Cognitive and Rhetorical Writing Difficulties among Libyan EFL Learners: (A Study at the Faculty of Education, Fezzan University).

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Abstract

Writing in English as a foreign language remains a significant challenge for university students, particularly in under-researched educational contexts. This study explores the major writing difficulties encountered by Libyan EFL learners at the Faculty of Education, Fezzan University. Using a descriptive–analytical design, data were collected from a purposive sample of 22 students through a mixed-method questionnaire that combined Likert-scale items with open-ended questions to capture both quantitative patterns and qualitative perspectives. Internal consistency reliability was examined for the quantitative items, and qualitative data were thematically analyzed to strengthen interpretive depth.

The findings show that the most substantial difficulties are cognitive and rhetorical rather than purely linguistic. Students struggle primarily with expressing ideas clearly (68.2%) and organizing them coherently (54.5%). Vocabulary limitation emerged as the most frequently reported specific obstacle. These challenges are aggravated by students' reliance on L1 (Arabic) translation and a perceived instructional focus on grammatical accuracy (63.6%), which seems to overshadow strategy-based instruction in process writing. In addition, the study reveals a lack of consistent process-oriented feedback that could support learners in developing more effective writing practices. Overall, the results suggest that learners' writing difficulties stem from a complex interaction of linguistic competence, cognitive processing demands, and pedagogical practices. The study proposes a pedagogical framework emphasizing explicit strategy training, structured multi-draft feedback, and enhanced vocabulary support. This research contributes new empirical evidence from a largely under-explored Libyan university context, offering insight into how cognitive, rhetorical, and instructional factors shape EFL writing performance.

Keywords: Writing Difficulties, Academic Writing, Libyan EFL Learners, Pedagogical Implications, Process-Oriented Instruction, Feedback.

الصعوبات الإدراكية والبلاغية في الكتابة لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في ليبيا: (دراسة في كلية التربية، جامعة فزان)

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الملخص

تعد الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية تحديًا كبيرًا لطلاب الجامعات، لا سيما في السياقات التعليمية

غير المدروسة جيدًا. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف الصعوبات الرئيسية في الكتابة التي يواجهها متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في كلية التربية، جامعة فزان. استخدمت الدراسة تصميمًا وصفيًا تحليليًا، وجُمعت البيانات من عينة محددة من 22 طالبًا باستخدام استبيان يجمع بين أسئلة بمقياس ليكرت وأسئلة مفتوحة، لالتقاط الأنماط الكمية ووجهات النظر النوعية. وتم تحليل الثبات الداخلي للعناصر الكمية، بينما تمت معالجة البيانات النوعية موضوعيًا لتعزيز التفسير. أظهرت النتائج أن الصعوبات الأساسية كانت إدراكية وبلاغية أكثر منها لغوية. واجه الطلاب صعوبة في التعبير عن الأفكار بوضوح (68.2%) وتنظيمها بشكل متماسك (54.5%)، وكان نقص المفردات أبرز العقبات المحددة. وتتفاقم هذه التحديات بسبب اعتماد الطلاب على الترجمة من العربية وتركيز التعليم على الدقة النحوية (63.6%)، ما يطغى على تعليم استراتيجيات الكتابة العملية. كما أظهرت الدراسة نقصًا في التغذية الراجعة المستمرة الموجهة نحو العملية، ما يحد من فرص تطوير مهارات الكتابة بفاعلية. تشير النتائج إلى أن صعوبات الكتابة تنشأ من تفاعل معقد بين الكفاءة اللغوية، ومتطلبات المعالجة الإدراكية، والممارسات التربوية. وتقترح الدراسة إطارًا تربويًا يركز على تدريب الاستراتيجيات بوضوح، وتقديم تغذية راجعة متعددة المسودات، وتعزيز المفردات، لتطوير الكتابة الأكاديمية لدى الطلاب في سياقات مشابهة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: صعوبات الكتابة باللغة الثانية، الكتابة الأكاديمية، متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في ليبيا، الآثار التربوية، التعليم الموجه بالعمليات، التغذية الراجعة

1. Introduction

Writing is widely recognised as one of the most cognitively demanding dimensions of second language development. It requires learners to coordinate lexical, grammatical, rhetorical, and discourse-level knowledge while managing the cognitive load of planning, organising, and expressing ideas in a coherent written form (Hyland, 2016; Weigle, 2002). Despite extensive classroom exposure, many L2 and EFL writers continue to experience difficulty constructing clear arguments, maintaining coherence, and selecting appropriate linguistic forms (Ferris, 2011; Hinkel, 2004). Understanding the nature of these challenges remains essential for informing theory-driven pedagogical approaches within TESOL.

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region—and Libya in particular—writing instruction in university English programs is undergoing rapid change, yet research on L2/ EFL writing development has not kept pace with classroom realities. Existing studies have typically focused on surface-level errors or general proficiency, offering limited insight into the cognitive and rhetorical demands placed on L2/EFL writers in higher education. There is currently no empirical research examining how linguistic, cognitive, and instructional factors intersect to shape writing difficulties among students in the English Department at Fezzan University. This lack of context-specific investigation represents a notable gap in the regional TESOL literature, where process writing, feedback practices, and learner strategy use remain under-examined.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the specific writing difficulties experienced by EFL learners at Fezzan University and by analysing how linguistic limitations, cognitive load, and pedagogical practices contribute to these challenges. Adopting a descriptive–analytical approach, the study aims to extend current TESOL scholarship by offering contextually grounded evidence from an under-researched setting. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions on the role of

instructional design, feedback practices, and strategy-focused pedagogy in supporting EFL writers, and they highlight areas for strengthening writing instruction in comparable EFL contexts

Research Problem

Although EFL writing difficulties have been widely studied in many contexts, there is a lack of empirical evidence focusing on EFL learners in the English Department at the Faculty of Education, Fezzan University. Specifically, little is known about how linguistic and pedagogical factors converge in this context to impede students' writing performance. Without such localized insight, curriculum designers and instructors may be unable to implement effective interventions.

Research Questions

To guide the investigation and address the aims of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

Main Research Question

What are the main writing difficulties faced EFL learners in the English Department at the Faculty of Education, Fezzan University?

Sub-Research Questions

1. What linguistic and pedagogical factors contribute to these writing difficulties among EFL learners?

2. What instructional practices and support mechanisms can be implemented to enhance EFL learners' writing performance at the university level?

Hypotheses

The study is guided by the following hypotheses:

H_1: The writing difficulties experienced by EFL learners at Fezzan University are largely attributable to limited exposure to authentic English text and insufficient opportunities for structured writing practice (Hyland, 2016; Nation, 2013).

H_2: Pedagogical practices that prioritize accuracy-focused instruction significantly contribute to challenges in coherence, organization, and the overall writing process among EFL learners (Ferris, 2011; Raimes, 1983; Lee, 2017).

H_3: EFL learners who receive systematic formative feedback and explicit guidance in process-based writing demonstrate measurable improvement in coherence, organization, and overall writing quality (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Evans et al., 2010).

Research Objectives

This study aims to systematically identify the principal writing difficulties encountered by EFL learners at Fezzan University, analyze the underlying linguistic and instructional factors contributing to these challenges, and formulate a targeted framework of pedagogical strategies to enhance writing performance and instruction.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Writing and Writing Proficiency

Writing is a complex, multidimensional activity central to knowledge construction and communication. It functions both as a cognitive tool, enabling learners to plan, organize, and refine ideas, and as a social activity, shaped by audience expectations and discourse conventions (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Hyland, 2003). Effective writing integrates higher-order skills—argumentation, idea development, and rhetorical awareness—with lower-order skills such as grammar, vocabulary, and syntax (Weigle, 2002; Kellogg, 2008). For this study, writing is defined as a purposeful

social and cognitive process through which meaning is negotiated and communicated.

2.2 Challenges in ESL/EFL Writing

Writing in a second language is cognitively demanding, requiring learners to manage language encoding, idea generation, and text organization simultaneously (Silva, 1993; Weigle, 2002). Even proficient learners often produce texts that lack fluency, coherence, or rhetorical sophistication.

2.3 Linguistic and Rhetorical Difficulties

Grammar and vocabulary are consistently reported as the most persistent obstacles for ESL/ EFL writers (Ferris, 2011; Hinkel, 2004). L1 interference can cause syntactic, lexical, and collocational errors (Odlin, 1989). Beyond sentence-level issues, learners often struggle with paragraph unity, coherence, and argument structure, as discourse conventions vary across cultures (Kaplan, 1966; Hyland, 2003; Connor, 2011).

2.4 Cognitive, Affective, and Pedagogical Factors

Cognitive constraints (e.g., limited working memory, underdeveloped writing strategies) and affective factors (e.g., anxiety, low self-efficacy, motivation) significantly affect writing performance (Manchón, 2011; Cheng, 2002; Zhou et al., 2022). Pedagogical practices also influence outcomes: process-oriented instruction and formative feedback enhance writing development, while overemphasis on grammar can limit rhetorical and strategic growth (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014; Hyland & Hyland, 2019; Raimes, 1983; Lee, 2017).

2.5 Previous Studies

Research on ESL/EFL writing has identified a range of linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors that influence learners' writing outcomes, placing significant cognitive demands on them. Studies on Saudi EFL writers, for instance, illustrate this complexity. الزهراني (2024) identified vocabulary and grammar as primary hurdles, while Alqahtani & Alhamami (2024) highlighted deeper structural and rhetorical issues, such as difficulty formulating a thesis and structuring introductions and conclusions. Beyond cataloging difficulties, these studies seek to explain their root causes. الزهراني points to inadequate foundational skills and L1 interference, whereas Alqahtani & Hamami (2024) emphasize pedagogical factors, including the role of the lecturer and the poor implementation of technology. A common thread, however, is the proposed solution: both studies, along with the earlier Jordanian study by Ibnian (2017), point toward the strategic use of technology and curricular reforms as essential pathways for improving EFL writing outcomes.

The misalignment between student and instructor perspectives is another critical factor. A study by Lekamge & Jenan (2024) on L2 science undergraduates revealed a critical disconnect between student and lecturer perspectives. While students primarily struggled with discrete linguistic features like grammar and vocabulary, lecturers focused on broader, holistic issues such as argumentation and research integrity. Their findings underscore the need for tailored pedagogical interventions, including targeted writing models, to effectively address the distinct needs of L2 learners in scientific disciplines.

At the core of many writing challenges is inadequate linguistic knowledge. Second language learners frequently struggle with vocabulary size, grammatical accuracy, lexical choice, and syntactic complexity (DasBender, 2016; Leki, 2007). In a study of first-year L2 writers, for instance, Okumuş & Ceylan (2019) found that this inadequate linguistic knowledge led students to over-focus on "how to say" rather than "how to write," hindering the development of their ideas.

Beyond linguistic competence, learner beliefs, self-efficacy, anxiety, prior writing experience, and instructional contexts play crucial roles. Zhou et al. (2022) found that L2 writing anxiety negatively affected self-efficacy, which in turn influenced writing engagement. Their study confirmed that learners with higher writing self-efficacy engaged more in writing tasks and achieved better outcomes. Similarly, Tanyer & Susoy (2019) identified three main sources of perceived writing difficulty: student-based sources, educational practice, and lecturer-based sources, showing a negative correlation between perceived difficulty and writing scores.

The literature thus suggests that linguistic difficulties and pedagogical shortcomings are not independent; rather, they interact dynamically. Learners with limited vocabulary may become anxious if pedagogy overemphasises error avoidance. Conversely, even proficient learners may struggle if instruction ignores rhetorical awareness or writing strategy knowledge (Habib et al., 2015). Therefore, writing difficulties stem from a combination of linguistic competence limitations and instructional contexts. In Libya, empirical studies remain sparse, particularly in universities like Fezzan University, leaving gaps in understanding how local instructional practices, cognitive factors, and linguistic competence interact to shape writing outcomes (Okumuş & Ceylan, 2019; Zhou et al., 2022). The present study extends this line of inquiry to the specific, under-researched context of Fezzan University.

2.6 Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature, this study adopts a framework in which writing difficulties are viewed as arising from the interaction of three key dimensions: linguistic competence, cognitive-affective factors, and pedagogical practices. Limitations in vocabulary or grammar can interact with anxiety, self-efficacy, or strategy use, while instructional contexts—such as feedback quality and process-oriented teaching—mediate how these difficulties manifest. This framework provides a lens for investigating writing challenges among EFL learners at Fezzan University.

3. Research Methodology

This section outlines the methodological framework used to investigate the writing difficulties of students at the Faculty of Education, Traghen, University of Fezzan. It describes the research design, participants, data collection instrument, procedures, and ethical considerations.

3.1. Research Design

The study employed a descriptive–analytical design to explore the writing difficulties of EFL learners. This design allowed for the systematic collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, providing a comprehensive understanding of linguistic, cognitive, and pedagogical factors influencing writing performance.

3.2. Participants

3.2.1 Research Population

The target population comprised undergraduate students from 3rd semester and above, majoring in English Language Teaching at the Faculty of Education, Traghen, during the 2025–2026 academic year. These students are expected to develop advanced writing skills essential for their professional training. Key characteristics of the population are summarized in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Population Characteristics

Characteristic	Description
Total Population	Approximately 40 students
Academic Levels	3rd semester to 10th semester
Age Range	19-25 years

Program	Bachelor's degree in English Language Teaching

This population represents students who are expected to develop advanced writing skills as a core component of their professional preparation.

3.2.2   Sample and Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique selected 22 students (55% of the population) with relevant academic writing experience. Inclusion criteria:

- Enrollment in the English Language Teaching program
- Completion of foundational writing courses (Fundamental Writing and Paragraph Writing)
- Representation across academic levels (3rd–10th semester)

A final sample of 22 students (55% of the population) participated. Sample distributions by academic level and age are presented in Tables 3.2 and 3.3.

Table 3.2 Sample Distribution by Academic Level

Academic Level	Number of Students	Percentage
Third Semester	4	18.2%
Fourth Semester	1	4.5%
Fifth Semester	7	31.8%
Sixth Semester	1	4.5%
Seventh Semester	1	4.5%
Eighth Semester	2	9.1%
Other (9th-10th Semester)	6	27.3%
Total	22	100%

Table 3.3 Sample Distribution by Age

Age Range	Number of Students	Percentage
18-19 years	4	18.2%
20-22 years	16	72.7%
23-25 years	2	9.1%
Total	22	100%

3.3 The research instrument

Data were collected using a self-developed questionnaire with five sections:

- Section A: Demographics
- Section B: Self-assessment of writing skills
- Section C: Specific writing difficulties
- Section D: Exposure to writing instruction
- Section E: Attitudes toward writing

Open-ended questions were included to provide qualitative insights into participants' experiences and challenges.

3.3.1 Validation and Reliability

The questionnaire was validated by three experienced EFL instructors for clarity, relevance, and coverage. Minor revisions were made based on their feedback. A pilot test with five students from a similar context confirmed item clarity and usability. Quantitative sections demonstrated strong reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.87).

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

Participants completed the questionnaire under supervised conditions. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were thematically coded to identify patterns and insights into writing difficulties.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Participants received an information sheet explaining the study's purpose and voluntary participation. Informed consent was obtained, and responses were anonymized and securely stored.

In summary, this study employed a descriptive-analytical framework, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data through a structured questionnaire. The methodology, encompassing instrument development, data collection from 22 participants, and analytical procedures, was designed to systematically explore writing difficulties at Fezzan University. Despite the limited sample size, the rigorous approach ensures the findings offer a valuable contribution to understanding these challenges.

4 Data analysis and Discussion

This section presents the analysis of data collected on the writing difficulties faced by EFL learners in the English Department at Fezzan University. A five-section questionnaire was used to explore the major contributing factors. The participants' responses were converted into numerical data and are presented using descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies and percentages, in the tables that follow. With a consistent sample size of 22 respondents for most items, the analysis provides a clear summary of the identified challenges.

Table. 4.1 Self-Assessment of Writing Skills Factors

Writing Skill Area / Items	Strong & Very Strong	Average	Weak & Very Weak	Dominant Response
Using correct grammar	10 (45.5%)	0 (0%)	12 (54.5%)	Polarized (Strong vs. Weak)
Using appropriate vocabulary	1 (4.5%)	14 (63.6%)	7 (31.8%)	Moderate (63.6%)
Organizing ideas logically	6 (27.3%)	12 (54.5%)	4 (18.2%)	Moderate (54.5%)
Writing coherent essays	3 (13.6%)	10 (45.5%)	9 (40.9%)	Nearly Split (Moderate->Weak)
Using transition signals	2 (9.1%)	11 (50.0%)	9 (40.9%)	Moderate (50.0%)
Writing introductions/conclusions	5 (22.7%)	10 (45.5%)	7 (31.8%)	Moderate (45.5%)
Editing and revising	3 (13.6%)	13 (59.1%)	6 (27.3%)	Moderate (59.1%)

Table 4.1 shows the analysis of writing competencies that reveals a sharply bifurcated profile for grammatical accuracy, with 45.5% (n=10) of respondents demonstrating strong proficiency while 54.5% (n=12) fall into the weak range, resulting in a distinct polarization for this skill. In stark contrast, performance in

most other domains is predominantly moderate. This is particularly evident in the use of appropriate vocabulary, where 63.6% (n=14) of writers were rated moderate, and in editing and revising skills, at 59.1% (n=13). A notable area of concern, however, is essay coherence. The distribution for this skill—45.5% (n=10) moderate versus 40.9% (n=9) weak—suggests a tenuous grasp of creating unified texts, a challenge mirrored in the use of transition signals, which also trends from a moderate 50.0% (n=11) toward a weak 40.9% (n=9). These patterns indicate that while foundational skills are developing, significant instructional focus is required to help writers integrate ideas into a cohesive whole.

Table 4.2 Key Descriptive Statistics on Writing Difficulties (Grouped for Problematic frequency)

Difficulty	Often & Always	Sometimes	Rarely & Never	Most Frequent Category
Struggle to express ideas clearly	15 (68.2%)	5 (22.7%)	2 (9.1%)	Often/Always (68.2%)
Have trouble organizing ideas	12 (54.5%)	8 (36.4%)	2 (9.1%)	Often/Always (54.5%)
Often translate from Arabic	11 (50.0%)	7 (31.8%)	4 (18.2%)	Often/Always (50.0%)
Make many grammatical mistakes	7 (31.8%)	12 (54.5%)	3 (13.6%)	Sometimes (54.5%)
Don't know how to use linking words	9 (40.9%)	9 (40.9%)	4 (18.2%)	Tie (Sometimes/Often)
Don't understand academic style	10 (45.5%)	8 (36.4%)	4 (18.2%)	Often/Always (45.5%)
Find writing time-consuming	8 (36.4%)	11 (50.0%)	3 (13.6%)	Sometimes (50.0%)
Hard to use wide vocabulary	5 (22.7%)	11 (50.0%)	6 (27.3%)	Sometimes (50.0%)
Feel anxious/nervous	5 (22.7%)	10 (45.5%)	7 (31.8%)	Sometimes (45.5%)
Difficulty following feedback	4 (18.2%)	8 (36.4%)	10 (45.5%)	Rarely/Never (45.5%)

Table 4.2 indicates that the most profound challenges in writing are cognitive and rhetorical in nature, rather than being purely grammatical. A significant majority of respondents frequently struggle with higher-order concerns, as 68.2% (n=15) often or always find it difficult to express ideas clearly, and 54.5% (n=12) report consistent trouble organizing their thoughts. This foundational struggle with ideation and structure is compounded for half of the writers (50.0%, n=11) by the frequent reliance on translating from Arabic, suggesting that cognitive load is a central barrier. While grammatical mistakes are most commonly a sporadic issue (54.5%, n=12), difficulties with the conventions of academic style, such as using linking words and understanding formal tone, persist as frequent problems for a substantial portion of the cohort. Interestingly, the process itself is not overwhelmingly daunting; following feedback, for instance, is rarely or never a difficulty for 45.5% (n=10). This profile suggests that the primary obstacles lie not at the sentence level but at the conceptual and discourse levels, where forming and structuring ideas in the target language presents the greatest hurdle.

Table 4.3 Descriptive Statistics (Grouped for Agreement/Disagreement) on Exposure to Writing Instruction:

Statement about Instruction	Agree & Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree & Strongly Disagree	Dominant Response
Writing helps me organize ideas	16 (72.7%)	5 (22.7%)	1 (4.5%)	Agree (72.7%)
Assignments connected to real life	15 (68.2%)	6 (27.3%)	1 (4.5%)	Agree (68.2%)
Teachers provide clear explanations	13 (59.1%)	7 (31.8%)	2 (9.1%)	Agree (59.1%)
Teachers focus on grammar mistakes	14 (63.6%)	4 (18.2%)	4 (18.2%)	Agree (63.6%)
Encouraged to write multiple drafts	11 (50.0%)	5 (22.7%)	6 (27.3%)	Agree (50.0%)
Have enough time and support	10 (45.5%)	5 (22.7%)	7 (31.8%)	Agree (45.5%)
Receive regular feedback	9 (40.9%)	10 (45.5%)	3 (13.6%)	Neutral (45.5%)
Peer feedback is used	5 (22.7%)	12 (54.5%)	5 (22.7%)	Neutral (54.5%)

An analysis of instructional exposure, as detailed in Table 4.3, reveals that learners predominantly perceive their writing instruction as valuable and teacher-centered. A strong majority agree that writing helps them organize ideas (72.7%, n=16) and that assignments are connected to real-life contexts (68.2%, n=15), indicating an appreciation for the cognitive and practical benefits of the curriculum. Instruction appears to be clearly explained (59.1%, n=13) with a pronounced emphasis on grammatical accuracy, which 63.6% (n=14) of respondents acknowledge. However, a shift is evident when examining process-oriented and collaborative practices. While half of the learners (50.0%, n=11) feel encouraged to write multiple drafts, agreement drops considerably regarding the sufficiency of time and support (45.5%, n=10). Furthermore, the dominant response shifts to neutrality on the receipt of regular feedback (45.5%, n=10) and the use of peer feedback (54.5%, n=12), suggesting these learner-centered components are less consistently implemented or perceived in the current instructional environment.

Table 4.4 Descriptive Statistics (Grouped for Agreement/Disagreement) on Attitudes Toward Writing

Attitude Statement	Agree & Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree & Strongly Disagree	Dominant Response
Writing should be taught step-by-step	19 (86.4%)	3 (13.6%)	0 (0%)	Agree (86.4%)
Good writing is essential for career	15 (68.2%)	6 (27.3%)	1 (4.5%)	Agree (68.2%)
Writing improves language skills	20 (90.9%)	1 (4.5%)	1 (4.5%)	Agree (90.9%)
Feedback helps me become better	18 (81.8%)	3 (13.6%)	1 (4.5%)	Agree (81.8%)
Feel motivated to improve	16 (72.7%)	2 (9.1%)	4 (18.2%)	Agree (72.7%)

I enjoy writing essays	12 (54.5%)	6 (27.3%)	4 (18.2%)	Agree (54.5%)
Writing is stressful/difficult	9 (40.9%)	7 (31.8%)	6 (27.3%)	Agree (40.9%)

What stands out in Table 4.4 is how torn students seem about writing. On one hand, their appreciation for it is crystal clear. An impressive 90.9% credit writing with improving their overall language skills, and 86.4% want it taught in clear, manageable steps. They have a decidedly practical outlook: 81.8% see feedback as essential for getting better, and 68.2% are convinced that good writing is a non-negotiable for their future careers. This isn't just empty praise—it translates into action, with 72.7% feeling motivated to improve and more than half genuinely enjoying the essay writing process. But here's the twist. Running parallel to all this positivity is a undercurrent of very real anxiety. For a sizable 40.9%, writing remains a fundamentally stressful and difficult task. It's a conflict many of us know well: understanding something's immense value doesn't always make doing it any easier.

4.2 Findings from Open-Ended Questionnaire

Analysis of the open-ended questionnaire reveals student perceptions across three core areas: difficulties in English writing, preferred feedback styles, and suggestions for improving writing instruction. The findings indicate a student body that is highly self-aware of its challenges and desires a more structured, practical, and supportive learning environment.

4.2.1. Difficulties in English Writing

The analysis identified a clear hierarchy of challenges, which can be grouped into four key themes.

A. Vocabulary Deficiency (The Most Prominent Challenge)

This was the most frequently cited difficulty, encompassing both the breadth and precision of lexical knowledge.

Evidence: Students directly cited a "lack of sufficient vocabulary" and the challenge to "find the vocabulary" or "remember the vocabulary." Others indicated a struggle with precision, mentioning the difficulty to "choose the right words."

B. Organization and Idea Formation (The Structural Challenge)

Students reported significant difficulty with the macro-level tasks of planning and structuring their writing.

Evidence: Responses highlighted problems with logical flow, as seen in quotes such as, "How to link my ideas," and "I find it difficult to organize my speech." A common concern was knowing "where to start," pointing to challenges in the initial planning stages.

C. Grammar and Mechanics (The Technical Challenge)

Concerns about sentence-level accuracy were prevalent, with an awareness that errors hinder communication.

Evidence: Students frequently mentioned "spelling mistakes," "correct grammar," and "how to make good sentences." One student noted a fear of "making a mistake that changes the meaning," indicating that their concern extends beyond mere accuracy to effective meaning-making.

D. Psychological and Process-Based Barriers

The data also revealed affective factors, including anxiety and writer's block, that impede the writing process.

Evidence: Several students identified "the beginning" as the hardest part, while others expressed a general difficulty, stating, "I find it very difficult to write in general."

4.2.2 Preferred Feedback from Teachers

Students expressed a strong preference for feedback that is constructive, clear, and actionable.

A. Corrective and Instructional Feedback (The Primary Need)

The dominant request was for direct error correction coupled with guidance on how to improve.

Evidence: Students explicitly asked for "clear and direct feedback that shows mistakes and how to fix them," "error correction," and a step-by-step approach where the teacher "should help me step by step."

B. Supportive and Motivational Feedback

Alongside correction, students desire a positive and encouraging tone from their instructors.

Evidence: Responses included requests for "positive comments," motivation "to write well every time," and for teachers to "focus on persistence and trying."

C. Explanatory and Example-Based Feedback

Students value feedback that provides rationale and models, not just corrections.

Evidence: There was a clear desire for teachers to "explain writing and how to organize the article" and to "use more than one example" to illustrate concepts.

4.2.3 Suggestions for Improving Writing Classes

Student suggestions call for a more hands-on, student-centered, and explicit instructional approach.

A. Increased Practice and Dedicated Time

The most common recommendation was to allocate more class time specifically for writing.

Evidence: Students suggested to "write in the lecture" and "give students a specific time in the lecture for writing," emphasizing that "the more practice you do the more successful you will become."

B. Structured Activities and Explicit Instruction

There is a clear demand for guided exercises and clear frameworks for academic writing.

Evidence: Proposals included using "a notebook for the subject, in which we write an essay in each class," to "study real examples of good essays," and to receive direct instruction on "how to write academically."

C. Interactive and Engaging Methods

Students advocated for moving beyond traditional lectures to include more dynamic activities.

Evidence: Suggestions included "add fun activities," "group writing," and the use of "body language" to make lessons more engaging.

D. Individualized Attention

A strong theme was the request for personalized feedback and support.
Evidence: Students explicitly asked for instructors to "provide individual feedback," with one student metaphorically describing the ideal teacher as "a doctor" who corrects and provides feedback.

4.2.4 Synthesis and Implications

The student feedback paints a coherent picture: the primary challenge is not a lack of motivation but a need for more structured support in translating ideas into coherent, accurate English. The findings suggest that pedagogical interventions should focus on three key areas:

1. Explicit Strategy Instruction: Integrating consistent vocabulary building and direct teaching of organizational frameworks using models and graphic organizers.
2. A Structured Feedback Framework: Moving beyond simple error correction to a system that provides clear, explanatory, and actionable feedback.
3. A Supportive Classroom Environment: Incorporating low-stakes writing practice, collaborative activities, and a balance of corrective and motivational feedback to build confidence and reduce anxiety.

   Ultimately, the students feedback points to a clear path for strengthening our writing program. The core challenge isn't a lack of motivation, but a need for more structured support in translating ideas into coherent, academic English. To address this, we should pivot towards a more balanced and practical instructional model. This means embedding consistent vocabulary-building and explicit lessons on essay organization—using models and graphic organizers to make structure visible. Critically, we must replace sporadic error identification with a reliable "feedback framework" that guides students through understanding and correcting their mistakes. Finally, by weaving in low-stakes, in-class writing and collaborative activities, we can demystify the writing process, reduce anxiety, and build the kind of confidence that allows fluency to flourish. These steps, focused on practical support and positive reinforcement, can directly address the gaps students have identified and help them become more effective and assured writers.

4.4. Discussion

This study set out to investigate the writing difficulties experienced by EFL learners at the Faculty of Education, Fezzan University, and the findings reveal a complex interaction of linguistic, cognitive, and pedagogical factors. In addressing the first research question, the data show that students struggle most with generating, expressing, and organizing ideas. A substantial proportion of participants reported difficulty articulating their thoughts and structuring written texts, which reflects the cognitive demands highlighted in the process models of Flower and Hayes (1981) and Kellogg (2008). These models emphasize that writing requires simultaneous planning, formulation, and monitoring, and the present findings align with this view, particularly within an EFL context where students must manage both linguistic and conceptual load. The challenge appears not to stem from a lack of ideas, but from difficulties in managing those ideas within English rhetorical conventions. This

pattern echoes Arab and Libyan studies such as Ibnian (2017) and Al-Zahrani (2024), which similarly found that L2 writers often struggle with coherence, cohesion, and textual organization.

Vocabulary limitations also emerged as a salient difficulty, with many students reporting a lack of appropriate word choice and lexical resources. These finding parallels earlier research in Arab contexts that identified lexical shortages as a major barrier to clarity and fluency in academic writing. International literature, including Hinkel (2004), supports this conclusion, noting that limited vocabulary restricts the writer's ability to express nuanced ideas and maintain stylistic accuracy. While grammar issues were acknowledged, they appeared less dominant in the quantitative results, suggesting that students may be increasingly aware of higher-order concerns such as content and organization. This pattern diverges somewhat from traditional EFL research in the region, where grammatical correctness has often been reported as the primary difficulty; however, it aligns more closely with contemporary international findings emphasizing cognitive and discursive challenges over sentence-level accuracy.

The second research question focused on identifying the linguistic and pedagogical factors contributing to these difficulties. The results point to the influential role of translation from Arabic, with half of the participants relying on this strategy when writing in English. This process likely increases cognitive load and contributes to syntactic transfer, a pattern widely documented in studies of L1 interference (Odlin, 1989) and observed in Libyan contexts (Nasir, 2019). Translation may offer a temporary coping mechanism, but it tends to hinder the development of automaticity and target-language discourse awareness. Pedagogically, the study reveals a mismatch between instructional priorities and students' actual needs. Although learners' main challenges relate to idea development and organization, classroom instruction appears to prioritize grammatical accuracy, often at the expense of strategic skills such as planning, drafting, and revising. This observation is consistent with the concerns raised by Lekamge and Jenan (2024), who reported similar disparities in other Arab university settings. Moreover, students' neutral responses regarding regular feedback and peer interaction suggest that process-oriented pedagogy is not consistently practiced. This stands in contrast to international research—particularly the work of Ferris and Hedgcock (2014) and Hyland and Hyland (2019)—which underscores the essential role of formative feedback, multiple drafting, and reflective revision in developing writing proficiency.

The third research question explored possible strategies to enhance students' writing performance, and the findings indicate a strong preference for structured instruction, guided practice, and explicit models. Students clearly expressed the need for step-by-step support, suggesting that a shift toward a process-based approach would be more effective than the current product-oriented model. Such an approach would help learners internalize organizational patterns and manage cognitive load more efficiently. Feedback emerged as another essential component, with the majority of students acknowledging its importance for improvement. Their request for clear,

actionable feedback supports the claim that effective commentary not only corrects errors but also develops writers' metacognitive awareness and strategic competence. This aligns with international evidence showing that meaningful feedback has a measurable impact on coherence, idea development, and revision behaviour. Finally, the combination of high motivation and notable writing anxiety demonstrates the need for a supportive learning environment that reduces psychological pressure and encourages risk-taking. Strategies such as low-stakes writing opportunities, collaborative tasks, and constructive peer review may help alleviate anxiety while strengthening confidence, a point consistent with recent findings by Zhou et al. (2022).

Overall, the present study demonstrates that the writing difficulties of EFL learners at Fezzan University extend beyond linguistic limitations and are deeply influenced by cognitive demands and instructional practices. Compared with previous Arab and Libyan research, the results align with regional challenges related to vocabulary and cohesion, while also reflecting patterns observed in global EFL writing literature relating to cognitive load and process writing. The convergence of these findings indicates the need for pedagogical reform that balances accuracy with idea development and provides systematic support for the writing process.

5   Conclusion

This study examined the writing difficulties of EFL students at Fezzan University and demonstrated that the major challenges arise from the interaction of linguistic limitations and pedagogical shortcomings. Students struggle primarily with generating and organizing ideas, retrieving appropriate vocabulary, and constructing coherent texts. These issues are intensified by an instructional focus on grammatical accuracy rather than on the writing process, leading many students to depend on translation and experience anxiety during writing tasks.

The findings highlight the need for a reoriented pedagogy that supports students through explicit strategy instruction, structured opportunities for planning and revising, and continuous, formative feedback. Actionable recommendations include integrating a dedicated academic writing course, adopting a multi-draft feedback approach, increasing in-class writing practice, and creating a supportive, low-pressure environment to enhance students' confidence and fluency.

Despite its contributions, the study is limited by its small sample size and reliance on self-reported data from one department, which may restrict generalizability. Future research should include teacher perspectives, classroom observations, and longitudinal or experimental designs to evaluate the impact of process-based instructional approaches.

Overall, this study provides valuable insight into the challenges faced by EFL writers in the Libyan context and offers practical steps for improving writing instruction. Addressing these challenges through balanced, process-oriented pedagogy can help cultivate more confident and proficient academic writers at Fezzan University and similar settings.

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155
Volume 5 – (N.1) - 2026

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