the participant's major. Data from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analysed by means of content analysis based on the most frequently mentioned responses by both Arabic and EFL student teachers.

5.5 Data analysis

For the quantitative data, the SPSS programme was used to obtain descriptive and inferential statistics. To answer the first and second research questions, the Mann-Whitney U Test was calculated to explore the statistical differences between the mean scores of the student teachers' writing proficiency and perceptions. The qualitative data that was obtained via the semi-structured interviews were categorised and summarised using frequencies and percentages to provide in-depth interpretations of the study results.

6. Results

6.1 Analysis results of students' writing samples

The Mann-Whitney U Test was used to distinguish the differences between Arabic and EFL student teachers regarding writing proficiency levels in the following subskills: content, spelling, grammar, punctuation, legibility, and text organisation.

Table 1. Students' proficiency levels in writing skills and subskills

Writing skills and subskills	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney U	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	Effect size
Content	Arabic student teachers	40	27.56	1102.50	282.500	-4.239	.000	.50
	EFL student teachers	32	47.67	1525.50				
Spelling	Arabic student teachers	40	39.36	1574.50	525.500	-1.443	.149	-
	EFL student teachers	32	32.92	1053.50				
Punctuation	Arabic student teachers	40	33.13	1325.00	505.000	-1.611	.107	-
	EFL student teachers	32	40.72	1303.00				
Grammar	Arabic student teachers	40	29.99	1199.50	379.500	-2.999	.003	.35
	EFL student teachers	32	44.64	1428.50				
Legibility	Arabic student teachers	40	29.80	1192.00	372.000	-3.079	.002	.36
	EFL student teachers	32	44.88	1436.00				
Organisation	Arabic student teachers	40	29.45	1178.00	358.000	-3.233	.001	.38
	EFL student teachers	32	45.31	1450.00				
Overall Writing skill	Arabic student teachers	40	27.84	1113.50	293.500	-3.934	.000	.50
	EFL student teachers	32	47.33	1514.50				

Based on the statistically significant differences between the two groups in Table 1, the direction of the differences (which group is higher) in the Mann-Whitney U Test should be described by comparing the medians. In the current situation, the median values for the writing proficiency levels of the Arabic participants were: content=4, spelling=2, punctuation=2, grammar=4.5, legibility=5, organisation=5.5, and overall writing skill=23.5. The median values of the EFL participants were: content=5, spelling=1, punctuation=3, grammar=6, legibility=6, organisation=7, and overall writing skill=29.5. The effect size was calculated by using the value of z reported in the output tables.

The results of the Mann-Whitney U Test in Table 1 reveals a statistically significant difference in the content proficiency levels of Arabic student teachers (Md = 4, n=40) and EFL student teachers (Md = 5, n=32), U = 282.500, z = -4.239, p = .000, r = .50 in favour of the EFL student teachers with a large effect size value.

Moreover, that there is no statistically significant difference between the two groups regarding spelling and punctuation proficiency levels. It can be seen from the data above that there is a statistically significant difference regarding grammar proficiency levels. The median value for Arabic student teachers is Md = 4.5, n =40 and for EFL student teachers is Md = 6, n =32, U = 379.500, z = -2.999, p = .003, r = .35 in favour of EFL student teachers. The effect size value shows a medium effect.

The results above indicate a statistically significant difference between the two groups in the legibility proficiency levels of Arabic student teachers (Md = 5, n =40) and EFL student teachers (Md = 6, n =32), U = 372, z = -3.079, p = .002, r = .36 in favour of the EFL student teachers with a medium effect size value. Likewise, the results reveal a statistically significant difference between the two groups in the proficiency levels regarding the organisation subskill. The median values of Arabic student teachers are Md = 5.5, n =40 and EFL student teachers Md = 7, n =32, U = 358, z = -3.233, p = .001, r = .38 in favour of the EFL student teachers with a medium effect size value.

Finally, the results, as shown in Table 1, indicate a statistically significant difference between the two groups regarding overall writing proficiency levels. The median values of Arabic student teachers are Md = 23.5, n =40 and those of the EFL student teachers are Md = 29.5, n =32, U = 293.500, z = -3.934, p = .000, r = .5 in favour of the EFL student teachers with a large effect size value. Based on the above results, it can be concluded that the EFL student teachers experience more writing proficiency levels in their performance with regard to content, grammar, legibility, and organisation subskills, as well the overall writing skill than Arabic student teachers. Therefore, the first null hypothesis is partially rejected.

6.2 Results of students' perceptions

The Mann-Whitney U Test was also used to distinguish the differences between Arabic and EFL student teachers regarding their perceptions of challenges concerning writing skills and subskills.

Table 2: Students' perceptions to challenges of writing skills and subskills

Student Teachers' Perceptions	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mann-Whitney U	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	Effect size
Overall Writing	Arabic student teachers	40	30.96	1238.50	418.500	-2.514	.012	.30
	EFL student teachers	32	43.42	1389.50				
Writing subskills	Arabic student teachers	40	28.89	1155.50	335.500	-3.452	.001	.40
	EFL student teachers	32	46.02	1472.50				

Regarding the above statistics, the median values relating to the perceptions to overall writing challenges are Arabic participants= 39 and EFL participants = 44. While the Median values relating to the perceptions of challenges regarding writing subskills are Arabic participants= 49 and EFL participants = 61. The effect size was calculated using the value of z that is reported in the output tables.

The results of Mann-Whitney U Test in Table (2) reveals a statistically significant difference in the perceptions to challenges concerning writing skills of Arabic student teachers (Md = 39, n=40) and EFL student teachers (Md = 44, n=32), U = 418.500, z = -2.514, p = .012, r = .30 in favour of the EFL student teachers.

Moreover, the results indicates a statistically significant difference in the perceptions of challenges concerning writing subskills of Arabic student teachers (Md = 49, n=40) and EFL student teachers (Md = 61, n=32), U = 335.500, z = -3.452, p = .001, r = .40 in favour of the EFL student teachers. Furthermore, both effect size values would be considered a medium effect based on Cohen (1988) criteria.

It can be concluded that the EFL student teachers experience more challenges in overall writing skills and subskills than Arabic student teachers. Therefore, the first null hypothesis is rejected.

The responses collected from the open-ended question of both groups were analysed according to reoccurring themes or ideas. The results showed that Arabic and EFL student teachers face other writing challenges that have been listed in Table 3.

Table 3. The results of the open-ended question regarding other writing challenges

Other writing challenges	Frequencies & percentages	
	Arabic student teachers (n=27)	EFL student teachers (n=21)
1. Lack of frequent practice of writing skills.	12 (44.4)	21 (100)
2. Underestimating the importance of writing skill.	9 (33.3)	20 (95.2)
3. Lack of reading skill that affects writing.	3 (11.1)	18 (85.7)
4. Lack of self-improvement and development in writing skills.	15 (55.6)	11 (52.4)
5. Low level of motivation to practice or develop writing skills.	4 (14.8)	11 (52.4)
6. High dependence on auto correction when using computer in writing.	13 (48.1)	10 (47.6)
7. Limited number of university writing courses.	10 (37.04)	9 (42.9)
8. Heavy use of objective tests and lack of essay questions at university.	11 (40.7)	5 (23.8)
9. Anxiety regarding making mistakes.	3 (11.1)	5 (23.8)
10. Lack of self-confidence when writing.	8 (29.6)	3 (14.3)
11. Limited practice of English outside the classroom.	-	7 (33.3)
12. The influence of the mother tongue on the target language.	-	1 (4.8)
13. Lack of emphasis on writing skills in early education.	26 (96.3)	-
14. Heavy use of local Arabic (different accents) in writing with the advent of social media and communication.	27 (100)	-

Although Table 3 indicates at least ten shared writing challenges brought up by the two participant groups, it should be noted that the frequency with which the challenges were mentioned varies.

EFL student teachers mention "lacking frequent practice of writing skills" (100%) significantly more often than Arabic student teachers for whom it of less concern (44.4%). "Lack of self-improvement", "high dependence on auto correction when using computer in writing" and "limited number of university writing courses" were listed as being challenging for both Arabic and EFL student teachers. "Underestimating the importance of writing skill" (95.2%), "lack of reading skill that affects writing" (85.7%), and "low level of motivation" (52.4) specifically appear to be challenging for EFL student teachers. While "heavy use of local Arabic with the advent of social media" (100%) and "lack of emphasis on writing skills in early education" (96.3%) appear to be challenging for Arabic student teachers.

6.3 Results of the semi-structured interviews

Following the analysis of the quantitative data, semi-structured interviews were administered to both Arabic and EFL participants. The goal of the interviews was to capture their thoughts about the most common types of writing mistakes that teachers make when writing on the board or designing home-prepared tasks (classroom activities, worksheets, and short quizzes). The data collected provided the researchers with opportunities to gain a deeper insight into the students' thoughts on the reasons behind their most common types of writing mistakes. The interviewees' comments were categorised according to the main writing subskills: content, spelling, punctuation, grammar and sentence structure, and legibility. Tables 4 and 5 show the results of both groups of participants.

Table 4. The results of the semi-structured interviews with Arabic student teachers

Writing Subskills	Common types of mistakes	Frequencies & percentages (n=40)			
		On the Board	Rank	In home-prepared Tasks	Rank
Content	No spaces left to answer the activities or questions	-		16 (40)	5
Spelling	Using incorrect vowel letters	8 (20)	7	-	
	Mispelling words	39 (97.5)	1	21 (52.5)	4
	Facing some confusion when spelling words with similar sounds	9 (22.5)		-	
Punctuation	No attention is paid to punctuation at all	31 (77.5)	2	22 (55)	3
Grammar & Sentence Structure	Committing some grammatical mistakes	23 (57.5)	4	25 (62.5)	2
	Writing incorrectly structured sentences	10 (25)	6	11 (27.5)	7
	Using inappropriate words	4 (10)	8	-	
	Incorrect question formation	-		39 (97.5)	1
Legibility	Using very small or very large font size	-		15 (37.5)	6
	Using unreadable handwriting	31 (77.5)	2	-	
	Not leaving sufficient space between words	13 (32.5)	5	-	
	Letters and words are not written in a straight line	10 (25)	6	-	
	Lack of organisation on the board when writing	29 (72.5)	3	-	

The most common mistakes made by Arabic student teachers while writing on the board are shown in Table 4. The results show that 97.5% misspelled words, while 77.5% did not use correct punctuation and had unreadable handwriting. On the other hand, 72.5% reported lacking organisation. Over half of the interviewees (57.5%) reported that grammatical mistakes are considered a critical writing issue. The participants did report making the following writing mistakes very frequently: word spacing (32.5%), writing in a straight line, writing grammatically ill-structured sentences (25%), spelling letters with similar sounds (22.5%), and using incorrect vowel letters (20%). The mistake made least frequently as reported by Arabic student teachers is using inappropriate words (10%). Critical writing mistakes were related to spelling, punctuation, legibility, and grammar.

Concerning mistakes while preparing tasks at home, the results show that 97.5% of the Arabic student teachers indicated that incorrect question formation is considered to be the most common type of writing mistake made. Over half of the participants (62.5%) reported using incorrect grammatical structures, incorrect punctuation (55%) and misspelling words (52.5%). The results demonstrated slight problems when designing tasks such as leaving no space for answers (40%), using a very small or very large font size (37.5%), and writing ill-structured sentences (27.5%). The participants reported having issues with grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Table 5. The results of the semi-structured interviews with EFL student teachers

Writing Subskills	Common types of mistakes	Frequencies & Percentages (n=32)			
		On the Board	Rank	In home-prepared Tasks	Rank
Content	Selecting unclear pictures, figures and images for activities or quizzes	-		7 (21.88)	4
Spelling	Finding difficulty spelling words with silent letters	2 (6.25)	9	-	
	Facing difficulty spelling words with similar sounds (homophones)	7 (21.88)	6	-	
Punctuation	Lack of capitalisation skill	28 (87.5)	2	-	
Grammar & Sentence Structure	Omitting articles when writing	3 (9.38)	8	-	
	Using inappropriate words	-		11 (34.38)	2
	Unclear set of instructions for the activities	-		22 (68.75)	1
Legibility	Using very small or very large font size	32 (100)	1		-
	Using unreadable font type	-		5 (15.63)	5
	Not leaving equal spaces between letters	15 (46.88)	3	-	
	Inability to draw the rounded letters correctly	8 (25)	5	-	
	Writing using slanted and italic letters	11 (34.38)	4	-	
	Using incorrect cursive writing	5 (15.63)	7	-	
	Lack of proper organisation			10 (31.25)	3

Regarding mistakes while writing on the board, the results in Table 5 show that all the EFL student teachers expressed that using very small or very large font size (100%) is the most common mistake. The majority indicated that they lacked knowledge of capitalisation (87.5%). Almost half of the interviewees (46.88%) reported having problems with spacing between letters. Other less common difficulties were writing using slanted and italic letters (34.38%), drawing rounded letters correctly (25%), and misspelling words with similar sounds (homophones) (21.88%). EFL student teachers reported that minor mistakes that they made included using incorrect cursive letters (15.63%), omitting the necessary articles (9.38%), and misspelling words with silent letters (6.25%). Generally, the participants all seem to have difficulties relating to legibility and punctuation subskills while writing on the board.

As shown in Table 5, the EFL student teachers reported some issues regarding writing mistakes made when designing tasks at home. Using an unclear set of instructions for activities (68.75%) was the most cited mistake. The results also revealed other issues such as using inappropriate words (34.38%), lack of proper organisation (31.25%), selecting unclear pictures, figures and images for activities or quizzes (21.88%), and using an unreadable font type (15.63%). To sum up, the participants have critical problems relating to the grammar and sentence structure sub-skill while designing tasks at home.

7. Discussion

On the basis of the results obtained pertaining to the first research question, it appears that the reasons why EFL student teachers have a higher writing proficiency level may be attributed to the efforts of the instructors and students of English language teaching and learning at university. It may also be that Saudi university students who major in EFL have a high motivation and willingness to master the English language which is their field of study. This result is in line with [Arslan's \(2013\)](#) finding that EFL student teachers are extremely proficient in writing after being exposed to extensive practice. In contrast, the results seem to be inconsistent with those obtained by [Ahmed \(2019\)](#) who attributed EFL students' writing problems to factors such as lack of motivation and inappropriately implemented teaching of writing skills methods. In sum, therefore, it seems that utmost attention is devoted to improving writing skills which EFL student teachers think is important to their teaching profession. On the other hand, the findings demonstrated that both Arabic and EFL student teachers were not sufficiently proficient in spelling and punctuation. Based on the results of several studies ([Al-zuoud & Kabilan, 2013](#); [Benzer, 2010](#); [Hirvela et al., 2012](#); [Khasawneh, 2013](#); [Subhi & Yasin, 2015](#)), these subskills were challenging and difficult to practice.

Regarding the results relating to perception, EFL student teachers experience more challenges in their overall writing skills and subskills. This result must be interpreted with caution in light of the significant results mentioned earlier regarding EFL student teachers' writing proficiency. A possible explanation for this might be that EFL student teachers were aware of the actual challenges that negatively affect the mastering of L2 writing skills. This interpretation is in line with the results obtained by [Ismail \(2011\)](#) who reported that students had

positive views about writing and demonstrated awareness of their writing needs and requirements. Thus, lack of suitable teaching materials and essential knowledge for teaching writing skills effectively are considered to be reasons that go beyond the shortcomings of language student teachers (Koster et al., 2017).

The results of the open-ended question provided deep insights and understanding of the challenges concerning overall writing skills and subskills. The results indicate that Arabic student teachers face challenges in acquiring writing skills such as insufficient writing practice, lack of self-development, and frequent use of auto correction when using computer in writing. Besides, they suffer from the exam-based Saudi educational system that depends heavily on objective questions rather than production of essays. This reveals the lack of a pedagogic vision to writing teaching and assessment. These results seem to be inconsistent with those obtained by Ahmedou (2016), Alkhodairy (2002), González (2008) and Manna'a (2007) have found that language student teachers' poor writing skills are due to various factors such as inappropriately implemented teaching methods, insufficient practical writing activities, and lack of critical writing and thinking skills. Furthermore, the above results are in accord with recent studies (Al-Naqbi, 2011; Lawrence, 2013; Mohammad & Hazarika, 2016) that indicated that high writing proficiency levels require using innovative teaching methods, supportive learning strategies, and authentic assessment techniques. Another challenge to Arabic writing proficiency is the use of local Arabic especially on social media. Therefore, as indicated by Morgana (2017) the use of social media, language applications, and even computers should contribute positively to learning writing accurately.

Moreover, the results relating to the EFL student teachers are likely to be linked to the results discussed earlier relating to perception. For example, EFL student teachers stated that insufficient writing practice, lack of emphasis on reading, and frequent use of auto correction when using computer in writing challenged their reaching their future goals. The results obtained by other research studies (Bacon & Anderson, 2004; Jahin & Idrees, 2012; Liao, 2016; Sultan, 2013) support this interpretation and highlight EFL students' poor writing proficiency levels in spite of the allotted time and effort spent at different levels of education. Motivation is also considered to be a challenge. A possible explanation for these results may be the lack of adequate extrinsic and extrinsic motivation factors at university. The results regarding motivation are in line with Ahmed's (2019) findings which consider lack of motivation as one of the factors that cause writing deficiency. On the other hand, the limited use of L2 and the overuse of L1 outside the classroom present a challenge to EFL student teachers. This result is in agreement with those obtained by Ahmed (2019) and Fati (2013) who documented the influence of the native language on students' writing proficiency levels.

Regarding the results of the semi-structured interviews, a possible satisfactory explanation for the low proficiency in spelling, punctuation, and handwriting legibility of Arabic student teachers when writing on the board are inconsistent with the findings of some other research studies (e.g. Alkhodairy, 2002; Khasawneh, 2013; Manna'a, 2007) who reported that these writing subskills are the most problematic language areas for Arabic student teachers. Furthermore, their writing deficiencies as they appear in their design of activities at home reflects the challenges expressed by them in their responses to the questionnaire's open-ended question. These findings are in line with Fati's (2013) findings regarding low writing proficiency in punctuation, spelling, as well as grammatical structure.

On the other hand, the problems of EFL student teachers relating to writing on the board including improper font size, capitalization issues, and spacing highlight the need for more practice and development of writing competencies, although their inability to set clear instructions, use appropriate vocabulary, and organise activity sheets indicate a possible relationship between lack of preparation and development and low writing proficiency. This result matches Fati's (2013) finding that students demonstrate low proficiency in numerous writing subskills such as capitalisation and word selection.

8. Conclusions and practical implications

The purpose of this quantitative and qualitative study was to determine the writing proficiency levels of both Arabic and EFL student teachers; compare the writing proficiency between them and measure the differences in the perceptions of both parties of challenges concerning writing skills. The participants included 72 Arabic (n=40) and EFL (n= 32) student teachers. The data relating to writing proficiency levels was collected through an analysis of participants' written samples. To capture their perceptions of challenges concerning writing skills, data was collected via a five point Likert-scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

The results of the Mann-Whitney U Test revealed a statistically significant difference between Arabic and EFL student teachers in content, grammar and sentence structure, legibility, organisation, and overall writing skill proficiency levels in favour of the EFL student teachers with a large effect size value. There was no statistically significant difference between the two groups regarding spelling and punctuation proficiency levels.

Regarding student teachers' perceptions of challenges concerning writing skills and subskills, the results of the Mann-Whitney reveals a statistically significant difference in favour of the EFL student teachers. This result indicates that the EFL student teachers experience more challenges in overall writing skills and subskills than Arabic student teachers.

The results of the open-ended question indicated that EFL student teachers face other challenges with regard to writing skill. For example, lack of frequent practice, lack of reading skill that affects writing, lack of self-improvement, low level of motivation and high dependence on computer use in writing. While for Arabic student teachers, the challenges include lack of self-improvement in writing skills, lack of frequent practice, high dependence on computer use in writing, heavy use of objective tests instead of essay questions, and limited number of university writing courses.

The results of the semi-structured interviews showed that the common types of mistakes made by Arabic student teachers when writing on the board are misspelled words, punctuation, unreadable handwriting, lack of organisation, and grammatical mistakes. When designing activities at home they are likely to make mistakes related to incorrect question formation, grammatical mistakes, punctuation, and misspelled words. On the other hand, the common types of mistakes EFL student teachers make when writing on the board include using very small or very large font size, lack of capitalisation, and no equal spaces between letters. When designing activities they are prone to developing unclear sets of instructions, using inappropriate words, and lack proper organisation.

Some practical implications were derived on the basis of these results. **First**, *university language teachers*, should focus on providing maximum writing practice rather than delivering passive lectures and should implement teaching methods that are based on the learner-centered approach. University teachers should use innovative, motivating, and appropriate teaching-learning writing strategies. They should discontinue using the method of traditional memorisation of compositions and exam-based assessment techniques. Instead, they should seek to vary composition topics, give opportunities to students to select their own topics, and use authentic assessment techniques. Moreover, university language teachers should value the importance of constructive feedback on all the basic writing segments including capitalisation, punctuation, grammar/language use, and spelling.

Second, *language student teachers* need to be exposed to face-to-face or online intensive self-development training sessions on how to write and how to teach writing. Moreover, in order to enhance their writing instruction, they need ongoing support from in-service teachers and supervisors during their practicum. Thus, student teachers would benefit from observing and engaging in supervised experiences that help them to gain self-confidence and trust in their abilities to teach writing.

Third, *teacher educators in the EDP* should be knowledgeable and familiar with the daily challenges of language teaching in schools to inspire their student teachers to find effective solutions to any critical learning situations. Moreover, gaining more knowledge about writing challenges will (a) increase their abilities to become role models for certain approaches; (b) explain the pedagogical choices to be employed in the classroom, and (c) incorporate various strategies for building on student teachers' professional performance. Besides, teacher educators should support student teachers in establishing a relaxed and secure classroom environment where students' thinking, arguments, discussion points, and interaction are valued.

Fourth, it would be valuable to integrate a writing bridging-course in the EDP that includes a clear study plan, interactive activities, sufficient time for practice, and authentic assessment techniques that provide student teachers with the best linguistic practices more than linguistic knowledge.

9. Limitations of the study

This study has some limitations. First, the generalisability of the results is limited due to the low sample size. Furthermore, as the participants were female ($n = 72$), a larger number of male and female student teacher participants may have revealed the impact of gender and number on writing proficiency. Second, it was difficult to obtain any assistance from experienced colleagues who were unaware of the research questions in scoring the written texts. Hence, inter-rater reliability was not measured. Thirdly, the linguistic measures adopted in this study only assessed certain aspects of linguistic complexity (e.g. content, spelling, grammar, punctuation, legibility, and organisation). Other important measures that are considered to affect writing proficiency (e.g. handwriting anxiety and language learning styles) were not explored. Lastly, students' writing performance in the native language plays an essential role in EFL writing performance, even though information on student teachers' native language was not accessible for this research.

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