



Learning to Write: Moroccan EFL Students' Strategies and Needs

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Abstract

The current study examines how Moroccan EFL university students develop their writing skills and investigates their needs regarding institutional support for this process. To achieve this, a qualitative content analysis was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 45 fourth-semester students from Ecole Normale Supérieure in Rabat, Morocco. The findings reveal that most students rely primarily on classroom instruction to improve their writing, while a smaller number use online platforms and an even fewer number have personal learning plans. The students also identified key areas for enhancement: they expressed a need for more detailed feedback from professors, increased opportunities for active learning in class, and additional writing sessions. By addressing issues related to how students learn inside and outside university classrooms, their mastery of writing may improve significantly.

Keywords: Learning; EFL writing; Moroccan university; strategies, propositions



1. Introduction

It was over 20 years ago that a significant number of Moroccan researchers concurrently qualified the writing of Moroccan EFL students as problematic at a variety of dimensions. Of these are paragraphing issues (Ouaouicha, 1980); frequent verbal, spelling, punctuation, and subjective-verb agreement errors (Nemassi, 1991); and low mastery of the use of cohesion connectors (Abouabdelqader, 1999). Research about how to improve Moroccan students' writing skills has since then been conducted at various levels, including curriculum design (Bouziane, 1999); teaching methodology (Abouabdelqader and Bouziane, 2016); critical thinking (Amrous and Nejmaoui, 2016); transfer of rhetorical organization from Arabic

(Khartite and Zerhouni, 2018); and the argumentative cultural dimensions in the writing of Moroccan students (Chibi, 2021).

Though rich and varied, these studies seem to significantly focus on the teaching of writing. As such, examples of objectives include suggesting techniques teachers can use to develop their students' writing (Hellalet, 2021), highlighting the impact of social media on students' writing skills (Lakhal, 2021), explaining the use of Learning Management Systems in teaching writing (Oumekloul and Aoujil, 2023), surveying the instructions of writing instructors (Mamad and Vigh, 2023), and exploring the ability of Moroccan university lecturers to identify the originality of their students' essays (Aherrahrou, 2023). The list extends to cover a lot more research about EFL writing at Moroccan universities. However, it is very obvious that this multitude of research largely shifts its attention away from one of the key components of writing – the students.

With the goal to partly fill this gap, the current study aims to answer the following two research questions:

1. How do Moroccan EFL university students learn how to write?
2. What do Moroccan EFL university students propose to improve learning writing?

2. Literature Review

The aim of this section is to explore the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of learning EFL writing. It attempts to briefly highlight theory relevant to learning EFL writing and simultaneously survey a few studies in light of which the current research and its findings can be contextualized and interpreted.

2.1. Theories of EFL writing learning

The learning of writing, in general, and that of EFL writing, in particular can be approached from the view of a number of theories. One of these is the interactionist/social theory of language learning, mainly based on the works of Lev Vygotsky (1978) and Jerome Bruner (1983). Its argument provides, the



ability of humans to learn language skills requires, in addition to innate biological abilities, social interactions (Ormord, 2007; Yohanes, 2010). The implementation of the interactionist/social theory in learning writing involves activities such as collaborative writing, peer review, discussions, and role-plays.

Cognitive process learning is another theory of how to learn writing, including writing within an EFL learning context. Flower and Hayes (1981) highlight four components cognitive process learning of writing rests upon. The first of these qualifies writing as “a set of distinctive processes” learners need to manage along the writing process (p. 366). The second emphasizes the hierarchically interconnectedness of these processes. The third contextualizes the act of composing a text within a goal or set of goals writers attempt to meet by the end of the writing task. Finally, Flower and Hayes indicate learners of writing need to generate “high-level goals” and supplement them with “supporting sub-goals,” or even replace them depending on the requirements of the progress of the writing task (p. 366). Within this approach, students can learn writing using activities like writing simple sentences into complexed ones, reflecting upon how to plan, draft, and revise their written texts, and generating outlines to logically organize their main and supporting ideas.

Last but not least, there is the genre-based approach to learning EFL writing. According to this approach, learners of writing engage in activities wherein they practice language and functions relevant to their learning contexts (Halliday, 1985). These enable them to produce texts that abide by the linguistic and rhetoric conventions common in their writing communities (Swales, 1990). In other words, students of applied linguistics learn how to write departing from applied linguistics texts. Similarly, students of biology develop their writing skills using biology model texts. In practice, adopting the genre-based approach to learning writing involves implementing four stages (Derewianka, 1990): familiarization with the field, exploration of model texts, collaborative writing, and independent production of texts.

Surveying these approaches separately does not necessarily mean they are strictly incompatible. Instead, learners of EFL writing can use them together to develop their writing skills. For instance, the interactionist/social theory many complement the genre-based writing approach by fostering collaborative learning, cultural understanding, and meaningful interaction, which are crucial for the effective development of proficiency in writing within varied genre communities. Simultaneously, learners of writing can add components of cognitive process learning to the interactionist/social and genre writing learning traditions. The ultimate goal emanating from whatsoever a learning or learning approaches a learner picks is to come up with an effective mix that eases and accelerates their learning of how to write effectively.

2.3. Previous studies



Studies on the learning of EFL writing primarily focus on either the strategies students use to enhance their writing skills or the challenges they encounter during the process. This section will spotlight some of these studies.

2.3.1. Strategies to learn writing

One such study was conducted by Mohammad and Hazarika (2016). The authors employed a questionnaire to investigate the perspectives of fifty students at Najran University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, regarding writing in an EFL context. Additionally, it analyzed fifty texts written by the same population with the goal to identify the difficulties they in writing. The study's findings indicated that the predominant strategy for learning writing among students was to memorize the types of texts required to pass exams. The study also found the mistakes the students made were common in most of their texts. These include mainly mistakes at the level of grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary. The authors argue the similarity of the mistakes the students made resulted from their dependence on memorization. Accordingly, they recommended that students refrain from memorizing texts and expand their approach to learning writing beyond merely passing exams.

Nevertheless, the authors' conclusion that memorization is the cause of the students' mistakes is quite debatable. Indeed, it may be true that memorizing texts for exams fails to provide students with the learning opportunities they need to write independently, particularly because their learning is passive and their cognitive processes are not fully engaged (Khamees, 2016). However, research indicates memorization can be a learning opportunity if it is used effectively (Ding, 2007; Yusuf, 2010; Yo, 2013). Effective use of memorization necessitates that learners comprehend the text they memorize, considering not only its meaning but also its linguistic and rhetorical components (Kember & Gow, 1990).

Learning how to write through cooperative learning (CL) is another area that EFL researchers have investigated. In their study, Ghufoin and Ermawati (2018) examined the perspectives of EFL university students on the effectiveness of CL in learning writing. They utilized questionnaires, interviews, and observations involving 2 EFL instructors and 60 students at an Indonesian private university. The authors found that CL notably enhanced students' self-confidence and motivation, alleviated their anxiety, and fostered a greater sense of responsibility in their learning. These positive outcomes suggest, according to the author of the study, that CL can significantly benefit EFL students in their writing development. Other studies have confirmed the effectiveness of CL in improving EFL students' ability to write effectively (Shammout, 2020; Harahap et al., 2021).

Other studies have explored the impact of information technology (IT) on EFL students' learning of writing. Some of these found that the use of Information Technology (IT) can have a notably positive effect on students' acquisition of writing skills. For instance, a study by Ware (2004) investigated how three distinct



ESL students engaged with web-based discussion boards and chat rooms in a university writing course. One main finding of this study is that students' anxiety was reduced significantly while learning how from behind the screens of their phones and computers. Consequently, their writing skills improved significantly. Similarly, another study showed EFL students take advantage of translation and proofreading digital technologies to overcome their writing difficulties (Naghdipour, 2022).

However, it is important to note that research has also identified several issues associated with using IT as a tool for learning writing. Violating writing ethics is a prominent concern among these. Several studies identified significant connections between the use of technology and cases of cheating, which negatively hinders the students' opportunity to practice writing, knowing their limits and working out ways to overcome them (Newbury, 2011; Gerrard, 2011; Trushell et al., 2013).

This section surveys some of the studies conducted to explore how university EFL students learn writing. The next section focuses on studies about the difficulties these students face in the process of developing their EFL writing skills.

2.2.2. Difficulties to learn EFL writing

Research on the challenges of learning EFL writing has explored a broad spectrum of factors. Using a categorical quantitative design, Sasmita and Setyowati (2021) explored the perceptions of EFL students at State University of Malang in Indonesia regarding what they thought was difficult in learning EFL writing. The study found the students had issues at the levels of writer's stagnation, expressing ideas, confidence, and fear of making mistakes. Additionally, the study identified coherence, grammar, and organization as the main mistakes students make in their writing. Belqiyah et al. (2021) conducted a mixed-methods study examining the perceptions of 26 undergraduate students regarding challenges in learning writing. Their findings highlight persistent affective issues between students and professors, language transfer challenges, and language errors related to vocabulary and grammar. The affective issues were also echoed in a study conducted by Fitria (2022).

Feedback is another issue highlighted in some studies as a significant challenge for EFL students learning writing. For example, Kangni (2015) found that students often lack the ability to provide appropriate peer feedback and simultaneously have doubts about the value of the feedback they receive from their peers. A similar study (Nguyen, 2016) identified two causes of students' inability to approach peer feedback constructively: one is that peer feedback was provisioned informally and the other related to the students' expectations for feedback that nurtures their metacognitive abilities. It is evident, however, that



while students may question the value of peer feedback, they concurrently place high value on feedback received from their professors (Lv et al., 2021).

3. Methodology

The objectives of the present study are (1) to investigate Moroccan EFL university students' strategies of the learning of writing and (2) to explore their propositions for measures to enhance writing proficiency at university. For such an end, a conventional and directed qualitative content study as described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) was conducted. On one hand, the analysis is conventional because the categories are coded directly from the data collected. On the other hand, it is directed since it builds on finding of previous research. The participants were randomly and voluntarily selected from semester four students at the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Rabat, Morocco (N=45). Then semi-structured interviews (see appendix 1) were employed to collect the perceptions of the participants of how they learn writing as university students who were on the verge of finishing an EFL teaching degree.

4. Results and discussions

The objectives of the current study are to investigate how Moroccan university students learn EFL writing and to suggest learning strategies that professors should consider to improve the entire writing learning process. To accomplish these goals, a semi-structured interview was employed, and the subsequent section presents its key results.

4.1. Understanding how to learn writing

The initial phase of the interview seeks to examine the participants' perspectives on learning writing in the context of EFL. While they unanimously acknowledge the significance of writing alongside other skills, they perceive it as the most challenging skill to master. Hence, many of them admit to facing challenges in courses where proficient writing skills are necessary for passing modules. Regarding the themes relevant to Research Question 1 (How do Moroccan EFL university students learn how to write?), the analysis highlights several key strategies: dependence on class instruction, technology, personal writing plans, learning about writing techniques, peer feedback, and reading. The table below outlines these strategies and indicates the number of students who utilize each of them:



| Learning Strategy | Percentage of Use among Students |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Dependence on Class Instruction | 60% |
| Learning about writing techniques | 15% |
| Personal Writing Plans | 10% |
| Reading | 7% |
| Peer Feedback | 5% |
| Others | 3% |

The table illustrates that the students interviewed use a range of strategies to develop their writing skills. However, the majority (60%) rely primarily on classroom instruction. This means their writing learning experience is largely confined to what is provided by their professors through lectures, assignments, and projects. When asked whether they thought this reliance on class instruction was sufficient for improving their writing skills, most students indicated that it was not. To explain this disparity, some students attributed the issue to their professors, citing a lack of feedback and insufficient motivation for independent writing practice. Supporting the students' concerns, a study by Mamad and Vigh (2024) found that Moroccan university students recognize the importance of feedback and frequently express dissatisfaction with either the quantity or quality of feedback they receive.

In contrast, professors express concerns about their large student loads, which make it nearly impossible to provide adequate feedback. For instance, Jamal Bahmad (2020) reports that during the 2018-2019 academic year, faculty members at the Faculty of Humanities at Mohammed V University in Rabat were responsible for 560 students each. Similarly, at the English department of University Ibn Zohr, each professor managed 587 students, with 27 professors collectively overseeing 4,783 first-year students.

Additionally, the current study reveals that only 15% of the interviewed students rely on self-directed methods to enhance their writing skills. These students primarily use online platforms and resources to support their learning. They frequently mentioned using Purdue OWL, Grammarly, and YouTube as key



tools for improving their writing. In contrast, only a few students mentioned using writing books to learn writing techniques. They noted that online resources are more accessible, cost-effective, and enjoyable compared to traditional books, which makes them a preferred option. The preference for online resources for learning English, including writing, is supported by several studies. For instance, Kawinkoonlasate (2019) demonstrates that Thai university students favor electronic methods for learning writing over traditional approaches. Similarly, Zarei (2024) reports that Iranian students perceive digital materials as more effective in enhancing their writing skills compared to conventional methods.

Moreover, the current study found only 10% of the students interviewed reported having personal plans to improve their EFL writing. These students usually adopt a systematic approach, setting clear objectives and establishing a routine for regular practice. They engage in various writing exercises, such as composing essays, keeping journals, and obtaining feedback from peers or instructors. This method, many of them confirmed, allows them to address specific areas for improvement and monitor their progress. For example, one the interviewees described a consistent technique she uses to improve her writing as follows:

Interviewer: Do you have a personal plan to learn how to write?

Interviewee: Sure, and I am doing my best to stay faithful to it.

Interviewer: Stay faithful to it?

Interviewee: Yes, it is helping a lot to learn how to write. I am a lot much better than I was a year ago.

Interviewer: Can you describe it?

Interviewee: Yes, it's very simple. For example, I ask Chat GPT to give me a simple paragraph about the topic I want to write. I read the paragraph for some time and try to remember it. I type it on my computer or phone and ask Chat GPT to proofread it. I notice the changes it proposes and make the necessary modifications. I repeat the process as many times as I can. It's a game...It's much fun and at the same time learning.

Interviewer: Do you this to learn paragraphs only?

Interviewee: No, I do it with sentences, essays, etc. The final two categories, reading and peer feedback, account for 7% and 5% of the responses, respectively. The three students who use reading to enhance their writing primarily engage with online texts. Additionally, the two students who rely on peer feedback for writing improvement share their living spaces with roommates who are also their classmates, making it convenient to receive and provide feedback. The final two categories, reading and peer feedback, account for 7% and 5% of the responses, respectively. The three students who use reading to enhance their writing primarily engage with online texts. Additionally, the two students who rely on



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4.2. Propositions of students

The objective of the second part of the interview was to understand students' perspectives on the university's role in enhancing their writing abilities. Three prominent themes emerged distinctly: the need for meaningful professors' feedback, the integration of active class learning, and the necessity for increased availability of writing courses.

4.2.1. Professors' feedback

There is almost unanimous agreement amongst the students interviewed that professors' feedback is vital for them to improve their writing skills. They expressed a crucial need for constructive comments that highlight their strengths and areas needing improvement. For them, this feedback is seen as essential for guiding their revisions and enhancing the clarity and effectiveness of their writing. One student reported, "**students never know whether their writing is good or**



bad until the midterm exam. Then, they are either shocked or satisfied with the grades they get. Worse is that the grade is all we know because we don't really have a look at our exam papers to know our mistakes. The same thing happens in the final." However, the interviewees seemed to be understanding of the situation considering the large size of the classes and also are aware that it is also their responsibility to find alternatives. For example, an interviewee declared he was good at writing "thanks to attending classes, taking notes, following the professors' recommendations, and practicing according to them. Plus, I read model writings, and I am fine. There is no problem."

4.2.2. Active class learning

The interviewees are aware that active learning is really important for them when it comes to improving their writing skills. They agree that hands-on writing tasks and interactive learning experiences help them apply what they learn in a more practical way. Active participation in discussions, workshops, and group projects, they said, enable them to express their ideas and refine their writing style much better. However, the students are once again aware of the impossibility of applying active learning because of the size of the classes

4.2.3. Increase of writing classes

Many interviewees emphasized the necessity for additional writing courses. They believe that having just one writing course per semester is insufficient, especially given the large class sizes and inadequate feedback. Nearly 70% of respondents expressed agreement that the initial two semesters should prioritize speaking and writing skills, with supplementary modules like reading and grammar serving to support and enhance these foundational skills. One student argued, "we should have writing in all the subjects we study... For example, in reading comprehension we can practice summarizing and paraphrasing by writing paragraphs; in grammar, we can practice the rules we learn by writing texts; in literature, we can write paragraphs or essays in response to what we learn... professors can give us model texts for us to follow...You know every lesson should lead to a writing activity."



Conclusion

The current study examines the strategies Moroccan EFL university students use to develop their writing skills and explores their suggestions for making the writing learning experience more effective. As for the strategies, the majority of Moroccan students (60%) depend on the instruction they receive in class. A few of them (15) learn about how to write independently. Another minority (10%) have personal learning plans of how to write. Concerning their propositions, the participants express a need for professors' feedback, active class learning, and more writing sessions.

The findings of this study suggest several key implications for educational practice and policy. Firstly, universities may need to enhance students' writing skills by motivating them to engage in independent learning activities since fewer students currently engage in self-directed writing development. Secondly, increasing the frequency and depth of feedback from professors, integrating more active learning opportunities, and offering additional writing courses could address the gaps the current study has identified. Thirdly, rethinking curriculum design to prioritize writing and speaking skills in the early semesters, with subsequent modules supporting these areas, could better meet students' needs. Addressing these areas can improve Moroccan EFL students' ability to write better academically and professionally.



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