



**DIFFICULTIES FACE TERTIARY STUDENTS IN ENGLISH WRITING SKILLS
A CASE STUDY OF ONAIZA COLLEGES STUDENTS- LINGUISTICS AND TRANSLATION
DEPARTMENT- GASSIM- KSA**

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ABSTRACT

This study tries to shed light on the Difficulties face tertiary students in English writing skills and to focus on the main difficulties that face tertiary students in developing their writing skills. One of the main objectives of the study is to shed light on the difficulties face tertiary students in writing skill and to suggest some techniques for developing students' writing skills. A student's questionnaire is used for the data collection of this study. The samples of the study were taken exclusively from Onaiza Colleges-Gassim- KSA. The questionnaire was distributed to (30) students. The questionnaire depended on two hypotheses, and each hypothesis included five statements. The data obtained from the instrument has been analyzed, and finally interpreted. The results of the study revealed that tertiary students face difficulties in English language writing skills. Also Teachers need to use different writing techniques to help their students develop their writing skills. As well as Teachers need to motivate and encourage students to develop their writing skills. The researcher recommends that teachers should use various techniques and methods in teaching writing in order to improve and develop their students' writing skill. Moreover, teachers should focus on the positive feedback in order to motivate their students. Also teachers should develop their students' spelling and vocabulary. As well as teachers should use the positive errors' correction to encourage and motivate students.

Keywords: English writing skills- EFL, English as a Foreign Language- ESL, English as a Second Language- writing approach- free writing. Writing difficulties.

Introduction

Language is a tool to express humans' opinions, ideas, thoughts and feelings. Without a language, it becomes difficult for human beings to communicate with others. The people of the modern world need to communicate with a common language that is widely spoken in the world in order to achieve their goals. Moreover, language skills are necessary for the people of the modern world to communicate effectively with the other people. Moreover, people's effective communication is possible just by acquiring the skills of the language. Thus, the ESL/EFL learners should focus on the language skills, especially on writing skills, where they are the most essential skills that are essential to communicate with others in the modern society.

Writing skills are crucial in every profession. In the medical field, for instance, doctors are required to write reports for patients, technicians, and software developers write instructional manuals for the users. Nearly everybody in all fields writes emails and other forms of communication to fellow workers and the

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managers. Good writing skills are, therefore, valued in the workplace, and people who are good writers appear to be more capable, intelligent, responsible, and credible unlike people in the same office that send emails full of typos, poorly constructed sentences and grammatical errors. Many working class people ignore the importance of good writing skills, yet it is a critical productivity skill. Good writing skills not only ease communication in the workplace but also positively affect careers. Here are some of the reasons why writing skills are important to our careers.

Writing skills

Writing is one of the skills required to be mastered and it is stated very clearly in the English language curriculum in Malaysia. However, writing skills together with other language skills stated in the curriculum specification do not come in isolation, they are integrated. The principle of integration aims to help teachers to deal with a set of skills in several lesson; thus, when learners use the language for interpersonal purposes, they do not only engage in conversation by talking and listening only, but also engage in written work when they are asked to write notes or messages (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2003). It is a skill that "...stimulates thinking, compels students to concentrate and organize their ideas and cultivate their ability to summarize, analyze and criticize" (Rao, 1997). The natural order of second language learning is listening, speaking, reading and writing; reading and writing are considered the advanced stage of language development (Brown, 1987). Dixon et al (2002) and Hinkel (2006) believe writing as a highly complex process that proves to be difficult for many second language learners. Despite of its complexity and difficulties, writing is important for many students. It is a means of demonstrating their knowledge in content areas. They also highlights that, the most difficult part of the language art to acquire is writing. This is because, the development of the writing skills to be mastered would take years and in fact, some "...professional writers assert that it takes 20 to 30 years to learn to write because of the complexity of writing...it incorporates a large number of skills: grammar, handwriting and spelling.." According to Dixon et al (2002), some language scholars believe that students who face great difficulties with writing are those with learning disabilities and emotional and/or behavioral problems. Steinberg (1982) views writing systems as "...systems of visual symbols which provide means for writing words". These words would convey meaning and limited vocabulary would affect the message which the writer tries to convey. Shameem (1988) states that writing is a recursive process and it is nonlinear and there are four basic processes: prewriting, composing/ writing, revision and proofreading/ editing. Prewriting is the initial stage where the writer would normally start to think, discover and create the ideas which are going to be used in the next stage, the composing stage. At the second stage level, it requires the students to compose the first draft. Shameem (1988) explains the processes of checking the coherence and cohesion, styles and syntax as well as grammar during the revision stage. In the final stage, editing is done as to ensure that the essay would be perfect or better. These are the four-stage process that needs to be informed to the students in order to make them aware of the processes involved in writing.

Writing has now become a huge part of every student's life, starting with the simplest content to the most complex writing pieces. At this point, students are asked to craft different types of essays, research papers and other kinds of creative writing tasks. The reason for this increase in variety of papers lies in the importance writing carries in students' lives during and after their education. Writing is a skill students will need for the future, which is why it is crucial to develop it to the proper level.

Approaches to teach writing skills

There are different approaches for teaching writing skills which can help learners and teachers are developing writing and avoiding difficulties. Following are some of the approaches which are used by teachers to teach writing skills to the students:



Product Approach

In the history of pedagogic reforms one of the oldest approaches is the product approach which focuses on finished written products of the students. The distinguished feature of this approach is its attention on accuracy. As said by Nunan, D. (1989) states that: *“the teacher who adopts this approach makes sure that the end product is grammatically correct”*. In the same point, Mc Donough, H & Shaw, F. (1993) argue that product approach can be considered as a traditional way to teach writing. Its main focus is on corrections and reinforcement of grammar. Moreover, this approach makes the teacher judge the finished products of the students. Error detection also falls in this approach. Teachers find out the errors committed by the students and try to eliminate them.

Process Approach

When the product approach could not provide fruitful results to composition writing more attention was given to the process of writing. Resultantly, this led to a shift towards what is called the process approach which considers writing as a complex, cognitive, recursive and evolving process. Six stages of writing process are: determining the topic, taking account of readers, editing, proof reading and revising [49]. In the words of Zeng, D. (2005) process sees writing as:

“A complicated cognitive process and it has multiple stages like pre-writing, drafting, revising and editing. But some drawbacks have also been attached to this approach. It does not focus on the variety and differentiation of the process of writing, specifically social context”.

Genre Approach

The genre approach is considered one of the important approaches of writing. A genre is a text which may be in the form of spoken or written. It has a particular purpose in a particular context and is written under some proper conventions. The basic spirit behind this approach is that the writers do not compose for pleasure but in different contexts, for different purposes and in different ways. Nevertheless, this approach is not free of drawbacks. According to Paltridge, B. (2004) says: *“mixing of textual and socio-cultural knowledge makes the identification of the exact knowledge a tough target”*.

Eclectic Approach

The eclectic or process genre approach is getting very popular because of its effectiveness in teaching writing skills. This approach is the blend of genre and process approach Badger, R., & White, G. (2000). This approach is helpful for both the teachers and the students to learn writing skills. It provides students a chance to develop their creativity. It also assists them in understanding the characteristics of target genre. It can be argued that the knowledge of form and language at the same time helps students to know how a particular form functions in a proper context. It can be very beneficial in enhancing learners' proficiency. However, there is a general disagreement over the issue that there exists a single approach which can enhance writing proficiency of the students. Different approaches suit to different contexts.

Academic Writing

Academic writing differs from other types of writing such as journalistic or creative writing. In most forms of academic writing a detached and objective approach is required.

Crème & Lea, 2003 & Borg, 2008 discuss that an academic argument appeals to logic and provides evidence in support of an intellectual position. It is important to present your arguments in logical order and to arrive at conclusions. However, academic writing can take many forms. You may be asked to write an essay, a



report, a review or a reflective article. Different styles adhere to each of these types of academic writing, so always check with your lecturer. In academic writing, writers always interact with each others' texts and so there will be frequent references to the ideas, thinking or research of other authors writing in this field. You must give credit to those with whom you are interacting and there are structured guidelines for referencing and citation. Also, in academic writing it is important that when a claim is made it is backed up by reasons based on some form of evidence; it is expected that the author takes a critical approach to the material being explored.

Planning for your writing task

Writing typically consists of four main stages: planning, writing, editing and reviewing. As writing is an iterative process, these activities do not occur in a fixed order; rather, writers move among these activities although typically, more time is spent on planning or thinking at the start and on editing and reviewing at the end. Hartley, 2008 says:

Planning for your writing has been identified as one of the key practices of good writers and you need to factor in time to gather, absorb and plan your arguments before composing text.

Free Writing

Free writing involves writing in full sentences about a topic for a specified amount of time without planning or worrying about quality; it can help writing at all stages. Elbow & Belanof (2003) argue that free writing is about trusting yourself and your words; they believe it is especially helpful at the initial stages of academic writing.

Free writing means:

- Not showing your words to anyone (unless you later change your mind);
- Not having to stay on one topic – that is, freely digressing;
- Not thinking about spelling, grammar, and mechanics;
- Not worrying about how good the writing is.

Elbow & Belanof (2003) also argue that most people learn and practice free writing by doing free writing exercises of five to ten minutes. It is more than just putting words on paper as it helps improve thinking and also this is the beginning of your voice in the writing.

It is really good to do some free writing or focused free writing which requires you to stay on one topic on a regular basis. So try it and remember the important thing is to keep writing.

Challenges in Second Language Writing

Writing in a second language seems to be the most difficult skill for language learners to acquire in the academic context. Myles (2002) argues that various social and cognitive factors help in assessing the underlying reasons why L2 learners exhibit particular writing errors. According to Myles (2002), social factors that influence second language writing include motivation and attitudes. Similarly, Ellis (2003) argues that social factors explain why learners differ in the rate of L2 learning and in proficiency type, for instance, conversational versus writing ability. Research based on motivation and attitudes shows that, learners with positive attitudes and motivation towards writing for academic purposes experience success unlike those with negative attitudes.



Myles (2002) suggests that for teachers to motivate students in writing for academic purposes, they should encourage students to read academic texts and work with other students who are more acquainted with the discourse. However, if they do not engage in the text or actively contribute during the study sessions, these activities will have little effect on students' progress. Thus, if students are motivated to write in L2, they will develop a higher level of proficiency and positive attitudes, which can have a positive effect on their writing. In addition, and in the same point Jarvis (2005) argues that in order to motivate students in L2 writing, teachers should write positive comments on learners' exercise books and verbally reinforce good language responses as part of their instructions. Sometimes, they can display exemplary students' work on school notice boards. The aim is to help build learners' self-esteem and morale towards L2 writing. Further, to improve motivation teachers can provide rewards for achievement to learners.

According to Myles (2002), cognitive processes involved in second language writing are learning strategies and language transfer. Due to the complex process of writing in a second language, learners often find it difficult to develop all aspects of the writing stages simultaneously. As a result, they select to use only those aspects that are automatic or have already been put in place. Therefore students need to develop particular learning strategies that isolate component mental processes.

Language transfer is another cognitive factor that influences L2 writing. Ellis (2003) notes that when writing or speaking in a second language situation, L2 learners tend to rely on their (L1) structures to provide responses. If the structures of the two languages are distinctly different, then one could expect a relatively high frequency of errors to occur in L2, thus, indicating an interference of L1 on L2 writing. Similarly, Cook (2001) points out that L1 interference has important implications in the learning of a second language expression. This is because L1 learning is different from that of L2. First language (L1) helps learners when it has common elements with L2, but hinders the learning process when both language systems differ. In addition, Nunan (1999) considers it an enormous challenge to produce a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing in one's L2. He points out that this is magnified by the fact that rhetorical conventions of English language, that is, structure, style and organization often differ from those in other languages.

Farooq (2012), notes that grammar is the most difficult area for L2 writers. Students face challenges in the use of correct sentence structure and paragraph development, and in creating coherent text. Grammar skills include run-on sentences, use of different types of sentences, subject verb agreement, placement of modifiers, tense agreement and parallel construction. Grammar is more than just a set of rules; it is an ever evolving structure of language. For instance, the students may know how to build sentences, but when applying them in written expression they face difficulties. The basis of these problems is the traditional style of teaching grammar on the part of teachers and lack of practice on the part of learners.

In investigating the low achievement in creative composition writing, Abaya (2006) carried out a study on the analysis of lexical errors in the written English compositions of standard eight pupils in Rigoma division, Nyamira district, Kenya. The findings revealed that the lexical errors learners made in their written compositions included: confusion of synonyms, inappropriate collocation, incomplete sentence structures, first language interference and coinage. From the findings of the study, it was recommended that teachers need to expose learners to a variety of reading texts as sources of exposing them to new vocabulary items and sentence structures.

From what has been mentioned, it is evident that second language learners often face various difficulties in learning L2 writing skills. The difficulties are partly attributed to teaching methods used, learning strategies, L1 interference, limited vocabulary and inadequate mastery of grammatical structures of L2.



Methods of the Study

The research paper based on descriptive analytical approach aims to analyze the Difficulties face tertiary students in English writing skills, so as to find the suitable solutions which can help in developing students' writing skills.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

a- **Hypothesis One:** Tertiary students face real difficulties in developing English writing skills.

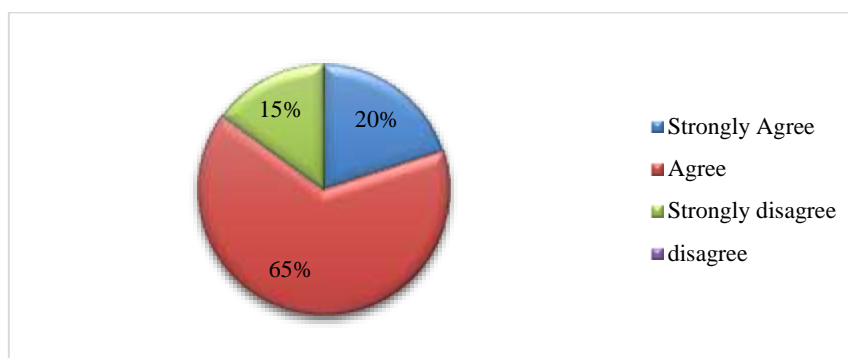


Figure No. 1. Facing difficulties in writing a correct sentence

Based on the questionnaire statement, "I face difficulties in writing a correct sentence." The results of the study revealed that most of the participants with a percentage of (65%) agreed on the statement and (20%) strongly agreed, while only (15%) disagreed that they do not face difficulties in writing a correct sentence. The results reflect that students face real problems and difficulties in writing. The responses are in line with what has been stated in the hypothesis and tertiary students face difficulties in developing their writing skills, so it is the teacher's responsibilities to do their best and help students develop and improve their writing skills

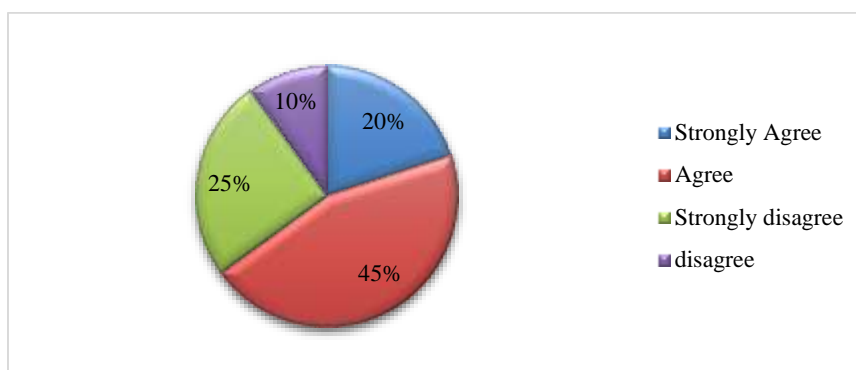


Figure No. 2. Poor writing skills

Based on the questionnaire statement, "My writing skill is poor, so I need to develop it." The results of the study revealed that (45%) of the participants agreed on the statement, (20%) strongly agreed, while (25%) strongly disagreed and only (10%) have disagreed. It is clear from the results that the most of the participants were agreed and strongly agreed that their writing skill is poor and they need to develop it. Respectively, this is in line with what has been stated in the hypothesis. So, students really need much effort such as practicing writing in different activities, at the same time teachers need to modernize their strategies in teaching writing skill.

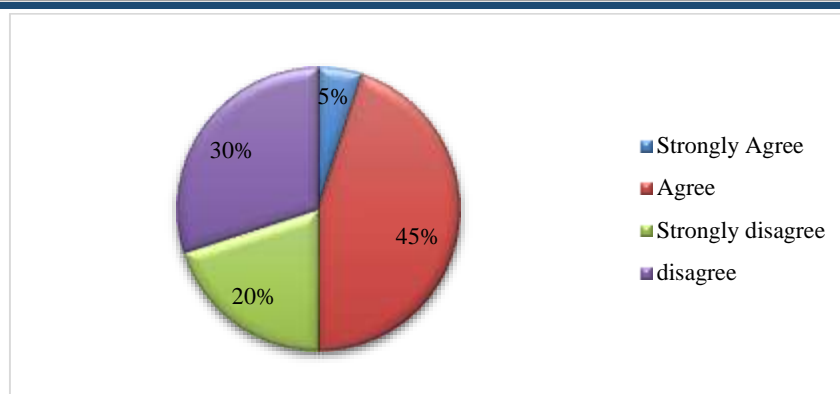


Figure No. 3. Writing accurate questions in English

Based on the questionnaire statement "I can write accurate questions in English." The results of the study revealed that (45%) of the participants agreed on the statement, while (30%) disagreed, (20%) strongly disagreed and only (5%) were strongly agreed. From the results it is clear that the responses are semi in line with the hypothesis. Half of the participants disagreed that they can write accurate questions in English. So, students need to develop their writing in order to write accurate questions and a correct sentence in general.

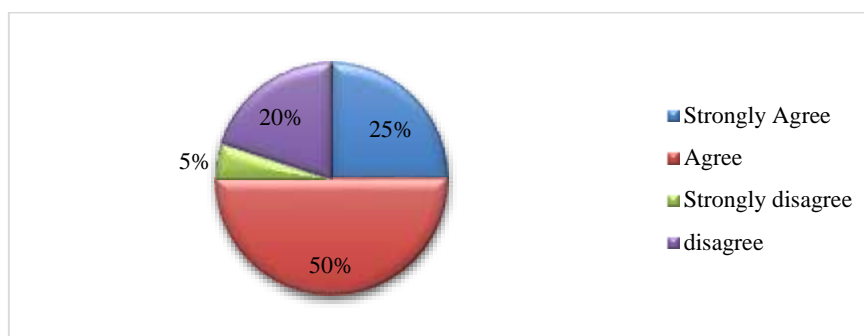


Figure No. 4. Editing my writing for correcting grammar and punctuation mistakes

Based on the questionnaire statement "I edit my writing to correct the grammar, and punctuation mistakes." The results of the study revealed that (50%) of the participants agreed on the statement, (25%) strongly agreed, while (20%) disagreed and only (5%) strongly disagreed. It is clear from the positive results above that the statement is in line with the hypothesis. Most of the participants have the ability of editing their writing to correct their grammar and punctuation mistakes. So teachers should encourage the positive points and help their students overcome the writing difficulties.

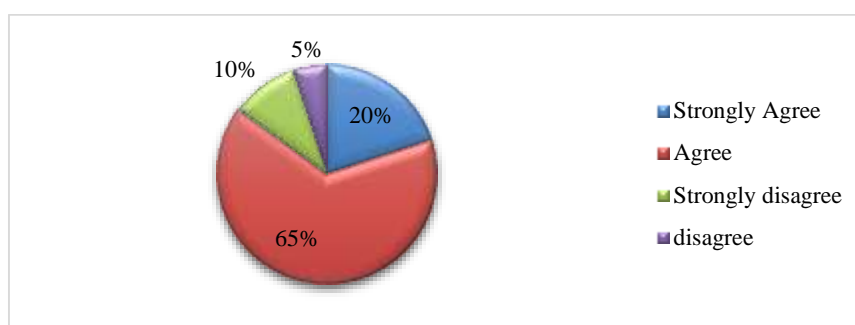


Figure No. 5. Facing difficulties with spelling while writing



Based on the questionnaire statement “I face difficulties with spelling while writing.” The results of the study revealed that the majority of the participants in a percentage of (65%) agreed on the statement and (20%) strongly agreed, while only (10%) strongly disagreed, and (5%) agreed. It is clear from the above results that the statement is in line with the hypothesis. The responses also reflect the real difficulties students face with spelling during their writing, and teachers should use the possible techniques to develop and improve the students spelling in writing.

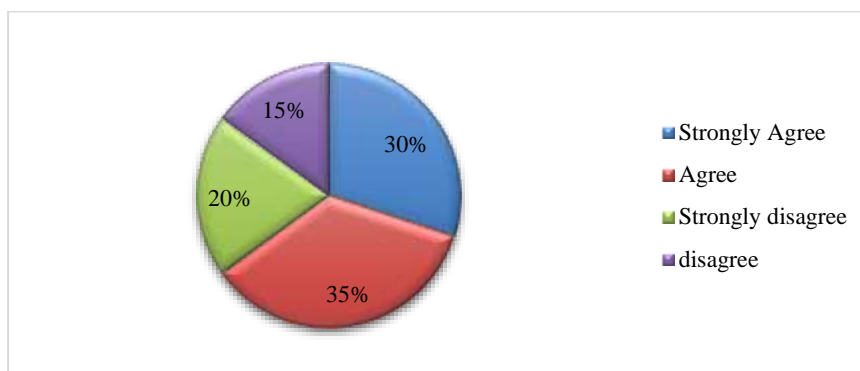


Figure No. 6. The lack of vocabulary affecting my writing

Based on the questionnaire statement “The lack of vocabulary affects my writing” The results of the study revealed that (35%) of the participants agreed on the statement, (30%) strongly agreed, while (20%) strongly disagreed and (15%) disagreed that the lack of vocabulary affecting their writing. From the results, it is clear that the statement is in line with the hypothesis and the lack of vocabulary is a problem facing students in developing their writing. Teachers have to find solutions and try as possible to develop their students’ vocabulary in order to help them improve their writing skills.

Hypothesis Two: Teachers can help their students overcome the writing skills’ difficulties.

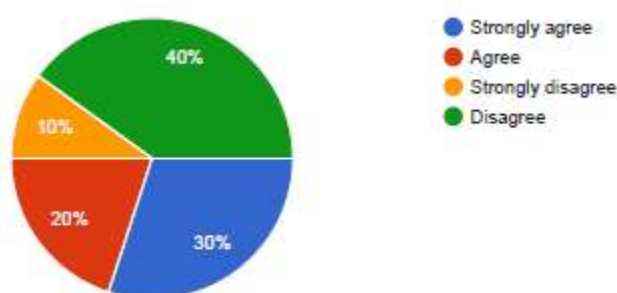


Figure No. 7. Receiving plenty of feedback from my teacher

Based on the questionnaire statement “I receive plenty of feedback from my teacher about my writing task.” The results of the study revealed that (30%) of the participants strongly agreed, (20%) agreed, while (40%) disagreed and (10%) strongly disagreed. It is clear from the results that the statement is not in line with the hypothesis, because many participants disagreed that they receive plenty of feedback from their teachers, so it is the teacher’s responsibility to provide their students with the continuous feedback in order to motivate and encourage them to improve their writing.

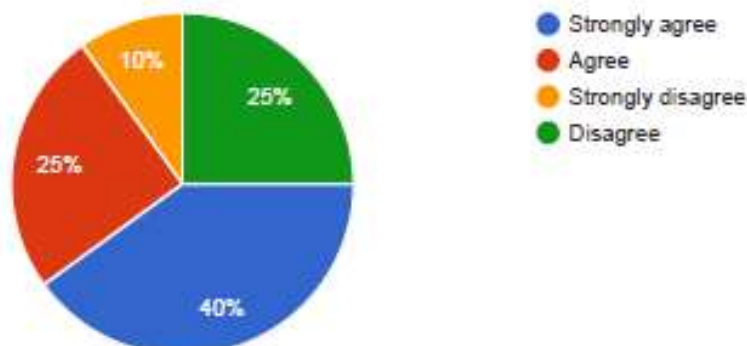


Figure No. 8. Offering a writing course every semester

Based on the questionnaire statement, “There is a writing course every semester for developing writing skill.” The results of the study revealed that (40%) of the participants strongly agreed on the statement, (25%) agreed, while (25%) disagreed and only (10%) strongly disagreed. Respectively, this is in line with what has been stated in the hypothesis. Most of the participants agreed that there is a writing course for developing writing skill. At the same time there are some participants disagreed with the statement. The regular writing course help students develop their writing skills and easily overcome the difficulties.

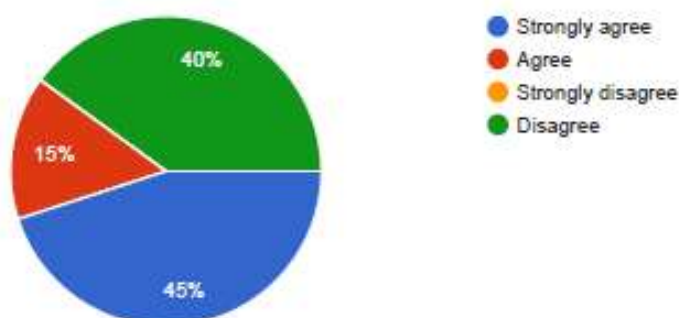


Figure No. 9. Teacher's guiding in writing

Based on the questionnaire statement, “My teacher always guides me in writing.” The results of the study revealed that (45%) of the participants strongly agreed on the statement and (15%) agreed, while (40%) disagreed that their teacher always guides them in writing. Respectively, this is in line with what has been stated in the hypothesis. Also from the responses, it is clear that teachers need to take care of their students' writing and guide them to develop their writing skills.

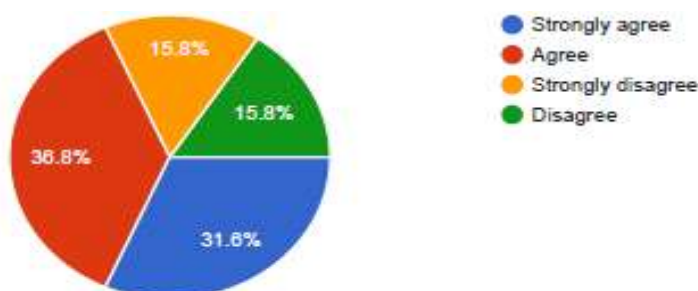


Figure No. 10. Discussing my writing with my teacher



Based on the questionnaire statement “I discuss what I am going to write with my teacher.” The results of the study revealed that (38.8%) agreed on the statement, (31.6%) strongly agreed, while (15.8%) strongly disagreed and (15.8) disagreed that they discuss what they are going to write with their teacher. Respectively, this is in line with what has been stated in the hypothesis. The positive responses also revealed that most teachers discuss the students’ writing and that will help in developing their writing and increase their motivation and confidence.

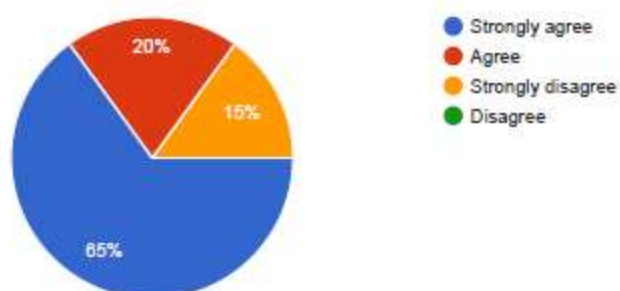


Figure No. 11. Errors correction is helpful for improving writing

Based on the questionnaire statement, “Errors correction is helpful to improve my future writing.” The results of the study revealed that the majority of the participants in a percentage of (65%) strongly agreed on the statement and (20%) agreed, while only (15%) strongly disagreed that errors correction is helpful for improving writing. Respectively, this is in line with what has been stated in the hypothesis. The responses revealed that errors correction is an important factor in developing students’ writing skills and teachers should try as possible to do the regular, positive errors’ correction.

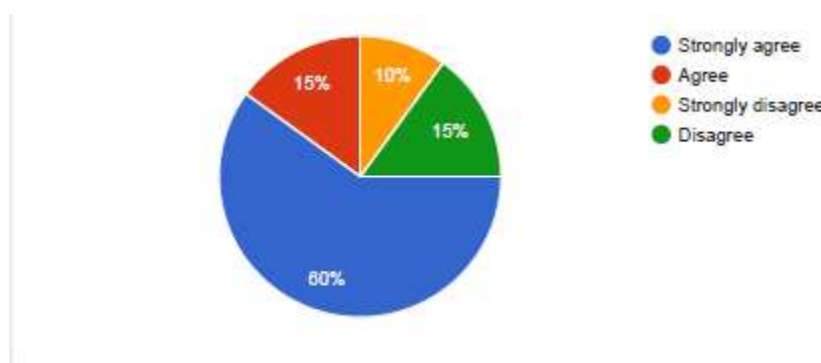


Figure No. 12. The teacher regularly presenting new writing techniques

Based on the questionnaire statement, “The teacher regularly presents new writing techniques to improve my writing skills.” The results of the study revealed that (60%) of the participants strongly agreed on the statement, (15%) agreed, while (15%) disagreed and (10%) strongly disagreed. Respectively, this is in line with what has been stated in the hypothesis. Most of the participants agree that their teacher presents new writing techniques to improve their writing skills. Presenting new techniques motivate students and encourage them to develop their writing skills.



Discussion

The results of the study clearly revealed that tertiary students face real difficulties in writing skills. The participants' responses in the questionnaire stated their weakness and strength area through the filling up of the questionnaire. Most of the statements were positive and reflected the areas of the problems that faced the students in the writing skills. After discussing and analyzing the results, the researcher has come out with different findings and recommendations in order to help teachers and the decision makers to find the suitable solutions and overcome the difficulties face tertiary students in developing their writing skills, as well as their English language in general.

Findings of the Study

The researcher has come out with the following endings:

1. Tertiary students face difficulties in English language writing skills.
2. Teachers need to use different writing techniques to help their students develop their writing skills.
3. Teachers need to motivate and encourage students to develop their writing skills.
4. Regular writing courses develop students' writing skills.

Recommendations

The researcher has come out with the following recommendations:

1. Teachers should use various techniques and methods in teaching writing in order to improve and develop their students' writing skill.
2. Teachers should focus on the positive feedback in order to motivate their students.
3. Teachers should develop their students' spelling and vocabulary.
4. Teachers should use the positive errors' correction to encourage and motivate students.

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