Advancing academic writing skills: An interventional study with EFL tertiary-level students

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Abstract

This study aimed to enhance the academic writing skills of EFL undergraduate students at Qassim University in Saudi Arabia. A total of 32 students from the Department of English Language and Translation participated in a quasi-experimental study with a one-group pre-test and post-test design. The participants were assessed on their writing abilities before undergoing a fifteen-week instructional intervention focused on proper essay formatting, the use of signal words and transitional phrases, and advanced sentence structures. The effectiveness of the intervention was measured through a post-test. Statistical analysis, including one-sample t-tests and descriptive statistics, was conducted to assess the results. The findings revealed significant improvements in the participants' writing performance and other linguistic aspects. However, it is important to note that the students' overall writing levels remained relatively low, aligning with previous research. Consequently, recommendations were made to intensify and diversify efforts in order to elevate the students' writing skills.

Keywords: academic writing; corrective feedback; form-focused instruction; empirical research; undergraduate female students

الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تعزيز مهارات الكتابة الأكاديمية لدى طالبات المرحلة الجامعية في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية في جامعة القصيم في المملكة العربية السعودية. شارك ما مجموعه 32 طالبة من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية والترجمة في دراسة شبه تجريبية تتضمن اختبار قبلي وبعدي لمجموعة واحدة. تم تقييم المشاركات بناءً على قدراتهم الكتابية قبل الخضوع لتجربة تعليمية مدتها خمسة عشر أسبوعًا بالتركيز على الكتابة النموذجية للمقالات، واستخدام الكلمات الدلالية والعبارات الانتقالية، والتراكيب المتقدمة للجمل. تم قياس فعالية التجربة من خلال الاختبار البعدي. ولتقييم النتائج، أُجريت التحاليل الإحصائية، بما في ذلك اختبارات t لعينة واحدة والإحصائيات الوصفية. كشفت النتائج عن تحسن كبير في الأداء الكتابي للمشاركات والجوانب اللغوية الأخرى. ومع ذلك، من المهم ملاحظة أن مستويات الكتابة الإجمالية للطالبات مازالت منخفضة نسبيًا، بما يتوافق مع مخرجات الأبحاث السابقة. وبناءً على ذلك، فقد تم التوصية بتكثيف الجهود وتنويعها من أجل الارتقاء بمهارات الكتابة لدى الطالبات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكتابة الأكاديمية، التغذية الراجعة، التعليم المرتكز على بناء الجملة، البحث التجريبي، طالبات المرحلة الجامعية

1. Introduction

Writing is a fundamental skill in the English language, emphasizing its importance for educators and teachers. Proficiency in writing at a higher education level is a reasonable expectation for university students. Insufficient writing and composition abilities hinder students and others from effectively conveying their ideas and thoughts. Through well-structured sentences, writing provides a means to express ideas and facts clearly.

Within the scope of English as a foreign language, educators often remark weakness in the students 'performances, their mastery of the language in general, and their writing skills in particular. This has been confirmed by many studies in this field. Research conducted by Bacha (2012) in an EFL context revealed that teachers find students' academic writing weak. It is assumed to be specifically difficult for those of "non-Anglicized linguistic and cultural backgrounds" (Al Fadda, 2012, p. 123)

Writing is considered to be a highly demanding and challenging task that requires proficiency in various sub-skills like grammar and vocabulary. Additionally, it necessitates the utilization of higher-order thinking abilities. According to Grami (2010), writing is not a straightforward cognitive activity, but instead a complex mental process that demands careful thought, discipline, and concentration (p.9).

Academic writing holds great significance at the university level as it is crucial for students to possess strong literacy skills in order to successfully engage in academic endeavors and conduct research tasks. Proficiency in academic writing also proves helpful in mastering other disciplines taught in English. Abdulkareem (2013) asserts that academic writing plays a pivotal role in the progress of second language learners.

While numerous research papers have explored writing techniques, there is a dearth of studies focusing specifically on academic writing and its strategies (Alsmari, 2019). Thus, there exists a need for this study.

In addition, traditional and non-traditional settings utilize distinct teaching methods. Although modern techniques emphasizing communication and interaction have become more prevalent, traditional approaches remain important (Alsmari, 2019).

When it comes to writing skills, explicit teaching procedures are necessary as they emphasize accuracy in expression and the proper use of vocabulary and structures. Several researchers argue that explicit grammatical instructions are more effective than implicit ones, especially for difficult rules (Archer & Hughes, 2010; Ellis, 2008). Furthermore, Müller and Gregoric (2017) state that explicit instructions are more efficient for complex rules. Therefore, for this research experiment, the direct instruction approach was utilized.

In addition, feedback provided by instructors plays a crucial role in rectifying errors and aiding students' development. Neglecting to correct students' mistakes will hinder progress. Studies on the effectiveness of corrective feedback in L2 writing have produced conflicting results (Baleghizadeh and Gordani, 2012). However, this present study contributes to this field by examining the role of written and oral feedback types in an EFL academic writing context.

To summarize, this study aims to determine the effectiveness of a form-focused teaching method in improving the academic writing skills of tertiary-level students. It also seeks to investigate the value of corrective feedback in enhancing students' linguistic abilities in writing.

1.1. Research objectives

The research objectives are as follows:
1. To determine the influence of explicit instruction of academic writing techniques on Saudi EFL students' skills in writing comparison-contrast essays, specifically in relation to the use of comparison and contrast signal words (e.g., like, unlike, similar, dissimilar, etc.).
2. To examine the impact of explicit instruction on the students' ability to organize their essays appropriately, including the inclusion of an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion.
3. To assess the effects of explicit instruction on the students' incorporation of prepositional phrases that demonstrate location and spatial relationships within their sentences.
4. To investigate the influence of explicit instruction on the correct usage of restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses in the students' writing.

1.2. Statement of the problem

The Saudi community views the English language as a foreign language, with limited usage outside of academia. As a result, there is a need to enhance the English language proficiency of EFL learners. Alkodimi and Al-Ahdal (2021) found that current teaching-learning practices in Saudi Arabia have not enabled learners to achieve native-like fluency in English.

Furthermore, academic writing, in particular, is a crucial skill that requires special attention and emphasis. Undergraduate students must develop academic writing abilities to effectively complete their academic tasks and research projects. However, previous studies have shown that Saudi undergraduate students, especially those in the context of this study, lack sufficient linguistic and writing skills. Alkodimi and Al-Ahdal (2021) identified limited academic writing skills in Saudi undergraduate learners, including a lack of vocabulary, proper sentence structure, and spelling. Similarly, Alqasham et al. (2021) explored the writing abilities of Qassim University students and found that they struggled with coherence and cohesion in their writing, leading to generally low essay writing achievements. Moreover, in their study, Alawerdy and Alalwi (2022) observed that Saudi EFL students exhibited deficiencies in their ability to write a coherent paragraph, specifically in terms of their usage of conjunctions. They found that certain conjunctions were either excessively utilized, insufficiently utilized, or improperly employed.

Considering these factors, there is an urgent need to enhance the writing skills of English-major undergraduate students. The existing literature on writing research also indicates a lack of studies addressing academic writing improvement, eventually highlighting the significance of this research.

1.3. Limitations of the study

The study has two limitations. Firstly, the sample size is small, which limits the ability to apply the findings to a larger population. It is recommended that future studies on the same topic use a larger sample size. Secondly, the study only involves a single assessment experiment that compares the means of pre-test and post-test variables. Conducting a two-group experiment with a treatment group and a control group would likely yield more effective results.

2. Literature review

2.1. Form-focused instruction

The assumptions that underlie this research were mainly drawn from the SLA theory known as form-focused instruction (FFI). FFI is defined as a type of L2 instruction that "involves some attempt to focus learners' attention on specific properties of the L2 so that they will learn them" (Ellis, 2008, p. 963). The term form-focused was originally used by Long (1991) to distinguish between "focus on forms" and "focus on form." The main distinction between the two terms lies in the type of syllabus a learner is exposed to and the type of exercises they practice. Focus on forms is found in structural syllabi and uses traditional types of exercises, in which explicit instruction of previously planned grammar structures is used. According to Ellis (2002), this kind of instruction involves "teaching of specific grammatical features in a structure-of-the-day approach." He argues that in this type of instruction, the learning is intentional because the language is treated as something to be mastered in order for the communication to take place. Focus on form, on the other hand, is based on a task-based syllabus and comprises communicative tasks which aim at drawing the learners' attention to linguistic structures while they are engaged in communicative activities. The term FFI can be considered as the one that meets both needs. As a term, it was first introduced by Spada (1997) as an alternative of but not identical to Long's focus on form (Long, 1991).

It can be concluded that FFI is a method of teaching grammatical features directly, i.e., through explicit explanation at times considered appropriate by the teacher, or indirectly, i.e., through meaning-focused or communicative activities by drawing the learners' attention to or helping them notice these structures.

A plethora of research has investigated the effectiveness of FFI or explicit instruction on enhancing EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners' writing skills. For example, Nasser (2019) investigated the difficulties in writing composition with Iraqi EFL learners. The study concluded that using explicit instruction helps the students improve their writing abilities. However, it was found that the majority of participants made mistakes in sentence structure, vocabulary, tenses, subject-verb agreement, articles and word order. Ultimately, instructors had to work hard to enhance the students' writing and decrease the pressure that students felt when doing this activity.

In the Saudi Arabian context, the issue of cohesive writing has been examined in a few studies. Firstly, in a study by Alawerdy and Alalwi (2022), the writings of 43 EFL students at a Saudi University in their first year of study were analyzed. These students attended explicit instruction sessions on using conjunctions as cohesive devices. The results showed significant differences in the post-test between the experimental and control groups. Additionally, Alshalan (2019) investigated the writing quality of 100 Saudi EFL undergraduate students at Al Imam Muhammed Ibn Saud Islamic University in Riyadh. The findings revealed that these students tended to consistently focus on the central idea of the topic. Furthermore, the statistical analysis indicated a relationship between the students' writing scores and the length of their essays, as well as the use of cohesive ties and the scores, and cohesive ties and the length of the students' essays. Based on these studies, it is recommended that EFL teachers provide Saudi EFL students with various cohesive tools to help them enhance their writing skills and create smooth connections between their ideas.

Moreover, Akkoç, Qin and Karabacak (2018) studied the impact of explicit teaching of formulaic language on the quality of Turkish EFL university students' argumentative writing. Their results indicated that the experimental group students outperformed the control group students in

both immediate and delayed post-tests. Overall, the findings suggest that explicit instruction of the target items raised the students' awareness of formulaic language and eventually improved the quality of their writing. Similarly, a study investigating the effectiveness of explicit instruction of discourse markers on EFL learners' writing ability was carried out by Sadeghi and Kargar (2014). A post-test administered at the end of the study showed that learners exposed to explicit instruction significantly improved their writing skills as well as awareness of discourse markers and text coherence.

Another study aiming at an appraisal of FFI on improving the writing accuracy of EFL Iranian students was conducted by Rajabi and Dezhkam (2014). The results obtained from statistical procedures pointed out the effectiveness of explicit grammar instruction as a scaffolding strategy that can provide a solid ground for students to improve writing accuracy. Finally, Wang and Wang (2014) explored the effect of FFI on Korean students' perceptions of their writing and editing skills. Their survey results revealed a positive impact of the intervention on the participants' perceptions of their writing and editing abilities, suggesting that explicit grammar instruction could have a beneficial role in foreign language writing pedagogy.

2.2. Corrective feedback

Another concept closely related to the premises of this study is known as "Corrective feedback." Corrective feedback takes several forms such as content comments, error correction, error correction and content comments and error identification without corrections (Ferris 2002). It is divided into two main types: direct and indirect feedback. Direct feedback is also known as explicit feedback. Direct feedback takes place when the instructor identifies the errors and corrects them on the learners' written essay. Indirect feedback, on the other hand, is when the instructor identifies the error but does not provide the correct form. However, in most cases, the instructor would underline, circle or place an error sign in the margin to indicate the mistake the students have committed.

In 2022, Albelihi conducted a study that examined how Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) instructors support their students with corrective feedback and also investigated the students' beliefs about the feedback they receive. The research revealed that the predominant type of corrective feedback used by the instructors was direct, particularly when addressing grammatical errors, vocabulary, syntax, and content evaluation. However, it was found that Saudi EFL learners favored direct corrective feedback for grammatical errors, while they preferred indirect coded feedback when it came to improving the content of their writing assignments.

Ferris (2004) examined the effects of direct and indirect error correction and found that more students revised their essays (88%) under the direct error feedback compared to the indirect error feedback (77%). In this research, the researcher—who was the course instructor —had provided direct corrective feedback throughout the course drawing the students' attention to their written errors wherever appropriate.

From an empirical point of view, the findings of some studies following a line of research concerned with the role of corrective feedback in writing are presented next. For instance, a study was carried out by Baleghizadeh and Gordani (2012) with the aim of exploring the role of corrective feedback in an EFL academic writing context over a course of 12 weeks. The study found both immediate and delayed effects for the student-teacher conference type of feedback on students' overall writing skills.

Similarly, Müller and Gregoric (2017) investigated the impact of explicit instruction and corrective feedback on ESL postgraduate students' grammar in academic writing. It was found that

the experimental group students significantly outperformed their counterparts in the control group, suggesting the usefulness of explicit grammar corrective feedback on ESL learners' writing improvement.

Yoke et al. (2013) examined the effectiveness of an innovative form of corrective feedback in improving Malay learners' academic writing. The findings of the research showed that online corrective feedback may be an effective way to improve the writing skills of learners, particularly when integrated into the teaching and learning of academic writing.

Finally, Irwin (2017) investigated EFL students' preferences and teacher feedback practices pertaining to written corrective feedback. It was found that the students preferred that their teachers provide direct lexical and grammatical error corrections and attend to all of their mistakes. In contrast, indirect feedback that simply pointed out that an error had been made did not seem appealing to the study participants.

3. Research methodology

3.1.Participants and sampling

The study sample consisted of 32 students majoring in the English language at Qassim University, Department of English Language and Translation. The sampling procedure used to choose students for the experiment is cluster sampling, which involves selecting an entire group or class as participants in the study. The students were enrolled in the Academic Writing (ENG 247) course during the first semester of the academic year 2021–2022. This course covers a range of topics about essential writing tips and techniques in addition to the identification of main essay types such as comparison-contrast essays, cause-effect essays, argumentative essays, classification essays and reaction essays.

3.2.Research design and data collection

The research reported herein is a quasi-experimental study in the form of a one-group pre-test and post-test design. The experiment was conducted during the first semester of the 2021–2022 academic year. Prior to the experiment, the participants' writing abilities were assessed using a pre-test. Thereafter, a post-test was administered to each participant after completing the 15 teaching weeks that represented the intervention period. During this period, the students were trained on how to write effectively and master the techniques of academic writing using explicit teaching methods, with a special focus on the comparison-contrast essay type. Students' mistakes were also regularly amended through the adoption of direct corrective-feedback.

3.3.Instruments

3.3.1. Pre-test and post-test

In this research study, two data collection tools were utilized: a pre-test and a post-test. The pre-test was administered at the beginning of the semester to all the students in order to gauge their initial writing performance and identify any weaknesses or areas that needed improvement. The test consisted of a one-question essay prompt that required the students to write a comparison-contrast essay of about 150-200 words. The limited writing abilities of the participants may explain the relatively small number of words. They could choose between two topics: comparing school study and university study, or comparing their hometown with another place they had visited.

Following the pre-test, the participants underwent a 15-week treatment of explicit writing instructions. The focus of these instructions was on specific writing forms, such as the appropriate usage of signal words, relative clauses, and essay organization format. The goal was to equip the students with the necessary skills to improve their writing abilities.

After the treatment period, a post-test was administered to assess the extent to which the students had applied the knowledge they had gained and to measure the difference in their performance compared to the pre-test. The post-test had the same format as the pre-test, with a single essay question. The participants were asked to compose a comparison-contrast essay on one of two topics: online studying and in-person studying, or online shopping and mall shopping (see Appendix A for samples of students' performances in the tests).

To analyze the data, the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS 23) was used. One-sample t-tests were conducted to compare the results of the pre-test and post-test and determine the significance level. The significance value was set at < 0.05. Additionally, the means and standard deviations for each variable tested during the experiment were reported.

Overall, the experiment involved administering a pre-test to diagnose the students' writing performance, providing explicit writing instructions as a treatment intervention, and evaluating the students' progress through a post-test. The data obtained were analyzed using statistical tests to assess the significance of any differences observed.

4. Results

The results of the students in the pre-test and the post-test revealed statistically significant differences in the students' performance in the two tests ($p. < 0.05$); see Table 1). The mean score in the pre-test was 4.19 compared to 12.28 in the post-test. This finding suggests that the intervention yielded fruitful results and positively impacted the students' general writing achievements.

Table 1. One-sample t-test

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test	32	4.19	6.203	1.097	.001
Post-test	32	12.28	9.145	1.617	.000

Regarding the internal assessment of some linguistic aspects in the performance of the students in the two tests, the results showed remarkable progress. For example, Table 2 below shows that the study participants' use of appropriate paragraph organization, wherein paragraphs are divided into introduction, body paragraphs and conclusion, increased in the post-test—as indicated by the mean score, which was 1.38 in the pre-test and which increased to 4.53 in the post test.

Table 2. Use of appropriate paragraph organization

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test	32	0	10	1.38	3.024
Post-test	32	0	10	4.53	4.204

Concerning the students' use of words that signal comparison and contrast (such as the words like, unlike, similar, dissimilar, etc.), Table 3 below shows that the usage increased in the post-test, as the average score was 3.38, compared to only .78 in the pre-test.

Table 3. Use of signal words

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test	32	0	5	.78	1.845
Post-test	32	0	10	3.38	3.119

However, the results showed little improvement in the use of relative clauses in the post-test. The mean score in the post-test was 1.49 compared to .78 in the pre-test (Table 4). In fact, both scores are considered low and indicate that the students need further improvement in the use of complex grammatical structures.

Table 4. Use of relative clauses

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test	32	0	5	.78	1.845
Post-test	32	0	7	1.49	2.675

Finally, regarding the integration of prepositional phrases in their sentences, the students showed little progress. The mean score pertaining to this linguistic aspect in the post-test was 2.44, while it was 1.25 in the pre-test (Table 5). This finding indicates that there are no significant differences between the achievements of the participants in the two tests concerning this grammatical point.

Table 5. Use of prepositional phrases

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test	32	0	5	1.25	2.048
Post-test	32	0	10	2.44	3.68

Figure 1 below shows a general configuration of the use of the linguistics aspects under investigation by the students in both tests and provides a summary of the students' overall performance.

Shape 1
A general configuration of the overall result
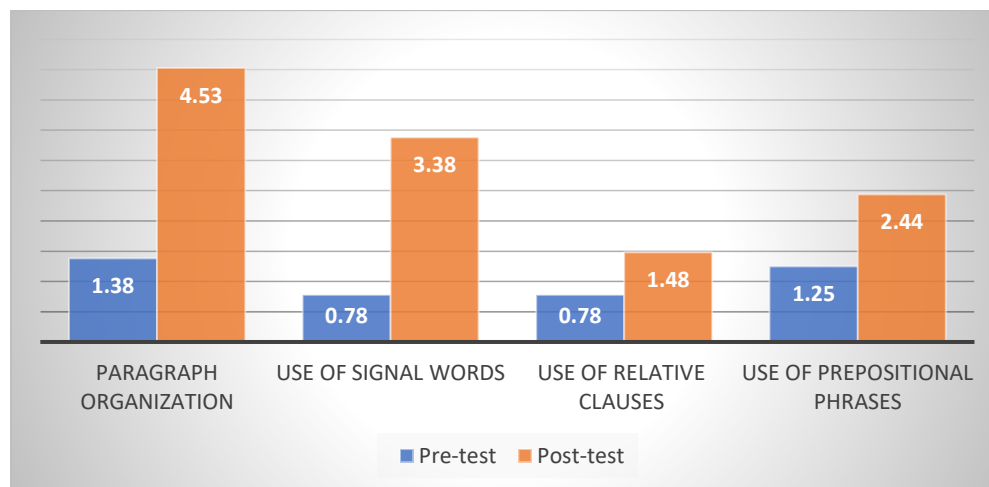
5. Discussion

The data analysis yielded some important findings that could contribute to the literature in the field of writing and skill improvement of EFL students.

First and foremost, it was found that the intervention adopted with the study samples resulted in a positive impact in developing the learners' writing abilities. This finding is quite consistent with those of previous researchers such as Nasser (2019), Müller and Gregoric (2017), Rajabi and Dezhkam (2014) and Baleghizadeh and Gordanis (2012). The sum of these studies found that explicit teaching of certain linguistic structures represents a scaffolding strategy that can provide a solid ground for students to improve their writing accuracy. They also highlighted the usefulness of direct grammar instruction and corrective feedback on EFL learners' writing advancement.

The current study also shows that the students developed adequate paragraph organization as a result of explicit instruction, which is similar to the findings of Nasser (2019), who dealt with EFL students' difficulties in writing composition and paragraph organization.

The use of specific paragraph signal words contributes to the fluency and coherence of writing and plays a facilitating role in communication; therefore, the lack of or inappropriate use of words and phrases might lead to the lack of comprehension or an awkward type of composition. Hence, this study found that focusing on teaching certain linguistic forms could lead to improving the learners' use of such forms. This also conforms to the findings of previous researchers such as Sadeghi and Kargar (2014), who clearly indicate that learners' exposure to explicit instruction of discourse markers significantly improved their ability in writing.

Although the students showed significant development in the use of connectors and transitions between sentences, the analysis showed that these devices were sometimes placed incorrectly or used out of context by the participants. This finding aligns well with that of Alqasham et al. (2021), who demonstrated that their study participants were clueless on the use of transitional linking devices, as they frequently used them with no relevance whatsoever to the context.

It is worth noting that despite the relative improvement in the performance of the participants in the present research, it can be fairly said that the general level of the students is still low. This is evident in the low scores obtained by some of the students reaching "zero" in both tests while measuring particular linguistic elements in the study. This result has already been confirmed by

previous studies conducted in the same context, such as Alkodimi and Al-Ahdal (2021) and Alqasham et al. (2021).

In fact, writing is one of the most daunting and demanding tasks, as it requires the mastery of a set of linguistic knowledge and techniques. For this reason, some researchers suggested that writing should be taught through practice and exposure. Mukmin and Afriyanti (2020) argued that writing is a complex activity that needs an immense amount of work to understand and teach, so it has to be taught through exposure.

This point clearly indicates that certain policies and efforts need to be undertaken to reform the existing conditions and develop the EFL learners' English language skills in general and writing skills in particular.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study showed that explicit teaching and corrective feedback are effective in improving university students' writing styles. While there were relative improvements in students' performance, their levels still need more attention and advancement. This reinforces findings from previous studies that more efforts are needed to enhance students' writing skills and language proficiency. To promote change in this area, higher level policies should be implemented, and changes should be made to department plans, curriculum, teaching methods, and admission criteria. There are still aspects of writing that require further investigation, such as analyzing students' linguistic errors and finding solutions to develop them. Future research should also conduct experimental studies to test the efficacy and usefulness of interactive methods. It is important to note that research in writing has the dual benefit of providing insights into students' performances as well as pushing their level forward.

6.1.Recommendations:

The findings of this study reinforce previous research indicating that EFL students in English language departments have below-average writing abilities. Therefore, it is necessary to implement policies at various levels, including the curriculum and senior management levels, to address this issue.

At the course level, it is recommended to intensify and diversify efforts to improve students' writing skills. This can be achieved through the use of effective teaching methods, such as interactive teaching, which encourages students to actively participate in language productive tasks like speaking and writing.

At the department level, it is proposed to assess the eligibility of students applying to join a foreign language department. This should include evaluating their readiness to improve and adapt throughout their enrollment in the program. Higher policy levels should consider specific criteria, such as increasing the enrollment percentage in the English language department or implementing admission tests for prospective students. These measures aim to ensure the quality of program outputs and ensure that applicants possess the necessary competence to study a foreign language.

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Dr.Yasamiyan Alolaywi is an assistant professor of Applied Linguistics in the Department of English Language and Translation, College of Sciences and Arts, Mithnab, Qassim University. Dr. Alolaywi received her Ph.D. degree in Applied Linguistics (2020) from Imam Muhammed bin Saud University. Her research interests include Applied Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition.

د. ياسمين العليوي، أستاذ مساعد في تخصص اللغويات التطبيقية في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية والترجمة، بكلية العلوم والآداب في المذنب في جامعة القصيم؛ في المملكة العربية السعودية. حاصلة على درجة الدكتوراه في اللغويات التطبيقية من جامعة الإمام محمد بن سعود الإسلامية عام2020. تدور اهتماماتها البحثية حول علم اللغة التطبيقي واكتساب اللغة الثانية.

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Appendix A

Samples of students' written scripts