Original Paper

Exploring EFL Teachers' Perspectives on Sources of Challenges in Writing Classroom

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Abstract

This mixed-method study explores Saudi EFL teachers' perspectives on students' writing competencies and their concerns regarding the writing challenges, particularly in relation to EFL teachers, learners, and textbooks. The study sample consisted of 139 female EFL teachers working in Saudi Arabia. Data was gathered using a questionnaire composed of three sections: demographic information, 15 close-ended items, and three open-ended questions. The findings revealed that Saudi students' writing skills are poor and fall below expectations. The results mainly showed their lack of vocabulary, grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, transition words, legible handwriting, logical paragraph arrangement, concept flow, and genuine and supportive examples. The first open-ended question results revealed that these EFL teachers highlighted ten issues as negatively impacting the quality of students' writing. The second open-ended question results showed eleven potential sources of these challenges related to learners. Finally, the results of the third open-ended question revealed six factors focusing on problems associated with textbooks potentially exerting a negative influence on the quality of students' writing. The study concludes with some practical recommendations and suggestions for further research.

Keywords

EFL Teachers' perspectives, Challenges in writing skills, Saudi Writing Classroom

1. Introduction

Writing is an essential productive skill, equipping learners with skills of communication, interaction, and thinking, as well as fostering their ability to refine their ideas, so increasing knowledge, creativity, and imagination (Alharbi, 2019; Fareed et al., 2016; Mohammad & Hazarika, 2016).

The field of language teaching employs various definitions of writing. Cox (2005) argued that writing "can refer either to the process of writing or to the written product. The term is also ambiguous between

the composing aspects of writing and the secretarial aspects, such as good handwriting and spelling" (p. 151). Flynn and Stainthorp (2006) stated that writing is "a highly complex task that requires the orchestration of [some] different activities simultaneously and thereby places great demands on the cognitive system" (p. 54) and "makes considerable demands upon our limited processing capacity" (p. 61). Moreover, Nation (2009) highlighted that written work depends on listening, speaking, and reading skills. Ahmed (2010) considered writing to consist of "a reflective activity that requires enough time to think about the specific topic and analyze and classify any background knowledge. Then, writers need a suitable language to structure these ideas in the form of coherent discourse" (p. 211). Furthermore, Alharbi (2019) viewed writing skills as tools for language learning and evaluating students' language competencies. Likewise, Fati (2013) identified two ways of overseeing writing skills: firstly, as a visual and symbolic system representing language and secondly, as a goal-oriented process that plans out writing through several steps.

Moreover, Richards and Schmidt (2010) considered communicative competence as the "knowledge of not only if something is formally possible in a language, but also whether it is feasible, appropriate, or done in a particular speech community" (p. 99). On the other hand, Ahmed (2019) viewed communicative competence in writing as an essential aspect of language development as well as academic achievement.

In addition, Cox (2005, p. 161) divided the writing process into several stages (i.e., drafting, conferencing, revising, editing and publishing), considering that teachers play a critical role in each stage while simultaneously emphasizing that it is learners who choose the writing topic and retain ownership of the writing.

1.1 Challenges in Teaching Writing Skills Worldwide

Several studies have pointed out issues associated with the teaching of writing. For example, Nasser (2016) stated that teachers face numerous challenges in relation to their students' writing skills and variations between the cultural and linguistic features of L1 and L2. Furthermore, despite extensive efforts to improve the skills of EFL students, their written proficiency remains below expectation. Moreover, Nasser (2016) indicated that such issues vary between contexts due to learners' skills and factors associated with teachers and textbooks.

Several global research studies have reported the issues of teaching writing skills to EFL students. The critical role of writing skills has resulted in researchers investigating the challenges of acquiring a foreign language, including students' academic backgrounds and personal interests, along with pedagogic, linguistic, cognitive, and psychological aspects. For example, Fareed et al. (2016) employed interviews, alongside an examination of essays, to investigate the factors negatively impacting the writing skills of 30 Pakistani undergraduate students. The analysis revealed the main problems as: (a) insufficient language ability (i.e., vocabulary, grammar, and syntax); (b) a lack of ideas; (c) writing anxiety; (d) reliance on L1; and (e) deficient structural organization. These were attributed to factors including: (1) large classrooms; (2) untrained teachers; (3) inappropriate teaching methods and

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examination systems; (4) low motivation; (5) limited ideas; and (6) a lack of practice in reading and writing skills. The study also suggested various solutions, such as increasing reading skills, improving writing and vocabulary teaching techniques, reforming the examination system, and reforming the teachers' training.

In Indonesia, Hidayati (2018) considered several internal and external challenges faced by teachers of English writing. The internal factors were identified as L1 interference, linguistic competence, motivation, and reading habits, with external factors deemed availability of time and resources and class conditions.

Likewise, Dhanya and Alamelu (2019) investigated the impact of positive interaction between Indian students and teachers, along with factors including a positive atmosphere in the classroom, intrinsic learner motivation, and positive feedback systems. The findings reported that students and teachers felt that these significantly improved students' written work, identifying the teacher as the common connection due to being responsible for maintaining a positive classroom environment and giving consistent encouragement to students

Kenta and Bosha (2019) explored the difficulties experienced by Ethiopian EFL secondary school students, concluding that the classroom activities of practicing writing skills failed to conform to the principles of effective teaching strategies. This led to inadequate levels of competence, attributed to (a) a lack of teacher preparation; (b) inappropriate teaching materials; (c) insufficient classroom facilities; (d) lack of motivation to acquire writing skills; and (e) shortage of time given to practice.

Jashari and Fojkar (2019) examined the views of Kosovar teachers on encouraging EFL elementary and secondary school students. The results revealed that, despite considering writing a vital skill, the teachers failed to match the attention given to developing other language skills, resulting in students experiencing: (1) writing anxiety; (2) a lack of vocabulary; (3) interference from the mother tongue; (4) a lack of ideas; (5) poor spelling; (6) grammatical flaws; and a (7) weak organization. The teachers considered these shortcomings to be caused by a lack of reading and practice in writing, alongside a lack of interest in writing and inefficient instructional techniques. The researchers suggested increasing writing practice in the classroom by developing remedial courses and implementing various learning strategies.

In the Malaysian context, Moses and Mohamad (2019) investigated difficulties experienced by EFL students and teachers in elementary schools, revealing that the students faced various obstacles to improving their written work, such as: (1) a lack of vocabulary and grammar; (2) poor spelling; (3) being unwilling to practice; and (4) little exposure to books and reading resources. At the same time, their teachers demonstrated low levels of motivation, parental support, professional experience, along with the presence of multi-level pupils in the same classroom.

Similarly, research in the Arab World emphasizes the critical problems that EFL learners face regarding writing skills. For example, Ezza (2010) examined the impact on Arab EFL learners of content, teaching methods, and assessment techniques, highlighting the negative influence of outdated resources

and approaches. The researcher analyzed writing courses in three Arab universities, revealing that English language departments depended on methods and teaching materials dating from the 1940s and 1950s. This led to the conclusion that Arab EFL learners would continue to experience issues without developing and updating content.

Rass (2015) explored the difficulties faced by Palestinian EFL students in composing well-written paragraphs, including using compelling themes and effective concluding sentences, as well as supporting information with instances and reasoning and correctly using discourse markers. The researcher employed contrastive analysis, error analysis, and process approaches, concluding that the majority could successfully write essays and concluding sentences but failed to grasp the following skills: (1) providing supporting facts and further instances; (2) employing appropriate written English; and (3) developing a cohesive paragraph, utilizing transition words and coordinators.

Likewise, Ibnian (2017) used a questionnaire to explore difficulties experienced by EFL Jordanian university students when writing in English. The results revealed the primary influence consists of a lack of ideas and incorrect writing mechanics, rather than inadequate assessment instruments, marking schemes, and time restrictions. The study also identified the issues arising from: (1) ineffective teaching strategies; (2) vocabulary restriction; (3) topic inappropriateness; (4) a lack of consultation materials; (5) grammatical difficulties; and (6) a lack of help from teachers.

1.2 Challenges in Teaching Writing Skills Related to the Saudi Context

In Saudi Arabia, EFL teachers face some challenges when it comes to the teaching of writing skills, including: (1) inappropriate teaching methods; (2) students' lack of proficiency and interest; (3) inefficient materials; (4) issues concerning educational policies.

Several Saudi studies have examined these challenges in writing and their origins. For instance, Javid and Umer (2014) addressed issues experienced in Saudi Arabia, concluding that EFL students display weaknesses in organizing their ideas, utilizing lexical items, and demonstrating incorrect use of prepositions, punctuation, spelling, articles, irregular verbs, and suffix, and prefixes.

To explore the linguistic issues in writing, Mohammad and Hazarika (2016) analyzed fifty writing samples from the first and second midterms of Saudi EFL students, emphasizing grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling and their impact on the use of prepositions articles and the delivery of coherence. The findings indicated that the students were unaware of their mistakes and employed various methods to pass examinations (i.e., memorizing answers\paragraphs) instead of developing effective writing strategies.

Nuruzzaman et al. (2018) investigated the writing faults of ninety Saudi non-English major undergraduate students from three faculties following an English foundation course at King Khalid University. The data revealed a number of common errors in writing English paragraphs, falling into four categories: (1) grammar, (2) lexis, (3) semantics, and (4) mechanics. The researchers identified grammar as the area in which pupils tend to make the most frequent errors, particularly verb tense and subject-verb agreement. They also found students' most frequent mechanical errors related to

punctuation and capitalization, while lexical errors were mainly associated with prepositions and articles. In addition, they identified inter-lingual errors due to L1 interference within some written paragraphs.

Ahmed (2019) identified several factors contributing to Saudi EFL university students' errors of unity and coherence in writing paragraphs, including a lack of appropriate techniques and motivation, along with interference from L1 and teachers' inappropriate implementation of teaching strategies concerning composing paragraphs.

Hussain (2019) argued that writing skills tend to pose challenges for Saudi EFL university students due to the demands of style, structure, and vocabulary, identifying a need to improve their punctuation, vocabulary, grammar, and academic writing strategies.

Furthermore, Alshammari (2020) argued that Saudi learners' proficiency in writing tends to be unsatisfactory, identifying the issues experienced by Saudi EFL teachers and learners. The review concluded that the prevalent instructional practices tend to be less productive, requiring an urgent transference from learning to write to writing to learn. In addition, the study identified a need to employ the process rather than the current product approach. This indicates that EFL learners' participatory roles should be encouraged by reducing the teachers' role as facilitators. The researcher also identified major issues needing addressing by writing courses, including: firstly, limited writing practice; secondly, a lack of constructive feedback; thirdly, inadequate instruction in writing methods; and finally, learners' lack of intrinsic motivation.

Moreover, Alzamil (2020) reported that Saudi EFL university students experience difficulties due to errors in punctuation, spelling, grammatical, and lexical items. Additionally, the results revealed such mistakes as due to: firstly, L1 interference; secondly, lack of teachers' follow-up of students' writing performance; thirdly, inappropriate activities; and finally, the insufficient practice of techniques.

In summary: the studies discussed above have identified four significant challenges facing EFL students in writing classes: firstly, linguistic (i.e., issues concerning grammar, vocabulary, spelling, style, and syntax); secondly, pedagogical (i.e., inappropriate teaching methods, materials, activities, assessment techniques, feedback, classroom facilities and allocated time); thirdly, sociolinguistic (i.e., L1 interference and attitudes); and fourthly, psychological challenges (i.e., lack of motivation and self-confidence).

2. Statement of the Problem

A considerable amount of literature (Ezza, 2010; Fareed et al., 2016; Moses & Mohamad, 2019) have reported that Arab EFL learners' competencies are currently below the acceptable criteria of qualified written texts due to the following: negative attitudes; lack of practice; L1 interference; cultural background; inappropriate language learning environment; improper teaching methods; issues with grammar errors, word order, punctuation marks; and limited vocabulary. Moreover, Saudi EFL learners have been found to face similar challenges, with several studies (Hussain, 2019; Javid & Umer, 2014;

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Nuruzzaman, Islam, et al., 2018) identifying issues regarding the quality of their writing performance, including those related to grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

The current researchers conducted a preliminary study on September 1, 2020, to explore the views of twelve EFL teachers concerning the writing quality of their school students. The researchers posed the following question: "On the scale below, how do you rate the quality of your Saudi students' writing?" using a 5-point Likert scale ranked (Poor=1, Fair=2, Good= 3, Very good=4, and excellent=5). The results showed that 50% (6) of the participants selected *poor* to describe students' writing quality, while 25% (3) chose *fair* to rate their competencies. Two teachers (16.7%) rated their students' performance as *good,* with only one teacher (8.3%) rating students' writing quality as *very good*.

A recent literature search (Ahmed, 2019; Alshammari, 2020; Alzamil, 2020; Hussain, 2019) revealed an absence of material exploring the difficulties faced by students in writing classes. This led to the current mixed-method study exploring the perspectives of Saudi EFL teachers on students' writing competencies and their concerns regarding the writing challenges, particularly in relation to EFL teachers, learners, and textbooks.

3. Research Questions

1. What are the Saudi EFL teachers' perspectives on students' writing competencies?

2. What are the Saudi EFL teachers' perspectives on students' writing challenges related to the teachers?

3. What are the Saudi EFL teachers' perspectives on students' writing challenges related to the learners?

4. What are the Saudi EFL teachers' perspectives on students' writing challenges related to the textbooks?

4. Methodology

The current study data was gathered using quantitative and qualitative data. As indicated by Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010), mixed-method research "involves the collection, analysis, and mixing of both quantitative and qualitative data" (p. 109).

4.1 Population and Research Sample

The population for this study included all Saudi EFL female teachers (n=589) in intermediate and secondary schools in Medina, Saudi Arabia, during the first semester of the 2020 academic year. The study sample consisted of 139 (23.60%) Saudi EFL female teachers participating voluntarily.

The data was gathered through the demographic information identifying the characteristics of the 139 EFL teachers participating in the questionnaire, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Research Sample

Variables		N	Percentages	Total (100%)
School Types	Intermediate	52	37.4	(139) 100%
	Secondary	62	44.6	
	Both	25	18.0	
Professional Qualifications	Bachelor	120	86.3	(139) 100%
	Diploma	-	-	
	Master	19	13.7	

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 reveal that most participants (i.e., 44.6%) taught at secondary schools, while 37.4% taught at the intermediate level and the remainder (18.0%) at both levels. Moreover, most of the participants held a bachelor's degree (i.e., 86.3%), and 13.7% had a master's degree.

4.2 Instrumentation

The researchers employed a mixed-method research methodology to gain insights and intricate details relating to the challenges facing the development of Saudi EFL students' writing skills. They, therefore, designed a questionnaire based on some previously reviewed literature (Alshammari, 2020; Moses & Mohamad, 2019). It consists of three sections: the first included demographic information to obtain participants' professional qualifications and the school level at which they were teaching, while the second section included 20 close-ended statements about writing competencies and implied a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree=1, Disagree=2, Neutral=3, Agree=4 & Strongly Agree=5). The third section comprised three open-ended questions designed to provide the views of Saudi EFL teachers in their own words, along with complex analyses of multiple perspectives and the specific context shaping their experience.

4.3 Validity

The researcher sent the questionnaire to three EFL experts to reach its validity. According to their recommendation, the primary level was deleted from the demographic section as the students in this level are introduced only to simple writing techniques. Hence, the first section of the demographic information included three school types (intermediate, secondary, both) and professional qualifications (Bachelor, High Diploma, Master). Regarding the 20 close-ended statements about writing competencies were decreased to 15 items.

4.4 Reliability

A pilot study was conducted with 18 Saudi EFL teachers to compute the questionnaire's reliability and internal consistency to measure the extent to which the questionnaire items measure the same underlying construct. Pearson correlation was employed to describe the strength and direction of the relationship between the questionnaire items. The correlation coefficient results indicated a positive, direct, and significant relationship between the total and 14 out of 16 items with range values (r= .484-.856). Item 15 showed a negative, direct, and significant relationship (-.397). On the other hand, item 13 indicated a

non-significant result (-.237). Hence, it was deleted. The final version of the questionnaire consisted of (15) items. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was employed to measure all items' internal consistency in the questionnaire. The results indicated a high level of internal consistency and reliability between the 15 items (0.870). The estimated reliability of the analyzed items was above the accepted value of 0.7.

4.5 Data Collection

On September 8, 2020, the researchers officially distributed the questionnaire to Saudi EFL female intermediate and secondary school teachers in Medina, Saudi Arabia. It then took six weeks to collect the responses.

4.6 Data Analysis

The data collected from the 15-item questionnaire data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program Version 25. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, & standard deviations) were computed to analyze the data. The qualitative data obtained via the open-ended questions were manipulated through the following steps. Firstly, one researcher commenced the open coding process as a first pass through the collected data, assigning initial codes to condense the mass of data into preliminary analytic categories (i.e., teaching methods; activities; practice; feedback; class settings; time; motivation; self-confidence; satisfaction; interests; grammar; vocabulary; mechanics). This categorization was derived from the results of previous studies (Alshammari, 2020; Alzamil, 2020; Fareed et al., 2016; Jashari & Fojkar, 2019; Kenta & Bosha, 2019; Moses & Mohamad, 2019; Nuruzzaman, Islam, et al., 2018). The researchers classified the raw data into these conceptual categories to represent the challenges related to teachers, learners, and textbooks. Subsequently, the second researcher undertook the second pass, relating the preliminary analytic categories to form primary analytic categories. Finally, both researchers intensively revised and examined the assigned codes to identify and select the data to illustrate the selected categories. Following this, the researchers deleted any unrelated responses to the open-ended questions.

5. Results

Frequencies, percentages, means, and standards deviations were computed to answer the first research questions. The mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) for each item of the questionnaire responses were used to rank the high to the low frequency of use. The qualitative data obtained through the three open-ended questions were categorized and summarized based on the frequencies and percentages of teachers' responses regarding their perspectives on Saudi students' text writing challenges related to the teachers, students, and textbooks.

5.1 Results of EFL Teachers' Perspectives on Saudi Students' Writing Competencies

To answer the first research question, ("What are the Saudi EFL teachers' perspectives on students' writing competencies?), the participants were asked to rate their responses to their views about anxiety attributed to structuring paragraphs on a 1-5 scale (see Table 2). The results were ranked in descending order of mean reading scores.

Table 2. The Results of EFL Teachers' Perspectives on Saudi Students' Writing Competencies

| Items	The Scale					Mean	S. D.	Level
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree			
1. Plagiarize others' work.	4 (2.9)	13 (9.4)	49 (35.3)	44 (31.7)	29 (20.9)	3.6	1.0	Agree
2. Use simple English language.	15 (10.8)	15 (10.8)	19 (13.7)	67 (48.2)	23 (16.5)	3.5	1.2	Agree
3. Show grammatical mistakes.	15 (10.8)	15 (10.8)	19 (13.7)	67 (48.2)	23 (16.5)	3.5	1.2	Agree
4. Write in legible handwriting.	13 (9.4)	24 (17.3)	37 (26.6)	53 (38.1)	12 (8.6)	3.2	1.1	Neutral
5. Clear up the main idea.	22 (15.8)	23 (16.5)	37 (26.6)	44 (31.7)	13 (9.4)	3.0	1.2	Neutral
6. Use a correct writing form.	23 (16.5)	26 (18.7)	24 (17.3)	58 (41.7)	8 (5.8)	3.0	1.2	Neutral
7. Choose appropriate vocabulary.	21 (15.1)	23 (16.5)	43 (30.9)	50 (36)	2 (1.4)	2.9	1.1	Neutral
8. Write using accurate standard English.	20 (14.4)	42 (30.2)	35 (25.2)	33 (23.7)	9 (6.5)	2.8	1.2	Neutral
9. Give more examples to support the main idea.	32 (23)	33 (23.7)	33 (23.7)	33 (23.7)	8 (5.8)	2.7	1.2	Neutral
10. Connect sentences by using transition words.	35 (25.2)	34 (24.5)	30 (21.6)	33 (23.7)	7 (5)	2.6	1.2	Neutral
11. Organize the text logically.	32 (23)	28 (20.1)	43 (30.9)	33 (23.7)	3 (2.2)	2.6	1.1	Neutral
12. Rely on accurate and authentic information.	30 (21.6)	30 (21.6)	43 (30.9)	33 (23.7)	3 (2.2)	2.6	1.1	Neutral
13. Expand the focal idea in each paragraph.	35 (25.2)	35 (25.2)	36 (25.9)	29 (20.9)	4 (2.9)	2.5	1.2	Disagree
14. Use correct convention (spelling, punctuation, capitalization).	42 (30.2)	41 (29.5)	25 (18)	25 (18)	6 (4.3)	2.4	1.2	Disagree
15. Use diverse vocabulary.	46 (33.1)	51 (36.7)	22 (15.8)	18 (12.9)	2 (1.4)	2.1	1.1	Disagree
16. Use the citation to support the arguments.	67 (48.2)	42 (30.2)	17 (12.2)	13 (9.4)	0 **(0.0)**	1.8	1.0	Disagree

The results in Table 2 show the participants demonstrated "Agreement" for 3 items as follows: plagiarize others' work (M=3.6; SD=1.0), use simple English language (M=3.5; SD=1.2), and show grammatical mistakes (M=3.5; SD=1.2).

Moreover, the results show that the participants displayed "Neutral" responses for another 9 items as follows: write in legible handwriting (M=3.2; SD=1.1), clear up the main idea (M=3.0; SD=1.2), use a correct writing form (M=3.0; SD=1.2), choose appropriate vocabulary (M=2.9; SD=1.1), and write using accurate standard English (M=2.8; SD=1.2). Moreover, the items: give more examples to support the main idea (M=2.7; SD=1.2), connect sentences by using transition words (M=2.6; SD=1.2), organize the text logically (M=2.6; SD=1.1), and rely on accurate and authentic information (M=2.6; SD=1.1) showed that EFL teachers' perspectives on Saudi students' writing competencies were undecided.

However, the responses to items 13, 14, 15, & 16 (M=2.5, SD=1.2; M=2.4, SD=1.2; M=2.1, SD=1.1; M=1.8, SD=1.0) indicate the participants' disagreement on students abilities to expand the focal idea in each paragraph, use correct convention (spelling, punctuation, capitalization), use diverse vocabulary, and use the citation to support the arguments.

5.2.1 Results of the Writing Challenges Related to the Teachers

The results in response to the second research question ("What are the Saudi EFL teachers' perspectives on students' writing challenges related to the teachers?"), the responses to the first open-ended question in the questionnaire were categorized as shown in Figure 1.
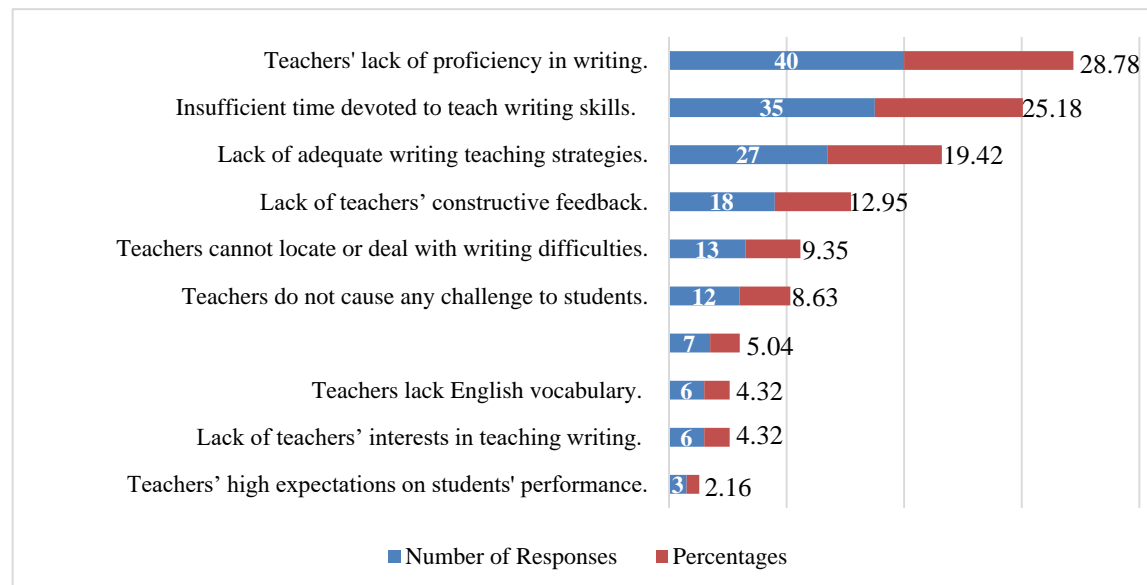
Figure 1. The Results of EFL Teachers' Perspectives on Writing Challenges Related to the Teachers

The teachers' responses were categorized into ten concepts representing how they considered they might provide challenges for the writing proficiency of Saudi EFL students, as follows: (1) The majority

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(28.78%) believed they lacked proficiency in writing. (2) 25,18% cited the shortage of time given to instruction in writing skills. (3) 19.42% indicated that they felt they possessed inadequate teaching strategies to assist students in becoming good writers. (4) 12.95% cited their failure to provide constructive feedback. (5) 9.35% highlighted their inability to locate or deal with writing difficulties. (6) 8.63% considered their approach was insufficiently challenging for students. (7) 5.04% placed responsibility on the need to focus on language skills other than writing. (8) 4.32% cited a lack of vocabulary. (9) 4.32% also cited a lack of interest in teaching writing. (10) 2.16% highlighted teachers' high expectations for students' written proficiency.

The comments below reflect the perspective of EFL teachers concerning the writing challenges related to them.

> *"As long as I taught two stages, I've difficulty with managing the time. It's too difficult to deal with two curricula with huge numbers of students. I can't concentrate, and most of the time, I'm under pressure."*
>
> *"I don't emphasize on points of weakness that my students need to learn how to write because there is not enough time in class."*
>
> *I have lots of other works to do in school, so I don't give my full attention to my classes especially writing and listening."*
>
> *"I can't give my students my whole attention to developing their writing as I have a large class to teach."*
>
> *"Writing needs time for both preparation and implementation, which I don't have at all."*
>
> *"I focus more on grammar than other writing mechanics."*
>
> *"I face difficulties teaching students with different levels in one class."*
>
> *"I sometimes ignore their mistakes not to make them feel frustrated."*
>
> *"I don't know how to gain their interest, especially in writing."*
>
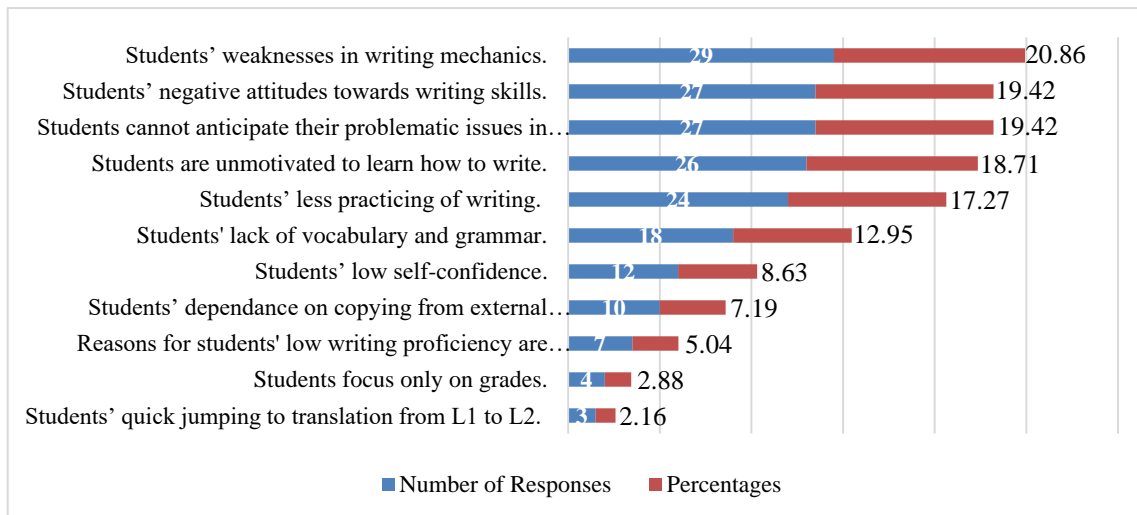> *"I might have difficulties with giving feedback continuously!"*
>
> *"I usually skip the writing section."*
>
> *"I don't have strategies in teaching writing."*
>
> *"I don't correct their writing tasks sequentially."*

5.2.2 Results of the Writing Challenges Related to the Learners

The results of the third research question, ("What are the Saudi EFL teachers' perspectives on students' writing challenges related to the learners?"), the responses to the second open-ended question were categorized as shown in Figure 2.

Students' weaknesses in writing mechanics. — 29 — 20.86
Students' negative attitudes towards writing skills. — 27 — 19.42
Students cannot anticipate their problematic issues in… — 27 — 19.42
Students are unmotivated to learn how to write. — 26 — 18.71
Students' less practicing of writing. — 24 — 17.27
Students' lack of vocabulary and grammar. — 18 — 12.95
Students' low self-confidence. — 12 — 8.63
Students' dependance on copying from external… — 10 — 7.19
Reasons for students' low writing proficiency are… — 7 — 5.04
Students focus only on grades. — 4 — 2.88
Students' quick jumping to translation from L1 to L2. — 3 — 2.16

■ Number of Responses   ■ Percentages

Figure 2. The Results of EFL Teachers' Perspectives on Writing Challenges Related to the Learners

The second open-ended question considered the perspective of EFL teachers concerning the challenges facing Saudi students related to the learners themselves. The results showed that 20.86% of the respondents cited students' weaknesses in writing mechanics, while 19.42% cited negative attitudes towards writing skills and 19.42% an inability to anticipate their issues. Moreover, 18.71% of the teachers believed that Saudi students lacked the motivation to learn writing skills, while 17.27% assumed this was due to a lack of practice. Furthermore, 8.63% considered their students suffered from a lack of self-confidence, while approximately 7.19% thought they tended to depend on copying writing materials from external resources.

By contrast, 5.04% of the teachers stated that they were unaware of other reasons for students' low writing proficiency, although 2.88% indicated they considered such difficulties due to a general focus on grades and 2.16% to a rapid move to translating from L1 to L2.

Furthermore, the comments below reflect EFL teachers' perspectives on writing challenges related to the learners, based on a thorough qualitative data analysis.

"They don't have good backgrounds to write topics also they don't have a large number of vocabularies, so they depend on memorizing topics for the exams."

"Students have fear from learning English in general! There are many reasons behind it, but I think it's the teacher's role to make them feel safe and comfortable to express themselves."

"They believe writing is a complex skill, so they don't make any effort or even try to improve themselves."

"They have no motivation and have real problems with the fundamentals of the English language."

"Students' lack of self-confidence, (less) vocabularies and grammar practices."

"I can't see their usual level when it comes to a topic that isn't in their interest!"

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"Students concentrate more on marks, or they just want to pass the exam."

*"Students depend mainly on Google translation."*

"They don't try to improve themselves."

"Students don't enjoy writing at all."

"They copy from the Internet."

5.2.3 Results of the Writing Challenges Related to the Textbooks

The results of the fourth research question ("What are the Saudi EFL teachers' perspectives on students' writing challenges related to the textbooks?"), the responses to the third open-ended question in the research instrument were categorized as shown in Figure 3.
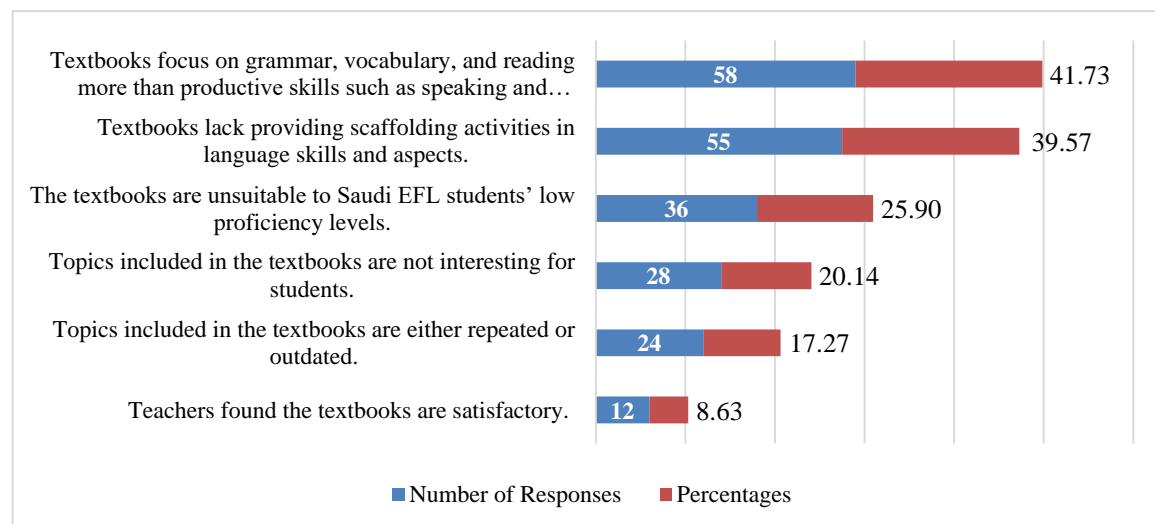
Figure 3. The Results of EFL Teachers' Perspectives on Writing Challenges Related to the Textbooks

The responses of the Saudi EFL teachers were categorized into six concepts, representing the difficulties for students presented by the existing language textbooks, as follows. (1) most teachers (41.73%) found such textbooks tended to focus more on grammar, vocabulary, and reading than productive skills, i.e., speaking and writing. (2) 39.57% believed that these textbooks lack language skills and aspects scaffolding activities. (3) 25.90% felt that the textbooks failed to accommodate the proficiency level of EFL students. (4) 20.14% indicated that the topics held no interest for students. (5) 17.27% reported that the writing topics were either repetitive or outdated. (6) 8.63% of the EFL teachers viewed the textbooks as satisfactory.

The comments below reflect the perspective of EFL teachers' perspectives on writing challenges related to the textbooks.

"EFL books are good; the students are not raised academically well enough to understand or know the basic language skills."

"It would be more beneficial if they provide optional topics in which students can choose

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according to their interest."

"They are not following a logical order in teaching writing."

"The textbooks are very good and up to date!"

"A lot of topics in each semester."

"Lots of tasks to be done."

"Repeated topics."

"Unsuitable topics."

"Complicated topics."

"Very difficult."

6. Discussion

The current mixed-method research results explore the perspectives of Saudi EFL teachers on students' writing competencies and their concerns regarding the writing challenges, particularly in relation to EFL teachers, learners, and textbooks. Regarding the first research question results, EFL teachers reveal that Saudi students lack writing competencies that sometimes lead to writing deficiency. EFL teachers viewed issues like plagiarizing others' work and committing grammatical mistakes. Moreover, they emphasize that their students are unable to expand the focal idea in paragraphs, use (a) correct spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, (b) diverse vocabulary, or (c) citation to support the arguments.

These findings could be explained by what Saudi EFL teachers stated in the open-ended question regarding students' lack of the necessary background to compose topics or select appropriate vocabulary, forcing them to copy from the Internet or memorize the model topics for the tests. Furthermore, they described their EFL students' writing skills as poor, and they admitted that they struggle with the fundamentals of the English language. They are also hesitant to write without extensively relying on Google translation due to their lack of syntax, vocabulary, and other writing mechanics. Generally, these results have been supported by Alshammari (2020) and Nasser (2016), who argued that Saudi learners' proficiency in writing tends to be insufficient. Similar results were reported by several studies (Alzamil, 2020; Fareed et al., 2016; Hussain, 2019; Ibnian, 2017; Jashari & Fojkar, 2019; Javid & Umer, 2014; Mohammad & Hazarika, 2016; Moses & Mohamad, 2019; Nuruzzaman, Shafiqul Islam, et al., 2018; Rass, 2015) who found that despite substantial attempts to improve EFL students' writing skills, it remains below expectation. EFL learners face challenges due to linguistic deficiencies, specifically, lack of ideas and incorrect writing mechanics such as vocabulary diversity, grammatical difficulties and flaws, and poor spelling.

One unanticipated finding was that EFL teachers were unsure about some Saudi students' abilities, such as writing legibly and utilizing acceptable language, transition words, logical paragraph organization, concept flow, and authentic examples. These findings contrast with the open-ended data analysis in which Saudi EFL teachers stated that students have substantial deficits in writing mechanics due to a lack of practice, motivation, and attitudes to learn how to write. Similarly, these findings contrast with

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those of Fareed et al. (2016); Ibnian (2017); Jashari and Fojkar (2019); Kenta and Bosha (2019); Moses and Mohamad (2019) and Rass (2015), who found that EFL students have insufficient levels of competence due to a lack of language ability, which they cited as a barrier to improving their written work.

The open-ended data analysis resulted in several themes representing the writing skills challenges faced by Saudi EFL students related to firstly, their teachers, secondly, the students themselves, and thirdly, language textbooks. The first open-ended question identified several issues. The data revealed that, like their counterparts in some other countries, Saudi EFL teachers tend to face situations that can cause their students to experience issues when learning writing skills. The findings reveal that one problem relates to the limited time given to teaching writing skills, as teachers generally require more time to create new instructional materials, activities they consider relevant for their pupils, and provide adequate feedback or reflections. This accords with the conclusions of Hidayati (2018), Ibnian (2017), and Kenta and Bosha (2019), who highlighted the inadequate time allocated to written work as forming an obstacle to developing proficiency.

The EFL teachers also cited the lack of adequate writing teaching strategies and teaching methods, preventing them from providing appropriate and interactive teaching methods for each topic. This indicates that using a variety of teaching strategies can assist students in developing their English writing skills, with their progress improved by being motivated and thus active participants. Furthermore, employing various writing methods can help encourage students to think creatively. This interpretation is consistent with the studies of Ezza (2010), Fareed et al. (2016), Ibnian (2017), Kenta and Bosha (2019), Alshammari (2020), and Alzamil (2020), who found students' writing proficiency impacted by the ineffective and inappropriate implementation of teaching strategies.

Moreover, the EFL teachers' responses indicated that students' writing ability could be compromised by a lack of constructive and immediate feedback, including: (1) understanding the assignment given; (2) organizing the content and the flow of sentences; (3) issues with writing style; (4) difficulties with grammar and spelling; and (5) the possession of appropriate vocabulary. This highlights the need for teachers to devote more time to selecting effective feedback methods, particularly as offering frequent and constructive feedback supports students in developing as writers. Therefore, this current study suggests that EFL teachers should vary the sources they use for delivering feedback, including peer feedback and self-assessment. This finding corresponds with those of Dhanya and Alamelu (2019) and Alshammari (2020), whose research concluded that a lack of feedback tends to prove detrimental to improvement, whereas constructive feedback demonstrates significant benefits when it comes to improving students' written work.

A further significant challenge indicated by the EFL teachers concerned the issue of focusing too much attention on other language skills, particularly as there is additional complexity to teaching speaking and writing as productive skills compared to teaching them as receptive skills. According to Hossain (2015), writing differs from speaking in that writers are required to express and communicate their ideas using

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words without any direct interaction and is thus demanding for teachers. One of the participants stated: "t*o be honest; I don't like teaching writing. It wastes so much time; thus, I focus more on other language skills.*" This finding corresponds with that of Jashari and Fojkar (2019), who concluded that teachers tend not to award the same attention to writing skills in terms of development, while Ezza (2010) stated that teachers tend to focus primarily on grammatical accuracy rather than written performance due to the outdated teaching materials.

The results of the analysis of the first open-ended question reveal some further challenges associated with the Saudi context, including: (1) teachers' lack of proficiency in writing; (2) interest in teaching the subject; (3) insufficient vocabulary; and (4) inability to identify difficulties. Despite the lack of evidence in the literature review, these issues should be considered as being due to the teachers' lack of vocabulary or interest when teaching writing skills.

The data from the second open-ended question reveals circumstances Saudi EFL teachers identified as leading to EFL students impeding their performance, including weakness in writing mechanics, grammar, and vocabulary, as well as motivation, a positive attitude, and willingness to practice their writing skills intensively. Additionally, the teachers reported the negative impact of the interference of L1 and L2, with one participant commenting that "*many students don't like writing because they feel uncomfortable with the writing process due to a lack of preparatory work. Students have weak grammar and spelling skills. No one wants to look stupid, but many students turn away from writing because they are afraid that their lack of grammar and spelling skills will make them look bad. Students don't feel that they need to write.*"

The majority of published studies support the presence of these challenges (Alzamil, 2020; Fareed et al., 2016; Hidayati, 2018; Hussain, 2019; Ibnian, 2017; Jashari & Fojkar, 2019; Javid & Umer, 2014; Mohammad & Hazarika, 2016; Moses & Mohamad, 2019; Nuruzzaman et al., 2018). This indicates that EFL teachers recognize the importance of vocabulary for building sentences and that students with limited grammatical understanding may experience fear and lack confidence. In addition, the sources of such challenges (i.e., lack of motivation and the impact of L1 on L2) result in some students experiencing difficulties in writing legibly.

Figure 2 demonstrates that the Saudi EFL teachers reported that students' writing skills were also impacted by their habit of copying from external resources and being focused on grades. One participant commented: "t*hey depend on texts from the Internet and rarely read to write in the English language,*" while another stated: "t*hey always Google the assigned topics.*" Previous studies have not highlighted these two challenges, and it is significant that they have been identified in Saudi writing classrooms. However, one of the limitations of this current perspective is that it does not explain the challenges presented by this aspect, particularly as students tend to check their work with online resources, and part of the teachers' role is to detect plagiarism.

The data arising from the third open-ended question reveals that Saudi EFL teachers reported specific issues related to the English language textbooks potentially obstructing writing skills, including that textbooks place less focus on writing than grammar, vocabulary, and reading. Moreover, the textbooks

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provide students with scaffolding activities, proving unsuitable for low proficiency levels for Saudi EFL students. The topics included in the textbooks are generally unattractive, repeated, or outdated, with one respondent noting: "*some of the topics need to be modified to suit students' age*," and another commented, "*it would be more beneficial if the textbooks provide optional topics to enable students to select based on their interests,*" while another noted: *"textbooks involve unnecessary topics*."

However, this result needs to be interpreted with caution, as only a small number of the EFL teachers stated finding the textbooks satisfactory, with one commenting: "*EFL books are good, but Saudi students have insufficient academic proficiency in understanding the writing materials by the time they reach high school*." At the same time, the second respondent said: "*the textbooks are excellent - but not for Saudi students*." Furthermore, Ezza (2010) assumed that Arab EFL learners face significant difficulties due to outdated resources. Moreover, Ibnian (2017) stated the need to design a language curriculum matching EFL learners' needs and interests to address any challenges potentially hindering students' improvement.

This study found little discussion in the literature regarding language textbooks impacting students' writing proficiency. However, Alzamil (2020), Kenta and Bosha (2019), and Ezza (2010) stated that EFL textbooks could cause issues for students if the focus was placed primarily on grammatical accuracy as opposed to written performance or included inappropriate teaching materials and non-attractive activities.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This mixed-method study explored the views of Saudi EFL teachers concerning the challenges facing students of writing in relation to EFL teachers, learners, and textbooks. The research found that both Saudi intermediate and secondary school EFL teachers understand the challenges confronting their students and the participants provided information on the unique circumstances that have shaped their own experiences of issues concerning writing skills, as well as expressing detailed views in their own words, and undertaking complex assessments of numerous perspectives.

As discussed above, the analysis of the first open-ended question revealed that EFL teachers identified ten issues potentially impacting negatively on the quality of students' writing: (1) their own lack of writing proficiency; (2) insufficient in-class time; (3) inappropriate teaching strategies; (4) lack of constructive feedback; (5) inability to deal with writing difficulties; (6) insufficient challenges for students; (7) too much attention focused on other skills (8) insufficient vocabulary; (9) a lack of interest in teaching writing; and (10) high expectations of students.

In addition, the results of the second open-ended question revealed eleven possible sources of challenges as identified by EFL teachers. The majority considered that Saudi students demonstrate weaknesses in mechanics, vocabulary, and grammar, along with unsatisfactory motivation levels, negative attitudes, and weak self-confidence, while some were found to copy from external resources or do a quick translation from L1 to L2. Besides, they revealed their inability to anticipate their problematic issues or reasons for

low writing proficiency in writing, the less practicing, and the focal point for learning writing is to get high grades.

Finally, when it came to EFL teachers' perspectives of the challenges related to textbooks, the results of the third open-ended question revealed six sources of challenges with a potentially negative influence on students' quality of written work. This study found that Saudi EFL teachers believe that language textbooks focus on grammar, vocabulary, and reading rather than productive skills such as speaking and writing. In addition, they lack scaffolding writing activities, engaging and up-to-date and uninteresting topics, and an ability to address Saudi EFL students' low proficiency levels. Only a few Saudi EFL teachers were found to be satisfied with the language textbooks.

These findings extend the current understanding of the challenges facing intermediate and secondary school students in Saudi Arabia, strengthening the view that English teachers face challenges in improving writing skills. Therefore, this study presents some recommendations to assist writing teachers in successfully understanding and addressing these issues.

Firstly, EFL teachers should enroll in professional development training courses to create a supportive learning environment, help them plan practical and interactive lessons, develop a comprehensive teaching experience, and enhance their teaching skills.

Secondly, EFL teachers need to inform EFL students of the various stages of the writing process, i.e., planning, drafting, sharing, evaluating, revising, and editing. Additionally, they should teach students to devote considerable attention to improving mechanics, grammar, vocabulary, and spelling skills. Furthermore, they should design creative lesson plans, with sufficient in-class time dedicated to teaching and practicing written work.

Thirdly, EFL teachers should provide frequent constructive feedback to students while also encouraging peer feedback.

Fourthly, EFL teachers need to motivate students, including encouraging them to acquire writing skills by integrating technology into scaffolding instruction. This can be enhanced through e-journals, e-dictionaries, language applications, and language games.

Finally, this study recognizes the benefits of creating a community of writers to engage students in multiple teaching methods, activities, and practices. It also recommends that EFL teachers use new supporting teaching materials alongside textbooks.

These findings offer the following insights for future research. Firstly, this study recommends investigating the writing challenges faced by EFL teachers and students. Secondly, it suggests a similar analysis to explore writing challenges arising from certain psychological factors, i.e., satisfaction, metacognitive awareness, and self-esteem. Finally, it highly recommends further investigation and experimentation into the impact of teaching strategies and assessment techniques on students' writing proficiency.

8. Limitations of the Study

This study has resulted in several significant findings. However, due to the participants consisting exclusively of Saudi EFL female teachers, the potential impact of gender is beyond its scope and could limit the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, the study focused exclusively on Saudi EFL female teachers in Madinah, highlighting the need to undertake further studies on a broader scale in Saudi Arabia to ensure the generalizability of the results.

Acknowledgments

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