Saudi English-Major Undergraduates' Academic Writing Problems: A Taif University Perspective

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Abstract

This study attempted to investigate Saudi English-major undergraduates studying at Taif University to identify a) the types of academic writing Saudi English-major undergraduates carry out at English departments, b) Saudi English-major undergraduates' writing problems, c) the reasons behind Saudi English-major undergraduates' writing problems and d) the solutions to overcome Saudi English-major undergraduates' writing problems. To collect data for this purpose, senior faculty members were interviewed and a 32-item structured Likert-scale questionnaire was developed that was administered to 75 English-major students (sophomores, juniors & seniors) studying at foreign languages department, Taif University. Data generated through the questionnaire were subjected to descriptive analyses and mean and standard deviation were recorded using SPSS. The findings of this study reveal that Saudi English-major undergraduates are very weak in writing skills and commit lots of errors in their academic writings and are usually engaged in sentence-level or at the maximum at paragraph-level academic writing and they do not consider it important at this level to write different kinds of essays. It has been strongly recommended that the language courses should be increased to strengthen all the language skills in general and writing in particular, motivate the students to use English with the teachers as well as with each, introduce modern and novel teaching techniques, equip the classrooms with necessary audio-visual aids, diagnose students' writing problems in the beginning of their studies at university, tailor the course contents according to their needs, introduce group/pair work, peer correction, use dictionaries frequently etc.

Keywords: academic writing, English-major undergraduates, genre approach, product approach

1. Introduction

Al-Jarf (2008) has stated that about one million students are learning English worldwide that manifested the importance of English teaching/learning for academic purposes. The students need to communicate effectively in the target language because English has become "the medium of a great deal of the world's knowledge" (Crystal, 2003, p. 110). Swales (2004) reported that English has become the language of research, commerce, education etc. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) mentioned that success in the relevant fields depends on the factor that how effectively the students handle different writing genres like summaries, essays, reviews etc. This is applicable to the students of all disciplines in general and English-major students in particular.

Much research has identified that Arab university students lack the required English language proficiency that hinder their academic progress (Javid, Farooq, & Gulzar, 2012; Javid & Khairi, 2011; Reymond, 2008; Rabab`ah, 2003; Ramakanta, 1999). Several research studies have indicated that international students studying in the Asian universities encounter challenges in coping with the writing demands in their disciplines (Jackson, 2005; Spack, 1997). This problem seems to exist in a much intensive form in the Arab world and a lot of studied conducted in the different parts of the Arab world reported the difficulties of Arab learners of English in this regard (Hisham, 2008; Rabab`ah, 2003; Zughoul and Taminian, 1984). Abbad (1988, p. 15) investigated the main cause behind the low proficiency of English-major Arab students and stated that "in spite of the low proficiency level in English of most applicants (Yemeni learners), they are accepted into the English department": a trend which seems to prevail in most Arab countries. He further suggested that these weaknesses are due to the inappropriate ELT methodologies and a learning environment that doesn't support foreign language learning. A proper language learning atmosphere is necessary to facilitate the students' success in English language learning in general and writing skills in particular. English-major Arab students lack this much sought-after support as their

English language exposure is limited to the university campus only. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating English-major students studying at Foreign Languages Department, Tiaf University (FLDTU).

2. Literature Review

Natural order hypothesis of language learning ranks writing as the last skill to be learned after listening, speaking and reading respectively. But this order of language learning skills should not deceive us to underestimate the significance of writing skills in the academic setting in general and at university level in particular. Talking about its significance, Bjork and Raisanen (1997, p. 8) argue:

We highlight the importance of writing in all university curricula not only because of its immediate practical application, i.e. as an isolated skill or ability, but because we believe that, seen from a broader perspective, writing is a thinking tool. It is a tool for language development, for critical thinking and, extension, for learning in all disciplines.

Writing has been defined as the "… recording of human communication, using signs or symbols to represent the spoken words" (McMillan Encyclopedia, 1986, p. 1317). Peters (1986) defines writing as a "… curiously solitary form of communication, addressed to an absent and often unknown reader" (p. 169). Abu-Ghararh (1998, p. 87) states that writing is " … the logical organization and arrangement of the written sentences within a paragraph and paragraphs within the units of discourse …and the expression of the ideas". The first definition seems to suggest that writing is a secondary linguistic activity whereas the second definition also considers it a kind of communication that lacks a clear and solid social context. Grami (2010) commented that many researchers (e.g., Widdowson, 1983; Smith, 1989; White, 1987) have defined writing as a 'complicated cognitive task' because of the fact that it "… demands careful thought, discipline, and concentration, and it is not just a simple direct production of what the brain knows or can do at a particular moment" (p. 9). All these definitions seem to suggest that writing is considered a secondary activity that involve complex mental processes that makes it a difficult skill to learn and teach. Much research conducted in the Arab world has reported that Arab students who are studying in institutions of higher education suffer from serious handicap in English language in general and writing in particular that make it very difficult for them to cope up with their higher studies effectively (Tahaineh, 2010; Rababah, 2003; Bacha, 2002; Khalil, 2000; Kharma and Hajjaj, 1997). Tahaineh (2010) states that writing is an important skill for university students because they have to use it for note taking, essay writing, answering written questions, composition writing etc. It is rather important for English-major university undergraduates who need to answer subjective questions related to their literature and linguistics courses in the form of multiple paragraphs.

Much research has suggested that writing in a second or foreign language learning context is a complex, difficult and demanding task. Alsamadani (2010) explained that "…this difficulty and complexity arise from the fact that writing includes discovering a thesis, developing support for it, organizing, revising, and finally editing it to ensure an effective, error-free piece of writing" (p. 53). Writing is considered a difficult skill to teach because it includes several components, for example, a) a comprehensive command of grammar, b) grasp on spellings and punctuation, c) use of appropriate vocabulary, d) suitable style to meet the expected readers' expectations and e) organizational skills (Musa, 2010).

Although writing has been recognized as an extremely important skill especially in the English for academic purposes context, yet it fails to occupy a deserving status in language programs as reported by numerous research studies (See for example, Dempsey et al., 2009; Badger and White, 2000; White and Arndt, 1991). Reinforcing the same trend, Furneaux (1999) has narrated the dilapidated situation elaborately as follows:

*For many years, the teaching of writing, in any context, was largely ignored; it was the Cinderella skill, forever tested but seldom taught. With this focus, students are given writing tasks, which are marked for linguistic errors and assessed, before they move on to the next task. The focus is on the product of composing: **what** the student produces, not **how** to do it. Teachers and students both suffer death by the red pen, and writing is invariably seen as a tedious chore for all involved. (p. 56)*

Yiu (2009) reported that despite the fact that history of second language teaching dates back as early as 1945, there has been a scarcity of research on English as second language writing. The same has been emphasized by Krashen (1984) as manifested by his comments that "…studies of second language writing are sadly lacking" (p. 41). This situation changed drastically in the second half of the 1990s and a growing mass of research studies has been reported since then. This positive change in the realm of ESL/EFL teaching was due to the fact that English started playing a key role in the world as a sole language of international communication. This significant role of English has resulted in an increased interest in English language teaching worldwide, thus, we can see a major emphasis on writing: a component that "…play an increasingly important role today in the lives of professionals

in almost every field and discipline" (Long and Richards, 2003, p. xv). Much research has offered valuable insights into the fact that this trend "…led to the exponential growth of research in L2 writing over the last decade and a half" (Yiu, 2009, p. 9). Chou (2011) has informed that though there has been an increased interest in writing yet there has been a dearth of research in this field in EFL contexts as most of the research studies related to writing skills has been done in the ESL context such as Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand, and America. He has further explained that the reported research in this field can be divided into four categories. The first category research studies investigated the faculty perspective regarding the academic writing (e.g., Zhu, 2004; Casanave and Hubbard, 1992; Bridgeman and Carlson, 1984; Eblen, 1983), the second category investigated the students (Chou, 2011; Alsamdani, 2010; Grami, 2010; Yiu, 2009; Anderson, Day and McLaughlin, 2008; Myles and Cheng, 2003), the third one analyzed the students writing specimens (Ezza, 2010; Tahaineh, 2010; Cooper and Bikowski, 2007; Zhu, 2004; Braine, 1989; Horowitz,1986) and the last category attempted to investigate the perceptions of the students versus the academic advisors (Bacha and Bahous, 2008; Anderson et al., 2008; Myles and Cheng, 2003; Dong, 1998; Belcher, 1994). It has also been reported that much of the research in the past two decades has primarily focused on either product, process or both" (Yiu, 2009, p. 9).

Yiu (2009) stated that L2 writing theories and teaching approaches have been categorized differently by different scholars. Much research has suggested that all these approaches have their individual strengths and weaknesses but collectively they are complementary to each other (Grami, 2010; Badger and White, 2003; White and Arndt, 1991). Silva (1990) reported that they have been traditionally categorized into four major approaches: "controlled composition, current-traditional rhetoric, the process approach and English for academic purposes (EAP)" (p. 12). Yiu (2009) reported that Raimes (1996) classified the four approaches of teaching L2 writing skills into four foci: 'form (the rhetorical and linguistic features of the text), writer (the composing processes), content (as demanded by the readers) and reader (their expectations)'. Various scholars have stated that although numerous L2 writing teaching approaches have been experimented yet product and process approaches are the major ones in this regard along with the comparatively new genre approach (Badger and White, 2000; Tribble, 1996). It has been further emphasized that the primary emphasis of 'controlled composition' and 'current-traditional rhetoric' teaching approaches is form (the written product) whereas the 'writer approach', 'content approach' and 'process approach' put greater emphasis on the cognitive processes of the writing process (Yiu, 2009).

Among various L2 writing skills teaching approaches, the product approach has been identified as the most traditional one (Grami, 2009; Yan, 2005). This is called 'product approach' because, as reported by Richards (1990), of its focus on the final product, i.e., the students' ability to write grammatically correct texts. Research has offered valuable insights into the fact that the hay days of this approach were 1950's and 1960's: a period when audiolingual method of English language teaching was in vogue and focused on learners' correct use of grammatical rules in which writing skills was exploited through exercises such as grammar drills, imitation of model sentences or passages, fill in the blanks, substitutions etc., to reinforce the oral patterns that were used to practice through intensive listening and repetition exercises (Ferris and Hedgcock, 2004; Silva, 1990; Flower and Hays, 1980). Though many teachers were satisfied with the emphasis on the strategies that helped the students to write grammatically correct written products as manifested by various popular writing textbooks (Jordan, 1990), yet there has been a growing discontentment of many researchers with this product dominated approach that resulted in an increased interest in what students do when they write (Yiu, 2009). Grami (2009, p. 29) stated that "…this approach has generally been regarded as a reaction against product-based approaches, where the focus has shifted from the final product to the underlying processes of writing that enable writers to produce written texts". White and Arndt (1991) suggested that various dynamics of writing process are cyclic and interrelated and they divide these processes into pre-writing and actual writing activities. Tibble (1996, p. 39) has summarized these processes as follows:

Rewriting   ----≥   composing   ----≥   revising   ----≥   editing

Several researchers have suggested that in process approach writing is considered as an exercise of linguistic skills unconsciously when the learners are facilitated in their writing skills (Badger and White, 2000; Gee, 1997; Keh, 1990). Process approach with its primary focus on the learners' individual cognitive processes was criticized due to its lack of attention towards the social and academic setting in which a written text is produced (Yiu, 2009). Hyland (2007) reported that this approach to teaching of L2 writing also known as the genre approach that emerged with the advent of the communicative approach of ELT in 1970's. Grami (2009) stated that "…this approach again focuses on writing as a product, and in some ways is an extension to product approach, but with attention being paid to how this product is shaped according to different events and different

kinds of writing" (p. 30). He has further explained that one major characteristic of the genre approach is its inclusion of social aspects in the writing.

3. Method

3.1 Research Objectives/Questions

The objectives of the study are based on finding out the answers of the following research questions:

a.   What are different types of academic writing Saudi English-major undergraduates carry out in the FLD at Taif University?

b.   What are the problems Saudi English-major undergraduates face in the FLD at Taif University in regard to their academic writing?

c.   What are the reasons behind the problems Saudi English-major undergraduates face in the FLD at Taif University in regard to their academic writing?

d.   What are the solutions to overcome the academic writing problems faced by the Saudi English-major undergraduates in the foreign FLD at Taif University?

3.2 Sample Size

A: Sample one: English teachers at FLD (N= 5)

B: Sample two: English-major students at FLD (N=75)

3.3 Statistical Analysis

The researcher used the descriptive statistics namely the <u>means</u>, <u>medians,</u> <u>standard deviations</u> and <u>percentages</u> of the samples' responses regarding the items on the questionnaire.

3.4 Instrumentation

This research project was carried out at FLDTU. The researcher could not find any appropriate questionnaire suitable to the academic echo system of FLD; therefore, it was decided that the senior faculty members of FLD should be interviewed to develop a questionnaire to elicit students' responses related to the research questions of this study. The researcher interviewed four senior faculty members (n = 4) according to an open-ended interview protocol (See Appendix # 1) to find out their responses related to the research questions. Based on the data generated through the faculty interview, a structured Likert-scale questionnaire was developed and translated in Arabic by the researcher (See Appendices # 2).

All 2nd, 3rd and 4th year male students enrolled at FLD were considered as the population of this research study. The Arabic version of the questionnaire was handed over to various faculty members who were teaching 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students. They were requested to administer the questionnaire during their lectures. The questionnaires were distributed, got them and recollected during the same lecture. It was done to ensure maximum collection and the researcher received 81 questionnaires filled in by the participants of the study. The questionnaires were examined carefully by the researcher and incomplete questionnaires were rejected. The remaining 75 questionnaires were manually coded and analysed by using SPSS version 17. The data analysis generated the following results.

4. Findings and Discussion

Grami (2010) reported that the studies that were conducted to investigate the beliefs of ESL/EFL learners regarding the writing usually focused on "…students' conception of writing, attitudes about themselves as writers, the need for personal expression in writing, and eventually the relationship between students' beliefs and their learning outcome" (p. 67). The present study encompasses rather broader areas and attempts to find out the Saudi EFL learners beliefs about four areas of writing: tasks which are significant and relevant for studies at FLDTU, the problems that are faced in academic writing tasks at FLDTU, the reasons for weak academic writing skills at FLDTU and the necessary steps to solve the above-mentioned problems.

Table 1 details the results of the data generated through analysing the participants' feedback to the questionnaire items that elicited their responses regarding the writing tasks that they considered relevant and significant for their studies at FLDTU.

Table 1. Tasks which are significant and relevant for studies at FLD TU

no	item	number	min	max	mean	SD
1	Topic sentences and supporting details	75	1.00	5.00	4.0800	.7843
2	Paragraph writing	75	1.00	5.00	3.8667	.9910
3	Summaries	75	1.00	5.00	4.2533	.9599
4	Letter writing	75	1.00	5.00	3.3467	1.0966
5	Narrative essays	75	1.00	5.00	3.0133	1.2573
6	Descriptive essays	75	1.00	5.00	3.3867	1.0120
7	Argumentative essays	75	1.00	5.00	3.4533	1.2975
8	Expository essays	75	1.00	5.00	3.4267	1.1291

The descriptive analysis reveals that Saudi English-major undergraduates represented by the participants of this study considered writing 'summaries' as the most important writing task by assigning the highest mean value of 4.25 to this questionnaire item followed by writing 'topic sentences and supporting details' by allotting a mean value of 4.08. This finding exhibits a great contradiction to the study conducted with the Arab postgraduate students of business administration at University Utara Malaysia who considered 'writing summaries' as one of the least important task in this regard. Furthermore, standard deviation of less than one (SD< 1) suggests that the participants did not have major differences in their responses for these two top ranking items. No other item in this category was assigned an average of four or more. Third most favoured item remained 'paragraph writing' with a mean of 3.86 (SD<1). All the remaining five questionnaire items were assigned lower mean values of less than 3.5 indicating that the participants perceived them less important writing tasks for their studies at FLD. Interestingly, all these items exhibited high value of standard deviation (SD> 1) indicating that the participants carried wider differences in their responses towards these items.

Much research has indicated that Arab students have serious lacking in their writing skills as reported by Abd Al-Haq (1982) and Rababah (2003) among the Arab Jordanian learners of English. Grami (2010) findings are also in line with the ones mentioned above and reported serious problems among Saudi EFL learners as evident by their lowest average marks in IELTS they scored in writing (4.83 out of possible 9) as compared to their average scores in other skills (5.17, 4.97, 5.81 in listening, reading and speaking respectively). The same has been reinforced by the findings of several other studies conducted in Saudi Arabia (See for example, Bersamina, 2009; Al-Eid, 2000). This data indicates that the participants of this study assigned comparatively lower values to the items that elicited their responses regarding the importance of writing different kinds of essays: a trend that strongly suggests that Saudi EFL learners are too weak in writing to write extended writing such as narrative essays, descriptive essays, argumentative essays and expository essays. It can be concluded that even English-major undergraduates as represented by the participants of this study do not consider it important for their studies to write essays and consider that it is sufficient for them to reach at paragraph level.

The descriptive analyses in terms of minimum/maximum values, mean values and standard deviation for the items eliciting the participants' responses about 'the problems that are faced in academic writing tasks at FLDTU' are recorded in table 2.

Table 2. The problems that are faced in academic writing tasks at FLD TU

No	item	number	min	max	mean	SD
1	Appropriate vocabulary	75	1.00	5.00	3.8000	1.0527
2	Spellings	75	1.00	5.00	3.2667	1.0946
3	Use of articles	75	1.00	5.00	3.1867	1.0742
4	Punctuation	75	1.00	5.00	3.1467	1.1113
5	Use of prepositions	75	1.00	5.00	3.3067	1.0902
6	Use of irregular verbs	75	1.00	5.00	3.4533	1.1425
7	Use of question words	75	1.00	5.00	3.0933	1.0420
8	Grammar	75	1.00	5.00	3.6000	1.1740

The participants assigned the highest mean value of 3.8 to the first itme indicating that using appropriate vocabulary is the major problem that they face in their academic writing at FLDTU confirming the findings of Al-Khasawneh (2010) who reported that the Arab postgraduate students of the college of business at University

Utara Malaysia do not have reasonable vocabulary size to accomplish their writing tasks to function effectively in their programmes. This finding is also in line with the Rabab'ah (2003) who informed that the students are unable to express them appropriately in their writings due to their limited vocabulary: the result is that they cannot find appropriate and necessary vocabulary to express themselves. 'Grammar' has been pointed out as the second most important problematic area, with a mean value of 3.6, that hinders their academic writing tasks supporting Al-Khasawneh (2010) who stated that ".... the findings of the current study revealed that the students face difficulties in grammar (p. 15). He further explained that grammar is extremely significant to convey a correct message. Hutchinson & Waters (1987) also strongly suggested that it is important to identify the grammatical forms needed for academic programmes and they should be included in the syllabus to acquaint the learners with them for smooth progression. The third most favoured item remained 'use of irregular verbs' with an average value of 3.45 indicating that it is another difficult area for Saudi English-major undergraduates represented by the participants of this study to use past and past participle forms of irregular verbs. Problems in using appropriate prepositions have been assigned fourth position with a mean value of 3.31among the eight items meant to elicit the problematic areas in academic writing tasks confirming the findings of numerous studies which reported that use of inappropriate prepositions is a major kind of error found in the academic writings of the Arab EFL students (Hashim, 1996; Mourtaga, 2004; Zahid, 2006; Mahmoud, 2006). The findings of Kharma & Hajjaj (1997) also offered valuable insights into the fact that Arab EFL learners' majority errors are in English syntax and faulty use of prepositions is a major component in this regard. The three least preferred items on this list of the problematic areas faced by Saudi English-major undergraduates in their academic writing remained inappropriate use of 'punctuation', 'articles', and 'spellings' partially confirming the results of the studies conducting in the Arab world (Khan, 2011; Kambal, 1980; Hashim, 1996). Another interesting thing is that all the eight items in this list showed major differences in the responses of the participants of this study as indicated by high standard deviation values calculated for all the items.

The results of the descriptive analyses done for eight items that were included in the questionnaire to elicit participants' responses to find out the reasons for weak academic writing skills at FLD TU are detailed in the following table.

Table 3. The reasons for weak academic writing skills at FLD TU

no	item	number	min	max	mean	SD
1	Low English language proficiency	75	1.00	5.00	3.8133	1.1589
2	Insufficient number of language courses at Taif University	75	3.00	5.00	4.6933	.5689
3	Teachers' lack of interest in writing tasks	75	1.00	5.00	3.7467	1.0792
4	Few opportunities to use English outside the university	75	1.00	5.00	4.6133	.8036
5	Inappropriate teaching methods	75	1.00	5.00	4.0667	1.0946
6	Insufficient writing practice at Taif University	75	1.00	5.00	4.0800	1.0875
7	Insufficient audio visual facilities in the classrooms	75	1.00	5.00	4.2400	1.0885
8	Insufficient use of dictionaries	75	1.00	5.00	3.7200	1.0725

The results of table 3 clearly indicate that the participants have assigned comparatively higher values to all the items of this section of the questionnaire as compared to the second section that was meant to record their problematic areas itself. The participants of the study unanimously, as indicated by lower standard deviation value of only .56, agreed that 'insufficient number of language courses at Taif University' is the most significant reason behind their poor academic writing with an extremely high mean of 4.69. The second highest mean value of 4.61 is reported for the item 'few opportunities to use English outside the university' indicating that the participants of this study believe that learning a language is a continuous process in which not only the environment at the educational institutions matters but also the outside environment plays an extremely important role in the learning process. The support of the society and the family that is quite instrumental in learning a second language is nearly non-existent in Saudi Arabia as mentioned by Khan (2011) who informed that the Saudi students' major handicap in learning English is the lack of positive support from the society and the family because in "… countries like Saudi Arabia … majority of the people are not well educated, have humble background in education" (p. 1251). The finding is also in line with Tahaineh (2010) who concluded that Saudi students have few opportunities to practice the target language which slows down their language learning process. The third most favoured item in this regard remained 'insufficient audio visual facilities in the classrooms' with a high mean of 4.24. The next two reasons identified by the participants of this study also

linked with teaching facilities at the university. 'Insufficient writing practice at Taif University' and 'inappropriate teaching methods' were recognized as the fourth and fifth most important reasons for weak academic writing at FLD TU with mean values of 4.08 and 4.06 respectively. These findings are in line with the causes of writing problems reported by Al-Khasawneh (2010) who concluded that insufficient opportunities of using English and inappropriate teaching methods were the major causes identified by the participants of the study as the major factors of their writing problems. The least important reasons identified by the participants for their weak writing were their low English proficiency, teachers' lack of interest in writing tasks and insufficient use of dictionaries. The data presents an interesting factor regarding the psychological underpinning of Saudi students that they held the university, the faculty and the society as the main factors behind their academic weaknesses whereas the items that mentioned their own responsibility in this regard were assigned quite lower mean values.

The descriptive analyses of the last eight items of the questionnaire are given in the following table.

Table 4. The necessary steps to solve the above-mentioned problems

no	item	number	min	max	mean	SD
1	Use of multiple teaching techniques	75	3.00	5.00	4.5867	.6797
2	Use of group/pair work	75	1.00	5.00	4.2000	.9864
3	Diagnosis of the students' writing problems	75	3.00	5.00	4.5333	.6438
4	Availability of modern teaching facilities in the classes	75	2.00	5.00	4.5333	.7593
5	Extra coaching facilities for the weaker students	75	1.00	5.00	4.3867	.9284
6	More language courses	75	2.00	5.00	4.5067	.8281
7	Use of peer reviews along with teachers' correction	75	1.00	5.00	4.2133	1.0436
8	Frequent use of dictionaries	75	1.00	5.00	3.8533	1.1353

These items were included in the questionnaire to record the participants' responses to identify the necessary steps to solve the reported problems in their academic writing and the order of priority of these corrective measures are exactly in the same order as the problems mentioned in table 3. The participants strongly suggested, as evident by the highest mean value of 4.58 assigned, that the teachers should use multiple teaching techniques to solve this problem. This supports the previous research conducted in the Arab world (e.g., Javid, 2012; Javid, 2011; Al-Khasawneh, 2010). Khasawneh reported that "…the students proposed that teachers should employ multiple teaching techniques in order to improve students' academic writing. Using some fun activities like games and scrambled sentences would motivate the students' in learning English" (p. 19). The same is emphasised by Javid (2011) who reported that for effective EFL learning/teaching "… fun activities and relaxed classroom atmosphere need to be ensured" (p. 40). The second most favoured item has been the 'diagnosis of the students' writing problems' with a high mean value of 4.53. The data analysis offers valuable insights into the fact that the participants of this study do realise that it is significant to know their errors that they commit in their academic writings. This finding confirms the conclusion presented by Al-Khasawneh (2010) who stated that the analysis of students errors is very helpful because "…it helps to build students' awareness of the different types of grammatical errors they are making and encourage them to check their errors by using grammar handbooks" (p. 19). The third highest mean value has been allocated to the item that expresses their desire to provide more modern facilities in the classrooms so that the teachers are able to incorporate variety in their teaching process. The participants of the study also insisted to have 'more language courses' and 'extra coaching facilities for the weaker students' as important steps to overcome their academic writing problems partially confirming the findings of Al-Khasawneh (2010) who suggested that increased lectures for writing tasks would help the students strengthen their academic writing abilities. Low SD values (SD< 1) for all these five questionnaire items clearly manifests that the participants did not have major differences in their responses for these items. The participants allocated comparatively lower values to the items that enquired their responses regarding the use of peer reviews and pair/group work to overcome their academic writing weaknesses. The least preferred item on this list remained the 'frequent use of dictionaries' by the students to improve their academic writing skills.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Although it is difficult to draw general recommendations based on the findings of this study that investigated a small group of participants, yet the results offer significant insights with relation to academic writing of Saudi English-major undergraduates. The responses of the participants of this study indicate that English-major

university undergraduates are usually engaged in sentence-level or at the maximum at paragraph-level academic writing and they do not consider it important at this level to write different kinds of essays. The faculty is advised to give intensive practice to the students in writing paragraphs of reasonable length. The findings of this empirical study further support the general assumption that Saudi students are very weak in writing skills and commit lots of errors in their academic writings. Erroneous use of grammar, lexical items, irregular verbs, prepositions, spellings, punctuation etc. seems to suggest that even Saudi English-major undergraduates who are considered to be better as compared to their counterparts from other departments have multiple problems in their academic writings and needs a serious concern and attention of the teachers who are teaching them language courses at the university. Considering the weak foundation of Saudi students who join English departments in universities, it is strongly suggested that the language courses should be increased to strengthen all the language skills in general and writing in particular. The students should be exhorted to use English with the teachers as well as with each other so that the necessary family and societal support may be compensated for to some extent. Much research has reported that majority of Saudi school teachers use traditional methods of teaching English that make it rather mandatory for the university faculty to go extra miles to introduce modern and novel teaching techniques so that they may be able to motivate the students to get actively involved in the classroom activities to master English language skills and achieve better English language proficiency. It also seems inevitable to equip the classrooms with necessary audio-visual aids to achieve sustained motivation in the students for English language learning to make up for the weaknesses they have during their schooling. Diagnosis of students writing problems in the beginning of their studies at university cannot be underestimated and a comprehensive diagnostic test should be administered to all the freshmen who join English departments in the universities to tailor the course contents according to their needs. Though majority of the students did not show very positive attitude towards common and effective corrective feedback measure such as peer correction and group[/pair work, there seems an urgent need to train the students to get involved in these classroom techniques to compensate for insufficient teaching hours for language courses and teachers' personal attention due to large classes in Saudi universities. With the proliferation of online resources, the importance of books is usually underestimated by the students; therefore, it is another problem with Saudi students that they do not use dictionaries. Despite their apparent preference for online resources, it is also strongly recommended that the faculty members should recommend good dictionaries and ensure that they must carry them even in their classrooms so that they may be able to consult them frequently to correct their mistakes.

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Appendix 1

Interview Protocol

Name: ………………….……….. Designation: ………………..…………………

Experience at FLD: ……..……… years Area of Specialization: ………………………….

1. What are different types of academic writing Saudi English-major undergraduates carry out in the foreign languages department at Taif University?

1. ………………………………….. 2. …………………………………
3. ………………………………….. 4. …………………………………
5. ………………………………….. 6. …………………………………
7. ………………………………….. 8. …………………………………
9. ………………………………….. 10. …………………………………
11.…………………………………. 12. …………………………………
13. ………………………………….. 14. …………………………………

2. What are the problems Saudi English-major undergraduates face in the foreign languages department at Taif University in regard to their academic writing?

1. ………………………………….. 2. …………………………………
3. ………………………………….. 4. …………………………………
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13. ………………………………….. 14. …………………………………

3. What are the reasons behind the problems Saudi English-major undergraduates face in the foreign languages department at Taif University in regard to their academic writing?

1. ………………………………….. 2. …………………………………
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9. ………………………………….. 10. …………………………………
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4. What are the solutions to overcome the academic writing problems faced by the Saudi English-major undergraduates in the foreign languages department at Taif University?

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3. ………………………………….. 4. …………………………………
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13. ………………………………….. 14. …………………………………

Appendix 2

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أستبيان للطلاب

أ- معلومات شخصية

الاسم : **البريد الالكتروني :**

المستوى: **المعدل التراكمي:**

ب- ضع الدائرة على الاجابة المناسبة:

1- ارفض بشدة 2 –ارفض 3- معتدل

4 –موافق5- موافق بشدة

أ ـ ماهي المهام المتعلقة بداراستك في قسم اللغات الاجنبية بجامعة الطائف.

</div>

ارفض بشدة	ارفض	معتدل	اوافق	اوافق بشدة	مهام الكتابه الاكاديمية	الرقم
					الجمل الافتتاحية و التفاصيل الداعمة	1
					كتابة النص	2
					كتابة الرسالة	3
					التقارير	4
					مقالات روائية	5
					مقالات وصفية	6
					مقالات نقاشية	7
					مقالات تعبيرية	8

ب - ماهي المشاكل التي تواجهها في كتابة مهام الكتابة الأكاديمية

ارفض بشدة	ارفض	معتدل	اوافق	اوافق بشدة	عناصر	الرقم
					هجاء	9
					استخدام اداة التعريف	10
					علامات الترقيم	11
					استخدام حروف الجر	12
					استخدام السوابق و اللواحق	13
					استخدام افعال شاذة	14
					القواعد	15
					ترتيب الأفكار	16

ج – ماهي أسباب ضعف مهارات الكتابة الاكاديمية.

ارفض بشدة	ارفض	معتدل	اوافق	اوافق بشدة	عناصر	الرقم
					ضعف طلاقة في اللغة الانجليزية	17
					عدم وجود دورات كافيه في اللغة بجامعة الطائف	18
					عدم اهتمام المدرسين بمهام الكتابة	19
					اساليب غير ملائمة للتدريس	20
					عدم وجود تمارين كتابية بجامعة الطائف	21
					استخدام اللغة العربية داخل القاعات	22
					عدم وجود معامل للغة كافيه	23
					عدم استخدام الأمثل القواميس اللغوية	24

د. ماهي الخطوات المهمة لحل المشاكل المذكورة أعلاه.

ارفض بشدة	ارفض	معتدل	اوافق	اوافق بشدة	عناصر	الرقم
					استخدام تقنيات متعددة للتدريس	25
					إستخدام التمارين الجماعية والزوجية داخل القاعة الدراسية	26
					اكتشاف وتحليل اخطاء الطلاب في الكتابه	27
					توفير اماكانيات تدريس حديثة داخل الفصول	28
					تكثيف الدروس الخارجية للطلاب الضعاف	29
					تصحيح أخطاء الطلاب دوريا	30
					تكثيف الدورات اللغوية	31
					استخدام القواميس بكثرة	32