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THE CHALLENGING FACETS OF EFL LEARNERS' WRITING PERFORMANCE

Rahmouna ZIDANE*

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ABSTRACT

Writing constitutes an important skill that has to be acquired by learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) to be able to express themselves in a written form within different contexts including academic studies and realistic situations. It requires the manipulation of a set of linguistic and cognitive sub-skills that determine the quality of the written product. The mastery of these features is reflected in the level of the learners' writing performance. Therefore, this article attempts to highlight the interrelationships between the distinct writing traits and their role in increasing or hindering the students' achievement through the study of the case of third year EFL learners at Tlemcen University using tests and interviews as research instruments. The analysis of the collected data has led to the conclusion that the students' writing difficulties are mainly related to the issues of fluency and style.

Keywords: Writing – instruction - assessment - traits - performance.

İngilizceyi Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğrenen Öğrencilerin Yazma Performansının Zorlu Özellikleri

ÖZET

Yazma, dil öğrenmede çok önemli becerilerden biridir. İngilizce'yi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen öğrencilerin bu mahareti kazanması gerekmektedir. Gerçek yaşam

* Dr., Tlemcen University Faculty of Letters and Languages Department of English, mouna_zde@yahoo.com

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durumlarında ve akademik çalışmalarda kendilerini ifade etmek için bu beceriye ihtiyacı vardır. Yazma, yazılı üretim kalitesini belirleyen bir dizi dilsel ve bilişsel alt becerileri kapsamaktadır. Kalite özellikleri olarak adlandırılmışlardır. Yazma alt becerileri ustalığı, öğrencilerin performansının düzeyinde yansıtılmasına rağmen gizli değişkenleri temsil etmektedir. Özellikle, bütünsel değerlendirme yöntemleri kullanırken, onların etkisi yeterince tanınmamaktadır. Bu makale, öğrencilerin performansının geliştirmesindeki veya engellemesindeki yazma alt becerilerin ustalığın rolünü ve aralarındaki ilişkileri bahsedilmiştir. Bu çalışma 3. sınıf öğrencilerin katılımıyla Tilimsan Üniversitesinde gerçekleştirilmiştir. Veri toplam araçları olarak testi ve görüşmeyi kullanılmıştır. Toplanan verilerin analizi ışığında yazma becerisinde öğrencilerin karşılaştıkları güçlükleri vurgulanmıştır. Bu sorunlar ağırlıklı olarak akıcılıkla ve üslupla ilgilidir.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Yazma - öğretim - değerlendirme - özellikler - performans*

1. Introduction

The present study investigates EFL learners' writing performance with special reference to the main weaknesses that shape their written output which is often influenced by the nature of the taught linguistic input and the type of tests that assess their compositions. It attempts to diagnose the students' writing deficiencies through the use of direct and indirect assessment tools for the purpose of proposing a set of strategies that can be incorporated in teaching writing. This is why it is necessary to provide an account of the main methods of teaching and testing written production.

In fact, writing is one of the four skills that determine the degree of success in foreign language learning; it is defined as a social activity representing a linguistic behaviour that is controlled through cognitive mechanisms. Hence, its significance is explained by various definitions leading to diversity in the way of teaching this skill. Consequently writing instruction has been characterized by the application of various methodologies including product, process and post-process models (Ferris & Hedgcock 2014). Product-oriented approaches focus on the accuracy of the written output. They include classical rhetoric and the

current traditional approach. Classical rhetoric represented a vital approach for instructing the writing skill during the period of the 19th century; this perspective focused on teaching the learners appropriate word choice, sentence construction and figures of speech (Barone & Taylor 2006). The current-traditional approach emerged in the first half of the 20th century. It represents a form-focused approach dealing with the accuracy of the written output (Canagarajah 2001). It gives importance to the organization and structure of the text through the correct application of grammatical rules and the use of appropriate style (Burnett & Kastman 1997).

From the 1960's to the 1980's, writing instruction was shaped by the process movement embodied in expressivism and cognitivism. In fact, process-oriented models give importance to the different stages and traits of writing. Expressivism or the neoromantic approach became highly popular by the 1960's; it focuses on individual expression. The expressivist approach gives importance to the activities that aim at promoting writing fluency and style. In addition to this approach, cognitive rhetoric appeared in the 1980's. It is also called the writer-focused approach. It relies on the mental activities involved in written production. The cognitive process approach is based on the use of writing tasks turning around the generation and organization of ideas as well as activities related to revision and writing style (Canagarajah 2001).

The period of the mid 1980's witnessed the emergence of the post process perspective which views writing as a cultural activity (Williams 2014). It includes new rhetoric, writing across the curriculum and the social constructivist approach (Ferris & Hedgcock 2014). New rhetoric relies on the use of various recursive writing activities. However, writing across the curriculum (WAC) concerns the exploitation of the written language in specific contexts; it is based on realistic activities. Another approach that resembles (WAC) is writing in the disciplines (WID). The two approaches focus on the mastery of the conventions of academic discourse (Williams 2014). In the 1990's,

social constructivist rhetoric appeared. This approach hinges on developing collaborative writing and the students' awareness of writing processes (Burnett & Katsman 1997). In the 21st century, the teaching of the written language has been shaped by multiple perspectives to meet the learners' needs and cope with the new writing contexts resulting from the advance of technological means.

Therefore, composition instruction has witnessed a shift in its perspectives. Moreover, it is interrelated with the process of testing the writing skill whose development has also passed through different stages. In the mid-19th century, written tests became a popular tool of assessment. By the beginning of the 20th century, they were based on objective tasks as well as essay questions designed to be scored objectively. Starting from the 1950's, writing assessment took the form of indirect testing which focused on the evaluation of discrete features of writing (Barone & Taylor 2006); it required the use of the multiple choice test that often involved tasks assessing the students' mastery of vocabulary, punctuation, grammar and usage. In the 1960's, direct methods of writing assessment were introduced; they gave importance to the learners' actual writing performance. As a result, essay tests became popular in the 1970's (Neff-Lippman 2012).

In the 1980's, multiple-trait scoring systems were developed for the purpose of grading essays in an analytic way. For instance, the six trait writing assessment model was elaborated for the purpose of promoting the way of learning and teaching this skill (Barone & Taylor 2006); this model represents an analytic scoring rubric based on the evaluation of six main features including ideas, organization, word choice, conventions, fluency, voice and organization (Edwards, 1998). In 1995, the presentation trait was appended to this framework which became known as the 6+1 traits of writing model (Culham 2003). By the beginning of the 21st century, computer-based testing appeared as an additional tool of evaluating the written production. Hence, the writing skill is assessed through different methods that measure either the learners' overall performance or the distinct sub-skills of the writing

ability. Generally speaking, a set of features should be taken into consideration when judging the quality of the students' compositions. These aspects are highlighted in the subsequent title.

2. Writing Performance Traits

Different assessment methods are employed to elicit information about the learners' writing performance. Nevertheless, they are often criticized as they display a set of limitations. In fact, indirect assessment is characterized by objectivity and reliability but it neglects validity because it does not provide accurate data about the actual writing ability of the learners. On the other hand, the direct assessment of writing reflects validity since it supplies sufficient information about the students' capacity to produce a composition. However, it disregards the aspect of writing as a process (Neff-Lippman 2012). In addition to this, it often displays subjectivity in rating the learners' essays.

Actually, various types of scoring procedures exist; they include holistic, analytic and trait-based scoring. Holistic scoring is based on the formulation of an overall impression of the value of the written product (Hamp-Lyons 2003). Analytic scoring implies awarding separate scores to different aspects of writing. Trait-based scoring assesses writing on the basis of specific criteria; it is classified into two types: primary-trait and multiple-trait scoring. Primary-trait scoring represents a form of holistic rating that judges the written product with reference to a single feature (Hyland 2003). On the other hand, multiple-trait scoring is considered as synonymous to analytic rating (Hamp-Lyons 2003). This technique relies on rating each writing attribute separately to come out with a global score concerning the quality of the piece of writing (Barone & Taylor 2006).

These different scoring procedures denote distinct views of the nature of composition. In reality, writing performance may be viewed as a global entity relying on the writer's ideas and discourse knowledge. In this case, it is assessed via the use of holistic scoring requiring a general judgement that furnishes a single score reflecting the learners'

mastery of the written language. Even if it is based on a global evaluation, it is implicitly influenced by the scorer's appreciation of the writer's manipulation of various sub-skills affecting the quality of the text.

Hence, writing performance depends on the writer's knowledge which is subdivided into various categories embodying linguistic, topical, text-structure, rhetorical and metacognitive knowledge. Linguistic knowledge implies the writer's mastery of language including vocabulary and conventions. Topical or content knowledge means the information about the subject implicated in the writing task; it entails the writer's ideas. Text-structure knowledge refers to the aspect of organization. Rhetorical knowledge encompasses the writer's voice and the ability to adopt a proper individual style (Kellogg 1994). Metacognitive knowledge refers to the strategies used for harmonizing cognitive processes; it interferes in the process of writing as it helps the writer to control, verify and refine the structure and content of the written output (Mayer 2003); it is manifested in the application of strategies like planning, self-monitoring and self-evaluation.

Furthermore, writing performance engrosses not only the writer's knowledge but also his/her ability to encode and retrieve this knowledge in a fluent manner. In fact, fluency is considered as a measure of writing performance since it reveals the ability to produce a written text (Kellogg 1994). It refers to the aspect of variety in the type and length of sentences.

Writing performance depends on the trait of fluency as well as other features including the knowledge of vocabulary and conventions, topical information, the organization of ideas and the writer's style. Hence, it is a multifaceted variable involving various features that can be assessed via the use of analytic rating (Hamp-Lyons 2003). In fact, multiple-trait assessment may be employed as a diagnostic tool in order to identify the learners' writing difficulties (Barone & Taylor 2006). Thus, the marks given for the distinct features of the written product

may highlight the main compositional subs-skills that lie behind the students' deficiencies. This issue is tackled in the practical part which is described in the next section.

3. Methodology

This investigation dealt with the issues related to EFL learners' writing performance; it relied on the study of the case of third year university students for the purpose of achieving a set of research purposes that are explained below.

Research Objectives

EFL learners writing performance levels depend on their mastery of the different features of the written language. Moreover, they vary according to the nature of the writing task and the students' distinct abilities. Actually, certain EFL learners may face difficulties in producing essays. Thus, this study aimed at examining the students' performance in the distinct writing traits to know the major areas of weaknesses shaping written production. Moreover, it tried to elicit the main factors influencing the quality of the learners' written output. In order to explore these constraints, the researcher attempted to summarize the targeted problematic issues via the generation of the following questions

- 1- How do EFL learners perform in distinct writing tests?
- 2- How are the writing traits interrelated?
- 3- What are the main factors affecting the learners' writing performance traits?

The above questions led to the formulation of the following hypotheses:

- 1- EFL learners may perform differently in distinct writing tests depending on their degree of mastery of writing features and the nature of the assessment methods.

2- The different writing traits are interrelated since the students' non-mastery of one of these features may be associated to the deficiencies existing at the level of other writing traits.

3- The learners' writing performance traits may be affected by the lack of linguistic knowledge and/or the inadequate application of metacognitive knowledge.

In order to answer the aforementioned research questions and confirm or reject the stated hypotheses, the investigative procedure relied on gathering information from a sample including twenty-seven (27) students whose age ranged from 20 to 22 years old. These participants were third year EFL university learners; they studied English as a foreign language for nine (09) years. These learners voluntarily responded to the tests and interviews that were employed as research tools.

Research Instruments

The phase of data collection involved the use of two tests and unstructured interviews. First, an essay test was administered to evaluate the learners' writing performance level; it represented a direct testing of the writing skill by asking them to write a composition on the following topic:

'The case study is widely popular in the field of social sciences since it serves as a method of investigation about a variety of issues.' Comment

Figure 1: *Essay question*

After performing the test, the students were interviewed about the difficulties they found in writing the essay. Two weeks later, a second test was administered to the same group of learners; it attempted to assess their mastery of the distinct features of writing and to diagnose their deficiencies in this skill. It took the form of a discrete writing traits test that consisted of six subtests embodying distinct task types. The

first exercise dealt with the aspect of word choice. It was formulated as follows:

- 1- Choose the word that best expresses the idea**
- a- A research method studying an entity
- | | | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Case work | <input type="checkbox"/> Case study | <input type="checkbox"/> Case method |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
- b- A group of persons from whom the researcher collects information
- | | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> A case | <input type="checkbox"/> A sample | <input type="checkbox"/> Informants |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
- c- The use of multiple tools for data collection
- | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mixture | <input type="checkbox"/> Multiplicity | <input type="checkbox"/> Triangulation |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
- d- The act of repeating the experimental procedures
- | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Redundancy | <input type="checkbox"/> Replication | <input type="checkbox"/> Refinement |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|

Figure 2: *Word choice task*

Therefore, the above activity is in the form of a selected response task that assesses the learners' knowledge of vocabulary. The next activity tested the use of language conventions. It required the students to correct the mistakes found in a set of statements; it included three subtasks as it is shown below:

- 2-Correct the mistakes**
- a-** since the case study helps to provide a holistic description of a social unit such as an individual a group or a society it has been advocated by frederic le play as a method of inquiry in the domain of social research
- b-** The researcher has to choose an appropriate research topic taking into account the feasibility of the subject, the accessibility of the sample and the availability of references.
- c-** Data is seek from researcher of a sample. Then, inferences drew for the purpose of supply conclusions.

Figure 3: *Editing task*

Hence, the aforementioned limited-response task focuses on the correction of capitalization and punctuation, spelling and grammar mistakes. The subsequent exercise assessed the learners' writing fluency via two subtasks embodying the following questions:

3-a Expand the following sentence:

The case study is a method......

3-b Explain the weaknesses of the case study using the different types of sentences (simple, compound, complex, compound-complex)

Figure 4: *Writing fluency task*

In fact, the above subtest involves a short-response task composed of two subsections concerning sentence expansion and sentence variety. The next exercise which aimed at the evaluation of the students' content knowledge of the given topic was formulated as follows:

4- Generate a list of ideas on the importance of the case study.

.....
.....
.....

Figure 5: *Idea generation task*

Thus, this short response task requires the learners to list ideas in the form of notes. The following activity involved reordering sentences as it is illustrated in the upcoming figure:

5- Re-order the sentences:

- a-** The researcher identifies the research questions and hypotheses as well as the unit of analysis and research tools.
- b-** In the compositional phase, the findings are reported and summarized.
- c-** In a case study design, it is necessary to define the research objectives and elicit the investigative procedures.
- d-** Data are furnished through various means to be analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Figure 6: *Re-ordering task*

The above short-response task measures the feature of organization. On the other hand, the last subtest assessed the learners'

individual writing style through two subtasks including the following question:

<p>6-a- How do you view the case study method ?</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>6-b- Paraphrase the following statement: <i>“The case study is the method of choice when the phenomenon under study is not readily distinguishable from its context ” (Yin, 2003, p.4)</i></p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>

Figure 7: Writing style task

In fact, this short-response task is divided into two subsections. The first one required the students to provide a short response to an open-ended question by writing a sentence involving their personal opinion while the second subsection asked them to paraphrase the given quotation. Hence, it dealt with the trait of individual style. After accomplishing the second test, the learners were interviewed about the difficulties they encountered in performing each test task.

Concerning the evaluation of the students’ performance in the two tests, the scoring procedure was based on a 20 point scale. For the essay test, analytic rating was employed to grade the students’ compositions. Taking into consideration the features of multiple-trait scoring rubrics (Edwards 1998; Luongo-Orlando 2003; Hyland 2003), the researcher elaborated an evaluation grid which elicited the criteria utilized to rate the participants’ essays as it is illustrated in the subsequent rubric.

Table 1: Essay scoring rubric

Trait	Descriptor	Points	Total Score
Vocabulary knowledge	- Inappropriate vocabulary	0	2 pts
	- Limited vocabulary	1	
Conventions	- Consistent vocabulary	2	5 pts
	- No mastery of conventions	0	
	- Poor mastery of conventions	1	
	- Limited mastery of conventions	2	
	- Moderate mastery of conventions	3	
	- Extensive mastery of conventions	4	
Fluency	- Excellent mastery of conventions	5	3 pts
	- Incomplete sentences	0	
	- Minimal sentence variety and length	1	
	- Satisfactory sentence variety and length	2	
Content knowledge	- Exemplary sentence variety and length	3	5 pts
	- Vague ideas and inadequate details	0	
	- Unsatisfactory ideas and details	1	
	- Limited content and details	2	
	- Satisfactory ideas and details	3	
	- Good content knowledge	4	
Organization	- Very good ideas and relevant details	5	2 pts
	- Unstructured essay	0	
	- Partially organized essay	1	
	- Well-organized essay	2	
Individual style	- Inconsistent individual style	0	3 pts
	- Unsatisfactory individual style	1	
	- Consistent individual style	2	
	- Exceedingly appropriate individual style	3	

Regarding the grading of the discrete test, the rating procedure was developed by the researcher; it relied on a scoring scale subdivided into six subscales. The total score of each test task is mentioned in the following table.

Table 2: *The marking scale of the discrete test*

Task	Assessed Trait	Main score
Word choice	Vocabulary knowledge	2 pts
Editing	Conventions	5 pts
Writing fluency	Fluency	3 pts
Idea generation	Content knowledge	5 pts
Reordering	Organization	2 pts
Writing style	Individual style	3 pts

The collected data were analysed quantitatively using descriptive statistics. Also, correlation matrices were employed to study the interrelationships between the different traits in each test. Moreover, qualitative analysis was applied for the interpretation of the students' responses to the interviews as well as the content of the essays and test answers formulated by the learners. Finally, the analysis of the data collected from the different research instruments has furnished the following results.

4. Results

The analysed data were summarized for the purpose of providing evidence and details concerning the problematic issues tackled in the present study. The main findings are presented below.

Learners' Performance

Concerning the learners' performance in the two tests, twenty (20) students out of 27, representing 74.04%, performed well in the discrete test while the number of those who could write an essay successfully was just fourteen (14) representing 51.85%. In fact, the mean of the scores of the essay test was 10.04 while the mean of the discrete test was 12.19. The tests results are provided in the below figure.

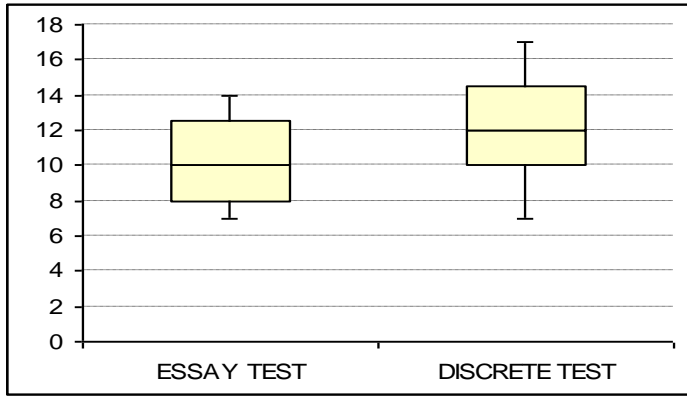


Figure 8: *Box plots of tests results*

From the above figure, it can be noticed that the maximum score achieved in the second test is higher than the one obtained in the first. Actually, only one student could reach the grade of 14 in the essay test while two learners managed to get 17 out of twenty in the discrete test. Generally speaking, the majority of the students scored higher in the second test. These results reveal the impact of the test task on the test scores. Thus, the learners' mental effort increases when writing an essay as they have to exploit all the writing traits together. On the other hand, the discrete test decreases the cognitive load by testing each writing trait separately. As a result, the students encounter difficulties in discourse production. This is why it was necessary to explore their deficiencies at the level of each writing feature as well as the interrelationship between the distinct writing traits.

Writing Traits Interrelationships

In fact, the diagnosis of the learners' writing deficiencies required the analysis of the scores obtained in each writing trait. However, the six subscales embodied in the rating rubrics of the two tests were dissimilar. Consequently, it was necessary to standardize the scores. Thus, the students' marks were converted into z-scores. This procedure gave the possibility to compare the grades attained in each

writing trait as it is illustrated in the following figure that concerns the essay results.

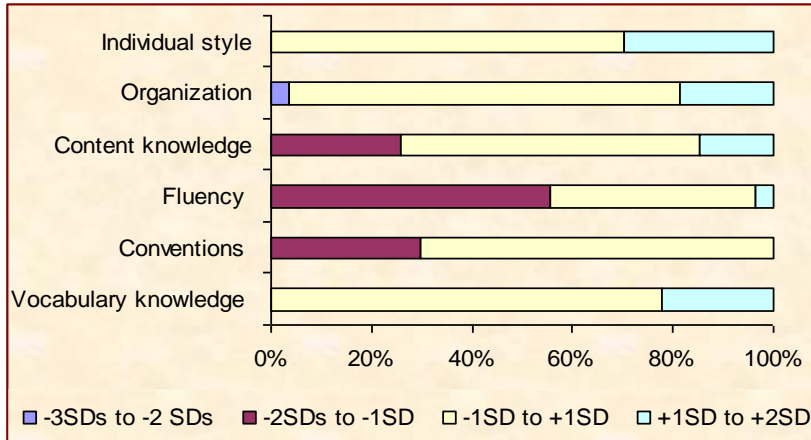


Figure 9: A 100% stacked bar chart of the essay scores

The above figure elicits that most of the learners' scores in the traits of vocabulary knowledge, organization and individual style spread around the average (± 1 SD). However, a considerable number of the students have a weak level of performance in fluency since 55.66% of the grades fall between two standard deviations and one standard deviation below the mean. Also, 29.63% of the marks assigned to conventions and 25.93% of the scores allotted to content knowledge lie within the same range of standard deviations implying that some students scored below the average in these two traits. Nevertheless, these weaknesses seem to decrease in the discrete test as it is demonstrated in the below figure.

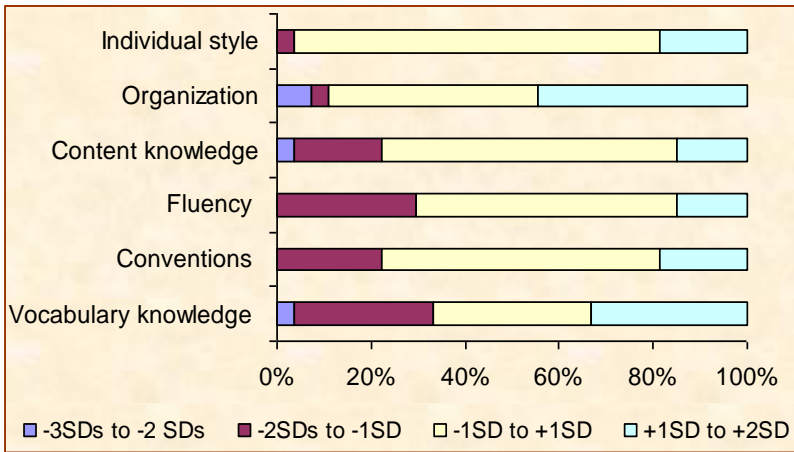


Figure 10: A 100% stacked bar chart of the discrete test scores

From the aforementioned figure, it can be noticed that 29.63% of the scores obtained in fluency fall between (-2 SDs) and (-1 SD) leading to the conclusion that this feature still constitutes a difficulty as well as conventions (22.22%) and content knowledge (18.52%). Nevertheless, these proportions reflect a lesser degree of weakness than the essay test. Moreover, the majority of the proportions of the traits scores reflecting a very good level of performance (+1 SD to +2 SDs) are higher in the discrete test.

In addition to the interpretation of the level of performance in each feature, the interrelationships between the distinct writing traits were analysed via the use of the standardized test scores. The results are displayed in the table below:

Table 3: *Correlation matrix of the essay test scores*

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.Vocabulary knowledge	1.00	.23	.17	.09	.22	.24
2.Conventions		1.00	.51**	.38*	.22	.53**
3.Fluency			1.00	.46*	.30	.73***
4.Content knowledge				1.00	.06	.37
5.Organization					1.00	.33
6.Individual style						1.00

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

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

*** Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed)

Therefore, the trait of conventions displays a moderate correlation with fluency (.51) and individual style (.53). Moreover, there is a strong relationship between fluency and individual style (.73) while the correlation is moderate between fluency and content knowledge (.46). Thus, these features are interrelated. In addition to this, conventions and fluency seem to be the dominant traits that determine the level of the students' performance. In order to corroborate these results, the scores obtained by the students in the discrete test were correlated leading to the generation of the following matrix:

Table 4: *Correlation matrix of the discrete test scores*

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.Vocabulary knowledge	1.00	.29	.02	.13	.25	-.02
2. Conventions		1.00	.14	.32	-.34	.23
3.Fluency			1.00	.62***	.16	.64***
4.Content knowledge				1.00	.01	.60***
5.Organization					1.00	.05
6.Individual style						1.00

*** Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed)

Hence, these results reveal that fluency strongly correlates with content knowledge (.62) and individual style (.64). Also, a strong relationship exists between content knowledge and individual style

(.60). This powerful correlation highlights the validity of short response tasks in measuring writing performance since the above traits were assessed via activities requiring note-jotting and the production of sentences. When comparing the two matrices, one can notice that fluency and individual style are the most prominent elements in the two tests; this means that they are the most interrelated features of writing performance. Another inference that can be drawn is that the relationship between conventions and the majority of the other traits is stronger in the essay production rather than the discrete writing tasks.

After highlighting the main interrelated writing traits, it was necessary to identify the main causes of the deficiencies at the level of each trait through the interpretation of the data collected from the interviews and the information elicited from the content of the students' responses to the tests.

Factors Affecting Writing Performance

The analysis of the students' interviews revealed a variety of opinions. When interviewed about the difficulties they faced in writing the essay, some learners mentioned the lack of vocabulary which led them to write just few sentences or use inconsistent words in their utterances; other students listed the non-mastery of grammar which pushed them to produce mistakes or write incomplete sentences. One student said that she had ideas about the subject but she could not write them; another one affirmed that he found a difficulty in coping with the type of the essay question since he preferred the open-ended question rather than commenting on a quotation. Generally speaking, good learners claimed that they had a problem of vocabulary while weak students stated they had various difficulties including the lack of linguistic and content knowledge. Thus, the learners seemed to have a sort of awareness of their writing deficiencies. However, they did not know exactly how to cope with them.

In order to validate the aforementioned opinions, the written essays were analysed to diagnose the students' weaknesses. The below table summarizes their main writing difficulties.

Table 5: Learners' writing deficiencies

Deficiencies	Main aspects	Examples
Lack of vocabulary	Inadequate word choice	- The case study cares about people's behaviour. - that is successfully efficient - The case study is concerned as a method of research.
	Redundant vocabulary use	- It helps to study...and gives a general description...it helps them to generalize...and gives rich data...it helps to understand social units.
Non-mastery of language conventions	Capitalization and punctuation mistakes	- it is dealing with society and social activities so there is a big relationship between social sciences and the case study
	Spelling mistakes	- domaine – intrested – focusses inappropriate – sollutions
	Grammar mistakes	- a reliable data – in the other hand- the researcher is ought to use his feelings- such method help.
Lack of fluency	Use of choppy sentences	It is necessary to have time management to analyse and interpret - since it studies people's behaviour and relationship between them - Also studies the object directly
Insufficient content knowledge	Irrelevant information	- It is utilized regularly by researchers. - This method helps the learner to learn in his society
	Repetition of statements	-...deals with an object or situation...focuses on the studied unit... takes one single unit or situation.
Lack of organization	Lack of coherence	- It describes and analyses the studied object... This method deals with one entity - It helps to provide solutions...the case study consists of analysing one element.

	Lack of cohesive devices	- The case study deals with an object. The case study is very popular. It gives rich data. It has positive and negative aspects.
Inappropriate style	Lack of clarity	- It generalizes all problems. - He may give his hypothesis - It extends experiences - You use the following characteristics.
	Use of second-person pronoun	- It helps you to have a global idea and it helps you to specify your domain.

From the above table, it can be noticed that the learners' weaknesses are related to the form and the content of the essay. Some of them do not have sufficient vocabulary. However, a considerable number of students have problems of style, organization, non mastery of conventions and fluency while a few of them do not possess enough content knowledge. Generally speaking, the learners who have an average level of performance exhibit some weaknesses in word choice and organization whereas low performers display deficiencies in all the writing aspects especially the traits of conventions, fluency and style.

Regarding the discrete test; some students had a difficulty in providing correct answers to the majority of the task items. The following figure gives an idea about the number of learners getting 100% correct responses in each task.

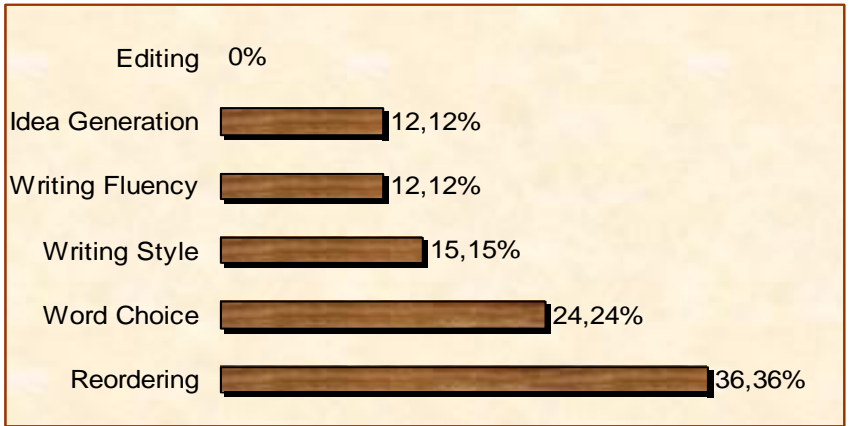


Figure 11: Bar graph representing the percentage of the students achieving a 100% task response rate

Hence, it can be inferred that the rate of the students' right answers varied from an activity to the other. For the word choice task, most of the learners have weaknesses at the level of the revision process since just eight of them could make an accurate selection of the appropriate word. Concerning the second exercise, no one could obtain a 100% correct response for the grammar subtask. This implies that they have a deficit in editing. Moreover, a low response rate was achieved in the subtests of idea generation and writing fluency since each task was successfully accomplished by four students. Thus, a considerable number of learners face difficulties at the level of the elaboration and retrieval of information. For the reordering task, twelve (12) students identified the correct order of the sentences while the majority could not find the right sequencing of the given utterances; consequently, they have deficiencies related to the organization and revision of sentences. For the last task, just five learners could effectively paraphrase the given quote. This result reveals a weakness at the level of the elaboration of information.

When interviewed about the causes of the incorrect responses that were produced in the discrete writing tasks, the students provided

different answers. Regarding the word choice task, some learners said that they could not find the correct word. Therefore, they have a problem of vocabulary recognition. However, other students claimed that they made a wrong word choice because they did not focus on the provided alternatives; this means that the absence of noticing has resulted in their inadequate vocabulary selection. As far as the editing task was concerned, the majority of the students stated that they could not identify the mistakes; this leads to the conclusion that they lack self monitoring. Concerning the activity of writing fluency, most of the learners said that they had a difficulty in remembering the structure of the compound-complex sentence. This means that they have a problem of recall. Regarding the reordering subtest, the students who could not sort out the correct order of the given sentences claimed that they did not concentrate on the sequences of ideas. This statement reflects inadequate revision resulting from the lack of self-monitoring. For the writing style task, the majority of the learners stated that they had difficulties in paraphrasing; some of them concluded that they needed to practise the writing skill via a variety of exercises.

Generally speaking, the results of the interviews represent the learners' self evaluation of the difficulties they encounter while manipulating the different writing traits for the sake of producing a written output. Furthermore, the content of the test was analysed to get an idea about their writing weaknesses. The conclusion was that the low performing students could not select the right words in the first task; this failure in word recognition may also happen while reading an essay question as they can not identify the exact meaning of the key words which leads them to produce irrelevant ideas.

In addition to inadequate word choice, the non-mastery of conventions is an obstacle that may hinder the students' performance. Such a difficulty can be elicited from the outcome of the editing task which reflected deficiencies in error detection faced by the weak learners while those students whose performance was average could identify the majority of the mistakes but they displayed a weakness in

error correction. This lack of linguistic knowledge is also depicted in the results of the writing fluency subtest which revealed that certain learners have difficulties in writing sentences; in the subtask of sentence expansion, weak students displayed a lack of vocabulary since the number of words they added ranged from six (06) to ten (10) words while the number of words provided by good performers ranged from eight (08) to fourteen (14). For the sentence production subtask, the variety and length of the generated utterances varied according to the level of the learners as it is illustrated in the following table.

Table 6: *Type and length range of the produced sentences*

Students' level	Type of produced utterances	Sentence length Range
Weak	Simple - Complex	07-15
Average	Simple - Compound - Complex	09-22
Good	Simple - Compound - Complex Compound-complex	10-34

Therefore, low performing learners could not provide lengthy sentences; they have weaknesses at the level of linguistic knowledge and fluency which affects their retrieval of ideas as their performance in the idea generation test has elicited that the majority of them provided only two ideas out of five and their notes were shorter than the ones supplied by good performers. On the other hand, some students whose level was average generated ideas but they did not organize them. This lack of organization seems to stem from insufficient reasoning. Such an assumption can be inferred from the learners' responses to the reordering task which reflected the inability of some students to guess the logical sequencing of the given statements. This problem was mainly encountered by low performing students who also revealed their incapability to paraphrase the statement given in the last subtest. Hence, they have a difficulty in elaborating and translating the ideas using their own personal style. Moreover, this category of learners produced spelling and grammar errors when they wrote notes or sentences. This

means that they could not identify and correct their own mistakes due to weak self-monitoring. Generally speaking, the results of the discrete test corroborate that some students have deficiencies in each writing trait leading to the inference that their production of a written composition will be definitely affected by such weaknesses.

5. Discussion and Suggestions

The process of testing EFL learners' writing performance is influenced by various factors including the task type and the kind of rating scale. In fact, the task type may affect the level of the students' performance since the activities requiring sentence writing may be harder than the ones involving discourse production. From the results of the two tests used as research instruments, it has been inferred that the scores obtained by the learners in the discrete test were better than those of the essay although the two tests dealt with the same content. This conclusion leads to the confirmation of the first hypothesis which assumes that the writing performance level varies from a test to another. In fact, discrete writing assessment can constitute a useful diagnostic tool that helps to identify the learners' weaknesses. Nevertheless, it does not provide sufficient information about the students' writing ability which is better elicited via extended response tasks. On the other hand, the essay test represents the best way of assessing written production since it requires the learners to manipulate various types of knowledge in order to generate a piece of written discourse. Thus, it is more valid and authentic. However, it is a difficult task since it involves a query that pushes the writer to recall information and rely on his/her personal style. This is why some students may not perform well in essay tests because of their insufficient knowledge of writing features.

The analysis of the scores obtained by the learners in the two tests has revealed that the main traits that may hinder the level of writing performance are conventions and fluency. In addition to this, the results of the study have also highlighted the prominence of content knowledge and style as influential features. In fact, there is an

interrelationship between the different features of written composition since the students' weak manipulation of some traits leads them to fail in mastering the other ones. Thus, the second hypothesis is confirmed to a certain extent. Generally speaking, low performing learners tend to have difficulties in all writing traits. This is why it was necessary to investigate the factors lying behind these weaknesses through the analysis of the interviews and the content of the students' responses to the tests. It has been found out that certain students have a weak performance level in fluency, content knowledge and style due to the insufficiency of their linguistic knowledge of the target language while the lack of awareness of writing strategies seems to affect the learners' performance in the majority of writing traits. These results validate the last hypothesis.

Generally speaking, there are various factors that influence the learners' writing performance. This is why the teachers should focus not only on teaching the main elements of the written language but also the strategies that help the students to become efficient writers. Hence, a combination of the major principles of writing approaches is needed. Additionally, the writing processes have to be taken into consideration by training the learners to plan, compose, revise and edit their compositions via the use of a set of activities moving gradually from those exercises that entail the decomposition of the writing skill into separate stages including prewriting, composing and reviewing such as asking the students to provide an outline, summarize a text or revise a given passage to those tasks that are based on the recursive aspect of writing processes like producing a written report or writing an essay. Moreover, it is necessary to develop the learners' linguistic knowledge through a variety of activities involving the use of vocabulary, mechanics and grammatical structures. Thus, they should be encouraged to read books or texts and exploit the new vocabulary acquired from reading to generate a written product.

Furthermore, the teachers should raise the students' awareness of the different factors that may influence their writing performance.

For instance, it is essential to develop their knowledge of the function of memory processes in learning vocabulary and grammatical structures as well as the memory strategies that help them to recall and retrieve information. Also, the development of the learners' metacognitive knowledge enables them to overcome the difficulties they may encounter while writing. This is why more attention should be directed to planning, self-monitoring and self evaluation which can be promoted through the practice of writing activities and discussions about the main strategies employed by the students in each given task. Since writing performance depends on various features, the teachers have to develop the students' linguistic knowledge, fluency and style via the utilization of tasks that incorporate the application of writing traits at the level of the utterance and discourse production. Moreover, continuous assessment of writing helps to promote this skill through the provision of feedback which increases the learners' awareness of the different types of mistakes they make when writing sentences, paragraphs and essays so that they can improve the quality of their compositions.

6. Conclusion

Writing constitutes an important element in learning a foreign language; it is a complex skill incorporating various cognitive processes that are employed to produce a written output conveyed to a specific audience according to the writer's goals. This implies that writing performance represents an entity resulting from the interaction of various components; its level may increase or decrease depending on the degree of the mastery of the writing features. In fact, the collection of information about EFL learners' abilities and their awareness of the different writing traits enables the teachers to know about their students' areas of weaknesses and provide remedies to their writing deficiencies. Hence, the assessment of writing performance should focus on the nature of writing as a process and product; it has to serve not only as an evaluation tool but also as a diagnostic instrument.

The present study has demonstrated that some EFL learners have certain difficulties in generating a composition. The results of the essay and the discrete test were examined to highlight the weaknesses existing at the level of writing performance traits. Another important conclusion that can be drawn is that the combination of direct and indirect tasks helps to promote the learning, teaching and testing of writing. Moreover, multiple-trait assessment can be used as a means of diagnosis and improvement of EFL learners' linguistic abilities. Generally speaking, the mastery of writing features results in the production of an accurate and fluent composition. However, it is not the only element that influences EFL learners' writing performance since the methods of assessment, the type of the writing tasks, the test content, the scoring procedure and the students' motivation also play an important role in determining the quality of their written output.

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