

Writing in EFL: Exploring students' perspectives in Syrian high school and university contexts

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Abstract

This paper is a part of a larger study that examines the development of students' English writing skills during the transition from school education to higher education in Syria, where English is a foreign language. The main objective of this paper is exploring teaching practices affect students transition from one level to the next via obtaining students' perceptions about writing, challenges they encounter while writing, and the strategies they use to overcome them. Two separate questionnaires were given to 206 school students from 7 different high schools across Latakia City and 206 first-year students at the Department of English Literature and Language, Tishreen University in Latakia. The main findings indicated that students of both levels were mostly concerned with grammar rather ideas and content, and with the product rather than the process of writing. Moreover, students lacked confidence in their writing ability and mostly depended on ready-made samples and teachers as the main sources of information. The study recommends changing the product-oriented approach to writing instruction currently adopted by school teachers, conducting effective teacher-training programs that include training them to develop students' writing by involving them in the writing process and teaching them how to use writing strategies effectively.

Keywords: Developing writing skills, writing in EFL; Syrian students; writing problems and strategies; school and university students.

Introduction

According to Crystal (2003, p. 5), "English is now the language most widely taught as a foreign language--in over 100 countries ... --and in most of these countries it is emerging as the chief foreign language to be encountered in schools." In contexts where English is a second/foreign language, writing plays a crucial role in the process of language learning (Ismail, 2011), and it is used as a primary tool to assess learners' development. However, writing is considered the most difficult and challenging skill to master, especially in EFL contexts where English is not needed or used in daily interactions (Salma, 2015). In such contexts, schools become the main source of formal exposure to English as well as training students to produce well-constructed pieces of writing. Therefore, the quality of English language teaching at schools becomes necessary to facilitate students' transition to higher education, especially those who wish to continue their undergraduate studies in English.

As for academic writing in higher education, Carroll (2002) and Sullivan (2006) argue that its requirements are much more complex than what students are learning in schools. Carroll (2002) states that the complex demands of academic writing tasks include using appropriate conventions of written discourse, selecting, analyzing and applying ideas from related materials, and achieving coherence and logical development of ideas. In addition to that, Sullivan (2006, p.16-17) defines college-level writing as the ability to write in response to "an article, essay, or reading selection that contains at least some abstract content and might be chosen based on its appropriateness for a college-level course". Furthermore, students' responses should reveal their ability to (i) carefully view and assess ideas; (ii) use high-level skills of thinking and analysis; (iii) arrange and present their writing efficiently; (iv) apply skillful incorporation and combination of materials they have read; (v) follow the rules of grammar, punctuation and spelling. However, Sullivan (2006) argues that the majority of students enrolling in the post-school institutions are under-prepared due to school teachers' pedagogical practices and teaching methods whose major focus is the helping students to pass important school examinations.

Based on what is mentioned above, the current study focuses on exploring students' views on writing, through uncovering the challenges that secondary school students face when attempting writing tasks and the strategies they use to overcome these challenges. It also explores the views of first-year undergraduate students about writing at the Department of English, Tishreen University (henceforth, TU), and their reflections on their school experience with learning English.

Literature Review

The following sections discuss a review of related literature, which focuses on the different approaches suggested to teach writing in EFL/ ESL contexts. In addition to that, it discusses the difficult transition from school to higher education, especially while adjusting to the demands and expectations of academic English. It also briefly sums up previous studies conducted by the authors as parts of investigating the development of English writing skills while students move from studying English as a school subject to selecting it as their major in the undergraduate level.

Approaches to writing instruction

According to Silva (1990), the development of teaching ESL writing spurred from the evolution in the field of teaching writing to native speakers of English. However, he argues that although L2 writing instruction has emerged from that of L1, both contexts are quite different from each other. Therefore, different methods and approaches must be used for the unique situation of L2 teaching and learning. Even though different approaches to writing instruction have been proposed since the second half of the twentieth century, the debate whether to follow the process or the product approaches to teaching L2 writing is ongoing still. Nunan (2015) argues that the product approach weighs importance on the finished product. Learners mimic what textbooks and teachers provide as models of correct and acceptable writing. In addition to that, grammatical correctness and accuracy on the sentence level are considered the most crucial because sentences are the base of the bigger text. On the other hand, the process approach weighs more importance on the steps involved in the process of composition rather than the finished product. Hence, the process-oriented writing classrooms engage learners in a variety of different exercises other than writing. For example, they work on selecting the topic, brainstorming, narrowing down ideas, and planning the paragraph structure.

White & Arndt (1991, p. 7) sum up the main activities involved in the writing process as follows:

1. Pairs, groups or the whole class take part in discussing the topic of the writing task.
2. Learners brainstorm for ideas and share their thoughts with each other.
3. Learners write whatever ideas come to their minds to establish their argument without considering sentence structure, punctuation, or grammatical correctness.
4. Learners produce a rough draft.
5. Learners conduct a primary evaluation of their draft.
6. Learners then focus on the layout and organization of ideas and text structure.
7. Learners produce the first draft.
8. Learners carry out a peer evaluation of the first draft.
9. Learners discuss their first drafts and make decision regarding necessary changes for the second draft.
10. Learners compose the second draft.
11. Learners proofread and edit their own second draft.
12. Learners produce the final draft.
13. Finally, peer review takes place and learners give their feedback on their peers' final product.

However, Nunan (2015) argues that the product and process approaches do not necessarily stand in opposition. Instead, they should be regarded as completing one another, and both can be implemented in the writing classroom. Mixing both approaches is especially effective in countries where English is a foreign or second language and most likely a compulsory subject. Nunan (2015) also suggests some important practices that would lead to the successful ESL/EFL writing instruction. These include:

1. Giving students as many chances as possible to practice writing since it only develops and improves with experience. If students do not practice writing outside the classroom, teachers should specify some sessions to carry out composition activities at school.
2. Giving students useful and meaningful feedback by creating self-correction and peer-reviewing checklists.
3. Both teachers and learners should be fully aware of the assessment procedures of writing tasks.

Within the same stream, Harmer (2007) lists three elements of successful ESL writing instruction. These are the genre, the writing process, and building the writing habit. According to him, the method followed to teach writing depends on the genre of the text required to be produced by learners. Thus, learners may be exposed to models and texts of different genres and then asked to write similar texts. The advantage of such a method, which is fairly similar to the product-oriented approach, is that it encourages learners to compose texts even if they have little or limited knowledge of English. However, Harmer does not stop there. That is, "as their [the learners'] language level improves, we need to make sure that their writing begins to express their own creativity within a genre, rather than merely imitating it" (2007, p. 113). With this in mind, he suggests involving learners in the process of writing (planning, drafting, reviewing, and editing), which is a rather complex process as they might plan and re-plan, write multiple drafts, carry out repeated evaluation and editing until they finish the process of composition.

The final point to be raised here is related to teachers and that they are supposed to help and encourage learners to build a writing habit. Practice helps developing better mastery of writing, which leads to increasing motivation and enthusiasm on the parts of the learners. "It is when students have acquired this writing habit that they are able to look at written genres and involve themselves in the writing process with enthusiasm" (Harmer 2007, p. 113).

Connecting school education with higher education

Although higher education offers more chances for advanced careers, it can be hard to adjust to the new atmosphere. Wangeri, Kimani, & Mutwelli (2012) state that "University entry all over the world provides students the opportunity to define and advance careers opportunities. Depending on their home environment and setting, the physical and social environment of the university is new, overwhelming and intimidating to some students" (p. 41). This difficulty increases when there is a significant gap between school and higher education in terms of teaching practices and demands. For example, in their study on writing problems and strategies, Al Seyabi & Tuzlukova (2014) designed a checklist given to randomly selected 1114 school students and 317 university students from three different regions of the Sultanate of Oman. They found that there were significant gaps between the two levels in terms of writing curricula, teaching practices, writing problems, and writing strategies adopted by students.

As for the case of Syria, the issue of developing English writing skills while moving from school to higher education has never been investigated before. However, a study conducted by Chabaan (2010) offered some insights about the status of writing at the Department of English Literature and Language, TU in Latakia City, Syria. She studied writing strategies adopted by second and fourth-year students and found that they lacked sufficient knowledge of writing strategies and confidence in their own writing as they always adopted their teachers' ideas and expressions. In addition to that, students thought of writing as a means of obtaining higher scores and did not consider composition lectures as related to other courses in the Department, and hence they thought of it as being as less important. A later study conducted by Rajab (2013) on Syrian high school teachers in Homs, Syria yielded results that could explain Chabaan's (2010) findings. Rajab (2013) found that teaching English was done through translation, and teachers mostly focused on grammar and vocabulary instead of teaching how to communicate in English. This implied that the classical Grammar Translation Method of teaching was still in use and the syllabus designed to be taught communicatively was being translated and explained in a classical teacher-centered manner. The whole idea behind teaching was viewed by teachers as a means to an end, namely passing tests. Since this was the goal, teachers would not have to spend time on planning their lessons or interacting with students.

However, the rough transition from high school into university is not exclusive to EFL contexts. In contexts where English is a first language, numerous studies such as (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Crank, 2012) found that there were various factors that affected the development of writing skills during the school level, such as pressures of time and national examinations, big numbers of students, and differences in the demands and teaching practices between school and higher education levels.

To investigate this issue in the Syrian context, the authors have previously analyzed the English textbooks used in Grades XI and XII, which immediately preceded the higher education level. The purpose of the analysis was to examine the materials used to teach writing at the secondary school and their alignment with the first-year writing course at the Department of English, TU. They found that students were to be exposed to a wide variety of writing topics and literary genres, such as poetry, drama, prose, writing for formal and informal purposes, outlining their writing tasks, conducting textual analysis, describing characters, locations and scientific diagrams, producing arguments, and writing reviews on different topics. In addition to the diversity of topics, students were to learn how to organize their paragraphs/ essays, how to develop introductions and conclusions, and how to produce unified and well-connected writing. All writing tasks were to be taught in integration with other skills, such as reading passages and discussing ideas related to the topic to be written about. Writing was also to be practiced in pairs/ groups following the process approach. As for the levels of cognitive demands of the writing

tasks, analysis indicated that *Level 1: Remembering* dominated the majority of the tasks, followed by *Level 6: Creating* and *Level 2: Understanding*, then comes Levels 3: *Applying*, 4: *Analyzing* and 5: *Evaluating*. The framework used to analyze the textbooks was adopted from (Al-Hammadi & Sidek, 2015).

As for the first-year writing course at the Department of English, it focused on paragraph writing. At the time of the study, *First Steps in Academic Writing* by Ann Hogue (2007) was the course book of first-year students. It combined information about organizing paragraphs, structuring sentences, mastering grammar, using writing mechanics, and practicing the process-approach to writing. The textbook was believed to help learners with their future writing professions as it worked on reinforcing solid academic writing skills. According to the Department's syllabus, the objective of the course was enabling students to produce coherent paragraphs that contained grammatically correct and logically structured sentences. Hence, the course highlighted grammar, types and structures of sentences, and punctuation, in addition to the basic concepts of paragraph writing, such as the topic sentence, developing sound supporting sentences, and using proper cohesive devices. Regarding types of paragraphs to be practiced in the first year, the focus was mainly on composing cohesive summaries and explanatory pieces on different topics. In terms of assessment, success in writing courses required good command over grammar and vocabulary, expressing critical thinking skills via presenting sound debates and well-supported arguments that covered the main ideas of the writing tasks, as well as a proper organization of the paragraphs.

Examining the objectives of writing at both levels revealed that they were aligned. Writing materials at school were designed to introduce students to literature, literary genres, paragraph/ essay writing, and writing techniques. As mentioned earlier, first-year students were to produce summaries and explanatory pieces of writing. This fell under second level (understanding) of the cognitive demands of writing tasks, which was one of the most common levels in writing tasks included in Grades XI and XII. However, classroom observations conducted by the first author in several high schools in Latakia revealed that writing was completely neglected, and the prospect of preparing students for higher education was not a priority for school teachers. These findings were further supported when the authors conducted another study that focused on teachers' perspectives and classroom practices. Through interviews and questionnaires filled by English teachers in different high schools across Latakia, it was found that fulfilling the curriculum's objectives was not the main goals of the school teachers. Their focus was on helping students pass the tests rather than teaching them how to use English for communication or preparing them for higher education. Therefore, they preferred providing students with ready-made samples of writing tasks instead of teaching them how to write on their own or practicing writing in class. The views of the writing instructor at the Department of English in TU reflected these findings. He stated that new students were always overwhelmed with the demands of the Department and lacked the ability to compose acceptable pieces of writing.

Method

Data for this study was collected from 412 students, 206 of which were studying in seven secondary schools located in different parts of Latakia City, Syria. The other 206 were first-year students at the Department of English, TU, which was also located in Latakia City.

Participants

The sample was selected through combining two methods: the multi-stage random sampling and the stratified random sampling. First, the public secondary schools of Latakia were identified. Then, schools to be visited were randomly selected and later stratified based on their location (city-based/ suburban) and type (all-male/all-female/mixed). In addition to that, out of the few private schools, one was randomly selected for the sake of comparison with the other schools in the sample. Each school, especially those located in the city, had students with different educational, social, and even ethnic backgrounds.

Although the number of schools visited was small ($N = 7$) due to the time limitations imposed by the scholarship regulations of the first author, the different locations of the selected schools helped obtaining a sample that covered the diverse population of the city. However, it is to be mentioned that for the same reason of time constraints, the first author was unable to visit schools located in the rural areas of Latakia.

Table 1. *The types and locations of secondary schools as well as the number of participant students in each school.*

Population of the Study		
Type of school	Location of school	Number of students
Public / all-female	City-based	25
Public / all-male	City-based	25
Public / all-female	Suburban	25
Public / all-male	Suburban	35
Public / mixed	Suburban	30
Public / mixed	City-based	30
Private / mixed	Suburban	36
Total number of students = 206		

Regarding undergraduate students, the selected sample was first-year students of the Department of English Literature and Language at TU, which was the only university in Latakia. At the time of conducting the questionnaire, 250 students were present, out of which 206 returned fully answered questionnaires, whereas the remaining 44 were incomplete and thus could not be considered for analysis.

The majority of the participants were females 83.49%, whereas 16.50% were males. According to some of them, the Syrian society considers the School of Humanities and Social Sciences as more "girly" than scientific ones, such as Engineering or Medicine. Being a teacher of English does not require physical strength or long working hours. Fields of medical studies and engineering however are associated with greater ability to do hard work, and better chances of post-graduation employment, as some students expressed. Male students seemed to agree with this social norm, and some of them confessed they only joined the English Department because they had no better choices since their scores on the Grade XII national examination were low. One of the male students said,

"I have a Baccalaureate degree (School Diploma) from the Scientific Branch. I should have been an engineer or a doctor and not an English teacher. However, my score was bad so I could only choose English, or redo the Grade XII test next year. The pressure accompanied with the Baccalaureate examination was unbearable so I said to myself "whatever, let's go for English." (Translated by the first author).

It is to be mentioned that gender, social, educational, and ethnic backgrounds of students at both school and undergraduate levels did not have any significant influence on their answers.

Therefore, the findings discussed below represent the results of data analysis of the whole sample.

Instruments

The items of the questionnaire filled by high school students were adopted from Al Seyabi & Tuzlukova's (2014) study on the writing problems faced by students at the high school and university levels, (see Appendix 1). The aim of this questionnaire was exploring students' views on writing and challenges they faced when attempting to write. The questionnaire had two parts. The first one focused on problems of writing and contained nine items that ranged from initiating the writing process, writing grammatical sentences, achieving coherence, selecting proper vocabulary, and having sufficient knowledge about the topics of writing tasks. A Likert-type scale that ranged from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' was adopted to represent students' answers. The second section of the questionnaire consisted of thirteen items that focused on selecting writing strategies used to overcome writing problems surveyed in the first section. The strategies under question were frequency of strategy-use, source of strategies, prewriting strategies, revising, self /peer editing, and consulting external resources. A Likert scale that ranged from 'always' to 'never' was also adopted to measure the frequency of strategy-use.

As for the questionnaire filled by the university students, various items were adopted from a number of studies related to writing instruction at high school, the writing continuum from high school to university, identifying and bridging the gap between the two levels, such as (Addison & McGee, 2010) and (Fanetti, Bushrow, & DeWeese, 2010). The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions divided into 3 main parts (see Appendix 2):

- 1- Their experience at high school: questions 1-7.
- 2- Their experience at university: questions 8-13.
- 3- Their opinions and personal practices: question 14- 18.

Since the study was conducted during their first semester of the academic year (2016-2017), students were still able to recollect their school experience easily while answering questions related to their current experience at the English Department.

Validity and Reliability

Testing the validity of the questionnaires was done through the following steps suggested in (Homaidan & Moalla, 1996, p. 293-٢٩٤):

1. Randomly splitting the samples into two equal halves.
2. Calculating the means of both halves, and comparing them to the mean of the entire sample.
3. Calculating the difference between the means of both halves.

According to (Homaidan & Moalla, 1996), validity is achieved if the variation between both means is equal to or less than 3% of the overall mean. As for reliability, it was tested by using split-half reliability index and calculating the coefficient of correlation between the means of both halves, which was later used to check reliability of entire test. According to Ratner (2009, p. 140), if the values fall between (0 and - 0.3), the correlation is weak, whereas values between (0.3 and - 0.7) mean a moderate correlation, and finally values between 0.7 and 1.0 indicate a strong positive correlation.

Results

Both questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The means and critical values were used to measure the frequency and central tendency of every item in the checklists.

School Students

Table 2. *School Students' Writing Problems*

Item	Mean	Critical Value	Score range
1. I do not practice writing regularly	3.592	3	Agree
2. I always have some problems when writing in English.	3.165	3	Agree
3. Feeling overwhelmed by writing tasks.	3.214	3	Agree
4. Deciding how to start writing.	2.942	3	Disagree
5. Sentence structure.	2.874	3	Not sure
6. Coherent arrangements of ideas.	3.039	3	Disagree
7. Choosing expressive vocabulary.	2.937	3	Disagree
8. Using correct grammar.	3.087	3	Agree
9. Not having enough ideas about the task's topic	3.170	3	Agree

Analysis revealed that the majority of students did not practice writing regularly and when they did, they usually faced problems and felt overwhelmed by writing tasks. The lack of sufficient ideas about the writing tasks, use of correct grammar, and difficulties in arranging the ideas of a paragraph coherently were the most common problems. Deciding how to start writing, selecting expressive vocabulary and sentence structures were seen as the least problematic of all. Dastjerdi & Samian (2011), Salma (2015), and Shokrpour & Fallahzadeh (2007) also reported similar findings in the EFL context of Iran. They found that Iranian students had significant issues with grammar and organization when attempting writing tasks.

The findings of the studies previously conducted by the authors may explain students' lack of ideas related to writing topics. According to those findings, teachers heavily adopted the product-approach to writing instruction, and they depended on ready-made samples of writing tasks that students could either imitate or memorize to use in tests. This also explained why students found deciding how to start writing tasks less problematic since they rarely had to make that decision. As for grammar, during informal discussions with students after the questionnaire was done, almost all stated they were not sure how and when to use each tense properly, especially when having to compose paragraphs. This could indicate that students may know the grammar rules but fail to apply them when they had to compose long texts. Therefore, the deductive methods of teaching grammar adopted at schools, "which assume that repeated exposure to formal rules, and positive input will eventually result in acquisition" (Knouzi, 2016, p. 153), does not seem to be that effective. Passing the examination dominated the teaching practices of grammar and students were instructed to find clues that would help them handle grammar-related questions in examinations. Hence, composing paragraphs with proper tenses was a challenge since it was not practiced enough in class. Other studies in the Arabic context reported that the limited repertoire of ideas and grammar deficiencies were also two of the most common issues faced by students while writing, as found by (Abdul-Hafid Kamil, 2011; Fareed, Ashraf & Bilal, 2016; Abdul-Kareem, 2014).

In order to find out if students' answers differed significantly from each other, which would indicate a significant variation in the writing problems they faced, **T** test was used to compare the sample mean to the theoretical mean. (See Table 3 below).

Table 3. Significance of Variation in Students' Writing Problems

Tabulated <i>t</i> value	Calculated <i>t</i> value	P. value	Decision
2.306	0.6233*	0.05	Non-significant

*Since calculated *t* 0.6233 is < tabulated *t* 2.306, the variation is not significant.

Table 4. School Students' Writing Strategies

Item	Mean	Critical Value	Score range
10. Using some strategies.	3.131	3	Sometimes
11. Teachers teach students some strategies.	3.447	3	Sometimes
12. Brainstorming for ideas.	3.931	3	Always
13. Writing ideas in Arabic.	3.165	3	Always
14. Preparing an outline.	2.631	3	Rarely
15. Revising grammar.	4.044	3	Always
16. Revising content.	3.976	3	Always
17. Ability to identify weak areas and mend them.	3.340	3	Sometimes
18. Using dictionaries.	2.723	3	Never
19. Teachers encourage peer-evaluation.	2.908	3	Never
20. Learning from peer-evaluation.	3.568	3	Always
21. Depending on teachers' feedback.	4.044	3	Always
22. Consulting books and websites.	2.738	3	Never

As for writing strategies, as shown in Table 4 above, the majority of students indicated that teachers sometimes directed them to use writing strategies, and they in turn used some of them to facilitate the writing process. However, analysis revealed that students were mostly conscious about strategies related to ideas and grammar. Remembering and applying teachers' feedback and revising grammatical content were the most frequently used strategies. Revising the ideas and content of the paragraph came second, followed by brainstorming for ideas. Writing down ideas and notes in Arabic was also one of the most common strategies among students. Students also found that pair work and peer-evaluation of writing tasks was quite beneficial. However, it was not encouraged by teachers even though it was constantly recommended in the Teacher's Book as found by the authors in previous studies. Planning writing tasks, consulting dictionaries, books, and websites were the least practiced strategies because as mentioned earlier, writing was not taught as a process, and students depended on ready-made writing samples provided to them by their teachers.

Sadi & Othman (2012) who examined writing strategies of Iranian EFL undergraduate students reported similar findings. They found that because of the teacher-centered environment of Iranian classrooms, learners always relied on their teachers as the sources of information. Therefore, learners' writing, especially with poor English competence, seemed to be a reproduction of information they learned by rote. Such practices along with students' insufficient

writing practices restrain the development of writing skills as their focus shifts from the communicative purpose of writing into "producing a set of error free sentences arranged one after another on a piece of paper." (Sadi & Othman 2012, p. 1156).

The **T** test was again used to see if there was a significant variation between strategies used by students. (See Table 5 below)

Table 5. Significance of Variation in Students' Writing Strategies

Tabulated <i>t</i>	Calculated <i>t</i>	P. value	Decision
2.179	2.391*	0.05	Significant

*Since calculated *t* 2.391 is > tabulated *t* 2.179, the variation is significant.

The significant variation in strategies, in contrast with the non-significant variation in writing problems faced by the same students (see Table 3), indicated that students lacked sufficient knowledge of how to use writing strategies, which was similar to what Chabaan (2010) found, as discussed in the introduction section of this paper.

Testing Validity and Reliability

Table 6. Validity of School Students' Questionnaire

Category	Variation between means	Allowed Variation	Decision
Writing in general	0.047*	0.0943	Valid
Writing strategies	0.1117*	0.10098	Valid

*Since the variation between both means is \geq than the allowed variation, the questionnaire is valid.

Table 7. Reliability of School Students' Questionnaire

Category	Correlation Coefficient	P value	Degree of reliability
Writing in general	0.9862**	0.001	Strong
Writing strategies	0.9642**	0.001	Strong

**Since the Correlation Coefficient is +/- 0.7 to 1, the reliability of the questionnaire is strong.

Undergraduate Students

Table 8. Undergraduate Students' School Experience

Item	Mean	Critical Value	Score range
1. Objectives of writing in English at school.	2.087	2	Prepare me for university English
2. Emphasis on writing at school.	2.3447	2.5	Not enough
3. Frequency of writing assignments.	2.709	2.5	Rarely
4. Types of writing tasks	2.369	2	Personal narrative

at school.			
5. Teachers provided feedback.	1.733	1.5	Yes
6. Focus of feedback.	2.053	2	Grammar
7. Teachers provided ready-made samples.	1.607	1.5	Yes
8. Samples used in tests.	1.76	1.5	Yes

Answers given by university students regarding their school experience mirrored those given by school students. They acknowledged that the emphasis on writing and the frequency of writing assignments were very little during their school days. In addition to that, the focus of their school teachers was on grammar rather than ideas or content. As for writing tasks, students professed their school teachers used to provide them with ready-made samples, which they depended on and some of them even memorized and used these samples in examinations. This is similar to what Salma (2015) found. The majority of participants in her study admitted that "the purpose of their writing skill in English is only for passing the examination." (p. 75). Therefore, writing was not assigned any important role, even though academic writing was quite important for students as a means of communicating their ideas.

Students believed that the main objective of their English education at school was to prepare them for academic English. However, to what extent did their expectations meet reality? The answer to this question is given in Table 10 below.

T-test was again used to see if there was a significant variation in students' school experiences, which turned out to be non-significant as shown in Table 9 below.

Table 9. Significance of Variation in Students' School Experience

Tabulated <i>t</i>	Calculated <i>t</i>	P. value	Decision
2.365	0.388*	0.01	Non-significant

*Since calculated *t* 0.388 is < tabulated *t* 2.365, the variation is non-significant.

Table 10. Undergraduate Students' University Experience

Item	Mean	Critical Value	Score range
9. Reason for choosing English for higher education.	2.4175	2	Future career
10. Knowledge about what to be studied at the Department.	1.3252	1.5	No
11. Additional academic writing courses.	1.0146	1.5	No
12. Writing guidelines given by teachers.	1.8641	1.5	Yes
13. Writing demands are different for each teacher.	1.5862	1.5	Yes

Most students stated that better opportunities to find jobs was the reason they chose to major in English for post-school studies. However, even though students used to believe that school English was designed to prepare them for the university level (see Table 8), they discovered that they did not really know what was expected to them at all, and whatever they

learned at school was not applicable at the English Department. Moreover, faculty members provided students with guidelines on how to write for them, but those guidelines varied from one teacher to another. For some scholars, this variation is considered strength rather than weakness since language is quite complex and writing evaluation should always be temporary (Greenberg, 1992) and (Belanoff, 1991). However, Graff & Graff (2009) believe that the relationship between teachers within the same educational level should not be severed. They argue that in higher education, courses are isolated from each other most of the time, and teachers seldom share their notes and do not even know what each of them is teaching. "Consequently our lessons not only fail to reinforce each other but often conflict, and we are so isolated in our privatized classrooms that we're oblivious to these disparities and contradictions when they occur" (Graff & Graff 2009, p. 412). They use the term "volleyball effect" to refer to university students as they are thrown from one course to another, each one having its own requirements, rules and expectations.

As for the Department of English at TU, the writing instructor at the Department stated that the faculty members agreed on who should fail rather than who should pass, and since readers differed in opinions, unified judgment or evaluation could not be imposed. Chabaan (2010) found this variation to be rather confusing for the students. She said, There is a need for a transparent and unified system of writing evaluation. The present study shows that the ambiguity of the assessment system causes students to be confused. For this reason, the department must develop a system of evaluation that takes into consideration the standards of good English academic writing as well as students' proficiencies in English. In addition, it is important that all teachers follow this system when they assess their students' written production whether in class or in an exam. (p. 279)

T-test revealed that there was no significant variation in students' experiences at the academic level.

Table 11. *Significance of Variation in Students' University Experience*

Tabulated <i>t</i>	Calculated <i>t</i>	P. value	Decision
2.776	0.173*	0.05	Non-significant

*Since calculated *t* 0.173 is < tabulated *t* 2.776, the variation is not significant.

Table 12. *Undergraduate Students' Opinions and Writing Practices*

Item	Mean	Critical Value	Score range
14. Importance of writing for future.	3.7913	2.5	Very important
15. How you feel about writing.	2.9175	2.5	It helps in future career
16. Your writing ability.	2.874	2.5	Same level as peers
17. Problematic areas in writing.	2.0437	2	Correct grammar and sentence structure
18. Most common strategy adopted.	2.898	2.5	Discuss writing with teachers

The final part of the questionnaire was related to students' own opinions and feelings about writing. The majority viewed it as very important and helpful for their future careers.

However, most students shared school students' anxiety about grammar. They chose to focus on form (grammar and sentence structure) over content (ideas and organization of sentences). In addition to that, the majority of them depended on teachers as a reference for their writing process, which was quite similar to what school students did.

T test was used to see if there was a significant difference between students' views and writing practices.

Table 13. *Significance of Variation in Students' Opinions and Writing Practices*

Tabulated <i>t</i>	Calculated <i>t</i>	P. value	Decision
2.776	1.219*	0.05	Non-significant

*Since calculated *t* 1.219 is < tabulated *t* 2.776, the variation is not significant.

Testing Validity and Reliability

Table 14. *Validity of Undergraduate Students' Questionnaire*

Category	Variation between means	Allowed Variation	Decision
School experience	0.0297*	0.059	Valid
University experience	0.00567*	0.05	Valid
Opinions and writing practices	0.021	0.083	Valid

*Since the variation between both means is \leq than the allowed variation, the questionnaire is valid.

Table 15. *Reliability of Undergraduate Students' Questionnaire*

Category	Correlation coefficient	P value	Degree of reliability
School experience	0.995**	0.001	Strong
University experience	0.995**	0.001	Strong
Opinions and writing practices	0.997**	0.001	Strong

**Since the Correlation Coefficient is +/- 0.7 to 1, the reliability of the questionnaire is strong.

Discussion

The findings of this study further strengthen what the authors have already established in previous studies. Teachers of English at schools were not fulfilling the objectives of the curriculum nor were they teaching language skills they way they were supposed to. They mostly overlooked the importance of practicing writing in class, focused on the product, and preferred providing students with samples of writing task rather than going through the all the steps involved in the process approach to composition. These practices have left a lasting effect on students' writing skills, especially those who chose to major in English after they graduated from school. For example, grammar was the major concern of students rather than content and arrangement of ideas even though the objectives of writing courses at both levels stressed the importance of these elements. Moreover, this study established that students did not know how and when to effectively use writing strategies, which suggested that their writing skills were deficient. In addition, undergraduate students struggled to undo what they have learned about writing during their school education and start adapting to the demands of academic writing,

especially in terms of learners' autonomy and focus on content. As analysis revealed, students lacked confidence in their own writing since they were used to receiving ready-made samples from their teachers.

Another important finding is related to testing. Throughout the secondary education level, students were trained to handle a particular type of examination, which was the national Grade XII test. Teachers translated important information and taught grammar in Arabic. They provided students with ready-made paragraph samples and highlighted what was crucial for the test. However, the case was completely different in higher education. Every department, within which each instructor set their own expectations and standards for success, and students were expected to meet these standards, show originality and critical thinking abilities. This may have led to students' confusion and demotivation, especially new school graduates, upon transitioning from learning English as a school subject to majoring in English at higher education.

Conclusion

Considering the findings discussed above, this study concludes that overcoming the challenges of English writing skills development needs to start with rethinking the testing methods currently adopted in Syrian schools. In fact, the overwhelming importance of the examinations forces teachers to shape their teaching practices into training-for-tests sessions. Testing should be designed to reflect students' real English competence rather than allowing them to reproduce whatever they memorize. This would automatically lead teachers to abandon the practice of providing students with ready-made writing samples and start focusing on and practicing writing in class.

Moreover, teachers have to be trained to manage large classrooms and effectively use the curriculum and encourage in-class writing activities. They should also be able to teach students how to handle writing problems and use appropriate tools and strategies to overcome these problems. In addition to that, building students' confidence in their own writing is very important, because unlike the common practice at school, no university instructor will ever provide their students with ready-made samples of paragraphs/ essays. This can be done by increasing the number of process-based writing tasks and encouraging self and peer evaluation. According to Abdollahzadeh (2010), combining such strategies is effective for developing writing skills and increasing learners' confidence, as they will be trained to spot strengths and weaknesses of their own writing as well as their peers'.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

School Students' Questionnaire

Challenges You Face When You Write

التحديات التي تواجهك عندما تكتب

إلى الطلاب المشاركين،

لقد تم بناء هذا الاستبيان خصيصاً بغية الكشف عن المشكلات التي تواجهكم عندما تودون كتابة مواضيع أو مقالات تعبيرية. أرجو منكم الإجابة عن كافة الأسئلة وذلك لكي أتمكن من اقتراح حل مناسب يساعد على التغلب على هذه المشاكل وبالتالي تطوير مستوى مهارات الكتابة لدى الطلبة السوريين. لن يتطلب إنهاء هذا الاستبيان أكثر من بضع دقائق من وقتكم، لذا أرجو منكم أن تعبروا عن آرائكم بكل صراحة. يمكنكم الإجابة على الاستبيان إما بالعربية أو الإنكليزية.

بتول خوجه

طالبة دكتوراه

جامعة تيزبور، الهند

في حال وجود أي استفسار يرجى التواصل عبر الإيميل: batulkhojasy@gmail.com

Dear Students,

This survey is designed in order to identify problems that you face when you attempt to write a paragraph or an essay. It is important that you answer all the questions so that a solution can be proposed to overcome all the problems that Syrian students face with writing and thus elevate the level of English proficiency. The survey will take no more than a few minutes of your time. Please feel free to express your feelings and answer as honestly as you can. You can answer the survey either in Arabic or in English.

Batoul Khoja

PhD Scholar

Tezpur University, Assam, India

For any queries, please contact me via email: batulkhojasy@gmail.com

بداية الاستبيان

ضع إشارة (√) عند الإجابة عن السؤال. رجاء تذكر أن جميع الأسئلة متعلقة بممارسة الكتابة باللغة الإنكليزية فقط.

أعراض بشدة	أعراض	لست متأكد	أوافق	أوافق بشدة	الكتابة بشكل عام

					لا أمارس الكتابة بشكل دائم.	1
					دائماً أواجه بعض المشاكل حين أكتب باللغة الإنكليزية.	2
					أصاب بالتوتر عند الكتابة حيث أشعر أنني لا أعرف كيف أبدأ أو كيف أطور الأفكار أو كيف أختتم الموضوع.	3
					أواجه مشكلة كبيرة عند البدء بالكتابة.	4
					أواجه مشكلة كبيرة مع تركيب الجمل.	5
					أواجه مشكلة كبيرة مع ترتيب وترابط الأفكار.	6
					أواجه مشكلة كبيرة مع القواعد.	7
					أواجه مشكلة كبيرة مع اختيار المفردات للتعبير عن أفكار.	8
					أواجه مشكلة كبيرة بسبب قلة أفكاري عن المواضيع التي يحددها المدرس للكتابة عنها.	9
					استراتيجيات الكتابة	
أبداً	نادراً	أحياناً	غالباً	دائماً	أتبع استراتيجيات معينة لتحسين مستوى كتابتي.	10
					لقد قام مدرس اللغة الإنكليزية بتعليمي بعض الاستراتيجيات لتحسين مستوى كتابتي.	11
					أقوم بالتفكير جيداً للحصول على أكبر قدر ممكن من الأفكار للاختيار من بينها قبل الكتابة.	12
					أقوم بكتابة بعض الأفكار باللغة العربية قبل البدء بالكتابة.	13
					أقوم بتحضر مخطط الموضوع قبل البدء بالكتابة.	14
					أقوم بمراجعة ما كتبت للتأكد من القواعد والأخطاء الإملائية.	15
					أقوم بمراجعة ما كتبت للتأكد من محتوى وأفكار الموضوع.	16
					أمتلك القدرة على معرفة نقاط الضعف في كتابتي وأعرف كيف أعالجها.	17
					أقوم باستخدام المعجم أثناء الكتابة وفي مرحلة التدقيق.	18
					يقوم المدرس بتحفيزي على قراءة وتدقيق كتابات زملائي.	19
					أتعلم من الأخطاء الكتابية التي يرتكبها زملائي.	20
					أحاول تذكر ملاحظات المدرس عندما أقوم بالكتابة.	21
					أقوم بالاستعانة بمراجع وكتب الكترونية لتحسين كتابتي.	22

شكراً لتعاونكم

Use (√) to indicate your answer. Please know that all items are related to writing in English only.

Beginning of the Questionnaire

Writing in General		Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	I do not practice writing regularly.					
2	I always have some problems when writing in English.					
3	I feel overwhelmed when writing: I don't know how to start, how to develop my ideas and how to					

	conclude.					
4	My biggest problem is deciding how to start writing.					
5	My biggest problem is not knowing how to write a correct English sentence.					
6	My biggest problem is putting the ideas together in a coherent way.					
7	My biggest problem is choosing the right vocabulary to express my ideas.					
8	My biggest problem is using correct grammar.					
9	My biggest is not having enough ideas about the topics that my teacher asks us to write about.					
Writing Strategies		Always	Often	Some-times	Rarely	Never
10	I often use some strategies to help me improve my writing.					
11	My English teachers taught me some strategies that could help me with writing					
12	I brainstorm to get suitable ideas before writing.					
13	I write some notes in Arabic before I start writing.					
14	I prepare an outline before I write an essay/paragraph.					
15	I revise what I write in terms of grammar, spelling and language in order to write an improved draft.					
16	I revise what I write in terms of content and ideas in order to write an improved draft.					
17	I can identify the weak areas in my writing and					

	decide how to address them to improve my writing					
18	I use a dictionary during and after I write an essay/paragraph					
19	The teacher asks me to correct/edit my classmates writing.					
20	I learn from correcting my classmates' writing errors.					
21	I try to remember the feedback that my teacher gives me and use it in my future writing.					
22	I consult books and websites to improve my writing.					

THANK YOU

Appendix 2

University Students' Questionnaire

Dear Participant:

In order to continuously improve the quality English language education in Syria, obtaining feedback from students is vital. This questionnaire has been developed to gather your valuable feedback regarding your experience with English in high school and university. Let your voice be heard.

I would appreciate your taking the time to complete the following questionnaire giving your opinions as honestly and clearly as you can. It would take approximately 20 minutes to complete this questionnaire. Your responses are completely anonymous, confidential, will be compiled together and analyzed as a group, and will be used only for academic purposes.

Thank you!

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me:

Batoul Khoja

PhD Scholar

Department of English and Foreign Languages

Tezpur University, Assam, India

E-mail ID: batulkhojasy@gmail.com.

Personal Information

- Age:

- Gender:

- Place of Origin

City Center

Suburbs

Rural Areas

- If you belong to a different city, please specify

.....

.....

- Before university, you attended Public school Private school

- Are you willing to participate in future academic research experiment?

Yes No

- If Yes, kindly provide your:

Name:

Phone Number:

Beginning of Questionnaire

The first section is related to your high school experience.

1. What do you think the aim of high school English was?

Teach me how to use English in and out of school.

Help me pass the Baccalaureate exam.

Prepare me for university-level English.

Other (please specify).....

.....

2. How much emphasis did your high school place on writing?

Too much Enough Not enough I am not sure

3. How often did you have writing assignments in English?

Often Occasionally Rarely Never

4. Did you receive feedback from your teacher after each assignment?

Yes No

5. If 'yes', what type of feedback?

Related to grammar. Related to content. Related to Ideas.

Other (please specify)

.....

.....

6. In English classes at Eleventh and Twelfth Grades, did your teacher give you ready-made samples of the paragraphs mentioned in the books?

Yes No

7. If 'yes', did you use these samples in your tests? Why?

Yes No

.....

.....

The second section is related to your university experience.

8. Why did you choose English for your higher education?

Because I am interested in English. Because it helps me find a good job.

Because of my Baccalaureate score. Other (Please specify).

.....

.....

9. Did you have an idea of what you will be studying at the English Department before you joined?

Yes No

10. Have you taken any course outside the department that focuses on academic writing?

- Yes No

11. If 'yes', what type of course and where?

.....

.....

12. Do university teachers give you guidelines about how to write in each subject?

- Yes No

13. Does each teacher have a different approach as to how you should write?

- Yes No

The third section is related to your opinion and personal practices

14. How important do you think writing is to your future career? Why?

- Very important.
 Somewhat important.
 Not very important.
 I am not sure.
-
-

15. How would you describe your feelings about writing?

- I enjoy writing and look forward to most writing tasks.
 I enjoy writing for personal goals but do not like assignment-related writing.
 It helps me in my future professional life.
 I only do it when I am asked to by my teachers.

16. Which of these responses best matches your perception of your writing ability? Why do you believe so?

- I think I write as well or better than most of my peers.
 I think I write about the same as my peers.
 I think most of my peers write better than I do.
 I don't know how my writing compares to my peers.
-
-

17. When you attempt to write, which of these elements do you mostly focus on? (Tick all that apply)

- Organizing your paragraph appropriately.
 Using supporting sentences.
 Using correct grammar and sentence structure.
 Others (please specify)
-
-

18. Which of the following strategies do you use when you attempt a writing task? (Tick all that apply). Explain your choice.

- Write multiple drafts. Discuss my writing with my teacher.
 Discuss my writing with my peers. Consult books or websites.
-
-