EFL university students' voice on challenges and solution in learning academic writing

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ABSTRACT
The present study aims to investigate the difficulties faced by 74 English as a foreign language (EFL) undergraduate students in developing a well-written paragraph in academic writing by designing a writing course based on the students' voices. The self-report survey (5-point Likert scale) was used as the pre- and post-questionnaire, and pre- and the post-tests task was used to track students' writing improvement before and after taking a writing course. Pre-questionnaire and pre-tests showed that participants had difficulties in using the mechanics of writing (punctuation, spelling, grammar, topic sentences, and supporting sentences). The majority of the students' responses in the post-survey shows that they believed their writing improved and encountered fewer difficulties in writing as compared to their views in the pre-questionnaire. The result of the post-tests indicates improvements in students' writing samples. The study concludes that EFL writing courses should be designed on the basis of challenges faced by the students in order to get the best outcome from the course.

Keywords: Academic writing; EFL writing; undergraduate EFL students; writing challenges

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is vital for students to master the English language and to be able to learn other disciplines where English is the language of instruction. Björk and Räisänen (1997) view writing as a "thinking tool… a tool for language development, for critical thinking… for learning in all disciplines" (p. 24). It is also a tool for language learning and for assessing learners' competence in a language (Lahuerta, 2017; McDonough & Crawford, 2018). However, the study conducted by Ansari, (2012) in EFL context have shown that research on second language writing still lacks investigation on the aspects of writing weakness and how to improve students' writing.

Second/foreign language writing at the university level has been a challenge especially for English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) learners. Students seem weaker in their writing skills. Most of the research conducted in the ESL/EFL setting, reports that learners studying English at the university level face challenges in English in general and writing skill in particular (e.g., Bacha, 2012; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope (1986); Khalil, 2002; Kharma & Hajjaj, 1997; Tahaineh, 2010). Many scholars consider academic writing as one of the biggest challenges for ESL and EFL students (e.g., Al Badi, 2015; Ansari, 2012; Mohan & Lo, 1985). Even though they study English for years, they still look at writing as a challenging skill to learn and master. Several researchers report that ESL undergraduate students struggle in achieving the English academic writing requirements in their literature and linguistic courses. Several researchers have pointed out that students in universities lack not only the required English language proficiency but also the knowledge of academic writing that hinders their academic progress (e.g., Ansari, 2012). Horwitz et al. (1986) suggest that students

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writing weakness is related to their anxiety in their communication apprehension, writing test anxiety and fear of making a mistake. Furthermore, researchers believe that these factors impact students learning the process.

Studies on the second language (L2) writing have not only highlighted the importance of academic writing but also indicated that writing is a difficult and complex task. Musa (2010) explained the reasons behind writing difficulties that students have and suggested that they should have: a) enough knowledge of spelling and punctuation, b) a comprehensive grasp of grammar, c) organizational skills to write the topic sentences and supporting sentences, and d) enough vocabulary size to use. According to Lahuerta (2017), the results showed that learners committed several errors that were categorized into syntactic, morphological, lexical, lexico-grammatical, spelling, and punctuation errors. The study also indicates that the learners' accuracy progressed, especially in the group that received content and language integrated learning (CLIL) instruction. Hughey, Wormuth, Hartfiel, and Jacobs (1983) suggested that, in order to have students overcome their writing weakness, writing should be taught as a process; pre-writing, writing, post-writing where writers generate new ideas and discover new topics. This process involves the sub-process of brainstorming, planning, drafting, revising, and editing (Huwari & Al-Khasawneh, 2013). In doing so, students learn through the writing stages.

Few studies conducted on writing in the ESL/EFL context revealed that learners face different challenges in writing in English (e.g., Barry, 2014; Hourani, 2008; Nuruzzaman, Islam, & Shuchi, 2018; Salem, 2007). Sawalmeh (2013) analyzed the errors of 32 essays that 32 EFL learners in the Preparatory Year Program at the University of Ha'il. Results showed that the students committed various errors in writing. These errors were: a) capitalization, b) spellings, c) word order, d) double negatives, e) verb tense, f) singular and plural forms, g) sentence fragments, h) articles, i) subject-verb agreement, and j) prepositions. Similarly, Zuhour and Fatima (2015) investigated the common types of errors of 40 female EFL students in the Department of English and Translation at Tabuk University. Results of the study showed that most of the mistakes were grammatical tenses, uses of articles, prepositions, spelling, capitalization, subject-verb agreement, and punctuation. The study, however, acknowledged that the data were collected from a small sample and students with different proficiency levels of English, so the findings cannot be generalized to all ESL/EFL settings.

From a different context, several researchers (e.g., Cheng & Fox, 2008; Correa, 2010; Crosby, 2009; Leki, 2003; Sasaki, 2004; Scordaras, 2009; Spack, 1997; Terraschke & Wahid, 2011) confirmed that L2 students face difficulties in writing and these challenges limited to grammar and mechanics, sentence structure and appropriate vocabulary in expressing their ideas. These studies suggested strategies that help the students to improve writing skill as well as recommendations for L2 writing teachers to consider students' needs in designing the writing course curriculum. Additionally, Frodesen (2009) reported the challenges that L2 encountered in their writing skill were syntactic, lexico-grammatical accuracy and writing mechanics. According to the researcher, the participants of the study worked hard on writing errors to improve. Sometimes, they rely on their L1 to write in L2 especially in generating ideas and conveying of meaning. Frodesen (2009) concluded that L2 writing instructor plays an important role in improving L2 writers editing skills, enlarging their vocabulary size and developing their syntactic complexity. Similarly, Hirano (2014) investigated the challenges that refugee ESL students encounter with academic writing and the resources they used to overcome their challenges at one of the largest universities in the US. The researcher collected data from 7 participants who came from four different countries using samples of their writing in different courses they enrolled in. The researcher concluded that students could overcome their writing challenges if they enrolled in a special ESL writing course as well as use the assistance of the writing center and receive feedback on their essays. She also suggested that in order to help the refugee ESL students to overcome their writing challenges, they should be enrolled in a writing course where the curriculum of that course designed based on their needs.

Several studies investigated the academic writing challenges that ESL/EFL students face in academic writing voices and identities (e.g., Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Ivanic & Camps, 2001). These studies indicate that second/foreign language writing is one of the most challenges that students confront in their studies when they start a new stage of literacy practices. In undergraduate ESL/EFL learners, Salem (2007) investigated 50 students' writing in English. The researcher also explored the relationship between students' first language (L1), which is Arabic, and L2, which is English, in their writing performance. The study reported that most of the students' errors in writing were in rhetorical strategies, vocabulary, cultural knowledge, and idiom usage. As the findings were for students who had advanced levels of English, the results cannot be applied to lower levels of English proficiency or students having different majors. Moreover, Hourani (2008) analyzed the common types of grammatical errors in EFL students' writing. The study was conducted at Emirati secondary school, and participants were all males. Findings showed that the most common grammatical errors were: a) prepositions, b) subject-verb agreement, c) articles, and d) verb tense. Similarly, Huwari and Al-Khasawneh (2013) explored the causes of EFL writing errors. The study showed that reasons for students' writing weakness were their lack of knowledge of grammar and understanding the meaning of English vocabulary words. Moreover, those students did not practice writing and did not have intensive writing courses before joining a university.

Most of the previous studies (e.g., Ansari, 2012; Barry, 2014; Hourani, 2008; Huwari & Al-Khasawneh, 2013; Nuruzzaman et al., 2018; Salem, 2007) show that the approach to teaching writing plays a vital role in enabling students to learn from their writing mistakes and overcome their difficulties in writing. However, writing instructors may consider the students' needs in writing, analyzing their weaknesses, and then designing a course accordingly. Analysis of students' writing weaknesses is needed to identify the difficulties they face, and then the syllabus should be designed accordingly (Ansari, 2012). Additionally, Leki (1995) assured that "classroom instruction plays an important role in dealing with students' writing errors. Different approaches, methods, strategies, and techniques are recommended to help ESL/EFL learners to write well in English" (p. 242). Considerably, it is the writing instructor's responsibility to adopt or develop more effective and practical procedures and techniques that not only help students to write well but also boost their English language proficiency in general. To the best of my knowledge, there are no studies that applied a research methodology were to investigate the students' writing improvement after intensive focus on students' writing weakness. The present study took the students' needs under consideration in designing the syllabus of the writing course. This study, therefore, is an attempt to investigate students' writing weaknesses and aims in designing the writing course syllabus according to what students need in writing. By doing so, the researcher hopes the findings will suggest solutions to the ESL/EFL writing difficulties that reported on second language writing research. The present study aimed at answering the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges that undergraduate EFL learners face in writing?
2. Is there any correlation between pre- and post-surveys in regard to the students' views about their writing?
3. How do the students perform in the pre- and post-tests before and after taking the writing course?
4. What is the effect of designing the course based on students' needs in writing with regard to specific writing components: mechanics, grammar, spelling, supporting sentence, and topic sentence?

METHOD
Study setting and participants
The present study was conducted in the English department at one of the Saudi universities. A total of 74 full-time, first-year students majoring in English (4-year degree) participated in the present study. The students are expected to become EFL instructors at elementary schools upon graduation. The participants were all males whose ages ranged between 18–20 years and Arabic as their first language. The detailed background information of the participants is shown in Figure 1.
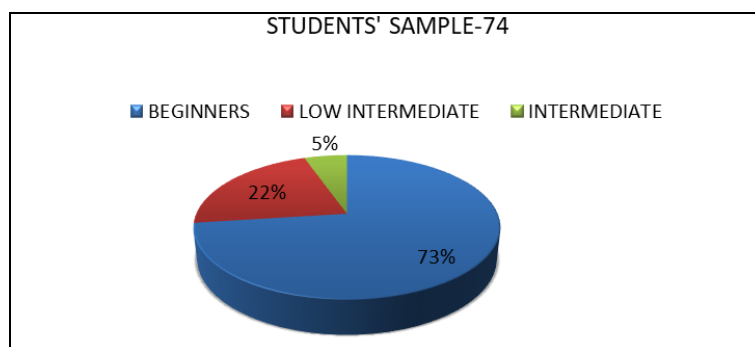

Figure1. Students' sample-74.

The program the participants were joining consists of eight levels of English (each level is a 3-month semester). Level one is the first level of the first year. Moreover, the participants had a beginning level by this point (Level 1) because they had just started the program at the time the study was conducted. Before they enrolled at The department, the students had general English classes from elementary through high school. Due to the participants' low level of proficiency in English, they were considered beginners by the university system.

Research design and procedure
The study took place during a writing course (ENG 101) taught by the same instructor throughout the spring semester of 2017. First, the researcher gave a questionnaire to the students to gauge their responses in the areas of writing that were most difficult for them. According to the students' responses to the pre-questionnaire, the researcher designed a pre-test to have first-hand evidence of the students' needs in writing. Based on the students' level of English proficiency, their responses in the pre-questionnaire and their results from the pre-test, the researcher designed the writing course and syllabus to focus on writing mechanics.

The primary goal of the course was to teach students to write a good paragraph free of errors. The course lasted three months (12 weeks), and students met once a week (3 hours each time). The students were introduced to five types of writing mechanics during the

course: spelling, punctuation, grammar, topic sentences, and supporting sentences. These particular types of writing mechanics were chosen due to the students' responses to the pre-questionnaire as well as their pre-test results. The course instructor guided the students to follow a particular process during the course, where the instructor introduced the lesson for the week, followed by exercises to foster the lesson. During the next week, the students went through exercises in groups. While some of these exercises were extracted from the textbook, some others were developed by the teacher. The students spent two weeks in each lesson.

Table 1. The syllabus of the writing course procedure

No. Weeks	Topics
Week 1	Pre-Questionnaire + Pre-Test
Week 2	Spelling lesson was introduced + Exercises to foster the lesson
Week 3	Students work in groups on the textbook exercises + teacher provides more exercises to practice the lesson
Week 4	Punctuation lesson was introduced + Exercises to foster the lesson
Week 5	Students work in groups on the textbook exercises + teacher provides more exercises to practice the lesson
Week 6	Grammar lesson was introduced (simple present) + Exercises to foster the lesson
Week 7	Students work in groups on the textbook exercises + teacher provides more exercises to practice the lesson + Mid-term Exam
Week 8	Topic sentence lesson was introduced + Exercises to foster the lesson
Week 9	Students work in groups on the textbook exercises + teacher provides more exercises to practice the lesson
Week 10	Supporting sentences lesson was introduced + Exercises to foster the lesson
Week 11	Students work in groups on the textbook exercises + teacher provides more exercises to practice the lesson
Week 12	Post-Questionnaire + Post-Test + Final Exam

Table 1 shows the writing course week-by-week syllabus that was designed by the instructor. The course lasted three months (12 weeks), and students met once a week (3 hours each time). In week 1, students were given the pre-questionnaire and pre-test. Throughout the next ten weeks, students were guided through writing lessons on spelling, punctuation, grammar, writing topic sentences, and writing supporting sentences. They worked in groups and completed exercises, plus took a midterm exam, to help them master the subject matter and assess learning. Each week, students were introduced to a new lesson, followed by exercises from the instructor to foster the lesson, and students worked in a group to practice different lesson each week. As shown in Table 1, students followed the same procedure every week for the entire ten weeks. In the final week of the course, students took the post-questionnaire and post-test as part of the study, in addition to the final exam.

Data collection and analysis
The data was collected from the participants using pre- and post-questionnaires (5-point Likert scale) as well as pre- and post-tests. The questionnaires contained 18 items, and each item prompted the participants to choose one of the options: "1= Always, 2= Very Often, 3= Sometimes, 4= Rarely, 5=Never". The scale was designed by the researcher to gauge the participants' perceptions of their difficulties in writing. The same questionnaire was used as a pre- and post-survey to obtain the students' views on writing difficulties after they studied the prescribed course. Specifically, this was intended to find out whether the participants changed their views after they had the intensive writing course on writing mechanics by comparing their responses between the pre- and post-questionnaires. The students' responses were captured and tracked across time, and the scores were statistically analyzed through SPSS. The hanges in scores were analyzed across the entire sample using statistical analysis to see whether the students thought their writing had improved. To analyze the quantitative data, descriptive statistics (i.e., means, standard deviations, frequencies, and response percentages) were used in this study.

For the qualitative portion of the study, open-ended questions were added to the post-questionnaire and were designed in a way to gain more profound insights from the participants that complement the quantitative data. The questions were intended to obtain the students' views, specifically, their opinions of what makes writing difficult for them, and to obtain their suggestions on the steps to improve students' writing. These questions helped in allowing the students to express their views on their writing skills.

The pre- and post-tests had two sections: first, five sentences having errors based on mechanics and participants were asked to correct the errors; and second, the participants were asked to write a paragraph comprising 100 words about the topic 'My best friend' (emphasis added) and were given 30 minutes to complete the task. Their written tasks were graded by trained external examiners to avoid biases and were analyzed through an analytic writing scale that is Corder's (1967) taxonomy of writing errors. This taxonomy of writing errors was found to be relevant to the study since it "systematically analyzes errors made by language learners which make it possible to determine areas that need reinforcement in teaching" (Corder, 1974, p. 54).

RESULTS
In this study, the survey consists of three parts focusing on three aspects: problems in mechanics of writing, students' problems in writing sentences or paragraphs, and reasons of writing weaknesses, which are discussed as follows.

Problems in the mechanics of writing
This section outlines some of the challenging issues related to the mechanics of writing that students face. Five items (5-9) were included to identify those problems. While making a comparison between the pre-

and post-test, the researcher came across remarkable findings. Unlike the pre-test, the post-test indicated more encouraging and affirmative responses. The students' responses are illustrated in Table 2 and Figures 2 and 3.

Table 2. Problems in the mechanics of writing (pre-post)

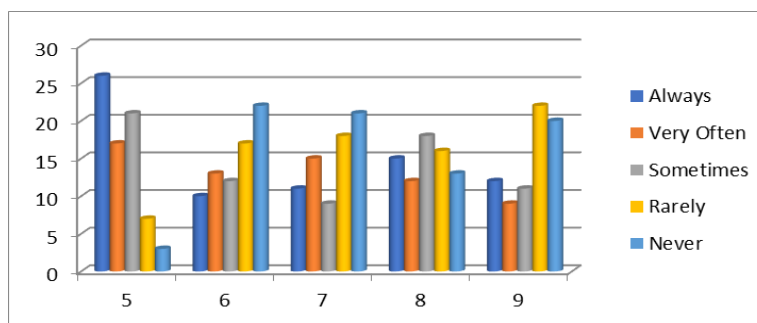| Items	5		6		7		8		9	
	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-
Mean	14.8	14.8	14.8	14.8	14.8	14.8	14.8	14.8	14.8	14.8
Median	18.0	17.0	17.0	13.0	9.0	15.0	19.0	15.0	17.0	12.0
Mode	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	2	NA	NA	NA
Max.	28	26	24	22	43	21	28	18	22	22
Min.	1	3	2	10	2	9	2	12	6	9
Std.Dev.	11.819	9.602	8.348	4.764	16.664	4.919	12.111	2.387	6.978	6.978
Variance	139.700	92.200	69.700	22.700	277.700	24.200	146.700	5.700	48.700	33.700

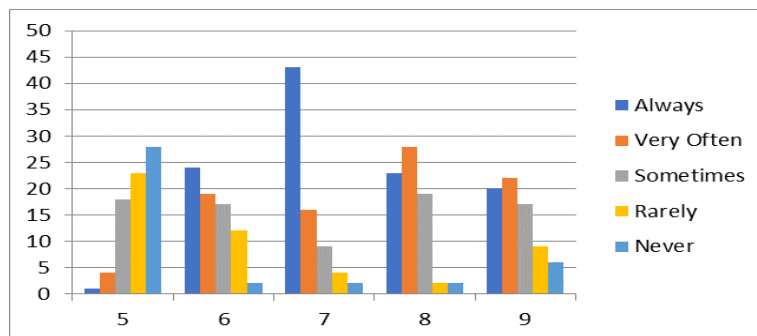Figure 2. Problems in the mechanics of writing (pre-questionnaire)

Figure 3. Problems in the mechanics of writing (pre-questionnaire).

In response to question 5, "Do you follow the mechanics of writing when you write?," the majority of students (i.e., 38% never and 31% rarely) replied earlier that they could hardly follow the mechanics of writing, but it was almost opposite later. A large number of students (i.e., 35% always and 23% very often) replied positively to the same item. Parallel responses were noticed when they had replied to the other items (6-7) in this category. In response to item 6, "Do you have any difficulty in making capitalization?," many students agreed that they had difficulties in capitalization (i.e., 32% always and 26% very often; Max.24, Min.2). Interestingly, only a few (i.e., 10% always and 13% very often) students pointed to difficulties later. In another question (item 7), "Do you have any difficulty in punctuation?," the majority of students responded negatively (i.e., 58% always and 22% very often; Max.43, Min.2), and later it was found a less number of students had such challenging issues (i.e., 11% always

and 15% very often). Surprisingly, a large number of students had weaknesses in spelling and grammar in both pre- and post-survey. Minor differences were observed between the two surveys. In response to item 8, "Do you have difficulty in spelling?," 31% and 38% (Max.28, Min.2) of the students initially stated always and very often, respectively, whereas 20% of them responded always, and 16% very as often later. Item 9 was about students' problems in grammar. It was found that 27% and 30% (Max. 22, Min. 6) of the participants always and very often had such problems, respectively. However, very few students had difficulties in grammar at the later stage (i.e., 16% always and 12% very often).

Although the results of the pre-questionnaire clearly indicated that the students had a higher level of difficulty in the mechanics of writing English, the efficiency level was improved when the same survey was administered to them after three months.

Students' problems in writing sentences and paragraphs

Apart from the writing mechanics, most of the EFL learners had challenging issues in writing a sentence or a paragraph. This section explores whether the participants have the same difficulties in writing. Five items were included (items 10-14) to identify those issues. The students' responses (pre- and post-survey) to these items are shown in Table 3 and Figures 4 and 5.

Table 3. Problems in writing a sentence or a paragraph (pre-post)

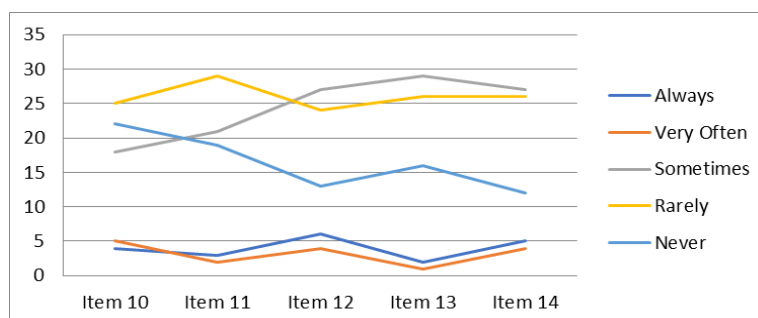| Items	10		11		12		13		14	
	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-	Pre-	Post-
Mean	14.8	14.8	14.8	14.8	14.8	14.8	14.8	14.8	14.8	14.8
Median	18.0	16.0	19.0	13.0	13.0	15.0	16.0	15.0	12.0	14.0
Mode	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Max.	25	20	29	21	27	26	29	20	27	20
Min.	4	9	2	11	4	3	1	8	4	10
Std.Dev.	9.731	4.658	11.840	4.147	10.377	9.176	13.065	4.658	11.122	4.549
Variance	94.700	21.700	140.200	17.200	107.700	84.200	170.700	21.700	123.700	20.700

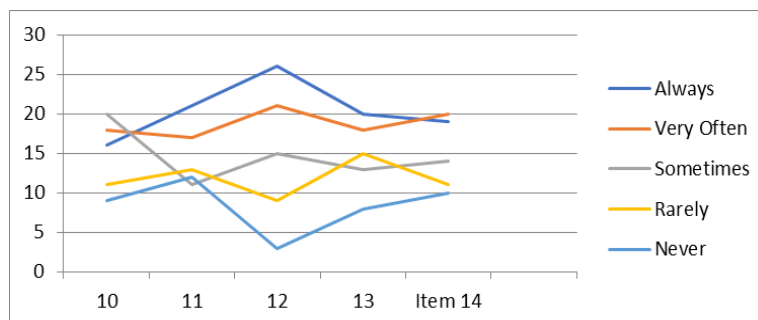Figure 4. Students' problems in writing sentences/paragraphs.

Figure 5. Problems in writing sentences/paragraphs.

Although the responses to these items were not satisfactory in the pre-survey, it was very much confident in the post-survey. In response to item 10, "Can you write a sentence without any mistake?," the majority of respondents initially replied negatively (10. 30% never and 34% rarely; Max. 25, Min. 4), while later, a significant number of them responded positively for the same item (always 31% and very often 24%; Max.20, Min. 9). Only 5% and 7% of them said that they always and very often had such problems, respectively. The next item (11) was about problems in writing a paragraph. While answering this question in the pre-survey, the students stated that they had difficulties in writing a paragraph too (i.e., 26% never and 39% rarely; Max. 29, Min. 2). This high number of students is not surprising given that many of them had already claimed that they could not write a sentence earlier. Nevertheless, the questionnaire received affirmative responses to this item later. It can be seen from the questionnaire that 28% and 23% of the respondents believed that they could write a paragraph always and very often, respectively.

In addition to the above questions, the students were asked (items 12-14) whether they knew how to write a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence. Initially, a significant number of students claimed that they had problems in these areas. In response to item 12 regarding topic sentence, most students (i.e., 18% never and 32% rarely; max .27, min .4) said that they had problems in writing a topic sentence, but the following survey identified unexpected changes. Only a few were found to have difficulties in writing a paragraph (12% rarely and 4% never; Max. 26, Min. 3). Item 13 showed the students' weaknesses in writing supporting sentences. Previously, many students admitted that they had problems in this area (i.e., 22% never and 35% rarely; Max. 29, Min. 1), but the results of the post-survey revealed that many of them could easily write supporting sentences (i.e., 27% always, 24% very often; Max. 20, Min. 8). Almost similar

responses were received for item 14 regarding their knowledge in writing a concluding sentence. They (i.e., 16% never and 35% rarely, Max.27, Min. 4) responded that they did not know writing a concluding sentence. However, in the post-survey, it was identified that 26% and 27% of them (i.e., Max. 20, Min. 10) could write a concluding sentence always and very often, respectively.

Reasons for students' weaknesses in writing
This section of the study includes three items (15-17) intended to identify the various reasons behind the problems in writing English. They are expected to contribute some valuable suggestions from the results later. Table 4 illustrates the findings of these items in the survey.

Table 4. Reasons for writing weaknesses (pre- and post-)

Items	15		16		17	
	Pre-	**Post-**	**Pre-**	**Post-**	**Pre-**	**Post-**
Mean	14.8	14.8	14.8	14.8	14.8	14.8
Median	10.0	15.0	13.0	7.0	11.0	9.0
Mode	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Max.	32	18	29	31	25	29
Min.	1	12	7	3	8	4
Std.Dev.	14.788	2.387	8.671	13.971	7.328	11.777
Variance	218.700	5.700	75.200	195.200	53.700	138.700

In the initial response to item 15, "Do you like writing English?," the majority of the participants were found to have lower motivation (i.e., 43% never and 39% rarely; Max. 32, Min. 1), whereas a higher number of students showed positive attitudes towards writing later (i.e., 35% always and 23% very often; Max. 18, Min. 12). Previously, while replying to item 16, "Does your teacher apply appropriate teaching method inside class?," many of the students (i.e., 39% never and 22% rarely; Max. 29, Min. 7) believed that teachers rarely use an appropriate teaching method inside the classroom, but a large number of students showed positive attitudes in the post-survey. They claimed that the teachers use (i.e., 42% always and 39% very often) suitable methods inside the classroom. When they were asked, "Do you find enough exercises to practice in the prescribed writing textbook?," most of the respondents replied negatively (i.e., 34% never, 27% rarely; Max. 25, Min. 8), and only a few of them (i.e., 15%) believed that the textbook had enough practice materials. Nevertheless, later, most of them agreed (35% always and 39% very often) that the textbook had enough hands-on materials. Findings of this section affirmed that there were significant causes of students' de-motivation in writing earlier. The negative responses to items 16 and 17 might be the reasons as they did not like writing (item 15). These were the major issues that did not allow the students to acquire the required proficiency in writing English previously. However, these discrepancies were minimized as indicated by the results of the post-survey.

Pre- and post-tests
To validate the results of the survey, the researcher also used a test to correlate the questionnaire responses. The same test was conducted before and after completing the prescribed syllabus over the two months. In this regard, Corder's (1967) taxonomy of writing errors – grammatical, lexical, semantic, and mechanics – assessing students' performances in the test (Nuruzzaman et al., 2018) was adopted in this study.

The test focused mainly on assessing three essential aspects of writing: mechanics, grammar, and lexical. In mechanics, five items (punctuation, capitalization, spelling, singular, and plural), two grammar items (i.e., sentence structure and subject-verb agreement), and four lexical items (i.e., nouns, pronouns, articles, and prepositions) were included.

Table 5 and Figure 6 demonstrate a comparison of the students' performances in the pre- and post-tests. As in the pre-questionnaire, the pre-test revealed that the students were very weak in almost every aspect of writing English. Among them, grammar was considered the lowest point of students' writing. In this category, errors that were remarkably high are those related to sentence structure (46%), and subject-verb agreement (42%). It was also discovered that the students had challenging issues in the mechanics of writing. The errors were in punctuation (33%,) capitalization (26%), and spelling errors (33%).

Interestingly, hardly any error was found in singular and plural forms of nouns. Lexical errors were the least problematic category. Only a few mistakes were identified in this category (e.g., 11% for the article and 14% for the preposition). No mistake was observed in nouns and pronouns.

Since the students had pointed out in the pre-survey regarding their difficulties in writing, their poor performance was not unexpected. Nevertheless, when pre-test results were compared to the post-test results, significant differences were observed because of the improvement in students' writing. Only a few students were found making mistakes in the mechanics of writing. The punctuation errors were only 12 %, capitalization errors were 9%, and incorrect spelling was 16%. Similarly, a small number of students were found making mistakes in two categories. The students made few errors in the grammar (sentence structure 19%, and subject-verb agreement 22%) and the lexical (nouns and pronouns 0%, articles 3%, and prepositions 6%) categories.

Table 5. Types of errors in the pre- and post-tests

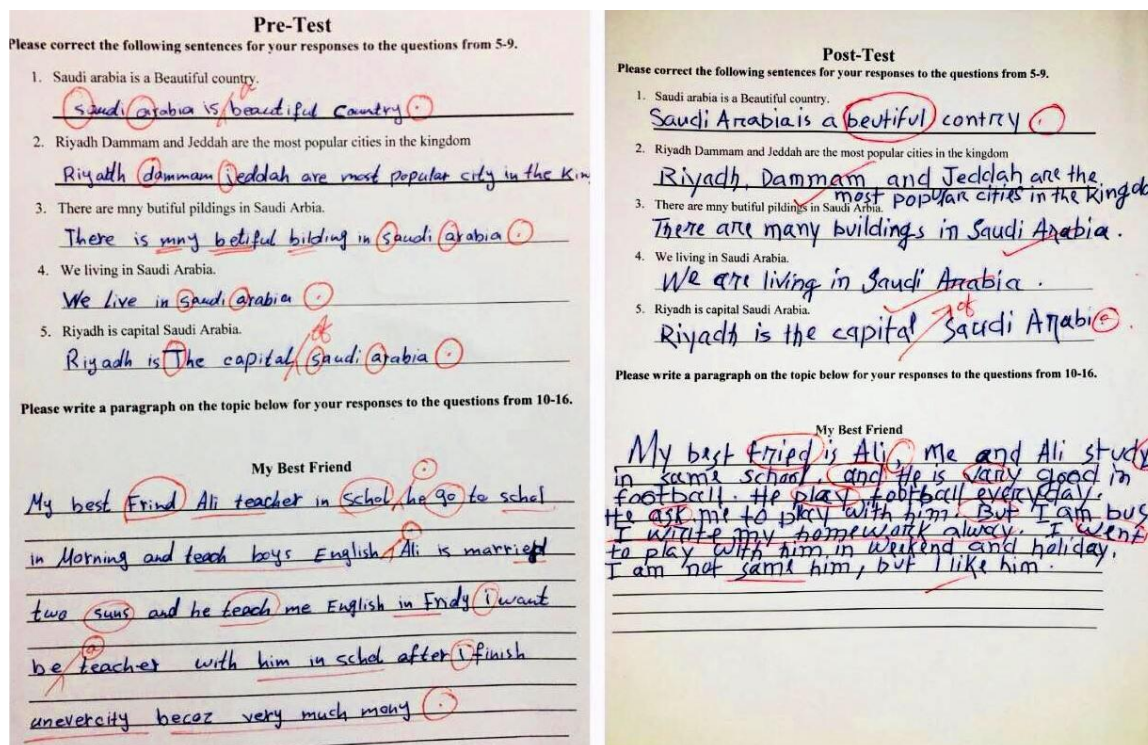| Category	Type	No. of Errors		Percentage	
		Pre Test	Post Test	Pre-Test %	Post Test %
Mechanics	Punctuation	24	9	33%	12%
	Capitalization	19	7	26%	9%
	Spelling	22	12	30%	16%
Grammar	Singular/Plural	None	None	-	-
	Sentence Structure	34	14	46%	19
	Subject-Verb Agreement	31	16	42%	22%
Lexical	Nouns/Pronouns	None	Nouns	-	-
	Article	8	2	11%	3%
	Preposition	10	4	14%	6%

Figure 6. Two randomly selected samples in the pre- and post-tests.

In addition to the questionnaire and test, the researcher also added four open-ended interview questions to obtain the students' reflections on their needs and expectations from the writing course. This part of the study also aims to cover students' specific problems in writing and their needs to improve their efficiency in writing. The following are the responses of three students randomly selected from the 74 respondents.

i. **In your opinion, what makes writing difficult?**
Student 1: *Because I should know grammar and spelling and paragraph details and it is difficult to know all those things.*

Student 2: *I think teachers make writing difficult when he teaches. I must know everything about writing to make my paragraph good.*

Student 3: *Writing always tricky because I should remember grammar and spelling and ideas and comma in writing my paragraph and it is difficult to do these.*

ii. **What do you expect from your teacher in the writing class?**
Student 1: *I want the teacher to teach me the basic rules slowly and simple way.*

Student 2: *For me, the teacher should teach us the rules of writing and gives activities to practice in a group.*

Student 3: *I think the teacher must give more activities in the class with examples. Group learning is also important*

iii. **What is the most challenging stage in writing?**
Student 1*: I think finding ideas is difficult. And sometimes when I bring ideas I forget about spelling and grammar, it is difficult to focus on many things in writing*

Student 2: *My paragraph is confusing because in the paragraph I must write a topic sentence and supporting sentence and not forget spelling and grammar and comma it is hard.*

Student 3*: I can write a simple sentence. But to write a paragraph is difficult for me for many rules.*

iv.   **Suggest some steps to improve students' writing.**
Student 1*: I want teachers in the department to teach one thing every week like this week we study only comma and next week capital letter because it is difficult to learn everything and improve your writing in one month.*

Student 2*: Teachers give me all the writing steps and want me to write a good paragraph, and they correct everything in my paragraph. I want the teacher to focus on one thing when he amends my paragraph until my writing become good.*

Student 3*: I think the teacher and the book must be engaging. After teaching, the teacher must give a quiz every week.*

DISCUSSION

The data analyzes in the current study show that there are significant differences between the pre- and post-questionnaire results, as well as the pre- and post-tests where students' writing improved due to the course design that focused on the students' needs and weaknesses in writing. As shown in the pre-survey and pre-test, the majority of students reported that they had difficulties in writing in general, and in the mechanics of writing in particular. The findings also indicated that students do not know how to write a good sentence or paragraph. It could be due to the writing courses that students had before, which did not focus on certain writing aspects. Students enrolled in general English class before they join the university. However, for students to be good writers, they need to enroll in writing courses where each course focus on a specific aspect of writing.

On the other hand, the result of the post-survey, as well as the post-tests, shows the improvement in students' writing (writing mechanics) and also they reported positive attitudes regarding their writing. It happened because the students were enrolled in a writing course that focused on writing mechanics where students had problems. Writing is considered the most challenging among the four English language skills (Ansari, 2012). Therefore, it is difficult to teach the whole aspect of writing and expect ESL/EFL learners to write well after enrolled in one course.

Findings of this study are in line with the results reported by Huwari and Al-Khasawneh (2013), identifying the reasons behind the students' weaknesses in writing. Their findings showed that students' weaknesses in writing were owing to their lack of knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Moreover, the students did not practice writing before joining the university. However, when the students enrolled in intensive writing classes, their writing improved.

Also, several previous researchers (e.g., Ansari, 2012; Nuruzzaman et al., 2018; Salem, 2007) have reported that the cause behind EFL Saudi students' weaknesses in writing is the schooling system where English was not taught in a good fashion. Moreover, Ansari (2012) stated that "more than 50% of Saudi EFL students do not know how to write in English and most of them are unaware of the cursive writing" (p. 521). He pointed out that English classes should be intensive and focus on students' needs to improve their English in general. To be more specific, the writing course should be anchored to the students' needs in writing to get the best results and enable students to enhance their writing. As Leki (1995) assured that "classroom instruction plays an important role in dealing with students' writing errors, and different approaches, methods, strategies, and techniques are recommended to help EFL learners write well in English" (p. 242). In other words, findings of the present study support Ansari's (2012) claim that English writing courses should be based on students' writing weaknesses and needs. Furthermore, Leki (2003) highlighted that writing is a difficult and complex task that cannot be taught as a whole skill, rather it should be divided into writing aspects where each writing course focuses on certain aspects. Findings of the present study also indicate if a writing course is designed from students' weaknesses in writing, there is a promising result on the students' writing improvement.

CONCLUSION

In the field of EFL writing, much research reported that EFL students struggle with writing skill. However, students' needs are essential to be taken into consideration when designing the syllabus for the writing course. It can be concluded from the results of the present study that writing instructors need an analysis of students' writing weaknesses beforehand, to identify the difficulties they face, and then to design the syllabus accordingly. Since writing is a difficult and complex task, expecting the students to write well takes time and effort, and teachers cannot teach the students everything about writing in one course. In other words, instructors can neither teach all writing aspects in one course nor expect their students to improve their writing skill. Writing instructors need to teach many writing courses instead, each focusing on only one aspect of writing at a time, such as the mechanics of writing, grammar, vocabulary, content, and organization. By doing so, the students would learn a different writing aspect in each course, and by finishing several writing courses, they should have enough practical exercises focusing on each aspect.

Findings of the present study are beneficial for EFL writing instruction as they assist instructors in developing an awareness of the positive effects of designing effective writing courses according to the students' writing weaknesses. Writing instructors might administer a pre-test before starting the course to analyze their students' needs in writing, and then they should design the syllabus accordingly. This study is useful not only for those who have an interest in language teaching and learning, but also for second and foreign language writing instructors and learners, curriculum designers, and education policymakers.

Furthermore, the current study provides evidence of designing a writing course based on students' needs to enhance their performance in EFL writing.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A
Students' Questionnaire

Dear students,

This questionnaire is administered for a research purpose only. Therefore you are assured that the information you provide will remain confidential. I will be highly grateful if you kindly participate in the survey.

Thank you

1. Name:_____
2. Age: _____ years
3. Gender:_____(Male/Female)
4. English Proficiency Level:_____(Beginner/ Low Intermediate/Intermediate)

Please rate the following items on a rating scale of 1- 5 *(1=Never, 2= Rarely, 3= Sometimes, 4= Very Often, 5= Always)*

Section A: Problems in the Mechanics of Writing

Sr. No.	Items	1	2	3	4	5
5	Do you follow the mechanics of writing when you write (i.e. *capitalization, spelling, punctuation and grammar)*?					
6	Do you have any difficulty in making capitalization?					
7	Do you have difficulty in punctuation?					
8	Do you have difficulty in spelling?					
9	Do you have difficulty in grammar?					

Section B: Problems in Writing a Sentence or a Paragraph

Sr. No.	Items	1	2	3	4	5
10	Can you write a sentence with no mistake?					
11	Can you write a good paragraph?					
12	Can you write an appropriate topic sentence?					
13	Can you write supporting sentences in a paragraph?					
14	Can you write a suitable concluding sentence in a paragraph?					

Section C: Reasons to the Problems

Sr. No.	Items	1	2	3	4	5
15	Do you like writing English?					
16	Does your teacher apply appropriate teaching method inside class?					
17	Do you find enough exercises to practice in the prescribed writing textbook?					

Appendix B
Pre- and Post-Test

Please correct the following sentences for your responses to the questions from 5-9.

1. Saudi arabia is a Beautiful country.
   _____

2. Riyadh Dammam and Jeddah are the most popular cities in the kingdom
   _____

3. There are mny butiful pildings in Saudi arbia.
   _____

4. We living in Saudi Arabia.
   _____

5. Riyadh is capital Saudi Arabia.
   _____

Please write a paragraph on the topic below for your responses to the questions from 10-16.
My Best Friend
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____