

The Effectiveness of Writing Circles Strategy in Developing Academic Writing Skills in EFL Classrooms

Albatoool Ahmad Alhazmi

Department of English, College of Languages and Translation, Najran University, Saudi Arabia

Marwa Ibrahim Elamin

Department of English, College of Languages and Translation, Najran University, Saudi Arabia

Abstract—This is an experimental study aiming to explore the effect of applying ‘Writing Circles’ strategy (WCs) in writing classrooms. WCs strategy is a type of collaborative methodology that relies heavily on peer-based collaborative learning. The study aimed to give a group of not less than 20 students from the college of languages and translation, Najran University, a chance to apply writing circles to explore how it affects their progress in writing. It also aimed to explore the role of WCs in scaffolding students’ communicative performance. Both quantitative and qualitative data analyses were employed in this research. Quantitative analysis of the study data was related to students’ performance, while qualitative data concerned students’ perceptions about their experiences in writing study and WCs application. Pre- and post-tests were given to the participants in order to check their progress after the application of the strategy. This parallel data, tests and reflection sheets, led to compatible results that proved WCs’s positive contribution to writing classrooms. It has a remarkable role in reinforcing writing skills, promoting interaction, and developing students’ communicative skills. Furthermore, the data showed students enjoyed working collaboratively in WCs which reflects positive and active atmosphere for language classrooms.

Index Terms—writing circles, collaborative learning, peer-based learning, academic writing

I. INTRODUCTION

When Covid-19 developed into a pandemic, Saudi schools and universities turned to online education as an alternative modern style of education. After students returned to traditional education, writing skill was one of the most affected parts for English language learners. This experimental study was planned to help students familiarize themselves with the demanding task of writing in a foreign language. In order to enhance this idea, a strategy that depends on pair and group work was applied. Vopat (2009) described writing circles as a very good method to encourage writing. This strategy was used for the sake of improving students’ writing skills as learning occurs within social event (Vygotsky, 1978; cited in Huber et al., 2020). The study aims to:

- Develop students’ writing skills in an innovative fruitful way through WCs method.
- Explore the role of WCs in scaffolding students’ communicative performance.
- Raise students’ awareness towards their weaknesses by editing for themselves and for their peers.
- Explore students’ perceptions towards WCs strategy.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing in general and academic writing in particular, has been a challenging miserable chore (Plakhtonik & Rocco, 2012). Academic writing is “written for a specific audience and attempts to put forward a well-balanced view about the topic under investigation. It constantly refers to published work (with appropriate referencing), theory and results” (White, 2000, p. 133; cited in Plakhtonik & Rocco, 2012). This means that in order to encourage students to write, teachers need enjoyable supportive methods.

Collaborative learning has become a major aim for teachers as it leaves far-reaching effects. Skehan (2003) found that by applying a task-based strategy for English language learners, progress has been noticed in various dimensions including content, fluency, accuracy, and complexity with different degrees. However, Naghdipour and Kathim (2021) investigated undergraduate EFL learners’ progress in written linguistic accuracy of grammar, spelling and punctuation by tracing and comparing second year, third- and fourth-year students’ performance in writing. Their results revealed that learners improved their spelling and punctuation, but not grammar. They found out that fourth year students outperformed their colleagues of second and third year only on surface structure errors of spelling and punctuation.

Feedback is one of the major reasons that enhance writing and some teachers, unfortunately, ignore it. Unless students know their mistakes, they do not know how to go ahead. Cameron et al. (2005) proved that corrective feedback is very influential in improving students' writing. They proved that individual written feedback has helped students' writing accuracy and when it is accompanied by oral discussion of their errors with their instructors, it has even better results. A study that has taken a different angle to encourage EFL learners to write is experimented by Abdulmajeed (2016). The researcher tried to encourage his students by giving them positive rather than negative feedback on their writing. He measured accuracy and lexical complexity before and after giving students positive feedback. His strategy resulted in some progress in students' performance. He named it positive corrective feedback.

Writing Circles (WCs henceforth) has proved its efficacy in various contexts (Vopat, 2009; Huber et al., 2020; Plakhotnik & Rocco, 2012; Roberts et al., 2017, to mention but a few examples). WCs is defined as "small groups . . . meeting regularly to share drafts, choose common writing topics, practice positive response, and in general, help each other become better writers" (Vopat, 2009, p. 6). It is designed initially to help children write, edit and publish in a set of groups.

Attempted with adults, WCs has shown great effectiveness with accounting students in improving their writing skills in a recent study by Huber et al. (2020) in which the researchers assure that various techniques have been implemented to improve writing skill for accounting students such as scaffolding, web-based learning as well as writing modules but none of these techniques has gained the success achieved by WCs. What distinguishes WCs is the collaborative nature and peer review that it depends on.

Another study that has tried WCs with adult learners is by Plakhotnik and Rocco (2012) in which the researchers have applied this strategy on graduates enrolled in a master's program in urban education. In this study, writing circles are adapted to become writing support circles 'WSCs', implying that the strategy is meant to support learners in academic writing. The researchers have not implemented the strategy themselves but assigned some instructors to do it. However, besides improvement of academic writing, a number of lessons were learnt from this experience such as the role of teachers as facilitators to explain WSCs when they assign a homework to the participants and the need for explicit instruction and well-organised design of WCS to avoid any misunderstanding or useless application of the strategy (Plakhotnik & Rocco, 2012). The researchers have proved the importance of the guidance and facilitation of the instructors to the participants.

Furthermore, the purpose of the exploratory study implemented by Roberts et al. (2017) to elementary teachers' candidates is to enhance learners' perceptions about writing and authorship. The study emphasized the positive influence of collaborative learning on teacher candidates applying WCs, showing teachers' satisfaction with the strategy in response to an investigation of their perceptions. This study achieved its goals as it was found that a majority (68%) of the candidates reported improvement in writing. This study has come out with very interesting results besides academic achievement. The researchers claim that WCs has given the participants motive to help, sustain, and motivate each other to work through the WCs writing process. Since the participants were elementary teacher candidates and have tested its efficacy, they were enthusiastic to apply this strategy with their school children (Roberts et al., 2017).

Washburn (2008) has also proved the efficacy of WCs on encouraging vibrant participation on writing, as it encourages participants to exchange and discuss ideas. Supported by feedback, participants have benefited notably from this strategy. The researcher recommends WCs for any university that is interested in encouraging its members to write for publication.

Studies to boost EFL students writing skill attempted various methods that encourage collaborative and autonomous learning. Sukerti and Yuliantini (2018) implemented a project-based learning model to assist students to learn autonomously. Their strategy helped students improve their writing accuracy. Progress was noticed in grammar as a result of continuous feedback.

To conclude, writing skill is a challenging task that needs some effort from the side of teachers to encourage and motivate students to write. Hence, further research would be beneficial to explore the methods that could be employed to improve the quality of students' writing, enhance their engagement, and encourage their autonomy in language learning classrooms.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is an experimental study applying Vopat's Writing Circles (WCs) method with some adaptation to suit the learning context. WCs is, as mentioned above, a strategy of small groups of students who meet regularly to help each other become better writers (Vopat, 2009). Vopat applied WCs to children, however, his strategy is efficient and applicable for all ages. For the purpose of this study, slight adaptations were made to suit the students' age.

Data collection was conducted over a period of ten weeks on the first term of the academic year of 2021, for three hours per week. It included three main stages; 1) Pretest that was given primarily to the participants in order to check certain items in writing such as sentence structure, vocabulary, grammar and punctuation, 2) Application of the theory phase and finally 3) A post-test was also given at the end of the course, following some practice in the form of 'ungraded' formative tests (see figure 1). A rubric was used, and students' scores were measured to check their progress and the benefit of the method. Further explanation of the strategy application will be introduced in the following sections.

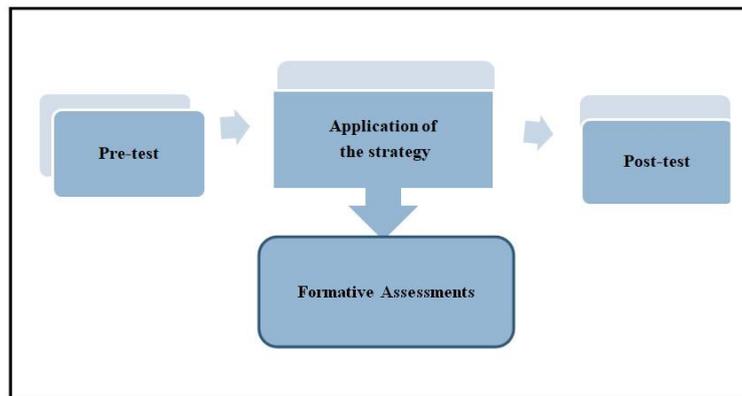


Figure 1 The Stages of The Study Data Collection

A. The Participants

WCs strategy relies heavily on peer- based collaborative learning. Thus, a group of 20 students from Najran University, faculty of Languages and Translation, were divided into 4 groups. The groups were given names to facilitate communication and to make it fun for learners. The participants were from level six to eight. These levels were chosen on the basis of the students' background on essay writing. According to the study plan, the students on level six must have covered writing courses that train them on paragraph writing to essay writing. Almost all participants are Arabic speakers. One student has a different language background, and she speaks Arabic as a foreign language.

Students registered on the course signed a consent to agree to have their writing used anonymously for scientific research and that they have to attend regularly and do all the required writing assignments.

B. Design of the Sessions

The course started by introducing the strategy to the students. The researchers introduced the course by giving a detailed plan of how they are going to help the students in this course. The assistance is by opening lectures of features of academic writing, followed by the steps suggested by Vopat (2009). Vopat suggested mini lessons at the beginning of each session, and the researchers used this part during the course either to introduce features of academic writing or to give students feedback on their writing and explain the linguistic features needed by the students.

In each session of the application of the strategy, the teacher introduced a type of essay, explained some academic aspects related to the type of the essay, then suggested some topics to write about. The groups were given freedom of choice of topics to stimulate discussion. Each group chose a topic to write about, then each student started writing about the chosen topic, sometimes group members edited for each other before handing the essay to the instructor (one of the two researchers). However, the general case was that the instructor collected essays for editing. The instructor gave feedback at the beginning of the coming session and the process went on in this way.

Feedback included in addition to ideas discussed in the essay, grammatical mistakes, vocabulary choice, spelling and punctuation problems. The same problematic areas would be the topic discussed in one of the sessions to scaffold students' performance. After explanation, students were given an exercise dealing with one of the problematic areas noticed in the previous written article.

Feedback is very important for students. Good feedback has many benefits such as helping students "close the gap between the current and desired performance" (Nicol & Dick, 2006, p. 207). Another benefit of good feedback is that it encourages positive motivation and self-esteem (ibid).

Moreover, formative assessment was done regularly to provide learners with feedback for the sake of improving the learning process. Specific writing rubric, similar to the rubrics used by writing instructors in the college, were used to assess students' writing in order to observe their progress. A reflection sheet was used, in the final stage, to examine participants' perception and interaction towards applying WCs in writing classrooms.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Regarding the overall efficiency of WCs strategy, both quantitative and qualitative data analyses were employed in this research. Quantitative analysis of the study data related to students' performance is presented firstly in this section. Then, qualitative data concerned students' perceptions about their experiences in writing study and WCs application is discussed afterwards.

A. Quantitative Analysis

For the purpose of this research, descriptive analysis of students' gain scores in each skill is presented to compare the students' scores on their attempts in essay writing in both pre and post-tests. The instructor checked the essays according to the rubric developed by the researchers. Paper marking considered content (ideas and information),

structure (organization of ideas and text), lexis (the richness and appropriateness of vocabulary) as well as the mechanisms that ensure accuracy of the language, which explicitly include grammar, spelling and punctuation.

The analysis includes scores gained in the six skills defined under the two main taxonomies recognized by the researchers “fluency-oriented” and “accuracy-oriented” tasks (see Figure 2). The skills include content, structure, spelling, grammar, punctuation, and lexis. In this section, both results of pre- and post- tests are discussed separately. Then, a comparison between the two follows.

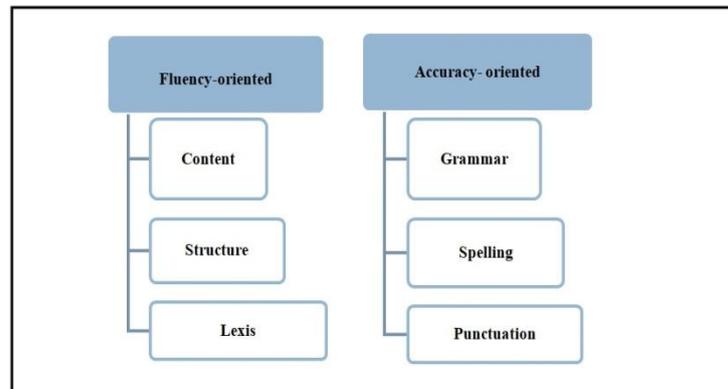


Figure 2 The Taxonomies of Skills Under Study

(a). *The Results of Pre-Test Performance*

After introducing the students to the course outlines and the strategy, they were given an individual task to write an essay about one of three assigned topics. In their first attempts that were referred to as pre-test, reluctantly, they wrote very short essays. The longest one was barely three paragraphs. They were asked to write between 200 and 300 words. The majority (85%) wrote between 150 and 200 words and some of them wrote even less. More than half (55 %) achieved scores below the medium (15). The total mark was 30, weighting 5 marks for each skill. The average of their scores in pre-test was only 16.85. The students who gained marks above the average were only 10 (50%).

The mistakes in their writing were massive and of all types. Most of the essays written by the participants did not have organized ideas and were not divided into introduction, body, and conclusion. Spelling and grammatical mistakes were frequent and common.

Additionally, mistakes resulting from mother tongue interference manifest themselves in the form of wrong use of pronouns, articles, prepositions, subject- verb agreement, word order and relative clauses. Consider the following example that works well for wrong punctuation:

- *I agree it separate the family the child and the old people may not see each other...*

Another example which also shows the effect of negative transfer of L1 on sentence structure is:

- *Online education is so helpful, with the pandemic Covid 19, when the school and university was closed, all the education be by online.*

Additional common mistake resulted from students’ lack of L2 vocabulary. Students use words that they know without paying attention to the lexical differences between words, e.g.:

- *In the last five years later happened the biggest event in Saudi Arabia. It (women driving cars) had a lot of noise (row) in middle east, ...*

These common mistakes could result from lack of crucial exposure and practice of the target language. During online experience, students had limited opportunities for language authentic experiences. Such negative effect of distance education was expected as teachers faced several problems in teaching as well as assessing students writing skills especially during pandemic period. One salient issue was plagiarism/originality of students’ writing (Dwiyanti & Suwastini, 2021). The absence of direct monitoring of the students writing caused ineffective teaching and made authentic assessment very challenging. Various issues were also identified by the educators and researchers regarding virtual learning whether before or during the pandemic including time management, technological knowledge, digital division (access to technology), students’ social skills, curriculum and material design, online assessments, and the provision of effective feedback (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007; Dung, 2020; Tamah et. al., 2020; Dwiyanti & Suwastini, 2021). Thus, more attention and further research are needed to address the increasing concerns about the quality of online education and to deal with the challenges faced by the teacher and the learner during such experience.

(b). *The Result of Post-Test Performance*

The last essay collected from the students marked a considerable change from the first one. The students at the end of the course became used to writing. They recognized the main features of the academic writing regarding formality, objectivity as well as complexity in essay writing. They showed awareness of the main components of essay writing. Their writing included more ideas and at least there is basic information about the given topic. Ideas were organized and distributed according to the parts of the essay. Lexis was enriched compared to their word choices in their first attempts.

All students achieved scores above average mark (15/out of 30). The average of their scores in this stage was 23.9. Remarkable improvement at all levels of language skills was recognized from their performance in the last attempts.

Moreover, the strategy was found to support students to learn autonomously. In this study, students self-directed their writing task, and managed writing and editing processes starting from choosing the topic, negotiating ideas, giving feedback, to revising and writing the final draft. They seemed to develop different communicative skills. They helped each other, engaged in groupwork, negotiated roles, and led themselves to accomplish their writing tasks.

Several studies such as Plakhotnik and Rocco (2012) and Huber et al. (2020) support this claim that proved the effectiveness of WCs in promoting autonomous learning. This finding is also in line with the scope of several studies on language education that call for implementing techniques that encourage autonomous learning (e.g., Ajideh, 2009; Masouleh & Jooneghani, 2012; Sukerti & Yuliantini, 2018). Such studies assert the importance of shifting the focus from the learning outcomes into the learning process and from teacher-based learning to learner-based (or teacher-less) learning to equip students with skills required in different environments.

In this attempt, participants have written better with regard to content. Further concepts were used to support their ideas e.g.:

- *There are many other reasons why there has been an increase in travelling, especially these days. One of them is business, or to explore multiculturalism and finally for medical reasons.*

However, as for students' problematic areas with regard to grammar, spelling and punctuation, as well as vocabulary, the time of the program was not sufficient to treat individual problems. Consider the following example:

- *Having friends from different countries and interacting with people from different society will teaches you more than studying.*

Thus, students were referred to different resources such as books and websites to try to work on these problems. They were also encouraged to attend further classes and events to strengthen such weaknesses.

(c). *The Comparison of the Results (Pre- and Post- Tests)*

A general comparison of mean values for the students' performance in writing before and after WCs strategy application showed that WCs strategy is effective in enhancing and supporting students and in raising their learning autonomy. The majority of students (75%) achieved generally better marks in their post- test at all levels of linguistic aspects under study including fluency and accuracy-oriented skills. The data revealed that students' performance improved in the six abovementioned skills (see Figure 3).

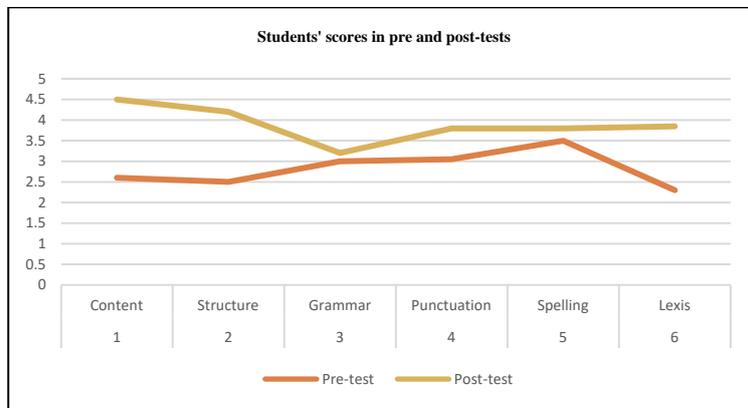


Figure 3 The Comparison of the Students' Performance in Pre- and Post- Tests.

A paired t-test of pre- and post-test scores was used to measure the significance of difference in students scores. The data showed a statistically significant difference in the mean (students marks) before and after the intervention as $p < .05$ level; $P = 0.017$ (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
THE DATA OF STUDENTS' SCORES IN PRE AND POST-TESTS

| No | Skill | Pre-test | | | Post-test | | |
|----|-------------|----------|------|------------|-----------|------|------------|
| | | Total | Mean | SD | Total | Mean | SD |
| 1 | Content | 52 | 2.6 | 0.59824304 | 90 | 4.5 | 0.6882472 |
| 2 | Structure | 51 | 2.5 | 0.82557795 | 84 | 4.2 | 0.61558701 |
| 3 | Grammar | 60 | 3 | 0.72547625 | 64 | 3.2 | 0.61558701 |
| 4 | Punctuation | 61 | 3.05 | 0.75915465 | 76 | 3.8 | 0.89442719 |
| 5 | Spelling | 71 | 3.5 | 0.99868334 | 76 | 3.8 | 0.89442719 |
| 6 | Lexis | 46 | 2.3 | 0.57124057 | 77 | 3.8 | 0.74515982 |

The difference was clearly manifest specifically in the performance of post-test regarding “fluency-oriented” tasks of writing that include content, structure, and lexis (see Figure 4). While the other three examined skills including grammar, punctuation, and spelling indicated similar scores in both pre and post-tests (see Figure 5).

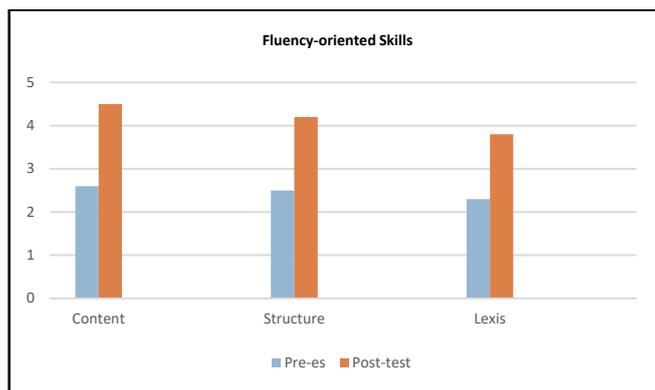


Figure 4 A Comparison of Students' Scores in Pre and Post-tests (Fluency-oriented Skills)

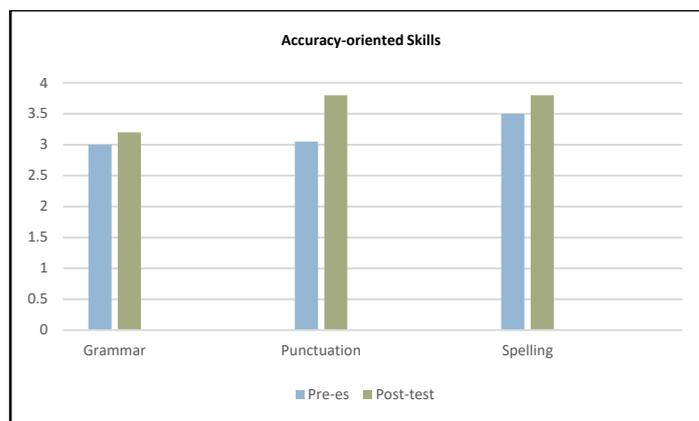


Figure 5 A Comparison of Students' Scores in Pre and Post-tests (Accuracy-oriented Skills)

The difference between pre-test and post-test in accuracy-oriented skills is not as great as in the case of fluency-oriented skills, and this was expected as fluency skills are more likely to be improved through collaborative learning activities such as WCs. Such activities positively affect communication and participation in different educational contexts (Skehan, 2003; Plakhotnik & Rocco, 2012). Additionally, this study also proved that WCs has a considerable role in building and improving social relationship during classrooms interaction. Huber et al. (2020) asserted that WCs is a strategy that enhances collaborative relationships among students during writing classrooms that considerably improved their writing skills. This finding is also supported in literature for example, Washburn (2008) found that WCs provided librarians with peer support, encouraged participation, and contributed to the creation of active and sustainable community of scholars. Moreover, as found in this study, WCs developed students' leadership in addition to collaboration skills. WCs allows the choice of writing as well as giving an important space of freedom in team management and task accomplishment as discussed in the section above regarding the role that the strategy plays in promoting students' autonomy.

However, concerning accuracy-oriented skills, some results were surprising and not expected. There was a decline in scores of some students while doing post-test. Still, only three students (15%) were found to have lower achievement in their last attempts; while they achieved higher marks in fluency-oriented skills, on the other hand, accuracy-oriented skills marked lower scores.

Though, students were expected to give more focus on fluency skills over the accuracy for the time bias. WCs was found to enhance communicative skills, as mentioned above, and thus improved fluency more than accuracy skills. This difficulty could be overcome if students' attention was constantly directed to revising and editing the accuracy aspects in their writing. Furthermore, this could be justifiable as students wrote more on the post-test. Thus, more mistakes were expected to appear in their last attempts. Hyland and Hyland (2006) stated that writing is a developmental process. The more learners practice, the better they write. Hence, accuracy is more likely to be improved on long-term intervention process and with more practice and attention given to them.

B. Qualitative Analysis

This section addresses the qualitative data of the research. It includes the data related to students' perceptions about their experiences in writing study generally and WCs application specifically. Reflection sheet was employed in this research to examine participants' perception and impression towards applying WCs in writing classrooms. Focused questions were included in the reflection sheet involving three main themes 1) The distance education experience, 2) The group work experience and 3) The WCs experience. These parts include data discussing the participants'

satisfaction about the strategy usage, the way it helps, the skills expected to be developed through strategy, and the perception about its effectiveness for other forthcoming courses and programs.

(a). *The Distance Education Experience*

Students were asked about the difficulties they faced in writing academically in English, especially during Covid-19 lockdown. They mentioned the following obstacles:

- Lack in efficient contact with the teachers since the teachers were behind the screen.
- Spelling mistakes and shaky sentence structure.
- Grammatical mistakes and shortage in vocabulary.
- Using applications to correct mistakes during online education lessened practice.
- Absence of practice of writing since most online tests were objective.
- Shortage in generating and expressing ideas.
- Weakness in organizing texts.
- Failure in using punctuation marks.

These answers showed students' awareness about problems that might have resulted from distance education regarding weaknesses that appeared in their abilities to write. Such attempts to diagnose the areas of problems are useful in raising students' consciousness and promoting their independence regarding learning process. These could be recognized from their responses about the role of WCs implementation in enhancing their writing skills which will be discussed in the following sections.

(b). *The Group Work Experience*

Students were also asked about the group work experiences during WCs implementation. Almost all the participants (95%) replied positively to whether they liked group work. Their answers were supported by a reason that group work helped them collaborate with each other.

According to their responses, they enjoyed it as it helped them share new words, gather, and organize ideas for the topic under discussion because they practiced "brainstorming", it improved the ability to accept criticism, correcting mistakes and asking for guidance from the teacher, and it improved writing skill by taking knowledge from others and detecting mistakes. Some of their comments that include some reasons are shown here:

- *"Group work helps exchange ideas and encourages us to accept others' views"*
- *"It generates ideas, gives new information,"*
- *"We felt more confident, not scared of making mistakes"*

One interesting comment was a description given by one girl who felt that sharing ideas among the group members is extremely helpful:

- *"It is inspiring, increases interaction, simplifies complicated ideas and develops respect for different views"*

Other comments are:

- *"One of the most interesting courses I've ever attended ... I managed to give my opinion when they consult me".*
- *"We learned from each other, we corrected each other's mistakes, there was a spirit of cooperation, and the instructor was there to help us and guide us"*

Such comments draw our attention, as instructors, to the importance of group work, editing and directing students.

However, the only participant who responded negatively to the question 'did you like group work in this writing course?', added to her "No" that *"it interrupts my thoughts"*. Still, she found it useful in taking the help of group members in sharing ideas and in finding the right term.

Still, some difficulties were recognized and added by the students regarding practicing group work through WCs strategy. As this strategy gives the participants choice of a topic for the whole group from the list given, some participants said that they faced difficulty in convincing other members with their opinions. They complained that some are not cooperative while others are dependent on others. Other participants commented that trying to come to an agreement, wasted some precious time while a few said the difficulties they faced resulted from their own weak competence in writing. However, this finding is asserting the role of WCs in developing students' communicative and social skills such as negotiation, persuasion and leadership (see section IV A-c). By focusing on the learning process, the students develop various skills needed for negotiation such as self- confidence, self-direction and problem- solving skills (Sukerti & Yuliantini, 2018).

(c). *The WCs Experience*

In the participants' responses to the question: 'have you noticed any progress in your writing after practicing writing with this strategy?', 100% replied with affirmation even if some of them think that this progress is slight.

As previously mentioned, this course started immediately after students returned from online education. There were difficulties encountered by the participants after distance education experience, and thus in their response to whether this course in which WCs strategy is used has helped them solve these problems or at least some of these problems; all of them (the 20 participants) answered positively, but not all of them agreed that all the problems were solved. They gave different answers summarized as follows:

- *“It helped me practice more, find out my mistakes, learn some grammatical rules as well as rules for using punctuation marks.”*
- *“I became more fluent in writing.”*
- *“I think I expressed ideas more creatively as we started to brainstorm and discuss topics openly.”*
- *“I found out that peer advice was valuable as we reminded each other of the rules that we studied but we did not apply before.” “We learnt from each other.” We even discovered that some peers have useful ideas that opened our minds to better expression.”*
- *“Our vocabulary increased.”*
- *“We were less scared of making mistakes.”*
- *“We continued and will continue to practice and learn.”*
- *“Spelling mistakes became less.”*
- *“Thinking skill became faster.”*
- *“We enjoyed learning in this way.”*

Additionally, to allow further information, the reflection sheet included a question about the linguistic and interactional skills that WCs strategy helped them to develop. They were asked if it helped them in the following skills:

- a) Enriching content and expressing ideas
- b) Writing correct grammatical sentences
- c) Using punctuation marks properly
- d) Increasing vocabulary
- e) Improving interaction skills
- f) Any other skill.

Although the purpose of the feedback gained from the reflection sheets was not to measure the performance of the students, their answers were useful to measure the efficacy of the WCs strategy. Their responses supported the results gained from quantitative data regarding the improvement that could be achieved with the intervention (see table 2 below).

TABLE 2
STUDENTS’ RESPONSES ABOUT THE SKILLS DEVELOPED THROUGH WCS

| Response | Skill | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----------|---------|------------|----|---------|------------|----|-------------|------------|----|------------|------------|----|-------------|------------|----|
| | Content | | | Grammar | | | Punctuation | | | Vocabulary | | | Interaction | | |
| Perc. % | Yes | Partly Yes | No | Yes | Partly Yes | No | Yes | Partly Yes | No | Yes | Partly Yes | No | Yes | Partly Yes | No |
| | 85 | 5 | 10 | 60 | 25 | 15 | 80 | 5 | 15 | 90 | - | 10 | 75 | 15 | 10 |

As can be seen in the table above, for the skills that WCs course helped the students improve in, their answers in the reflection sheet ranged from ‘yes’, ‘partially yes’ to ‘No’. In some cases, their answers might contradict with the recognized progress in the post test. However, the majority (85% - 60% - 80% - 90% - 75% for the skills respectively; see the table) asserted positive effect of using WCs strategy during writing course. Students reported they benefited from the teacher’s feedback, and they detailed their answer in a way that reveals how they had spotted their mistakes. One girl said *“Now I know very well when to use capital letters”*, another said: *“Now I can write an essay even though it can be full of mistakes”*, a third commented by saying *“I got more ideas and I got help when I needed it”*. Comments as such proved that students were able to realize their mistakes after the course and they were satisfied with what they had achieved from the course.

In the first point that is whether WCs strategy has helped them in writing a richer content and whether their ideas became more organized, their reaction was positive for 85% of them. Only 5%, that is one student, said *“somehow”*, one student answered negatively, and one student left it blank which could be taken as negative response or ‘not sure’.

The second skill is writing sentences accurately with regard to grammatical structure. More than half (60%) answered positively that the strategy helped them fix their grammatical errors and sentence structure, 25% said that the progress is very little, and 15% answered negatively.

Punctuation mark was noticed as a real problem in the students’ writing. The majority (80%) of the answers were positive, 15% answered negatively while only one student (5%) was not sure whether she improved this skill.

As for their response in the reflection sheet about their progress in vocabulary, the majority reported positive answers as 90% answered ‘Yes’, while only 10% said ‘to some extent’.

Since one of the major aims of the course was to encourage students’ interaction after ‘individual’ online education, students were asked about the role that WCs played in promoting interaction during writing classes. The reaction was positive for the majority (75%), while 15% said only to some extent, and 5% answered negatively whilst 5% left it blank which could be considered negative.

Additionally, the students were asked if they have had developed other skills other than the abovementioned, their answers ranged from ‘No’ for 65% of them to ‘Yes’ for the remaining number (35%) who thought that they developed the following skills during the course:

- Self-reliance
- Working with teams

- Free writing: not restrained by marks (The student here means the instructors told them to feel relaxed as there are no marks related to their graduation).
- Discussion skills
- Brainstorm ideas and use of creative ideas in writing
- Clear expression and better thinking
- Various writing styles

Finally, to ensure that they enjoyed learning using WCs strategy, they were asked if they want this strategy applied in other courses and why. The majority (85%) asserted their positive attitudes toward strategy application. For the second part of the question, however, the students mentioned abundant reasons for their positive responses that are similar and aligned with previous findings, including:

- *“Working in a team and working outside the curriculum will improve our cognition”*
- *“To increase vocabulary, organize ideas, and improve writing skills”*
- *“To clarify unfamiliar sentences, and ideas and to improve communication skills”*
- *“It helps improve learning quality, expressive and interactional skills”*

Only 10%, that is two students, said ‘no’ regarding the application of WCs in other courses, and one student left it blank. They mentioned reasons related to group work difficulties such as the group agreement on a topic or the ideas. These students could be described as introvert students as they showed a tendency to quiet and individual work that may be related to their personal attributes.

The last question was if the participants wish to apply this strategy if they became teachers, or if they are given a chance to teach. Similarly, almost all (95%) answered positively and the one who was not interested in group work avoided a negative answer by elaborating the answer and explaining that she will encourage regular writing and she will give feedback to her students and will discuss their mistakes with them.

To sum up, from the findings mentioned in the reflection sections, WCs strategy has a significant role in training students to employ and develop various communicative skills needed for the group work generally and for collaborative learning particularly including negotiating, convincing, and management skills. Additionally, students’ performance is expected to be enhanced as different academic skills related to accuracy skills were found to be improved. Students responded positively to the role of WCs in developing their writing skills including enriching content and vocabulary, organizing structure, and developing spelling, grammar, and punctuation. These findings go in line with the quantitative data (post-test results) that emphasized effective role of the strategy in developing both fluency and accuracy skills.

However, some neutral and negative comments were reported. Though, comparing these comments to the results gained from quantitative data, showed some contrast as all students gained better marks and showed progress in their ideas and skills after the intervention.

V. CONCLUSION

This parallel data, tests and reflection sheet, led to compatible results that proved WCs’s positive contribution to writing classrooms. It has a remarkable role in scaffolding writing learning, reinforcing writing skills, promoting interaction, and developing students’ communicative skills.

With reference to the data collected and analyzed, the strategy has achieved its goals by helping students not only practice writing, but also improved their writing in an interesting and active way. One of the cornerstones of this strategy is editing and scaffolding. The study revealed WCs is an effective strategy that encouraged students to exchange and to discuss ideas. The participants appreciated the idea of having their writing assessed, their progress encouraged, and their errors explained and corrected.

The strategy may not have apparently fixed accuracy defaults as they need a longer time, but it has drawn attention to them. Participants were satisfied with what they have achieved according to their response in the reflection sheet. They became more aware about their weaknesses and the skills needed to be developed and scaffolded. The strategy has helped students improve the way they generate ideas, organize them and brainstorm for relevant vocabulary. As for fluency, the strategy helped enhance communicative skills needed for the group work in general and for collaborative learning such as negotiation, persuasion, and leadership skills. Furthermore, the data showed students enjoyed working collaboratively in writing circles which reflects positive and active atmosphere for language classrooms.

VI. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

As the study proved the effective role of WCs in writing classrooms, it is a worthwhile experience to be implemented in EFL classrooms. Several points could be considered in this sense:

- WCs could be more valuable and efficient in developing fluency than accuracy- oriented skills considering the following two predictable reasons:
 1. The nature of the strategy in reinforcing communicative skills.
 2. The nature of accuracy skills and students’ low competence that confirm the need for longer time and intensive work to deal with such issues.

- Though, WCs could significantly contribute to accuracy skills in terms of recognition and identification of weakness points for the learners.
- WCs could be an effective strategy used for follow-up and feedback from both peers and instructors.
- Further research is needed to examine the way the strategy could be used to improve the quality of writing produced and to enhance students' engagement in classroom learning considering their individual differences.

REFERENCES

- [1] Abdulmajeed, H. M. (2016). *An Integrated Approach to Achievement: Measuring the Development of Writing Skills in Kurdish Learners of English as a Foreign Language* (A PhD thesis). Birmingham: Birmigham University.
- [2] Ajideh, P. (2009). Autonomous Learning and Metacognitive Strategies Essentials in ESP Class. *English language teaching*, 2(1), 162-168.
- [3] Cameron, D., Young, S., & Bitchner, J. (2005). The effect of different types of feedback on ESL student writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 14(3) 191-205.
- [4] Dung, T. H. (2020). The advantages and disadvantages of virtual learning. *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 10(3), 45-48.
- [5] Dwiyantri, K. E., & Suwastini, N. A. (2021). Assessment for writing skills in online learning. *Lingua Scientia*, 28(1), 8-19.
- [6] Gaytan, J., & McEwen, B. C. (2007). Effective online instructional and assessment strategies. *The American journal of distance education*, 21(3), 117-132.
- [7] Huber, M. M., Leach-Lopez, M. A., Lee, E., & Mafi, S. L. (2020). Improving accounting student writing skills using writing circles. *Journal of Accounting Education*, 53, 100694.
- [8] Hyland, K., & Hyland, F. (2006). Feedback on second language students' writing. *Language Teaching*, 39(2), 83-101. doi:doi:10.1017/S0261444806003399
- [9] Masouleh, N. S., & Jooneghani, R. B. (2012). Autonomous learning: A teacher-less learning!. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 55, 835-842.
- [10] Naghdipour, B., & Kathim, K. (2021). Exploring Omani EFL Students' Written Linguistic Accuracy Development in Disciplinary Contexts. *Language, Linguistics, and Literature: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, vol. 27(3), 129-143. doi:1 http://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2021-2703-08
- [11] Nicol, D. and Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006) Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2), 199-218.
- [12] Plakhotnik, M. S., & Rocco, T. S. (2012). Implementing writing support circles with adult learners in a nonformal education setting: Priority, practice, and process. *Adult Learning*, 23(2), 76-81.
- [13] Robert, S., Blanch, N., & Gurjar, N. (2017). Exploring Writing Circles as Innovative, Collaborative Writing Structures With Teacher Candidates. *Reading Horizons*, 56(2), 1-21.
- [14] Skehan, P. (2003). Task- Based Instruction. *Language Teaching*. doi:DOI: 10.1017/S026144480200188X
- [15] Sukerti, G. A., & Yuliantini, N. (2018). Learning autonomy in writing class: Implementation of project-based learning in English for specific purposes. In *Journal of Physics: Conference Series*, (Vol. 953, No. 1, p. 012101). IOP Publishing.
- [16] Tama, S. M., Triwidayati, K. R., & Utami, T. S. (2020). Secondary school language teachers' online learning engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia . *Journal of Information Technology Education, Research*, 19, 803-832.
- [17] Vopat, J. (2009). *Writing Circles: Kids Revolutionize Workshop*. Portsmouth: NH: Heinmann.
- [18] Washburn, A. (2008). Writing circle feedback: Creating a vibrant community of scholars. *Journal of Faculty Development*.

Albatool Ahmad Alhazmi had her masters and PhD. from UNSW, Australia. Research areas are discourse analysis, language acquisition, language education and bilingualism. She is currently an assistant professor in English Dept. and vice dean of the college of languages and translation, Najran University, Saudi Arabia. She has a paper published under the title: "Linguistic Aspects of Arabic-English Code Switching on Facebook and Radio in Australia". Another paper is a coauthored one under the title "Light as a Source Domain for Metaphors in the Holy Quran". Recently, in 2021, a third paper entitled "The Ideology of Language Purism in Online Interaction of Arabic Speakers" was published. Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3737-524X>.

Marwa I. Elamin graduated from University of Khartoum, Sudan: B.A. Honours, M.A. and Ph.D. Research areas are English language and cognitive linguistics. She has attended a good number of teacher training courses including British Council Summer course in Plymouth, UK. She is currently an assistant professor at the college of languages and translation, Najran University, Saudi Arabia. Her interests include teaching English as a foreign language, translation, and linguistics. She has published a paper entitled "Metaphors of Love in Happy New Year: A poem by Suad Assabah" after presenting it in a conference in the University of South Denmark, Odense, Denmark. Another paper is a coauthored one under the title: "Light as a Source Domain for Metaphors in the Holy Quran". Orcid Id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6664-2212>.