Evaluating Saudi University Students' English Writing Skills Using an Analytic Rating Scale

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the extent to which Saudi university students master the main aspects of ESL Composition Profile proposed by Jacobs et al. (1981). The study also aims at analyzing Saudi English-majors students' text length features and examining whether they are associated with their text quality aspects. It analysed the essays written by 88 students studying English language at Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University in Al-Kharj and Al-Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh. The study yielded a number of results. The most important of which is that Saudi students can produce essays of analytic quality features at a level that ranging from poor to fair. A positive correlation was also found between text length and writing quality aspects in the students' essays. Based on these findings, the researcher provided a number of pedagogical implications and some suggestions for further research were provided.

Keywords: Writing Skill, ESL composition Profile, Text Length

INTRODUCTION

To master a language is still an ultimate goal of learning a foreign language. In order to learn a foreign language, four main skills have to be taken into consideration; i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The latter is the main concern of this study. Though the importance of the other three language skills, the role of writing in learning foreign languages is very important because it can show what students have learnt. The rationale is that writing is basic to develop other skills such listening, speaking, and reading. Despite its importance, less attention has been paid to writing studies along with the challenges and problems EFL Saudi students encounter in the EFL writing process.

In its essence, writing can be defined as "the logical organization and arrangement of the written sentences within a paragraph and paragraphs within the units of discourse...and the expression of the ideas". Writing, according to Hyland, (2003, p. 14) is "a combination of lexical and syntactic forms and of the rules used to create a text". Zamel (2007, p.9) argues that writing is a "consistent attempt of exploring what one wants to say". It is an activity that is both personal and public. It is personal in the sense that the act of writing is "a solitary form of communication",

It is unanimously stated by first language (L1) and second language (L2) instructors and learners that writing is one of the four skills that a student should have adequate mastery of. Nevertheless, many students still suffer from writing problems because their compositions usually lack some necessary components. Accordingly, One main concern of this study is the text length aspects, and how these issues influence the writing production. Reviewing related literature revealed that very few studies as in (Hassan's, 2001; Alsamadani's, 2010) addressed this topic in the Arabian EFL context. Not only this but also, to the researcher's best knowledge, no one single study related to this topic has been adopted in the Saudi context. Furthermore, the literature reviewed on text length aspects in relation to writing quality revealed that most studies investigating the influence of writing proficiency as well as writing competence on writing length aspects have essentially focused on the total words in the text, and, unfortunately, no due attention has been paid to other aspects of writing length such as sentence length, number of sentences, text length. As a result, the paucity of the studies related to the topic of the current study justifies the need for the present study. In the face of this argument, this study tends to evaluate Saudi English- major undergraduates' performance in written text using an analytic rating scale, and to find out to what extent these students master the necessary components of EFL writing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ESL Composition Profile

The five elements that English as a Second Language (ESL) Composition Profile, suggested by Jacobs, Zingraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel, and Hughey, in 1981, are of great importance, and should be available in a text, if the text is to be evaluated as highly acceptable. This scale was the first reported rating scale, and it was used to evaluate the ESL students' writing performance at North America Universities. Additionally, it comprises five different rating dimensions of writing quality, and each dimension has a different score. These five dimensions as standards are: content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics. Content (ranges from 13-30 points) here refers to the subject which the writer has adequate knowledge of; organization (ranges from 7-20 points) means that the ideas of the writer should be expressed clearly; vocabulary (ranges form 7-20 points) is related to the usage of the words in the text written; language use refers to constructions (ranges from 5-25 points); mechanics (ranges from 2-5 points) is generally related to punctuation, spelling etc.

Hamp-Lyons (1990, p.78) pointed out that ESL Composition Profile is "the best-known scoring procedure for ESL writing at the present time", and has become well-known since its publication in 1981 (Farvardin & Zare-ee, 2009). According to Bacha (2001), Jacobs et al.'s (1981) criteria have constructed validity since clear differences have been found when leaner's writing product scores were compared. Despite the importance of these five elements in evaluating writing skills, most of the studies, unfortunately, that evaluated the Saudi University students' writing performance in terms of these five dimensions were limited to some of these elements. For example, Ahmed (2016) investigated writing errors of Saudi EFL university students that are mainly related to

mechanics, grammar use and discourse. Siddiqui's study (2015) evaluated capitalization errors in Saudi university students' EFL writing. As a result, this study aims at investigating Saudi university students' English writing skills by using Jacobs et al (1981) scale as a whole.

Written Text Quality and Text Length Features

Investigating the factors that influence text length aspects is still an area that has not been given due attention in writing product research (Abdul Latif, 2008).

Several text length features have been explored in previous studies. Some of these features are: number of words per sentence, number of paragraphs, number of clauses, word length, number of t-units, t-unit length, clauses per sentence, paragraph length, sentence length, clause length, the quantity of words written in the text, number of sentences, sentence length. Of all these features, the last three features (i.e., the quantity of words written in the text, number of sentences, sentence length) are the most examined ones in previous research (Abdul Latif, 2008).

Previous L1 and L2 studies have shown that there is a relationship between some aspects of text length and writing quality. For example, many reviewed studies such as Chao's (2004) study; Kim's (1996); Sasaki and Hirose's (1996) and others' revealed a positive relationship between the number of words written in the text and text quality (Abdul Latif, 2008).

The results of the previous research also have documented a positive relationship between L2 proficiency and text length aspects. For example, evidence for the influence of L2 proficiency on the number of words written in the text was introduced by Crerand's (1992) study and Intaraprawat and Steffensen's (1995). They found that the texts were longer in the students with higher TOEFL scores than those with lower scores.

The sentence length, however, should not be taken as a quality factor apart from other considerations regarding the readability of the written text. Many studies were conducted to investigate the standard number of words within sentence that make it easy to read. Sanyal (2006), for example, found out that a sentence of 11 words was easy to read; 14 words fairly easy; 17 words standard; 21 words fairly hard; 25 words difficult and a sentence of 29 words or more per sentence was viewed as very difficult. However, it is important that writers should always be careful to use the correct structure that maintains the readability of the text.

In terms of text length aspect, Grant and Ginther's (2000) study indicated a salient correlation between text length and writing scores. This result was later enhanced by Gebril and Plakans' (2009) study which investigated on text length in relation to writing scores. The study showed that text length aspect has a notable effect on writing score, and that raters favored evaluating long texts more than short ones. The study as well concluded that text length is a significant predictor of the essay scores.

Witte's (1983) study illustrated that high-quality essays included more words than low-quality essays. That is, about 531 words compared to about 407. Though the study stated a positive correlation between text length and writing quality, some issues should be

taken into account. First, text length alone cannot tell in what ways the invention skills of good writers differ from the poor ones. Second, text length cannot inform us about the variance in the ways the good writers and poor writers use to structure and arrange their texts. Lastly, text length fails to precisely specify what features of texts might contribute to the qualitative differences readers identify.

Holistic versus Analytic Rating Scales of Writing Performance

To adopt an appropriate writing rating scale for evaluating writing is a painstaking task. However, there are two commonly used approaches in essay scoring in the literature; the holistic approach and the analytic one (White, 1985).

In Holistic Scale, the rater/the teacher usually reads the text quickly accounting for the overall quality of the text rather than concentrating on certain aspects of the text. (White, 1985; Weigle, 2002; Hyland, 2002). An example of a holistic scale is the General-Impression Marking Scale which is the simplest type of holistic evaluation. Here, a piece of writing is scored by deciding where the paper fits among other pieces of writing. This type of scale was developed by Education Testing Service and the College-Entrance Examination Board to score the English Composition Test (Conlan, 1976) and the Advanced Placement Test in English (R. Smith, 1975). Although holistic scale is quick and easy because the text is treated as one entity, better diagnostic information is not expected here in that holistic rating does not focus on specific tangible aspects of writing (e.g., organization, content, grammar, etc.) (Knoch, 2009). A further argument for adopting holistic evaluation is that holistic scoring pinpoints what the writer does well rather than identifying the writer's specific areas of weakness (Charney, 1984; Cumming, 1990; Hamp-Lyons, 1990; Reid, 1993; Cohen and Manion, 1994, White, 1985; Elbow, 1999). Advocates of this approach argue that writing is "a single entity which is best captured by a single scale that integrates the inherent qualities of the writing" (Hyland, 2003, p. 227).

Analytic Scale, by contrast, encompasses "an itemized analysis" (Klimova, 2011). That is, the text is scored based on a number of dimensions (such as content, mechanics, organization, etc.), each dimension is graded, and a general score is given accordingly. It is "the recording and tabulating of subscores which separates analytic from holistic scoring" (Goulden, 1989, pp. 4-5). A well-known example of analytic scale is the Test in English for Educational Purposes (TEEP) (Weir, 1990) and the Michigan Writing Assessment Scoring Guide (Hamp-Lyons, 1991). The aim of analytic scale as posited by Weigle (2002) is "to decide on students' fundamental writing skills with regard to specific writing tasks". Analytic Scale is believed to result in higher reliability, more informative, has higher construct validity for EFL/ESL writers, because analytic evaluation scales score writing on several different aspects (Weigle, 2002). Hence, supporters of analytic scales also argue that those scales have been found to be better fit in scoring the different aspects of the writing skill (Bacha, 2001).

Writing Difficulties Encountered by Saudi University Students

Researchers believe that writing in general is a difficult skill to teach and to learn as well. Hopkins (1989) pointed out that learning writing is the most difficult task for non-native

speakers (as cited in Javid & Umer. (2013). Alsamadani (2010) reiterated that writing is "a complex, challenging, and difficult process". He mentioned that this difficulty stems from the fact that writing includes multiple skills such as "discovering a thesis, developing support for it, organizing, revising, and finally editing". What makes teaching/learning writing skill complex is because it requires using proper lexical items, knowledge of grammar, writing mechanics, imagination, organization etc. (Javid & Umer, 2013). According to Byrne (1988), difficulty in writing can be ascribed to some issues like linguistic knowledge, cognition and psychology. Hyland (2003) stated that many L2 writers encounter difficulties in properly expressing themselves in English. Consequently, learners are expected to encounter difficulties to write effectively, and this no doubt applies to all languages at all levels.

In the Saudi academic contexts, mastering EFL writing skill is important because students are usually requested to use this skill as a main tool to prove that they have learnt. Furthermore, writing is important for university students for they have to use it for composition writing, note taking, essay writing etc. (Tahaineh, 2010). Despite the importance of writing skill in L2 learning and the effort undertaken to overcome the challenges that writing poses, Saudi learners at university level still suffer from major problems and difficulties in English writing which might hinder their academic progress. In a published report by the Cambridge Examination Center in 2009, Saudi students, unfortunately, were ranked 39 out 40. This report aimed at evaluating the proficiency of ESOL students in 40 countries (Al-Seghayer, 2011).

It is also worth noting that many studies have shown that Saudi leaners face the same difficulties in English writing as Arab learners because both share common culture and language. (Haq, 1982; Abbad, 1988; Wahba, 1998; Rabab'ah, 2005). According to Tahanineh's (2010) study, Arab learners face several problems in writing mainly in syntax and grammar. In the case of Saudi students, Khan (2011) has reported that Saudi university undergraduates' main problems in writing involve "phoneme clusters, spellings, grammar, mistakes due to L1 interference, structure, doubling of subjects, doubling of preposition, tenses, articles, appropriate vocabulary, wrong use of affixes etc.". Another study conducted by Javid & Umer (2013) at Taif University in Saudi Arabia has revealed that Saudi English-major undergraduates have major problems in their academic writing because they are weak in using suitable lexical items, organization, grammar, spellings, irregular verbs, articles, punctuation, wrong use of prepositions, prefixes and suffixes. The results of this study has manifested that using of appropriate vocabulary has been classified as the most problematic area for learners while grammar and organization of ideas came next respectively. More interestingly, this finding is in line with Alkhairy (2013) who reported that using appropriate vocabulary is considered to be as the major problem for Saudi English-major undergraduates at Taif University; grammar has been ranked as the second most difficult area; using past and past participle forms of irregular verbs has been assigned third position whereas problems in using suitable prepositions were fourth. In the same vein, Shukri (2014) found out that EFL university students experienced some writing problems, and these problems arose in the areas of word choice, spellings, grammar etc. From students' perspectives, learners

attributed their sufferance in academic writing to grammar mistakes, misunderstanding of the requirement of writing and less practice of writing (Huwari & Al-Khasawneh, 2012).

Previous Studies

The literature concerning the EFL writing skills in the Saudi context is limited, and most of the studies in this domain did not discuss Saudi university students' English writing skills in depth, especially with reference to writing length aspects. Nevertheless, a brief review of these studies is presented below.

Alsamadani (2010) conducted a study about the relationship between Saudi college-level EFL students' writing competence in L2 (English) and their L1 (Arabic) writing proficiency. It further examined the relationship between Saudi students' self- regulation abilities and their writing competence in L1 and L2 language. A total of 35

Arabic-speaking ESL male students were asked to write essays in two languages (Arabic and English). The ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs et al., 1981) was used to evaluate student's writing competence in both languages. They were also asked to fill out the Metacognitive Awareness Inventory (MAI) to measure the possible relationship between self-regulation and writing competence among students. The Pearson Correlation analysis indicated a strong correlation between L2 writing competence and L1 writing proficiency. That is, students with high scores in English essays scored the same on Arabic essays. Moreover, the study indicated strong-to medium correlation between students' self-regulation abilities and their L1/L2 writing competence.

Alkubaidi (2014) investigated the relationship between Saudi English-major students' writing performance and their preferred learning style and strategy used. The participants consisted of 74 Saudi female undergraduate students studying at King Abdulaziz University. Two questionnaires were administrated, and the participant were asked to write an essay on a TOEFL writing prompt. Findings showed that Saudi female students were auditory and group learners, and used more

'before writing' strategies than "during writing" and "reviewing writing" strategies. In addition, there was no correlation between the participants' learning style preference and their writing strategies, and the same holds for students' use of writing strategies and writing proficiency.

Siddiqui's (2015) sought to evaluate capitalization errors in Saudi students' EFL writing. The participants were 20 female students studying in preparatory year and majoring in Nursing at Bisha University in Saudi Arabia. The data were gathered through real classroom assignments, tests and examination copies, observation. The researcher also interviewed 10 students. Ellis's (1994) procedure was used to evaluate the errors of capitalization committed by the students. The findings revealed that capitalization errors constituted a huge number of the learners' errors. Results as well indicated that 983 errors were found across the ten major rules of capitalization. Therefore, the study suggested that implementing novel techniques in capitalization teaching should be taken into consideration to overcome such a problem.

In a recent study, Ahmed (2016) conducted a study on 20 Saudi students studying English at Tanumah campus, which is a branch of King Khaled University. The main purpose of this study was to investigated the main causes that contribute to the writing errors committed by Saudi EFL university students. The study focused on punctuation, grammatical, lexical, spelling and discourse errors in the writing English production of these students. An essay-timed test was administrated in order to identify the students' writing errors; a writing errors questionnaire consisting of 46 questions and divided into five sections was developed so as to investigate the learners' views and evaluation of their writing abilities and an interview was structured to examine the EFL university teachers' general opinion about the possible factors that make leaners commit errors in EFL writing. On the basis of the descriptive analysis of these instruments, the study revealed that most of errors committed by Saudi EFL university students in their writing performance can be attributed to: a) mother tongue interference in learning process in general and in writing skill in particular, b) practice techniques of writing and activities presented to the learners are insufficient, c) lack of follow-up to the student's writing activities and some other factors.

Fraidan (2005) endeavored to measure the relationship between Saudi English-major students' performance at King Faisal University on direct (essay, letter etc.) and indirect (editing) tasks. The study revealed that there is no significant relationship between learners' performance on direct and indirect tasks, and that both skills i.e., writing and editing are totally different. The study also reported similar frequency with respect to using summarizing and editing in real life and in class by both teachers and learners.

Currently, this study has insights from those previous studies and attempts to fill some gaps and respond to some limitations appeared in them. It is the first of its kind to utilize Jacobs et. al.'s (1981) scale to measure the mastery of the five aspects of analytic writing by Saudi students and the variables related to them. It also investigates some writing length features within Saudi undergraduate students' produced texts and their correlation to text quality. These features i.e., sentence length, number of sentences, text length, unfortunately, had not been addressed intensively, or to say the least, paid due attention in literature. As such, the present study can be considered different from the previous ones.

METHOD

Design of the Study

To get insights from students regarding their mastery of Jacobs et. al's. five dimensions, and whether EFL undergraduates in different academic levels differ in their mastery of these dimensions, and to investigate the most frequent writing length aspects - sentence length, number of sentences, and text length aspects- in their written texts, participants were asked to write one essay based on their course book prompt.

Participants of the Study

Eighty-eight undergraduate students participated in this study. They were from four different levels. All of the participants were majoring in English at the department of

English language during the second semester of the academic year1438 AH corresponding to 2017, Human Studies College, Hotat Bani Tamim, branch of Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University in Al-Kharj, and Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh. The study collected and analyzed the data based on the related literature. The students who took part in the study were:

1. Level Two (N=24)

2. Level Three (N=23)

3. Level Four (N=15)

4. Level Five (N=26)

The Following table shows the distribution of students in details:

Table 1. The Distribution of the Participants of the Study

University	Levels				
	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Total
Prince Sattam University	24	23	11	0	58
Al-Imam University	0	0	4	26	30
Total					88

Writing Tasks Used

The participants were asked to write one essay based on a prompt related to their English writing instruction. The students wrote essays about these topics in response to prompts assigned by their teachers. The writing topics assigned include:

a. Life in Saudi Arabia in the Past and Present.

b. Tourism in Egypt and France.

c. Reasons for learning English Language.

d. Studying Abroad and inside Saudi Arabia.

e. Differences between Riyadh and Dammam.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The current study used one kind of instruments for data collection. The data was collected with the help of two teachers. One is teaching English at English Language Department at Prince Sattam University. The other one is teaching at Languages and Translation College at Al-Imam University. Both teachers asked the writing skills teachers to ask their students write one essay on one of the above listed topics. After two weeks, teachers submitted the essays to the two cooperative teachers who handed over the essays to the researcher.

The present study used three text length measures: total word count in the essay, number of sentences in the essay, and average words per sentence or average sentence length. The three text length measures were obtained from the final draft produced by the participants. The study used the word count guidelines suggested by Polio (1997, p.140):

a- Counting contractions as one word whether correct or not (e.g. can't),

b- Counting numbers as one word,

c- Counting proper nouns in English and in other languages as they are written,

d- Not counting hyphenated words as single words (e.g. well-written = two words),

e- Not including essay titles or subtitles in the word count,

f- Counting words as they are written, even if they are incorrect (e.g. a lot = one word).

To check the reliability of the rating using the ESL composition profile, 88 essays written were marked by the researcher while the essays of 10 participants were rated by the second rater who was teaching at the Department of English Language at Prince Sattam University. Both raters marked the written essays independently using Jacobs et. al's scale. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients of inter-rating was found to be 813, which is considered a good reliability coefficient.

The frequency of the following writing length aspects: sentence length, number of sentences, and text length aspects were analyzed and processed through using the statistical program (SPSS) which is regarded as a reliable and widely used tool in the field of studying Humanities. The researcher implemented descriptive statistics tools such as frequency, means, and standard deviations; then, he compared and contrasted the writing length aspects within the participants' written texts.

RESULTS

To measure the extent to which Saudi English-major students master the five dimensions of the analytic writing evaluation (content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics), the researcher calculated the mean and Standard Deviation (SD) of each text for the five dimensions of the analytic writing evaluation (content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics). The analysis yielded the results in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Means Scores and SD of All the Participants' Analytic Writing Scores

Aspects of Analytic writing	Mean	SD
Text Content Score	18.75 [Fair to Poor]	4.92
Text organization Score	13.26 [Fair to Poor]	3.74
Vocabulary Score	12.62 [Fair to Poor]	3.85
Language Use Score	16.32 [Fair to Poor]	5.20
Text Mechanics Score	3.45 [Fair to Poor]	1.19
Total Text Score	64.42	16.61

It can be claimed that Saudi students' mastery of the five aspects of the analytic writing evaluation is ranging from fair to poor. The overall mastery of these components is 64.4 which indicates a fair mastery of these aspects. However, there is no consistency across the aspects. The subjects show a higher mastery of the third aspect i.e. organization with a mean score of 13.26. which tends to be good. According to the ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs et. al.'s,1981), if students' scores are from 14 –17 in the aspects, then this can be

interpreted as good to average performance. On the other hand, on all other aspects the students' scores fall in the category of fair to poor.

To measure the correlation between students' mastery of the five dimensions of the analytic writing evaluation and their writing length aspects, Pearson correlation coefficient is used generating the results tabulated in 3 below:

Table 3: Correlation Between Students' Analytic Writing Evaluation Scores & their Writing Length Features

Text content score	.765**	.681**	.349**
Text organization score	.688**	.574**	.419**
Text vocabulary score	.636**	.587**	.288**
Text language use score	.578**	.478**	.400**
Text mechanics score	.439**	.460**	.015
Total text score	.742**	.650**	.391**

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Another question of the current study was to investigate how Saudi English-major students in different academic levels differ in their mastery of the analytic writing evaluation dimensions. To yield supporting clues, means of scores obtained by members of each levels are computed and visually analyzed. Furthermore, SDs are calculated too check the homogeneity between members of each level, Finally, a correlation analysis was performed to check the extent to which the overall students' performance differs. Results in regard to question three are presented in table 4 below.

Table 4: Means Scores & SD of the Analytic Writing Scores of the Participants in Each Academic Level

	Mean	SD.	Mean	SD.	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Text content score	15.0	2.35	16.13	2.36	21	4.51	23.15	4.54
Text Organization	11.29	3.55	11.26	2.45	14.33	3.28	16.23	2.90
Text vocabulary score	11.04	3.86	10.52	3.51	13.80	3.05	15.26	2.72
Text language use score	14.50	6.185	13.52	4.52	17.60	4.25	19.76	2.68
Text mechanics score	3.12	1.11	3.04	1.10	3.46	1.06	4.11	1.17
Total text score	55.04	14.43	54.47	10.64	70	14.50	78.53	12.18
Sentence length	13.95	4.672	11.50	4.02			15.76	3.93
Number of sentences	6.29	2.216	7.30	2.93	13.90	4.69	13.96	6.06
Text quantity	87.37	39.07	79.52	28.56	189.60	75.02	218.88	101.544

The overall results indicate a noticeable development in mastering of the analytic writing evaluation dimensions from level 2 to level five. The highest mean score, as it might be hypothesized, is obtained by the highest proficient level. This finding makes sense when bearing in mind the amount of exposure to English writing lessons and the participants' previous experience in writing English tests and tasks. Nevertheless, this result, though it seems logic, have some exceptions. i.e. the development is not always consistent among all the dimensions and across all levels. The mean scores obtained by students at level 3, to give an instance, is less than those obtained by participants from level 2 in all dimensions except text content and number of sentence. Bearing in mind that this the only deviation from the consistent development witnessed across other levels. It can be assumed that there are other factors that relate to level two participants that may cause

such a result. Further, research which utilizes more homogeneous sample of the research may obtain supporting results.

DISCUSSION

When analyzing the research findings, it is clear that the overall performance of the research sample in the five aspects of writing aspects is fair to poor. Students perform well in regard to content and organization aspects. However, their performance in text mechanic and vocabulary tends to be poor.

This generalization can, to a considerable extent, be considered compatible with previous literature findings. It was proved by many previous studies that Saudi EFL learners encounter different problems in writing English texts. Vocabulary selection, for example, is found to be one of the problems that impedes the EFL writing quality by Saudi subjects (Khan, 2011; Javid & Umer, 2013). It was even considered as the major problem that encounters Saudi students who attempt writing in English by Al Khairy (2013). The current study proves this finding as it was found that the aspect of text vocabulary is one of the aspects of which students' mean score was poor. Out of 20 points assigned to this aspect, the subjects' mean score was only 12.5. According to the ESL Composition Profile, this score indicates "limited range, frequent errors of word/idiom form choice, usage, meaning confused or obscured".

Another area of difficulty regarding writing is the text structure and grammar. The results of the present study indicate that the students level in this aspect is also poor to fair with a mean score of 16.32. This score can be interpreted that the students commit many errors related to tense, number, negation, articles, prepositions and pronouns. It also indicates serious problems pertaining to word choice, fragments and run-ons as stated by the ESL Composition Profile. When this finding is compared with the previously-generated results, a considerable agreement can be observed. Shukri (2014), for example, found that grammar is a major causal factor of writing problems by the participants. This problem is considered by some researchers a problem of all Arab learners (Haq, 1982; Abbad, 1988; Wahba, 1998; Rabab'ah, 2005). Even the subjects themselves are aware that grammar is one of the factors that hinders their writing success as stated by Huwari & Al-Khasawneh, (2012).

Other aspects of difficulties that students suffer from can be represented in the poor usage of punctuation and spelling. It was stated by many previous researchers as (Javid &Umer, 2013; Shukri, 2014) that spelling and punctuation appear to be an influential problem that weakens the students' writing. The results of the present study support this claim since the students' score mean regarding text mechanic was 3.4 out of 5. which again indicates a poor to fair level and implies frequent errors of capitalization, paragraphing, spelling and poor handwriting.

Regarding the content and the organization of the text, previous studies reveal that there are problems in realization of the topic, presentation of the ideas, and understanding of the requirements of writing (Huwari & Al-Khasawneh, 2012). With mean scores of 18.75 out of 30 for content aspect and 13.26 out of 20 for organization, it can be observed that students level in such aspects are also poor to fair and indicates limited knowledge of the

subject, inadequate development of the topic and absence of logical sequencing and developing. This finding also conforms with the previous studies.

The statistically significant correlation between text length and writing quality which is yielded by the present study is also compatible with the previously-generated findings. A number of previous studies found positive correlation between number of words within texts and text quality (Chao's 2004; Kim's 1996; Sasaki & Hirose, 1996). With a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.742 between the mean of total score and sentence length, it can be claimed that sentence length correlates significantly with students' writing performance. Moreover, previous studies found a positive correlation between proficiency levels and text length, i.e. texts are longer whenever the proficiency level of the students is higher. This finding which was suggested by Crerand's (1992) study and Intaraprawat and Steffensen's (1995) is also supported by the current study as it was clear that students from level 5 outperformed students in Level 2, 3 and 4 with respect to text length.

CONCLUSION

The present study shed light on and examined Saudi university students' English writing skills using an analytic scale suggested by Jacobs et. al. (1981) In addition, they highlighted the significance of writing skills in learning English as a second language and its seminal role in the educational process in Saudi universities. They also evaluated the performance of L2, L3, L4 and L5 of Saudi undergraduates in writing English classes. Further, they traced the EFL writing difficulties and problems encountered by Saudi university students.

The outcomes of the study can be summarized as flows.

Firstly, almost all students encounter difficulties in grammar. Most of the essays lack proper grammatical structures, and shows flawed use of tenses, aspects, word order and agreement. This makes the average level of language use aspect poor.

Secondly, the majority of the L2, L3, and L4 have almost the same writing problems in content criterion and most of their scores were very poor since most of their texts were not enough to evaluate.

Thirdly, vocabulary is one of the problems that weakens the writing of Saudi students. This is represented in the writing of students from L2, L3, and 4. This problem is represented in wrong word choice, missing or overuse of preposition, and failure to present the intended meaning.

Fourthly, the students in L2 and L3, and L4 suffer from problems in recognizing what is required. Consequently, they frequently fail in presenting their ideas logically and show confused and interrupted development of thought.

Fifthly, students of L5 show a considerable development in most of these aspects. This implies the correlation between proficiency and text quality and it also suggests an influential role of instruction on developing writing.

Based on the above-mentioned outcome, the following suggestions are posed:

Regarding teachers, they should provide their students with appropriate techniques of writing processes, background and linguistic knowledge, enable writing skills, well-prepared equipment plus proper exercises to assist students implement effective strategies during writing process.

Moreover, according to the texts produced by the participants, it is obvious that one of the big obstacles that impedes learners in writing skill is their lack of vocabulary. Thus, it is nonnegotiable for teachers to expose their students to more vocabulary. In addition, most sample members do not show mastery of grammar; therefore, learners have to be more trained in expressing their thoughts in correct grammar to help them write communicatively.

Concerning the syllabuses designers, they are required to enrich the curricula with different kinds of input that enhance grammar, coherence, relevance, proper sequencing and logical development of thought. More areas of practice are required to be included in these syllabi.

Although the researcher attempted to cover the research variables thoroughly, there are still plenty areas that can be suggested for further studies. It is obviously noted that Saudi universities students encounter difficulty in handling grammatical rules, vocabulary, and mechanics of writing which are substantial and important components in any written test. Consequently, a research on assessing learners' grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics might be of a great importance. Moreover, a larger corpus of graded produced texts should be examined in future research, because this might allow for the examination of additional variables of text length features. Finally, future work may examine the variables investigated in the study before hand with other informants from different cultural backgrounds.

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