

Saudi Learners' Perceptions of Academic Writing Challenges and General Attitude Towards Writing in English

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Abstract—Second language (L2) academic writing is one of the most fundamental, yet sophisticated skills for university students to master. It requires the ability to not only create ideas using sentences, but also construct meaningful, logical and comprehensible texts. Thus, understanding students' attitudes towards L2 writing and exploring the challenges that they experience while composing texts are necessary for L2 teachers and curriculum designers. The overall goal of this study is twofold: (1) to investigate students' perceptions of the difficulty that they experience while writing academic texts in English and (2) to explore learners' attitudes towards writing assignments in English. The goal here is to explore these issues using data obtained from 109 Saudi university students. Data were first collected using a questionnaire and then quantitatively analysed. The results show that students tend to perceive academic writing as challenging and adopt a mildly to moderately positive attitude towards writing in English. These findings offer some implications for teachers and curriculum designers to improve the L2 academic writing skills of students.

Index Terms—L2, positive attitude, negative attitude, academic writing, writing challenges, perception

I. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a very important area of research. This is because it has mainly become an increasingly important part of university and college learning. Overall, the interplay among social, educational, linguistic and cognitive factors seems to shape the development of the writing ability, resulting in true challenges for second language (L2) writers (Manchon, 2009). Hence, it is important to find solutions to the numerous writing problems that writers face. The social context is the factor that allows L2 writers to form their conceptions of writing, including their motivation and perspective towards writing, which affect their writing performance. Some educational factors, such as the amount and type of instruction received, also have an effect on the development of the writing ability for writers. It is also worth mentioning that the cognitive skills, writing competence and writing approaches of writers have a great impact on their writing abilities. Indeed, several linguistics factors, which are present in writers' linguistic knowledge and language transfer, play an essential role in shaping their writing performance (Manchon, 2009).

Several researchers have described academic writing as the production and logical organisation of sentences in paragraphs to express specific ideas (Hyland, 2003; Kroll, 1994; Manchon & Matsuda, 2016). For example, Hyland and Hyland (2006) stated that writing is context-embedded and can be understood only from the perspective of society rather than from that of a single individual. Manchon and Matsuda (2016) and Elsherif (2012) indicated that one of the basics of academic writing is the ability of learners to find and access relevant resources, to evaluate such resources in order to arrange their ideas and to insert their opinions in order to develop their own voice. Since academic writing is a product of the mental processes of writers, it is considered a cognitive activity (Manchon, 2009). Given these three different perspectives, it can be concluded that academic writing involves a variety of aspects that operate together in a complex process and require a deep understanding from the educators' side and specific skills from the language learners' side.

As most subjects nowadays are delivered in English, students need to compose their ideas and write their assignments also in English. They need to overcome the challenges of writing and to master the skills of academic writing to succeed in their courses. This, however, results in great difficulties for L2 students, who learn English as a second language (ESL) and study other subjects through the medium of English (Hinkel, 2020). This problem causes L2 university students to form specific attitudes towards writing in English and to encounter challenges when composing texts while simultaneously trying to fulfil the requirements of their academic context. This whole notion stems from the fact that academic writing generally causes frustration for university students, as they perceive themselves as lacking the L2 language proficiency required at the academic level (Hyland, 2002). Thus, these challenges and attitudes are two related factors that may complicate academic writing for L2 students.

Purpose of the Study

According to the above-mentioned literature, and from the researcher's own experience in language teaching, many L2 students fail to meet the requirements of the institutes that they study at in terms of producing a well-written form of

academic text that meets the expectations of their instructors. It is also worth highlighting that little research has been performed to detect and identify the reasons for students' low English writing performance. Thus, it is important for language teachers and curriculum and course designers to understand the root cause of students' writing difficulties that negatively affect their writing abilities. Since the attitude of students towards academic English writing might impact their challenges, or vice versa, either negatively or positively, the current study had two goals: (1) to examine Saudi students' attitudes towards writing in English and (2) to investigate the L2 academic writing challenges that students face.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Academic Writing

Academic writing is a complex process that is neither easy nor spontaneous for many L2 writers. It is the result of employing different strategies to manage the composition process, which involves gradually developing a complete text. Composition process involves activities such as setting goals, generating ideas, organising information, selecting appropriate language, making drafts, reading, reviewing, revising and editing (Hedge, 2014). Earlier studies have shown that interest has started to shift from textual features presented in orthography, sentence structure and discourse-level structure to the process of writing itself, focussing on investigating the processes underlying the production of written discourse (Kroll, 2008).

Several researchers have identified the characteristics of the writing process. For example, Hedge (2014) asserted that writing is a recursive and generative process, with students re-reading their work, assessing it, reacting and moving on. In this vein, two types of writing have been distinguished: knowledge telling and knowledge transformation. On the one hand, knowledge telling is the easiest form of writing, which is accessible to all language users. On the other hand, knowledge transformation requires thinking about a topic, obtaining the information needed for analysis and modifying one's thinking strategy. This type of writing causes writers to expand their knowledge and develop new ideas by processing new information (Hinkel, 2020). In another study, Tribble (1996) classified the most important characteristics of academic writing: organising writing to convey major and supporting ideas; using relevant reasons and examples to enhance a position; demonstrating a command of standard written English, including grammar, phrasing, effective sentence structure, spelling and punctuation; manifesting facility with a range of vocabulary appropriate to the topic; and showing awareness towards the audience and writing for a particular reader. The author also listed the four frequent writing tasks in colleges and universities: analytical writing, extracting information, summarising important points and developing factual reports and observations (ibid). In general, the writing process includes various stages: pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and finally publishing (Sari et al., 2020). This means that L2 writers should have various skills to compose well-developed academic texts, such as being able to exploit others' ideas and write them in their own words, creating outlines and summaries, organising ideas and editing drafts (Tribble, 1996).

Writers also need different sorts of knowledge related to content, context, language system and writing processes to compose a well-written text. Gillett et al. (2009) asserted that academic writing requires writers to have specific abilities and to apply various strategies, such as understanding the task at hand, making plans, carrying out research, reading, taking notes, writing descriptively and critically, expressing their own voice and working with feedback.

All of these factors indicate that writing is not a simple cognitive task. It requires complex mental activities that need specific knowledge, skills and processes. Therefore, writing has always been considered as the most challenging skill of language learning for all students, especially if it is required in a foreign language. Thus, it is important to investigate the L2 writing weaknesses of students and shed some light on the obstacles that negatively affect their L2 academic writing.

B. Students' L2 Writing Challenges

Several facts related to students' academic writing challenges have been highlighted in the literature on L2 students' academic writing. For example, in a qualitative study by Altınmakas and Bayyurt (2019) with a small sample size investigating undergraduate Turkish students' writing challenges, the authors showed that the students' previous educational and contextual factors and writing experiences, exemplified in writing classroom instructions and examinations, are the main sources for their writing challenges. Similarly, Qasem et al. (2019) investigated the challenges that final-year undergraduate Saudi students face while writing research projects in English. They found that students face some difficulties in deciding on and understanding the topic for research and finding references. Heo and Sim (2015) investigated the causes underlying the difficulties that Korean learners face while writing English academic texts. They found that students experience challenges with organising their ideas logically and coherently. They also highlighted that the lack of learning experience and linguistic knowledge and the students' inability to find appropriate lexical choices and expressions in English are the most common causes for such writing challenges.

Anderson and Cuesta-Medina (2019) asserted that students face challenges with the rhetorical aspects of L2, which stem from a lack of L2 writing training. Shakib Kotamjani and Hussin (2017) investigated the academic writing challenges postgraduate students face at University Putra Malaysia. They found that students perceive great difficulties with academic writing skills, such as critiquing existing research and determining research gaps. They also found that

writing the introduction, discussing the findings and tying up the loose ends in the conclusion are a source of difficulties in academic writing. In this regard, Akhtar et al. (2020) studied a small number of Malaysian students and found that academic challenges are the main cause for the students' apprehensiveness towards L2 writing. In the same vein, Mahmood (2020) conducted a research exploring the challenges of academic writing that 19 English as foreign language (EFL) learners face in the higher education section of Pakistan. He concluded that finding references and including citations, ensuring cohesion and coherence, choosing a worthwhile topic and focussing on language usage are the greatest sources of the challenges that students experience in academic writing. Likewise, Cennetkuşu (2017) highlighted that the most problematic areas in academic writing for students are the use of proper grammar, connections and transitions, presenting ideas clearly, knowing about different vocabulary and expressions and choosing correct words related to the field.

In another study, Hammad (2016) examined the essay writing skills and obstacles that face Palestinian university students. The results showed that students lack linguistic knowledge, cohesion and academic style and adopt word-for-word translation. Similarly, within the Indonesian context, the researcher found that students dislike writing because of the linguistic problems and cognitive issues related to paragraph organisation and text structure (Rahmatunisa, 2014). In another study, Schneider (2009) found that formulaic writing is one of the reasons why students are not interested in writing, which consequently affects their writing performance.

Difficulties related to the influence of writers' first language (L1) and applying the theories of L1 writing may also have negative effects on the L2 performance of writers (Hinkel, 2020). In this vein, several researchers have asserted that the rhetorical features of certain languages tend to transfer into writers' L2 writing, resulting in challenges and obstacles in L2 writing performance (Cai, 2013; Graham, 2019; Michel et al., 2020).

Together, these studies indicate that most L2 students in different contexts fail to meet the requirements of the institutes that they study at and the expectations of their instructors because of the writing challenges that they experience. However, little research has been conducted to identify the reasons for students' low writing performance in the university context. Therefore, it is important to investigate what other students in different contexts believe hinders their academic writing performance, especially in the Saudi context. It is also very important to investigate students' attitudes towards academic writing, as it is believed that their attitudes can result in various writing challenges and influence the quality of their academic writing and English assignments (Shakib Kotamjani & Hussin, 2017).

C. Students' Attitudes

Attitudes are envisaged and viewed differently by scholars (Chambers, 1999) and are defined in different ways by experts. They are related to preferences, likes and dislikes (Agesty et al., 2021), tendencies towards things (Garrett, 2010) and ideas that influence someone to behave or think in a particular way (ibid). Bartram (2010) viewed attitude as a behavioural intention and part of the human identity (ibid). Attitude helps educators understand human behaviour in terms of one's beliefs and feelings (Garrett, 2010). It also informs educators of their students' performance, such as the way they think, act and behave (ibid). It is a set of values that students bring to the language learning experience (Chambers, 1999). Attitude includes three important categories: cognitive, affective and conative (Mishra & Pani, 2021). The first component refers to one's beliefs and ideas or opinions of something, the second component refers to one's feelings and emotions towards something and the behavioural component refers to one's actions towards an object. For the purposes of this study, attitude is considered to mean the negative or positive ideas or beliefs that evaluate and affect behaviour.

In L2 writing, attitude has a dynamic influence on the individual's response to all subjects in all different contexts. Many factors affect students' L2 writing performance, such as the time to write, writing with a purpose and for an audience and sharing and choosing writing topics (Mishra & Pani, 2021). Over the past few decades, emphasis has shifted to L2 writers' attitudes, motivations and perceptions. According to L2 writing researchers, there is a positive relationship between students' attitudes and their writing behaviour (Hashemian & Heidari, 2013). In other words, students should have a positive attitude towards writing, as this can help them achieve better writing results and save some effort in writing tasks. Agesty et al. (2021) found a positive correlation between students' writing attitudes and their writing performance. All of these studies indicate that the writing attitude influences the writing achievement.

However, earlier studies have shown that L2 student writers who have a negative attitude towards writing often perceive essay composition as a difficult task and dislike the activity altogether. Many researchers have drawn connections between writing attitude and challenges. For example, Erkan and Saban (2011) stated that being successful in L2 writing is related to the attitude and self-perception towards writing. These negative perceptions may be a result of many factors, such as the lack of time to practice writing or an ineffective writing course guide and curriculum. Similarly, Zhu (2001) found that the lack of rhetorical and linguistic knowledge for student writers is the major cause for their negative attitudes towards writing. Jabali (2018) also found that writers who have a positive attitude towards writing perform well in writing tasks. He also found that students' lack of confidence and time constraints are the main causes for their negative attitudes, which hinder their performance. In other words, most of the students who tend to show a negative attitude towards writing make writing mistakes and feel unconfident in expressing their thoughts. According to the literature, the attitudes of L2 learners have been the topic of many studies on language learning. Most of the findings suggest that adopting a positive attitude towards learning has positive effects on the writing performance, and vice versa (Wang, 2010). Thus, it is clear from the thorough literature review that there is a need to study and

understand Saudi students' attitudes towards academic English writing and to explore the factors that affect their writing performance. According to Garrett (2010), there is a relationship between attitude and behaviour, and changing someone's attitude towards something can accordingly change their behaviour.

The L2 writing field is an area of inquiry with a rich and very interesting history. However, there is still a need to understand students' writing challenges in and attitudes towards L2 writing. There has also been considerable interplay over the years between research into writing and learning and instruction in writing. So far, there has been relatively little research focussing on Saudi students' perceived L2 writing challenges and attitudes towards academic writing. Most of the earlier studies have had direct repercussions on classroom practices, and much research has been dedicated within the context of classroom pedagogy and feedback on students' actual writing (Elsherif, 2012; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Mazgutova & Hanks, 2021; Tsao et al., 2021). Therefore, more research is required to understand how Saudi students view English writing and to identify the challenges that they experience while writing academic assignments.

D. Research Questions

The aim of this study is to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What are the Saudi EFL students' attitudes towards academic writing in general?

RQ2: What are the most and least common challenges perceived by students while writing assignments in English?

RQ3: Is there a significant correlation between students' writing attitudes and writing challenges?

RQ4: Are there differences in students' attitudes and perceived challenges between the following three English-taught tracks: general (ELIA), science (ELIS) and humanities (ELCA)?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants of the Study

The population chosen for this study were undergraduate Saudi female university students studying at King Abdulaziz University in Saudi Arabia. This study was performed on 109 students aged between 18 and 24 with different proficiency levels (pre-intermediate, intermediate and upper intermediate) and studying three different English-taught tracks: general (ELIA), science (ELIS) and humanities (ELCA). Sampling method was also used to recruit the participants, which involved snowballing and asking students enrolled in the researcher's teaching sections and other colleagues teaching in the same field to participate and distribute the survey link to other students.

B. Study Design

This is a descriptive quantitative study that is deemed significant as it sets out to describe and interpret specific phenomena in a specific context. It seeks to address two crucial aspects related to L2 academic writing: students' challenges and attitudes. Finding sound answers can help writing instructors and curriculum designers adopt suitable teaching methodologies to enhance the L2 academic writing skills of university students.

C. Instruments

A questionnaire consisting of three sections (Sections 1, 2 and 3) was used to gather the data. Section 1 includes questions pertaining to the students' demographic information, including their age, level of English proficiency, taught language track, major and year of study. Section 2 consists of 14 questions that aim to identify the challenges that students face while writing in English. Finally, Section 3 contains 15 questions that aim to identify learners' general attitudes towards writing in English. The rating scale used in the current study is the generally used Likert scale with five responses: 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neither agree nor disagree*), 4 (*agree*) and 5 (*strongly agree*). Two open-ended questions were also formulated to allow the participants to freely express their opinions regarding whether they find writing assignments in English difficult, the reasons for the difficulties they face and their weaknesses in writing English composition assignments.

To gather data from the participants, two major questionnaires were adopted and modified: the Writing Apprehension Test (WAT), also called the Daly–Miller Test, developed by Daly and Miller (1975), and a questionnaire prepared by Podsen (1997) (cited in Islam, 2017; Setyowati, 2017; Setyowati & Sukmawan, 2018). Several modifications were made to the surveys to suit the purposes, context and students of the current study (see Appendix A).

The questionnaire was designed and distributed online via the SurveyMonkey platform. The typical time spent to fill in the questionnaire was calculated as 12 minutes. To ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, it was reviewed and referenced by several university instructors. It was then piloted with three students and three English teachers. The final version of the questionnaire was modified with the referees' comments and piloting results. Then, the survey was reviewed on the basis of the α -Cronbach coefficient method of correlation and reliability coefficient. With the α -Cronbach formula, the reliability of the questionnaire was found to be 0.92. Next, a bilingual (Arabic and English) questionnaire was prepared to allow the participants to better understand the instructions, questions and items and to proceed at ease while filling in the questionnaire.

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from King Abdulaziz University and the chair of the English Language Institution (ELI). This questionnaire was conducted according to established ethical guidelines, and informed consent was obtained from the participants at the beginning of the online questionnaire.

D. Data Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics (version 27; IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) was used to analyse the data. Descriptive statistics were used to present categorical variables, whereas continuous variables were presented as the mean ± standard deviation (SD). The difficulties faced by L2 learners were explored using a 12-item five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (items 1 and 2 were reverse-scored as they were negatively worded). The total possible score for this scale was 60, with a higher score meaning more difficulties faced by L2 learners. A total of 15 items from another five-point Likert scale, which ranged from 1 to 5 (items 1, 2 and 3 were reverse-scored as they were negatively worded), were used to explore the participants’ general attitudes towards writing in English. The total possible score for this scale was 75, with a higher score meaning more positive attitudes towards writing in English. Pearson’s correlation coefficient was used to assess the correlation between the difficulties faced by L2 learners (difficulty score) and the participants’ general attitudes towards writing in English (attitude score). Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to explore the difference in the mean score between different demographic groups. A confidence interval of 95% ($p < 0.05$) was applied to represent the statistical significance of the results, and the level of significance was assigned as 5%.

IV. RESULTS

A. Demographic Characteristics of the Study Participants

A total of 109 students were recruited in this study, most of whom were aged between 18 and 24. In total, 73.0% of the study participants had an English level of 103, and 39.4% of them were in the ELIA study track. Most of the study participants were in their preparatory year of study. For further details on the demographic characteristics of the study participants, refer to Table 1.

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Demographic variable	Frequency	Percentage
Age category		
Below 18 years	6	5.5%
18–24 years	94	86.2%
25–34 years	6	5.5%
35–44 years	2	1.8%
45 years and above	1	0.9%
Level of English		
101	13	11.9%
102	8	7.3%
103	79	72.5%
104	5	4.6%
Pre-intermediate	2	1.8%
Upper intermediate	1	0.9%
Advanced	1	0.9%
Study track		
ELIS	40	36.7%
ELIC	1	0.9%
ELIE	1	0.9%
ELCA	23	21.1%
ELIA	43	39.4%
ELIG	1	0.9%
Year of study		
Preparatory year	98	89.9%
Second year	6	5.5%
Third year	1	0.9%
Fourth year	3	2.8%

B. Difficulties Encountered by ESL Learners

The mean difficulty score for the study participants was found to be 38.6 (SD: 6.8) out of 60, representing 64.3% of the total maximum obtainable score, which reflects a mild to moderate level of difficulty encountered by L2 learners. A total of 12 items were utilised to explore the difficulties encountered by L2 learners. When the participants were asked about the difficulties that they encounter, the most commonly agreed upon difficulties were frequently making common spelling mistakes (56.5%), taking too much time to understand and familiarise themselves with the topic at hand before they start writing (56.5%) and frequently making common grammar mistakes (56.4%) (see Figure 1).

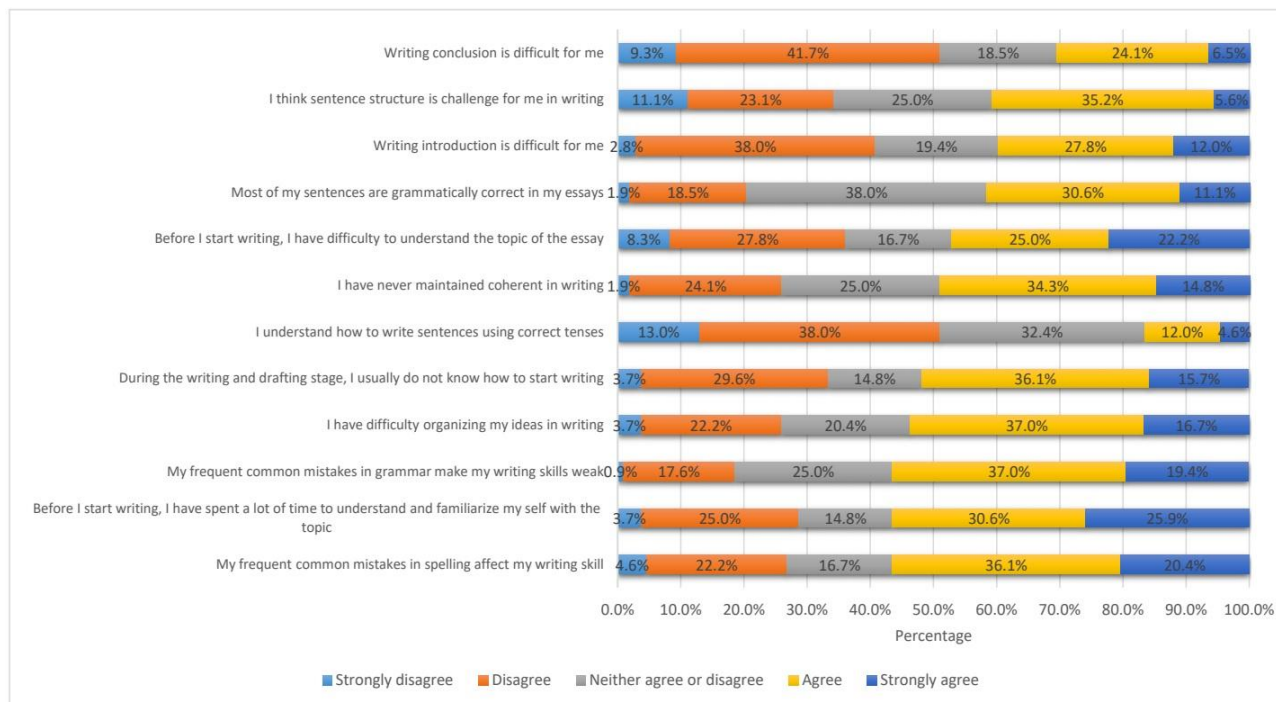


Figure 1 Percentage of Agreement Regarding the Difficulties Encountered by ESL Learners

C. Weaknesses or/and Difficulties Faced While Writing Assignments

In general, 64.8% of the participants reported that they find English assignments easy to some degree. When the participants were asked about their weaknesses or/and the difficulties they face while writing assignments, the most three commonly reported weaknesses or difficulties were coherence and cohesion, language use and finding relevant references, with 46.3%, 38.9% and 37.0%, respectively. For further details on the weaknesses or/and difficulties faced while writing assignments, refer to Table 2.

TABLE 2
WEAKNESSES OR/AND DIFFICULTIES FACED WHILE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Weaknesses/Difficulties	Frequency	Percentage
Coherence and cohesion	50	46.3%
Language use	42	38.9%
Finding relevant references	40	37.0%
Organising and connecting ideas	38	35.2%
Expressing own voice	33	30.6%
Writing supporting details	31	28.7%
Choosing a significant topic	27	25.0%
Writing a topic sentence	27	25.0%
Referencing and citation	23	21.3%
Writing electronically	13	12.0%

D. General Attitudes towards English Writing

The mean attitude score for the study participants was found to be 55.9 (SD: 7.6) out of 75, representing 74.5% of the total maximum obtainable score, which reflects a mildly to moderately positive attitude towards writing in English. A total of 15 items were used to explore the participants' general attitudes towards writing in English. According to the participants, the three most commonly agreed upon attitude statements were that the teachers' motivational words are always helpful for them (94.5%), that writing in English is important for their success in their careers (89.9%) and that the teacher's behaviour and personality affect their writing (83.4%) (for more details, see Figure 2).

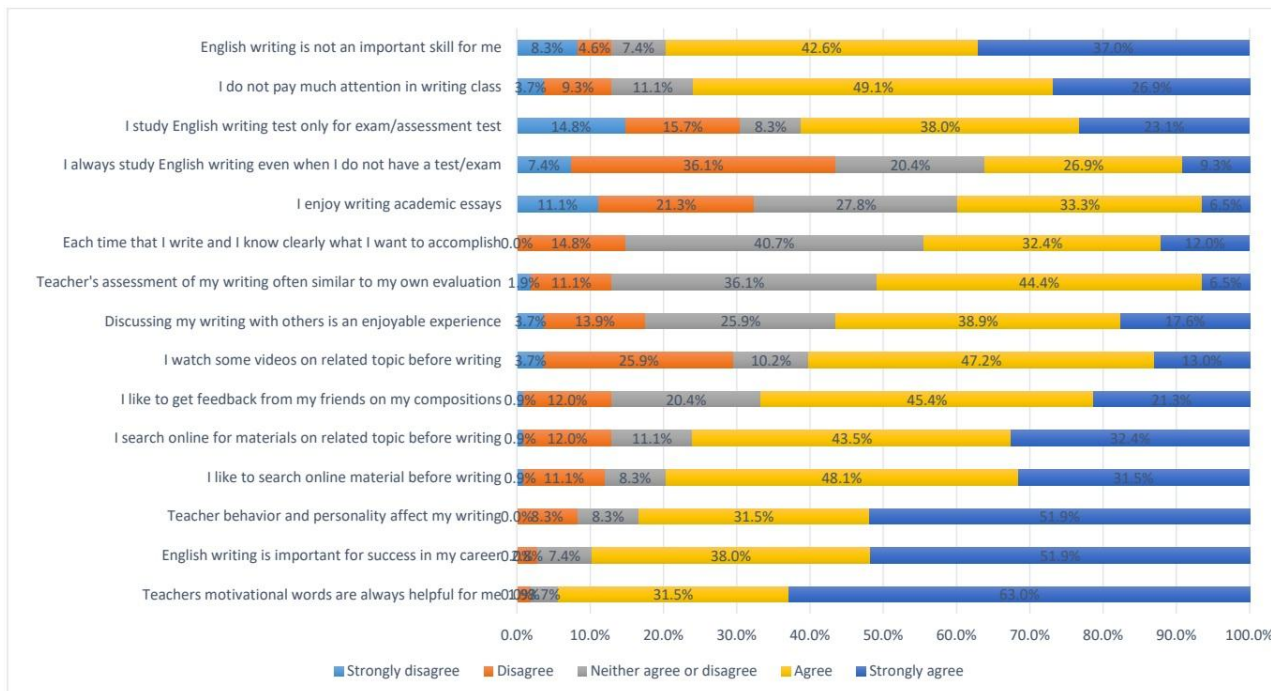


Figure 2 Percentage of Agreement Regarding the General Attitude Towards Writing in English

E. Difficulties Encountered by L2 Learners and the General Attitude towards Writing in English

Pearson’s correlation coefficient was used to explore the correlation between the difficulties encountered by L2 learners and the general attitude towards writing in English. The coefficient measure was found to be -0.376 ($p \leq 0.001$), which reflects a medium negative correlation between the positive attitude score and the difficulty score. In other words, the more the difficulties encountered by an L2 learner, the less likely they are to have a positive attitude towards writing in English.

F. Participants’ Characteristics, the Difficulties Encountered by L2 Learners and the General Attitude towards Writing in English

The difficulties encountered by L2 learners, represented by the difficulty score, were found to significantly differ depending on the level of English proficiency of the study participants and their study tracks ($p \leq 0.01$). However, no statistically significant difference was found in the attitude towards writing in English (represented by the attitude score) between participants from different demographic groups (for more details, see Table 3).

TABLE 3
PARTICIPANTS’ CHARACTERISTICS, THE DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY ESL LEARNERS AND THE GENERAL ATTITUDE TOWARDS WRITING IN ENGLISH

Demographic Variable	Difficulty Score	p-value	Attitude Score	p-value
Age category				
Below 18 years	42.0 (7.9)	0.085	57.3 (6.2)	0.656
18–24 years	38.4 (6.3)		55.7 (7.6)	
25–34 years	37.2 (11.2)		59.8 (10.9)	
35–44 years	49.5 (2.1)		51.5 (3.5)	
Level of English proficiency				
101	43.4 (5.8)	0.004**	54.8 (9.7)	0.324
102	40.1 (7.4)		59.0 (6.2)	
103	38.0 (6.3)		55.2 (7.2)	
104	35.2 (7.3)		62.4 (10.1)	
Pre-intermediate	27.5 (6.4)		58.0 (4.2)	
Study track				
ELIS	36.1 (5.4)	0.004**	56.6 (6.8)	0.214
ELCA	41.7 (7.5)		58.4 (6.4)	
ELIA	39.6 (6.6)		53.7 (8.7)	
Year of study				
Preparatory year	38.4 (6.8)	0.539	55.8 (7.7)	0.988
Second year	39.5 (5.6)		56.5 (9.4)	
Fourth year	42.7 (11.1)		56.3 (6.5)	

V. DISCUSSION

Writing has always been perceived as the most troublesome and challenging skill for most L2 students. Over the last decade, there has been an increase in research on L2 students' academic writing in universities and colleges. This increase was prompted by the belief that L2 learners have poor academic writing skills. This quantitative study was designed to investigate the L2 academic writing challenges those Saudi students face and their attitudes towards English writing assignments in general. Analysis of students' responses showed that students face many challenges while composing academic texts in English. The study also focussed on students' attitudes towards writing assignments in English.

The first research question in this study sought to determine Saudi students' attitudes towards L2 academic writing assignments in general. The findings revealed mildly to moderately positive attitudes towards writing in English (74.5%). One of the three most commonly agreed upon attitude statements was that the motivational and encouraging words of English language instructors are always supporting and helpful for L2 students. The participants also indicated that writing in English is important for their success in their careers. This proves that they are aware of the importance of mastering English, particularly with regard to their writing skills. They further indicated that the teacher's behaviour and personality in the classroom affect their writing performance. This proves that they need to be encouraged, motivated and interested to improve their writing abilities. Only a very few of the participants reported that they enjoy writing academic assignments in English and that their teachers' assessments of their writing are often different from their own evaluation. Many of the participants also indicated that they only study English writing for their exams and to achieve high grades. A possible explanation for these results may be the students' negative attitudes towards English academic writing resulting from their poor writing abilities and the difficulties that they experience while writing their assignments.

Regarding the second research question, a mild-to-moderate level of difficulty was found to be encountered by ESL learners (64.3%). According to the participants, the most commonly agreed upon difficulty was frequently making common spelling mistakes that affect their writing skills. Similar to the results obtained by Setyowati and Sukmawan (2018), the participants in the current study reported that spending too much time to understand and familiarise themselves with the topic at hand before they start writing and frequently making common grammar mistakes negatively affect their writing skills. They also stated that using English terms, for example, to form correct sentences, and finding the appropriate vocabulary are sources of difficulty in their academic writing. These findings are in line with the results obtained by Ahmed (2019), Alharbi (2019), Cennetkuşu (2017), Heo and Sim (2015) and Sari et al. (2020), showing that low English proficiency is the most significant obstacle that negatively affects L2 students' academic writing. The results obtained in this study also show that one of the three most commonly reported weaknesses or difficulties in academic writing is forming a whole unit of text and making information in text flow smoothly. This finding was also reported by Al-Badi (2015), Mahmood (2020) and RahmtAllah (2020), who found that coherence and cohesion are considered difficult by L2 learners to be applied in academic writing. The participants also reported that searching for information and selecting relevant references are challenging strategies of academic writing. In contrast, they stated that writing electronically is overall the easiest strategy. They also referred to citing information and writing topic sentences as not problematic in academic writing. These results are, however, contrary to previous studies (Alharbi, 2019; Miller & Pessoa, 2016), who found that writing topic sentences is challenging for L2 writers. A possible explanation for such a disparity in the results may be the different student contexts and previous L2 language education and experiences.

The third question in this study was whether there is a significant correlation between students' writing attitudes and writing challenges. The results revealed a medium negative correlation between the positive attitude score and the difficulty score, which means that the more the difficulties encountered by an ESL learner, the less likely they are to have a positive attitude towards writing in English. These results confirm the association between learners' attitudes towards writing in English and their actual academic writing performance. This finding was also reported by other researchers (Akhtar et al., 2020; Ansarimoghaddam & Tan, 2014; Mishra & Pani, 2021; Mulyono et al., 2020; Setyowati, 2017), who argued that students' attitudes have a direct effect on their performance.

The fourth research question was whether there are differences in students' attitudes and the perceived challenges among students from three English-taught tracks: general (ELIA), science (ELIS) and humanities (ELCA). The results showed that the difficulties encountered by L2 learners, represented by the difficulty score, significantly differ depending on their level of English proficiency and their study tracks. In other words, the ELCA group was found to comprise the largest number of students who experience challenges while writing in English, whereas the ELIS group comprised the smallest number. Moreover, the results indicated that with the students reaching higher levels of language proficiency, their L2 academic writing challenges decrease. Alternatively, students from different demographic groups were found to exhibit no differences in their attitudes towards writing in English. In other words, participants from the ELIS, ELCA and ELIS groups and participants from all language levels (101, 102, 103 and 104) were found to share similar attitudes towards writing assignments in English. A possible explanation for these results may be related to the students' previous experiences in learning L2 academic writing. According to Kroll (1994) and Hedge (2014), learners' knowledge and experiences of receiving writing instructions in the classroom as well as interacting with teachers are factors that affect their attitudes and performance.

VI. IMPLICATIONS

Given the above findings, this study provides useful recommendations for L2 students and teachers. First, the results obtained in this study can help English instructors focussing on academic writing skills in Saudi universities become familiar with students' weaknesses and strengths in terms of their L2 academic writing skills. The results also shed light on how Saudi learners perceive English academic writing. These results can guide curriculum and course designers to select appropriate materials and teaching methods that can help learners overcome their writing challenges. They can also encourage teachers to prepare a curriculum based on their students' choices and interests to motivate them to write in English. Teachers can also use visual materials to engage their students in interesting topics and encourage them to write about such topics. By doing this, teachers can enhance their students' schemata and enrich their background knowledge, which can overall improve their attitudes towards writing in English. Furthermore, teachers should design teaching materials with more activities and tasks that focus on writing strategies, such as coherence, cohesion, unity, searching for information, paraphrasing and summarising. For English students, this research can also make them aware of their writing challenges and consequently help them overcome such challenges. Thus, this research can motivate students to improve their writing skills, as it informs and makes them aware of their weaknesses and strengths in academic writing.

VII. LIMITATIONS

This research has some limitations. First, the study mostly resulted in descriptive data, in which generalisations about the findings cannot be made. The current research also did not provide information regarding the relationship between students' attitudes towards writing and their actual writing performance and achievements. Thus, qualitative methods, such as interviews, focus groups, think-aloud protocols and student-written texts, are required to collect more in-depth data about the L2 writing challenges that students face. This can help provide deep insights into the different external and internal factors causing difficulties in L2 academic writing. Moreover, the current study focussed only on a specific group of students and did not investigate the L2 academic writing attitudes and challenges of students of different genders, ages and disciplines and from different language institutions.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Given the findings obtained in the current study, there are many recommendations and suggestions for further research. First, there is a need for action research to investigate the writing skills among Saudi L2 learners. In this regard, teachers and/or researchers may cooperate and investigate the relationship between students' attitudes towards L2 writing and their actual L2 writing performance. By doing so, they can design a curriculum and modify it according to research results. It is also recommended to perform research on different students from different disciplines, ages and genders as well as from various language institutions and universities. This may result in fruitful and plausible findings. Finally, it is recommended to further study the writing difficulties related to the influence of students' first language (Arabic) on their L2 academic writing assignments, as this can help reveal some of the reasons underlying the L2 writing challenges.

APPENDIX A. QUESTIONNAIRE

Q1 - Your Email Address

عنوانك البريدي (الايمل)

Q2 - Age

العمر

- Under 18
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65+

Q3 - Describe your level of English language?

ما هو مستواكي في اللغة الانجليزية؟

- 101
- 102
- 103

- 104
- Pre-intermediate
- Upper-intermediate
- Advanced

Other (please specify)

What is your Track? ما هو مسارك؟

- General English Track (ELIA) مسار اللغة الإنجليزية العامة
- Academic English Track (ELIS) مسار اللغة الإنجليزية الأكاديمية
- English Majors Track (ELIE) مسار تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية
- Geo-Sciences Track (ELIG) مسار اللغة الإنجليزية للعلوم البيئية
- Faculty of Arts and Humanities Track (ELCA) مسار اللغة الإنجليزية لكلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية
- Health Sciences Track (ELIH) المسار الصحي
- Communication and Media Track (ELIC) مسار الاتصال والإعلام

Q4 - What is your major?

ما هو تخصصك الجامعي؟

Q5 - Year of Study

ما هي مرحلتك الدراسية؟

- Preparatory year السنة التحضيرية
- Second year السنة الثانية
- Third year السنة الثالثة
- Fourth year السنة الرابعة

Other (please specify)

Difficulties Encountered by ESL learners

الصعوبات التي تواجه الطالب أثناء الكتابة الانشائية باللغة الإنجليزية

Q1 - I understand how to write sentences using correct tenses

أنا متمكنة من كتابة جمل صحيحة من حيث الزمن مثل المضارع البسيط والمضارع التام

Q2 - I think sentence structure is challenge for me in writing.

أعتقد كتابة وتكوين جملة صحيحة باللغة الإنجليزية صعب

Q3 - Most of my sentences are grammatically correct in my essays.

معظم الجمل الانجليزية في كتاباتي صحيحة نحويًا

Q4 - During the writing and drafting stage, I usually do not know how to start writing.

عندما أبدأ كتابة القطعة الانشائية لا أعرف بماذا أبدأ أو كيف أبدأ

Q5 - Writing introduction is difficult for me.

كتابة المقدمة في القطعة الانشائية صعبة

Q6 - Writing conclusion is difficult for me.

كتابة الخاتمة في القطعة الانشائية صعبة

Q7 - My frequent common mistakes in grammar make my writing skills weak.

الأخطاء المتكررة عندي في قواعد الجمل الانجليزية تجعل من كتاباتي ضعيفة

Q8 - My frequent common mistakes in spelling affect my writing skill.

الأخطاء المتكررة عندي في كتابة هجاء الكلمات تؤثر على مستوى كتاباتي

Q9 - Before I start writing, I have difficulty to understand the topic of the essay.

قبل البدء في الكتابة، أواجه صعوبة في فهم محتوى السؤال

Q10 - Before I start writing, I have spent a lot of time to understand and familiarize myself with the topic.

قبل البدء في الكتابة، اقضي وقت طويل احاول ان افهم واستوعب موضوع الكتابة المطلوب

Q11 - I have difficulty organizing my ideas in writing.

أواجه صعوبة في ترتيب افكاري أثناء الكتابة

Q12 - I have never maintained coherent in writing.

لا اعرف كيف احافظ على ترابط وترتيب الافكار في كتابة القطع الانشائية

Q13 - Put a tick next to the weaknesses or/and difficulties you have faced when writing your assignments.

أختاري ممايلي الصعوبات التي تواجهك أثناء الكتابة الانشائية باللغة الإنجليزية

paraphrasing إعادة كتابة المعلومات

- language use استخدام اللغة الانجليزية
- expressing own voice التعبير عن رأيي
- finding a relevant references أيجاد المعلومات المناسبة
- referencing & citation استخدام المصادر وتنسيقها في الكتابة
- coherence & cohesion ربط الأفكار ببعضها وتنسيقها
- choosing a significant topic ايجاد موضوع مناسب للكتابة
- writing a topic sentence كتابة الأفكار الرئيسية
- writing supporting details كتابة المعلومات المدعمة للفكرة الرئيسية
- writing electronically الكتابة الكترونيا
- organize and connect my ideas تنسيق الأفكار وربطها
- others (specify)

Q14 - In general, you find writing assignment in English

بصفة عامة أجد واجبات الكتابة باللغة الانجليزية

- Very easy جدا سهله
- easy سهله
- Neither easy nor difficult غير متأكدة
- Difficult صعبه
- Very difficult جدا صعبه

Q15 - Do you find writing assignments in English difficult? Why or why not?

هل تجدي الكتابة باللغة الانجليزية صعبة أم سهلة؟ ولماذا؟

Q16 - What are the main weaknesses you have faced when writing your assignments?

ماهي نقاط ضعفك أثناء الكتابة الانشائية باللغة الانجليزية؟

General Attitude Towards English Writing

الموقف العام اتجاه كتابة القطع الانشائية باللغة الانجليزية

Q1 - English writing is not an important skill for me.

اعتبر الكتابة باللغة الانجليزية مهارة غير مهمة

Q2 - I do not pay much attention in writing class.

أنا لا أهتم كثيرًا بمادة الكتابة باللغة الانجليزية

Q3 - I study English writing test only for exam/assessment test.

أذاكر مادة الكتابة الانجليزية فقط لغرض النجاح في الاختبار

Q4 - I always study English writing even when I do not have a test/exam.

أذاكر مادة الكتابة الانجليزية حتى عندما لا يكون هناك اختبارات

Q5 - I enjoy writing academic essays.

أنا استمتع بكتابة المواضيع الانشائية وواجبات الكتابة باللغة الانجليزية

Q6 - I like to search online material before writing.

أبحث عن المعلومات الكترونيا قبل البدء في الكتابة

Q7 - Each time that I write, and I know clearly what I want to accomplish.

في كل مرة أكتب فيها قطعة انشائية أعرف بوضوح ما أريد تحقيقه

Q8 - I watch some videos on related topic before writing.

أشاهد بعض مقاطع الفيديو حول موضوع ذي صلة بالموضوع الانشائي قبل البدء في الكتابة

Q9 - I like to get feedback from my friends on my compositions.

أحب الحصول على تقييم (تغذية رجعية) من الآخرين (الاصدقاء و المعلم) حول كتاباتي باللغة الانجليزية

Q10 - I search online for materials on related topic before writing.

أنا أبحث في الإنترنت عن معلومات ذي صلة بالموضوع الانشائي قبل البدء في الكتابة

Q11 - English writing is important for success in my career.

القدرة على الكتابة باللغة الانجليزية مهمة في نجاح حياتي العلمية والعملية

Q12 - Discussing my writing with others is an enjoyable experience.

مناقشة كتاباتي الانشائية مع الآخرين هي تجربة ممتعة

Q13 - Teacher's assessment of my writing often similar to my own evaluation.

غالبًا ما يكون تقييم المعلم لكتاباتي مشابهًا لتقييمي الخاص

Q14 - Teachers motivational words are always helpful for me.

الكلمات التحفيزية من المعلمين مفيدة دائمًا بالنسبة لي

Q15 - Teacher behavior and personality affect my writing.

يؤثر سلوك المعلم وشخصيته على كتاباتي الانشائية

This is the end of the questionnaire. هذه نهاية الاستبيان

Thank you for filling out this survey. شكرًا لملئ هذا الاستطلاع

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