

Self-Reported Writing Difficulties of Saudi English Majors at Qassim University College of Sciences and Arts: A Survey and Analysis

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Abstract

This study explored students' own perspectives on their writing challenges. A mixed methods research design combining a quantitative questionnaire with a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews was used. Therefore, the triangulation of data collection techniques was applied in this research. The study was conducted in the Department of English and Translation at Qassim University. 55 students filled 32 items questionnaire and ten were selected for the interview. For the questionnaire data, the descriptive statistics for ordinal Likert-type data include frequency, median, and mode were used. For the qualitative data analysis, the thematic coding was used for analyzing the interview. The obtained results showed that there are different types of writing problems among English language and translation major students at Qassim University. Findings suggest that some difficulties and perspectives are broadly shared by Saudi English students, e.g. struggles with irregularity and the non-phonemic nature of English. Other difficulties tend to evolve as students proceed in their studies. The lack of research into Saudi perspectives on English writing difficulties is emphasized, and further scholarly attention is strongly advised.

Keywords: EFL writing; Writing difficulties; Student perception; Writing errors

1. Introduction

The fact that the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of those who acquire English as a second language continue to influence their use of English for years and even decades to come (including after a high level of English proficiency has been attained) has been extensively documented in the academic literature (Centeno et al. 2014; Saville-Troike & Barto 2016; Romero & Manjarres 2017). Despite the rapid emergence of English as the language of global commerce, however, in the English as a second language (ESL) educational context, there are a number of major linguistic backgrounds that have been largely overlooked. This report, therefore, undertakes an empirical exploration of some of the difficulties that native Saudi speakers experience in developing mastery of written English. Rather than merely carrying out a diagnostic examination, it seeks to explore students' perspectives on the nature and significance of these challenges. To this end, a mixed methods research design combining a quantitative questionnaire with a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews is used.

2. Literature Review

Grami (2005) explores how Saudi university students perceive written feedback on their English-language writing from university instructors. Because errors in second-language writing projects are frequently inadvertent and go unnoticed by the author, this practice is a pervasive one not just in classes and courses involving written composition in foreign languages, but also in written composition classes conducted in students' native tongue. Considering this, it is not very surprising that both professors' commenting styles and students' responses to those comments and corrections can have far-reaching implications for how students perceive not just their own written English ability level overall, but also the kinds of errors they are prone to making and finally the significance of those errors. In contrast to some previous studies (e.g., Truscott, 1996), Grami (2005) offers preliminary but compelling results suggesting that Saudi university ESL students tend to report "profound interest, appreciation, and enjoyment in teachers' written feedback" in the context of English composition. The appreciation notably includes feedback regarding grammatical and surface-level errors (p. 1). If nothing else, this is an encouraging preliminary indication that self-report measures might be an effective tool for exploring how this population perceives its writing difficulties and common error types.

At a minimum, it offers a counterpoint to the possible criticism that these students may tend to reject, ignore, or respond defensively to their instructor's feedback on these topics. For more diagnostic explorations of common writing errors associated with Arabic language backgrounds in the ESL context, see for instance Binturki (2008), Siagh and Schmitt (2012), and Sawalmeh (2013). Additionally, it is essential to keep in mind that instructor comments are typically not the only type of feedback that university-level Saudi ESL students receive on their English-language compositions (Al-Hazmi & Schofield 2007). Review and comment by peers is also a common practice in most ESL and EFL contexts—and for written language instruction more generally. In an unpublished doctoral dissertation building on his previous (published) work, for instance, Grami (2010) explored this practice and its effects in detail. The findings suggested that while this practice is not yet standard in the university-level English course setting in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (where classroom instruction often tends toward instructor-centric rather than learner-centered), it is generally well-received by students and appears to be growing increasingly common. In addition, based on the preliminary pre-post controlled experimental portion of the research conducted in the study, students exposed to peer feedback outperformed the control group "in every aspect of writing investigated" (abstract). In any event, the increasing prevalence of the incorporation of peer feedback into university English classrooms in Saudi Arabia is also advantageous for research along the lines set out in the present study. It adds to the body of evidence indicating that university-level Saudi ESL students do not have to rely on their nonspecific perceptions of their English language difficulties, but instead receive multidimensional and multimodal feedback from multiple sources (Polio & Fleck 1998; Grami 2012).

Building on the preliminary work carried out by Grami (2005, 2010, 2012) and others, Mustafa (2011) carried out a qualitative study grounded in sociocultural theory from a meta perspective. The study solicited Saudi students' "feedback on the feedback" they received from their English teachers (p. 3). Despite the trends regarding the use of peer review outlined by Grami (2010), Mustafa's (2011) results find that a strong majority of the interviewees prefer instructor feedback to peer feedback, indicating that they assign greater weight to it (pp. 3-4). Somewhat surprisingly, however, the interviewees expressed a healthy measure of doubt regarding the prospect that even instructor feedback on their English writing would significantly improve their abilities over the long term:

The teachers invested mostly in feedback about local errors, and even so, the students felt that the feedback was not showing them how to fix the errors. Moreover, the feedback failed to involve students in the process, and the feedback techniques were not sufficiently eclectic (p. 10).2

In interpreting these findings, it is important to note that the sample composed of students actively studying for their IELTS examination; thus, the pessimism that pervades much of Mustafa's results can be read at least partially as a reflection of test anxiety. Consistent and constructive instructor feedback can help reduce student anxiety, but it is agreed that it cannot eliminate it entirely (Di Loreto & McDonough 2014). In this regard, it should be emphasized that the empirical pedagogical literature offers consistent and robust support for the value of feedback in English language acquisition, whether that feedback comes from instructors or fellow students (Chaudron 1984; Min 2006; Bijami, Pandian, & Singh 2016). In any case, it should be noted that matching pedagogical approaches to specific skills and learning outcomes represents a critical component of English instruction, and can measurably impact how students perceive their English abilities and consequently how they frame the challenges and difficulties they encounter. Ahmad (2014), for instance, describes the significant improvements in the engagement and subsequent performance on examinations of Saudi ESL learners exposed to a stylistics approach emphasizing interactivity (rather than conventional didactic methods) to a unit on English poetry, for example. By creating a more hands-on, learner-centered, dynamic learning environment, students were able to re-frame difficulties as challenges to be overcome in actually constructing sentences, rather than framing them as conceptual failures or a lack of understanding (pp. 133-36). Based on the above literature review, this study raises the following questions:

1. What are the writing difficulties that challenge the tertiary Saudi Students?
2. What are the tertiary Saudi students' perceptions about their writing difficulties?

3. Methodology

In order to facilitate peer review and the critical analysis of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations presented in this study, it is necessary to offer a clear and detailed explanation of its design. This section offers just such an account, laying out and justifying the methodological decisions that went into the design of this project as well as describing procedures for data collection and analysis. The limitations of this project (both practical and methodological) are reviewed in the discussion section below.

3.1. Research Design

This study utilizes a simple mixed-methods design in which data is collected by way of two distinct self-report measures: namely, a written quantitative questionnaire and a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews. The quantitative questionnaire constituted the primary data collection instrument, with the qualitative data playing a supportive and contextualizing role. The questionnaire was designed primarily to build on previous research by diagnosing specific problem areas, while the interviews were structured to provide a bit more depth and explore participants' writing difficulties on their terms. By combining these two tools, it is possible to systematically assess the significance of common, predefined difficulties that conform to established categories in the scholarly literature, while also emphasizing the imperfect nature of predetermined response categories and empowering participants to identify relationships between these areas that may not have been described previously.

With the purpose of accomplishing this, the study utilized a relatively modest (n=55) non-random convenience sample composed of current Saudi students at the Qassim University College of Sciences and Arts. In order to be eligible for inclusion in the study, potential candidates were required to be current English majors in good academic standing at Qassim and attending the university full time; double majors were not disqualifying. Out of convenience (and to limit the potential influence of confounding variables), the sample was constructed exclusively of male participants. Interview participants were recruited from the pool of survey respondents. Of 18 respondents who volunteered to participate in the interview, ten were selected at random. Participants' ages ranged from 18-24 years.

3.2. Instruments and Procedure

As suggested above, this study follows a two-pronged approach that incorporates one quantitative data collection instrument (a questionnaire) and one qualitative instrument (semi-structured interviews). This subsection reviews the design, structure, and format of these paired, mutually-complementary instruments.

3.2.1. Quantitative Questionnaire:

The quantitative questionnaire began with a brief section designed to collect demographic information that might be useful with respect to segmenting the results (e.g. age and university year). The core of the survey, however, consisted of 32 statements designed to assess four distinct categories of potential writing difficulties: phonology and morphology (including spelling); syntax (including punctuation); semantics and pragmatics (including general vocabulary); and registers, variants, idioms, and colloquialisms (including Standard English as well as non-standard varieties). The categories were equally weighted, and each category consisted of four items. The prompts were not identical across categories for contextual reasons, but they followed a similar format and structure: specifically, they asked respondents to rate past and current writing difficulties, perceived progress, and level of interest or frustration. It should be emphasized once again that the questionnaire was not an English test (i.e. it was not designed to assess respondents' English proficiency directly); instead, it was structured to gain insight into participants' own subjective, self-reported perspectives on how challenges in each of these areas impacted their English writing. Because this intention was made explicit in the informed consent waivers participants were presented with, no effort was made to conceal these categories from respondents, as this may have undermined the results by compromising the clarity of the prompts. Prompts themselves were structured as symmetric five-point Likert-type scales whose values ranged from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree" and which were arranged around a neutral central value ("Neither agree nor disagree"). In addition to these five responses, an additional category designed to express uncertainty ("Don't know / Not applicable") was included in response to debates in the methodological literature regarding the use of a central category: some scholars maintain that central categories often act as a catch-all and are selected by respondents wishing to express uncertainty or lack of understanding as well as those who wish to express a neutral opinion. For clarity, therefore, these categories were differentiated.

For the purposes of statistical analysis, this questionnaire used ordinal Likert-type scales rather than true interval Likert data. In the former case, median and mode are used as the most common measures of central tendency, while frequency is used to gauge variability and the chi-square test to compare the actual results against the expected results if responses were selected randomly (Boone & Boone 2012). By contrast, the mean is the most commonly used measure of central tendency for interval Likert data, and variability is measured using standard deviation. While both are valid strategies, their appropriateness depends on the research design and objectives. Sullivan and Artino (2013) offer a useful and cogent summary of the conceptual difference between these two approaches:

In an ordinal scale, responses can be rated or ranked, but the distance between responses is not measurable. Thus, the differences between "always", "often", and "sometimes" on a frequency response, Likert scale are not necessarily equal. In other words, one cannot assume that the difference between responses is equidistant [...] This is in contrast to interval data, in which the difference between responses can be calculated, and the numbers do refer to a measurable "something" (pp. 541-42).

In this case, an interval scale would not be appropriate. This means that it would not be meaningful to suggest that one could take the average of "Disagree" and "Neither agree nor disagree," for example.³ Even if this were meaningful, the mean would not provide a useful measure of central tendency for items that generated bimodal distributions—a potential outcome that would be very meaningful in the context of the present exploration, since it would indicate controversy or diversity of experience (ibid.).³ Sullivan and Artino (2013) make this point well concerning the idea of finding the mean of "never" and "rarely" on a hypothetical interval Likert scale with responses ranging from "always" to "never": "Does 'rarely and a half' have a useful meaning?", the authors ask (pp. 541-42).

The survey was completed online. Although each respondent provided identifying information in order to verify their eligibility for the study, once verified this personal information was automatically discarded; it was not associated with any set of responses. The online survey software automatically tabulated responses. The researcher then analyzed the response distributions using descriptive statistics. Finally, the questionnaire closed with an invitation to volunteer for the qualitative interview portion of the research. If respondents indicated interest on this item, then they were prompted to enter contact information which was sent to the researcher for follow-up. This information was not linked in any way to respondents' survey responses.

3.2.2. Semi-Structured Qualitative Interview:

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were carried out one-on-one and face-to-face. The interview schedule began by encouraging respondents to reflect on their experience completing the questionnaire. Next, it encouraged them to elaborate on their writing difficulties more generally. Third, they were encouraged to reflect on how their experience of writing difficulties in English had changed over the course of their studies. Open-ended questions were used wherever possible. Participants were encouraged to speak freely and identify new topics as they saw fit; similarly, the interviewer asked questions as needed in order to clarify the meaning behind participants' answers as well as encourage them to elaborate on intriguing areas. The interviews were video recorded and transcribed; to protect participants' privacy, the video recordings were saved in a password-protected file and permanently deleted after transcription was complete. Interviews ranged from approximately twenty to thirty-five minutes in duration. Transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis along the lines described by Aronson (1995), Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas (2013), and Talmy (2010), for example. Briefly, this form of analysis involves an iterative coding process in which a text under analysis is first coded for topic, then additional layers are added (e.g. orientation, agreement, conflict, etc.) as a larger thematic structure begins to take shape (ibid.; Barcelos & Kalaja 2011). The process is considered complete when no new categories or insights begin to emerge despite continued review.

4. Results & Analysis

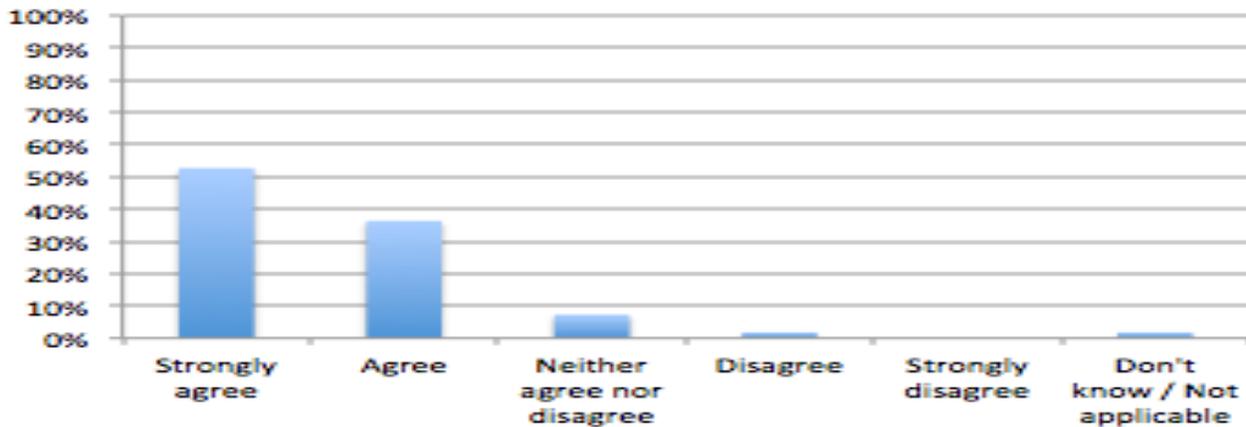
This section presents the results of each segment of the research project in a relatively raw form. For the quantitative portion of the research, this means that survey results are summarized using descriptive statistics. For the qualitative portion of the study, the primary categories, perspectives, and conflicts that emerged from the thematic analysis are presented. These two components are considered in relation to one another, as well as in relation to broader empirical, theoretical, and pedagogical contexts, in the following section.

4.1. Quantitative Questionnaire

Of 60 candidates who began the online questionnaire, 55 completed it (~91.7% completion rate). Since this study is interested specifically in comparing multiple areas of potential writing difficulty with one another, incomplete surveys were discarded; only the 55 completed surveys were included in the final sample. Second and third year students were most prominently represented, with each accounting for approximately one-third of the overall sample, whereas first and fourth year students were under-represented, with the remaining one-third divided more or less equally between these two groups. Although a seemingly foundational category, response distributions highlighted the importance of phonology, morphology, and spelling for respondents' English writing difficulties.

Notably, respondents consistently assigned high ratings to past difficulty, perceived progress, and current frustration, while simultaneously indicated a relatively low level of interest. In fact, the response distribution for past difficulty in this category was the most skewed of any item in the entire questionnaire, with slightly more than 96% of respondents selecting a positive response and no respondents selecting a negative response (i.e. all respondents selected either "Strongly Agree", "Agree", or "Neither agree nor disagree"). Remarkably, the positive extreme ("Strongly Agree") represented both the median and the mode for this item—a meaningful finding since Likert-type response distributions are typically shaped by central tendency bias, in which respondents tend to avoid extreme response categories (Fig. 1).

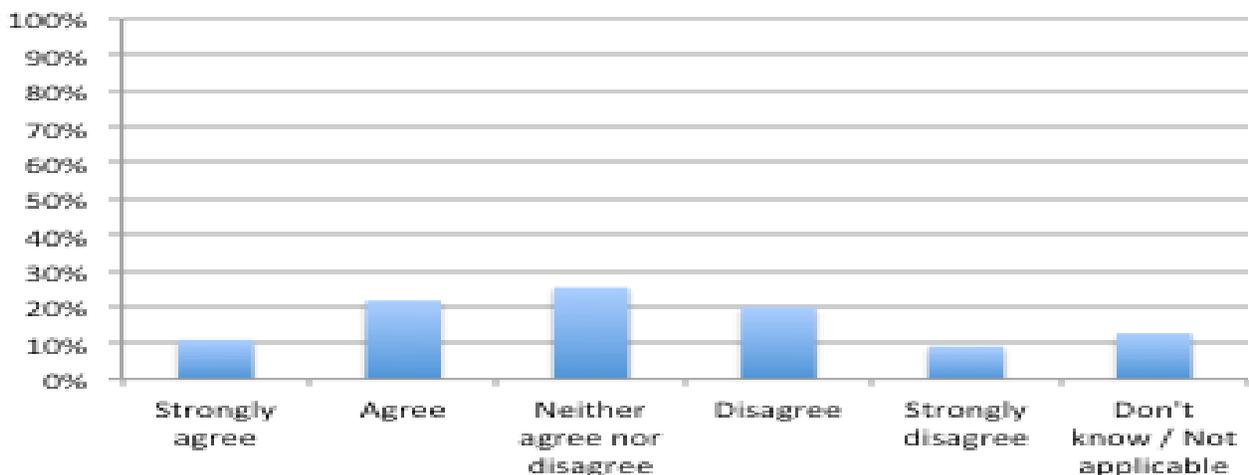
Figure 1: Response frequency distribution for Item 1: "In the past, changing word forms and/or connecting word spellings to sounds was one of the areas where I struggled most when learning to write in English."



The most skewed response distribution generated by any item in the survey. Note that the positive extreme response category represents both the median and mode of the ordered data set. In comparison, the narrative painted by respondents' perspectives on syntax (e.g., word order, punctuation) was much more moderate and optimistic. Here, response distributions loosely approximated the normal distribution if the non-response category is excluded, with skew varying from item to item (Fig. 2).

Here, approximate is a crucial term: since ordinal data is non-continuous, discrete, and bounded, by definition it cannot be normally distributed; however, for descriptive purposes, the response distributions for ordinal data can be said to approximate normal distributions. This item illustrates an item where response distributions more closely approximated the normal distribution. The relative frequencies with which respondents selected "Neither" and "Don't know" may suggest that these categories were not adequately differentiated in the written survey.

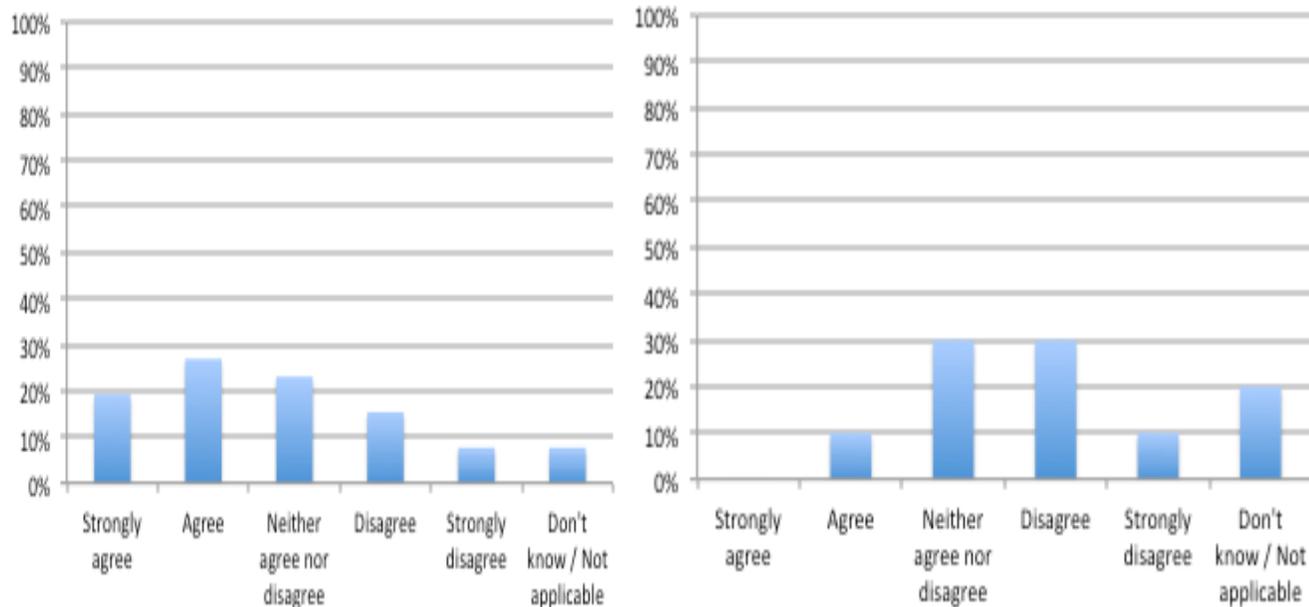
Figure 2: Response frequency distribution for Item 9: "In the past, using words and/or punctuation in the correct order was one of the areas where I struggled most when learning to write in English."



Generally speaking, respondents indicated more significant difficulties in the past than in the present, tended to have a positive view of their progress, and relatively low levels of frustration.

Segmenting the data by seniority revealed that upper-level students tended to give higher ratings to their progress in this area, whereas first year students were more pessimistic (Fig. 3)

Figure3: Response frequency distributions for Item 16: "I am much more confident in my ability to construct sentences with grammatically correct syntax and punctuation than I used to be." (a) Left: Responses by third- and fourth-year students (n=26); (b) Right: Responses by first-year students (n=10).

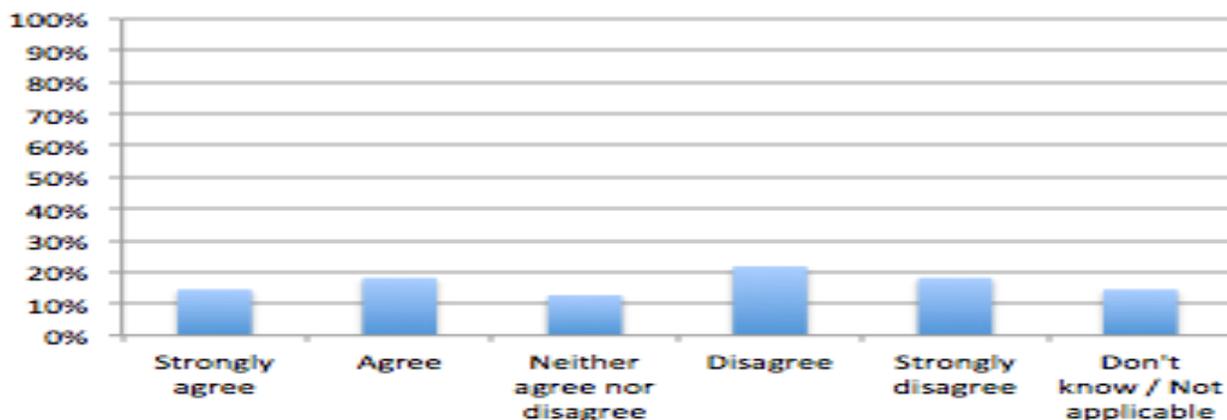


Note that first-year students are underrepresented in comparison with second- and third-year students, so small variations (e.g., one first-year student choosing "Agree" rather than "Don't know") can have a significant impact on the appearance of the frequency distribution. It is essential to exercise caution before drawing hard conclusions based on this comparison.

Response distributions generated by items relating to semantics and pragmatics followed a similar trend: students tended to rate past difficulty more highly than current difficulty and select response categories reflecting positive views of progress, with declines in frustration corresponding to respondents' seniority. Notably, first- and second-year students were much more likely to select the non-response category ("Don't know / Not applicable") than their upper-level peers for these items.

The final category of items (registers, variants, idioms, and colloquialisms) was the most conceptually diverse and also proved to be the most controversial both within and across years. It was in this category that the most pronounced bimodal distributions were identified. Notably, these divergences could not be resolved by segmenting respondents by academic year or other demographic variables (Fig. 4)

Figure4: Averaged response frequency distribution for all Category 4 items



So as to average the frequency distributions, prompts were first re-formulated so that the positive responses ("Agree" and "Strongly Agree") reflected an optimistic or positive outlook on registers, variants, and colloquialisms (e.g., low difficulty, high progress, etc.). On the other hand, the negative response categories are associated with a more negative view (e.g., low progress, high frustration).

While the neutral response ("Neither agree nor disagree") was frequently the mode or close to it in other categories, this response was selected with a much lower frequency for items in this category, with respondents instead tending to cluster around the extremes.⁵ The larger group indicated low levels of past and present difficulty and moderate progress but overall low levels of interest in related English writing difficulties. However, a smaller but substantial group indicated an ongoing interest in colloquialisms and non-standard varieties of English, reporting greater progress, high levels of past difficulty, and moderate levels of present difficulty. It should be noted, however, that the nearly 15% "Don't know / Not applicable" response frequency for the averaged distribution for this category was noticeably higher than the average across the survey as a whole.

4.2. Semi-Structured Qualitative Interviews

As indicated above, 18 survey respondents indicated that they would be interested in participating in the qualitative interviews and provided their contact information. Due to time and resource constraints, 10 of these were selected at random: two first-year students, two second-year students, three third-year students, and three fourth-year students. Interviews were carried out in private. Based on a thematic analysis of the transcripts, three fundamental themes emerged that can provide context to the survey findings and give them more depth: *irregularity and fluency*, *utility*, and *intrinsic and sociocultural value*. In this section, these themes are simply presented and characterized. Their significance, nuances, and relationships to the quantitative data are raised in the following section.

The first theme, irregularity, and fluency, appeared in virtually every transcript analyzed in one form or another. Briefly, participants appeared to frame many of their writing difficulties regarding characteristics of the English language (e.g., its non-phonemic orthography) on the one hand and their own goals regarding written fluency on the other. Students consistently expressed their desire to write in a way that was not just consistently grammatically correct, but also natural sounding and professional; like many native and non-native speakers alike, however, they struggled with the sheer complexity of rules and their many exceptions. One second-year student, for example, noted:

So many of the vowels, and even some of the consonants, just sound the same, even to people like me who spoke some English before ever trying to write it. That is difficult to start out with. But on top of that, when you begin writing you have to know what the word sounds like to you, try to figure out which vowel sound it is exactly or whether it's a p or a b or whatever [...] And then you have to connect that to really inconsistent spellings. Like there are many examples that people complain about: though like 'although', rough, cough, through like 'go through', threw like 'He threw a ball' [...]

A fourth-year interview participant summed up this sentiment somewhat more concisely, giving insight into the curious tension between the morphological and phonological items on the quantitative questionnaire, and precisely the way in which older students reported both high levels of progress, but also high levels of continued difficulty:

Look, it is just that even with a lot of practice and experience it's hard to be confident that you aren't missing something, and the more you learn the more things it seems like there are to miss [...] You always question yourself: rule or exception? Does this fit the pattern I studied, or a different pattern, or no pattern? The second theme was more pragmatic: rather than anchoring their English writing difficulties in fluency as an intrinsic goal, to varying degrees many participants saw mastery of written English in a more pragmatic light. In other words, they conceptualized this skill as having an extrinsic value that would enable them to accomplish personal or professional goals. This trend could shape their responses to writing difficulties in several distinct ways. For some, it provided a source of comfort. In the words of a third-year interviewee, for instance: *I remind myself: even if there are small errors or awkward language in this paragraph, I am confident in my ability to make myself understood. This is not my first language and I will always be improving it. I will never be done learning it. But for now, if I can write and be understood, then I'm happy because I can function.* For others, however, this way of thinking about writing caused anxiety. The fourth-year student quoted above, for instance, worried about the professional (rather than the intellectual) implications of the ongoing learning process:

Even though I can get my meaning across, you know, a hiring manager who sees some stupid typo in my cover letter will throw my application in the bin very quickly. In contrast to this pragmatic conceptual frame, the third theme, intrinsic sociocultural values, revealed in analyzing the transcripts centered on participants' interest in improving their English writing abilities for its intrinsic value. Here, participants described personal projects and interests that they described as having fairly limited professional value or implications. This included, for instance, expressions of interest in areas ranging from poetry to pop culture or even exchanges with members of other cultures using English as a medium. In some cases, these discussions tied directly back to discussions of major difficulties. A third-year interview participant, for example, brought up the same example of phonological difficulties that another interviewee raised previously, but in a very different light:

You know these things people whine about, threw [demonstrates throwing a ball], through [clarifies with hand motion], I think it's great that native speakers, they complain too. You can see it in even in official abbreviations: through like t-h-r-u, you know? Or texting: who wants to keep track of 't-o', 't-o-o', 't-w-o'? They write the Arabic number, just for all of them. I love to learn about these things: slang, text-speak, how people really write, you know, outside of textbooks. Framing challenges in this way, multiple participants described embarking on projects or gaining written skills that might not be applicable in their academic or expected professional work, simply out of curiosity and genuine interest in the subject matter. This was frequently, but not always, a topic that emerged in discussions of non-standard dialects and non-academic forms of written English like poetry or pop culture.

5. Discussion

This section unfolds in several distinct but functionally related segments. First, the relationship between the qualitative and quantitative results presented in the previous section is examined. Second, these findings are contextualized in relation to current and emerging scholarship, including major themes from the literature review. Third, the implications of these findings and the limitations associated with both the study and its data are explored; these two threads, in turn, are synthesized to identify potentially beneficial directions for future research.

Perhaps most significantly, the enduring difficulties posed by mastering English phonology and morphology suggested by the quantitative results were supported and elaborated upon in the interviews, which discussed the frustrations that are associated with English irregularities in depth. Previous studies have well documented steep learning curves in this area, but the present research elaborates on these findings by emphasizing students' perspectives rather than simply analyzing performance on standardized skill metrics (Fender 2008; Saigh & Schmitt 2012; Deraney 2015). The interview data suggests that frustrations regarding irregularities (and specifically the sheer quantity of case exceptions to be memorized) can mostly explain for the strongly skewed response distributions for items in this category, and particularly the fact that even strongly positive responses about perceived progress did not translate into reduced frustration or current difficulty.

Interview participants contextualized this finding by suggesting that it is connected to goals and expectations regarding fluency: even when one has learned seemingly large numbers of irregular spellings and structures, it can still be easy to make errors that might be read as indications of a lack of writing proficiency in some contexts. This frustration, in turn, was operationalized in the theme of utility. The contrasting themes of utility and intrinsic and sociocultural values as perspectives on English writing difficulty can also help shed light on the different patterns in response distributions observed in the pragmatics category and the non-standard variants category, the latter of which showed a marked bimodal distribution. Given the segmentation by year, it seems that increased English education levels translates into greater perceived syntactical competence and confidence, and this confidence seems to exceed that associated with phonology and morphology.

Generally speaking, these results are in line with the empirical literature: students' perceptions of their writing difficulties largely correspond to documented problem areas (Binturki 2008; Saigh & Schmitt 2012; Sawalmeh 2013). However, they also add to this literature by shedding light on how learners relate these perceptions to one another as they organize them into larger conceptual structures. Statements associated with the utility theme suggest that students interested in using their English to accomplish certain professional goals may feel confident in their ability to learn and use certain syntactical structures and formats. However, these same students may be less inclined to invest resources in learning about variations between registers or varieties of English.

The tension between those with more pragmatic and utilitarian views of their writing and those who express fascination with English writing for its intrinsic, aesthetic, or sociocultural values helps to contextualize the bimodal distribution in the final category of the survey. These perspectives could influence students' affinity for more instructor-centered didactic approaches or more exploratory stylistic approaches as described for instance by Ahmad (2014).

As is common in research projects at this level, this study features a number of potential shortcomings and limitations emerging from a basic shortage of time, space, and resources. The sample was both small and homogeneous: thus, it is entirely possible that aspects of these findings reflect the university's student demographics or pedagogical approach, or even the teaching strategies of specific professors in the English department. Future research along the lines described here, therefore, might seek to replicate these results using larger and more diverse samples. The sampling approach could also shape these findings in other ways as well. By the time they reach their university studies and choose to major in English, a process of self-selection has occurred. While English majors are not necessarily more proficient in English than all of their peers in other disciplines, in general a baseline level of performance has been reached. Thus, fundamental grammatical errors that lower-level Saudi ESL students often struggle with, such as the use of commas rather than full stops or zero copulae in the present perfect aspect, tend to be markedly less prevalent (Deraney 2015; Romero & Manjarres 2017). Most English majors have internalized these rules, and make associated errors relatively infrequently. Once again, future research studies might address the limitation in part by engaging with broader and more diverse sample populations.

6. Conclusion

This study presents the results of a quantitative survey and series of semi-structured interviews conducted in a sample of native Arabic speakers majoring in English at a respected Saudi university. It adds to the existing ESL linguistic and pedagogical literature by focusing on the perspectives of this understudied demographic. The results indicate that irregularities in English (particularly in the areas of phonology and morphology, and to a lesser extent with respect to syntax and pragmatics) continue to present writing difficulties and cause stress even for students who are relatively advanced in their studies. The way in which participants conceptualized these difficulties, however (including their capacity to meaningfully overcome them as they progressed toward written English mastery) appeared to be connected to the way in which they assigned a value to the idea of English mastery more broadly. Participants oriented primarily toward professional outcomes showed a preference for structure and confidence writing within well-defined forms, while those who expressed interest in English studies for more intrinsic reasons appeared to enjoy exploring certain kinds of irregularity, such as those present in non-standard English varieties. These perspectives could have implications for how ESL instructors structure their pedagogical approaches in different didactic contexts moving forward.

Overall, the relatively limited scholarship dedicated to the diverse Saudi population of ESL learners (and Arabic speakers more generally) is strongly emphasized. This segment of the ESL literature is growing, but it remains nonetheless in a decidedly early stage of development. Notably, rigorously-designed, published, peer-reviewed studies of university-level Saudi ESL learners' perspectives on English language acquisition are largely neglected in the literature, despite the fact that this group has a uniquely broad and informed perspective on English pedagogy and classroom culture in Saudi Arabia. Thus, it would seem that substantial increases in scholarly attention to this topic are warranted.

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