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Improving writing proficiency in a virtual classroom setting: Students' perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the perspectives of Sudanese EFL university students on improving writing proficiency in a virtual classroom setting in the first semester of the academic year 2023–20244. The research involves conducting structured interviews with 15 EFL learners in the Faculty of Education at the West Kordufan University in Sudan. Thematic analysis is utilized to analyze the gathered data. The findings reveal numerous challenges faced by Sudanese EFL university students in the process of learning and improving writing proficiency in a virtual learning environment. The challenges encompass issues such as unreliable and inadequate internet connectivity, insufficient feedback from teachers, and difficulties in acquiring and honing writing skills within an online learning environment compared to other language skills. Additionally, limited interaction between teachers and students and the high costs associated with online learning are identified as hindrances. The study demonstrates that these challenges have significantly impeded the students' progress in enhancing their writing skills. Nevertheless, the data analysis indicates that some students hold positive views regarding online learning and its impact on developing writing skills. They believe online learning facilitates improvement in writing performance through online research, contributes to developing language and online learning skills, and encourages communication and collaboration. The research discusses the implications of these findings for teachers and researchers.

KEYWORDS: improving, learning, Students' perspectives, Sudanese EFL University Students, Students', virtual classroom, writing skills

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1. Introduction

Academic writing is an emerging style of writing that is widely used in academic settings, for example, in colleges, universities, and research institutes. Academic writing is characterized by its formal, structured tone and clear and concise nature. It adheres to backing up the objectively presented arguments with evidence or credible sources. As stated by Nasihah and Senta (2022) academic writing ability is often seen as one of the most crucial elements of linguistic proficiency for learning achievement. Through writing, as Ahmed (2024) thinks, students can improve grammar skills, expand vocabulary and deepen understanding of conveying the best ideas and how well their message is understood. Academic writing is necessary for learners to learn English language and other subjects that are taught in English. It was noted by Alharbi (2019) that ''writing can be used to learn a language and evaluate a learner's proficiency" (Lahuerta, 2017; McDonough & Crawford, 2018).

However, academic English writing is difficult for EFL university students to master since it requires good grammar, a full grasp of writing mechanics, vocabulary, and a sufficient awareness of writing components and genres. Thus, this skill's growth has attracted considerable attention to its learning and teaching from the start of language learning. Many writers contend that writing is a challenging mental task that requires the learner to exert control over several variables. These variables range from the writer's academic background and personal interests to various psychological, linguistic, and cognitive phenomena. According to Richards and Renandya (2002), the most difficult skill for EFL learners is writing. It is challenging to come up with organized ideas, as well as to turn those ideas into readable text. Writing necessitates a wide range of abilities. Second language learners need to concentrate on advanced abilities like planning and organization in addition to relatively basic ones like word choice, spelling, and pronunciation. Writing in a second language at the university level has been proven difficult, particularly for ESL/EFL students, whose writing abilities appear to be weaker. According to Alharbi (2019), many studies in the ESL/EFL field shows that university students studying English struggle with the language in general, and their writing skills in particular. (e.g., Kharma and Hajjaj, 1997; Bacha, 2012; Horwitz and Cope, 1986)

Cahyono et al., (2023) believe that teaching or learning writing skills in an online classroom is more difficult since materials are shared via virtual sites, and feedback is offered through feedback methods like Word's comments feature. Moreover, student-teacher and student-student interaction in online learning setting are so limited. For Lowenthal et al., (2015) students preferred face-to-face classes, Courses offered online received lower ratings than in-person ones. According to Tichavsky et al., (2015) , this could be due to the perception of an online course's lack of "*a real or a human teacher*" and the value of social presence. Alwaheebi and Al-Qahatani (2022), Emphasize instructors' complaints about technical difficulties with internet connectivity, students missing lectures, and a lack of institutional support and training. Vesisenaho et al. (2010) finds that many EFL learners struggle to use learning portals because they lack digital competency.

Both teachers and students can learn writing skills online in various ways. There has not been any research on EFL university students' difficulties when learning and honing their writing abilities in a virtual learning setting, certainly not in the Sudanese setting. The current research, conducted at the University of West Kordufan in Sudan, intends to bridge this information gap by examining the perspectives of Sudanese EFL university students on their online learning experiences when learning writing skills.

1.1 Statement of Problem

Writing is an essential skill that can benefit EFL students by increasing vocabulary and improving English language proficiency. Enhancing linguistic and communication skills is part of developing EFL university students' writing skills. However, EFL university students face numerous challenges when learning writing skills in an online classroom setting. While online teaching is currently the subject of EFL investigation, few studies concentrate on students' writing in online classes. In an online classroom setting in Sudan, little attention has been paid to students' writing difficulties. Thus, this study aims at investigating, identifying, and assessing the impact of these challenges on the development of Sudanese students' writing proficiency in a virtual classroom setting at the University of West Kordufan in Sudan.

1.2 Questions of the Study

The research paper addresses the questions below:

 a. What perspectives do Sudanese students have toward learning writing skills in a virtual classroom setting?
 b. What difficulties do Sudanese students experience in learning and improving writing skills in a virtual classroom setting?
 c. To what extent do these difficulties impact the learning and improvement of writing skills in a virtual classroom setting?
 d. What suggestions do Sudanese students recommend for improving writing proficiency in a virtual classroom setting?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The research seeks to achieve the following objectives:

 a. Examining the difficulties Sudanese students face in learning and improving their writing skills in a virtual classroom setting.
 b. Shedding light on the impact of these difficulties on the learning and improvement of students' writing skills in a virtual classroom setting.
 c. Recommending suggestions for improving students' writing skills in a virtual classroom setting.

1.4 Significance of The Study

This research paper is thought to be the first to investigate the difficulties that Sudanese EFL university students face when learning and improving their writing proficiency in a virtual classroom setting. The study's findings aim to contribute to online learning by providing new perspectives for teachers to deal with these difficulties. Discussing these difficulties with students benefits both students and teachers. Teachers will be able to investigate their perceptions of learners' learning and adapt their ways of teaching to meet the needs of the students. Furthermore, student feedback is critical for improving future online language teaching and learning efforts.

2. Literature Review

According to Sun (2014), online classes are an innovative method for students to learn and improve, particularly in language classes. Classes can be held virtually using advanced technology, enabling students and teachers to interact remotely. Aside from technological advancements, the development of the global world and the needs of students are all important reasons for developing the concept of online classes. O'Shea et al., (2015) claim that the revolutionary educational idea enables teachers and students to communicate across geographic boundaries and saves both parties money and time. Teachers use writing platforms or learning applications as teaching aids for their students in language classes.

Hyland (2003) thinks learning how to write is one of the most challenging aspects of mastering a second language. This is hardly surprising given that successful writing requires considerable and particular learning, even among native speakers of English. EFL university students find writing challenging because it demands grammatical proficiency, a deep comprehension of writing mechanics, a sufficient vocabulary, and an awareness of writing aspects and styles. Thus, promoting writing proficiency has been a priority from the very beginning of English language instruction.

Ansari (2012) mentions that various studies have indicated that EFL university students struggle to achieve the English academic writing standards in their linguistic courses and literature. Numerous studies have noted that university learners' academic progress is impeded by their lack of the necessary academic writing and English language ability. Al-Jarf (2007) cited in Bostanci and Ariannejad (2022), claims that advancements in educational technology, such as the internet, computer software, networks, and e-mail, have enabled students to improve their writing abilities. These platforms can be incorporated orally and visually into lesson plans to teach students to write. Despite this, improving writing skills online remains a significant challenge for teachers and students. Delahunty (2012) thinks that one of the major difficulties learners face is a lack of communication, which can lead to misunderstandings between teachers and students, adapting to circumstances, a lack of motivation, and poor time management.

Ahmed (2024) thinks that teaching and mastering English language writing skills online has posed significant challenges for both university teachers and students. Numerous studies in this area demonstrate that EFL university teachers encounter difficulties while attempting to teach and develop EFL students' online writing competencies. Alwaheebi and Al-Qahatani (2022), for example, investigate EFL teachers' and learners' views of virtual writing learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Their investigation aims to examine the advantages, disadvantages, challenges, and possibilities of adopting Moodle in writing courses for Saudi EFL undergraduates at Shaqra University. The findings show that students as well as instructors views Moodle as a powerful tool for writing online. Moodle allows learners to get direct peer/group feedback. It fosters an adaptable, student-centered learning context in which teachers and learners engage in the virtual class.

Moreover, it makes interactive online writing collaboration possible. Technological difficulties and Internet disruptions are the primary challenges restricting learners from interacting with their teachers and other learners.

Pham et al., (2022) investigate the difficulties that English learners at the University of Van Lang experience when learning online. The study employs qualitative and quantitative approaches, including semi-structured interviews and questionnaire surveys with 100 students. The data analysis of this study shows that most EFL learners are susceptible to frequent interruptions including unstable internet connections, external noises, and the harmful effects of excessive screen time. Following the investigation, this study indicates that instructors at Van Lang University seek many positive remedies for learners' challenges to enhance the standard of their virtual classes.

Syukri and Fitryani (2022) address the experiences of learners in an online writing course. The study examines EFL students' questionnaires and reflection writing experiences throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. It employs two variables during online writing learning: environment and interaction. The researcher found out that the limits of the internet connection and the cost of acquiring quotas influence learners' experience. Certain learners believe that online learning facilitates this because it is flexible.

All these previous studies emphasize various aspects of online learning generally and the challenges of developing writing skills specifically. However, the current study approaches this area of research from various perspectives by employing various data collection tools and populations.

3. **Methodology**

3.1 Method

The current research paper uses a descriptive qualitative research method to get a deep understanding of learning and improving writing online, especially the difficulties EFL university students face when learning and promoting writing proficiency in a virtual classroom setting. Since the present paper uses a case study as its investigation approach, the conclusions of this research study are not intended to be generalized to wider range.

3.2 Participants

The participants include 15 Sudanese EFL university third-year male students of Faculty of Education at West Kordufan University in Sudan during the first semester of the academic year 2023/2024.

3.3 Data Collection

A structured interview is used as a primary tool for data collection. It targets EFL university students. The interview questions investigate EFL university students' difficulties in learning and improving their writing abilities in an online classroom setting. They are also requested to discuss how these difficulties impact the improvement of EFL university students' writing proficiency. Lastly, the interview investigates EFL university students' strategies and suggestions for improving their writing abilities in a virtual learning setting. The data is then analyzed and described by interview questions. The respondents' codes, such as Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, and so on, are utilized to show the participants' responses.

3.4 Data Analysis

This study uses a structured interview approach to collect data from EFL university students. The interview questions are designed to explore the difficulties university students experience in learning and enhancing their

writing skills in a virtual learning setting. A descriptive analysis is conducted to examine and interpret the gathered data in line with the interview questions. To ensure confidentiality, respondents' codes are utilized to present the participants' responses. The data analysis process reveals insights into the challenges EFL university students face in their pursuit of improving their writing abilities in an online classroom setting.

4. **Findings and Discussion**

This part analyses and describes the students' responses as follows:

Question.1 Have you encountered difficulties learning and improving your writing skills in a virtual learning setting?

80% of the respondents answered with 'Yes' while 20% of them answered with 'No.'

Question. 2. What difficulties have you encountered in learning and improving writing skills in a virtual learning setting?

Based on the participants' answers, the researcher finds that Sudanese university students face many difficulties when learning writing skills in a virtual learning setting as follows:

(a) *Internet connection*

Many participants think that unstable and poor internet connection is one of their biggest challenges when learning writing skills online. Many students lack Internet access, and some live in remote areas with no Internet connection. For example, Student 1 thinks that weak internet connection is one of the major problems he encounters in online learning of writing skills. For Student 2, the biggest obstacle he faces during an online writing class is the difficulty of getting a good Internet connection for learning, which causes miscommunication between what he understands and what the teacher says. However, some students claim that they do not face any problems with internet connection. For instance, Student 11 mentions, ''*I do not face any problem in the Internet connection; everything works well, the microphone, uploading assignments, and doing the test*'.

(b) *Technical difficulties*

Certain students encounter difficulties with downloading course materials, accessing classes, and connecting to the internet due to technical issues. Student 9 notes that 'because *of poor internet connection, I find it so difficult to access writing lectures*.' Student 15 states that he experiences technical problems like downloading course materials and uploading written assignments. In contrast, Student 11 thinks he faces no technical problems; it is easy for him to download the learning materials and upload the written work.

(c) *Inadequate Feedback*

Many students think that the feedback given by the teacher in an online classroom setting is inadequate. For instance, Student 5 states that the teacher provides insufficient feedback. Moreover, Student 7 notes that, '*because it takes more time, the teacher finds it challenging to track and cover all the students' written assignments step by step and provide sufficient online feedback on the learners' written work*.' Similarly, Student 6 thinks it is challenging for teachers to correct all learners' writing errors, give immediate feedback , and cover all the students' written work in a limited period.

(d) *High cost of online learning*

Some students think using the internet to learn could result in high learning costs. Student 9 believes, for instance, that the high cost of purchasing quotas has had a negative impact on his ability to learn and develop his writing skills online. Furthermore, he claims that because online learning is expensive, it can be difficult for him to purchase an internet bundle.

(e) *Lack of devices for learning*

Some students do not have access to learning devices. For instance, Student 10 claims that because his family is poor, his parents cannot afford to buy him a laptop or a high-quality mobile phone for his studies. Similarly, Student 13 and Student 14 believe the Internet package is so costly that they cannot access devices to acquire

and improve writing skills online.

(f) *The difficulty of learning and developing writing skills in an online environment compared with other language skills*

Student 5 mentions that 'learning *writing skills in an online classroom is so challenging since we experience some difficulties with using the internet to upload writing tasks*". Some students find it difficult to understand the learning material compared to that of face-to-face learning, as commented by Student 4 '' *My greatest difficulty in the online writing skills learning process is that it is extremely challenging for me to maintain concentration and grasp the material provided by teachers because it is not as efficient as face-to-face instruction in a classroom.* However, Student 11 states' *Learning writing skills online encourages me to read widely and expand my vocabulary. I prefer to be taught online rather than in a traditional classroom setting but using an internet package to learn costs much money*". Furthermore, Student 15 thinks some teachers' online writing techniques are too complicated to understand. Student 2 adds that ''*writing skills can never be developed through an online classroom*". Some of the teaching strategies teachers use in teaching writing online are ineffective. According to Student 15, sometimes the teacher teaches writing skills but does not teach writing in stages. Developing writing skills online is challenging if taught as a whole skill. In contrast, Student 7 claims that the online teaching techniques employed by the teacher helped him largely develop his writing abilities because online learning encourages him to search online and boost his writing abilities.

(g) *The teacher's domination of the online classroom*

There is sometimes little interaction between the teacher and the students. As student 1 puts it, "*the most major impediment to learning and developing writing skills online is the lack of interaction between students and teachers*". Moreover, Student 4 states that teachers dominate online writing lessons; there is little interaction between teachers and students. He mentions that 'the teacher dominates 95% of writing lessons; he rarely allows us to interact with each other'. For Student 13, learning writing skills online is tedious because the teacher controls everything. There is sometimes no opportunity for discussion and interaction between the teacher and the learner. Student 8 mentions that, '*Few students interact with one another or participate in class activities*". Student 14 says, ''*Competent and proficient students dominate the classroom activities*". Student 1 mentions,' *Developing writing proficiency in a face-to-face learning environment is more effective and beneficial than virtual learning of writing skills due to the interaction and engagement of students in face-to-face learning*'. (j) The time allotted for learning and developing writing abilities online is insufficient; it sometimes does not enable students to finish their written tasks. Student 8 expresses his disappointment by adding, "*We need extra time to accomplish our writing assignments*'. In a similar way, Student 1 mentions that,' *Teachers must spend significant time illustrating how to employ suitable sentence structures and words due to my limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge.* Furthermore, Student 6 adds that '*the teachers require additional time to offer remarks and feedback on our writing assignments.*"

(h) *Language difficulties*

Few students find it difficult to write about any topic assigned by teachers in an online class due to linguistic challenges such as grammatical competence, lack of vocabulary, lack of coherence and poor spelling, and poor punctuation. For instance, Student 12 notes,' *Sometimes it is very difficult for me to write about certain topics assigned by teachers due to lack of relevant vocabulary and topical knowledge.* Student 13 adds,' *Because of the language difficulties and lack of vocabulary , I sometimes rely on other sources of information, such as websites, to complete writing assignments.*'.

(i) *The difficulty of adapting in-person learning to Internet-based learning style*

Sometimes a few students struggle to adapt their face-to-face learning styles to online learning. For instance, Student 8 notes that ''*Because of the internet disconnection and insufficient interaction with teachers, I find it difficult to adapt face-to-face learning style to online one.*"

Despite these difficulties, some students have positive attitudes towards online learning of writing skills because it empowers them to improve their creativity and critical thinking. Here are some comments made by

the participants selected randomly.

Student 7:''*Online learning encourages me to develop my writing skills through searching online. I like learning virtually more than in-person learning style because online learning helps me develop both language and online learning skills*''.

Student 11:' *Online learning encourages me to improve my learning and writing skills*''.

Student 6:''*I feel more comfortable attending my online lectures from home, saving my time, but it costs much money to buy internet bundles*''.

Question (3) How do these challenges influence the learning and promotion of your writing proficiency in a virtual classroom setting?

Most of the respondents believe that these difficulties have negatively impacted the learning and improvement of their writing skills to a large extent. For example, Student 2 mentions," *These difficulties make the online learning and improvement of writing proficiency so challenging*". These challenges have had the following impact on the learning and improvement of learners' writing proficiency:

(a) Decreasing their learning motivation and, as a result, impacting their overall online writing performance.
(b) Fostering plagiarism: learners utilise various other sources of knowledge during the writing process, such as internet sites and their colleagues, to complete their writing tasks. Participant 4 believes that depending on such sources of information may motivate learners to engage in plagiarism and, as a result, damage learners' writing creativity.
(c) Preventing students from having enough interaction with their teachers and peers.

Question (4) what recommendations would like to provide for overcoming these challenges and improving writing proficiency in a virtual learning setting?

For student 10, these difficulties can only be overcome with the help of teachers and through cooperation between teachers and learners. Similarly, Student 12 believes that teachers and students should be responsible for overcoming these difficulties. To overcome these difficulties and improve writing skills in an online classroom setting, the respondents recommend the following:

(a) Adapting teaching strategies to suit the students' needs and weaknesses: Teachers should offer intriguing techniques for the virtual teaching of writing skills to boost learners' writing performance and their motivation. For instance, Student 13 states that teachers can use techniques like encouraging students to feel confident, making the classroom fun, and implementing self-selection of topics. Student 9 suggests teachers use a variety of teaching methodologies and techniques to develop appropriate writing activities that suit learners' various levels of writing proficiency.
(b) Providing adequate feedback by incorporating both oral and written feedback:
Student 9 believes that he sometimes gets confused by the teacher's written feedback. He suggests incorporating both written and oral feedback. Student 14 suggests that teachers should use a Screencast application for oral feedback *to clear our confusion about written feedback*. According to Student 3, oral feedback can also be given to the entire class using student work samples. For Student 6, the teacher's feedback helps him improve his writing skills by reducing errors. Giving learners' written work or activities immediate and appropriate feedback is important in promoting their writing skills. Student 10 observes that learners' writing proficiency will not improve unless they receive adequate feedback on their errors. As Student 8 believes, offering immediate and successful feedback on the students' written task is difficult because of the insufficient time allotted to online writing lessons. To solve this problem, Student 9 proposes that teachers can make use of WhatsApp and Telegram to provide learners with appropriate feedback on their written performance. Providing online feedback via these platforms of social media boosts students' confidence and interest in writing.

(c) Adopting a learner-centered approach:

> Student 4 sees that the teacher should not dominate the writing lesson; he should allow all students to interact with each other. Furthermore, Student 5 suggests that teachers implement small group discussions as a teaching strategy to foster a student-centered learning context. This is because collaborative learning, based on interactions between students and teachers in an online classroom, is crucial for students to learn and develop writing skills.

(d) Enhancing the discussion abilities of students:

> Student 12 believes that using small group discussions is important in improving students' writing skills because it creates a flexible, comfortable, and student-centered learning context in which teachers and students participate in online classes. Additionally, it ensures immediate and interactive online writing collaboration.

Student 14 suggests that teachers should allow us to select the topics we are interested in. Similarly, Students 11 proposes that teachers should discuss the assigned topic with students as an important step before they start writing about it so that they can have enough background knowledge. For Student 3, selecting the assigned topic should be based on the student's needs, interests, and background knowledge.

To overcome language difficulties, as many participants propose, teachers should expand learners' vocabulary and improve their grammatical knowledge via intensive reading exercises.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study investigates how Sudanese EFL university students perceive developing their writing abilities in an online classroom environment. Additionally, it identifies students' challenges and sheds light on how they affect learning and writing skills development. The study shows that Sudanese EFL university students face various challenges, including unstable and insufficient access to the internet, inadequate teacher feedback, and high purchasing quotas, which many participants believe have a negative impact on learning and developing writing skills online. Moreover, in contrast to in-person instruction, some students struggle to comprehend the course material. Many students believe these difficulties negatively impact their learning and improving writing skills, such as impeding their development, lowering their motivation to learn, and influencing their overall online writing achievement.

To overcome these difficulties, the study suggests tailoring teaching strategies to the expectations and weaknesses of the learners. Moreover, the study recommends that teachers can create a student-centered learning environment by adopting small group discussion as a teaching strategy on the ground that collaborative learning, is the most important element for the learners to learn and develop writing skills. Teachers should enrich students' vocabulary and develop their understanding of grammar by extensively practicing reading activities and providing immediate and effective feedback on students' written work using chat groups on social media. Furthermore, using debate as a method of instruction in a virtual learning environment can promote engagement and motivate students to express their thoughts about the writing topic as an initial stage prior writing about it. As a result, the study recommends that learners should be trained in using modern technologies for learning purposes. They should also be given enough time to become familiar with technological tools.

In general, the primary implication of the current research is that examining Sudanese students' perspectives on learning and improving writing proficiency is an important aspect toward improving learners' writing performance. Exploring EFL learners' online writing skill learning challenges has become critical for identifying the current and potential demands for successful writing skills. Furthermore, addressing EFL university students' challenges when learning and developing writing skills is a critical step toward maintaining efficient online instruction.

The current study intends to contribute to learning and developing writing skills online. The results of this research will undoubtedly assist both students and teachers in recognising the challenges of learning and developing writing skills, as well as finding techniques for overcoming them in a virtual teaching and learning setting.

6.   Limitations

This research includes limitations, such as the relatively small number of respondents and the structured interview employed in the present investigation. The researchers suggest that a future study employs various research methods with many participants involving teachers and learners to get more deeply into the topic. The findings of the current research may be specific to Sudanese learners at the University of West Kordufan in the Faculty of Education and may not be representative of all EFL university students in Sudan or other countries. The data collection method relies on structured interviews, subject to self-reporting bias. The limited scope of the investigation does not explore other aspects of language learning or other skills in the EFL context, and the single data collection method limits the depth and breadth of information that could be obtained. Triangulating the findings with other data collection methods could enhance the validity and comprehensiveness of the study.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest

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