

UNDERSTANDING SECONDARY SCHOOL LEARNERS' DIFFICULTIES IN EFL WRITING



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Abstract:

This research work investigates real causes underlying Algerian secondary school learners' difficulties in EFL writing. To this end, data were gathered in two different secondary schools in Blida and Tlemcen cities, within a mixed method approach and using two questionnaires and an interview. The responses of the informants, 150 third year learners, 50 teachers, and 03 inspectors, were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively and served to shed light on learners' linguistic, cultural, and affective challenges in writing. The findings are hoped to contribute in understanding the problem and to serve as groundwork for alternative remedies.

key words: writing skill; difficulties; 3rd year learners; secondary education; EFL

Introduction:

In secondary education, writing is a highly important cognitive activity that may be considered as an end in its own right and as an index of learners' mastery of preceding lessons in the pedagogic unit. It is also important for tests and exams, reading skill development, future career prospects as well as Internet use. Thus, writing has to be carefully taught in order to ensure learners' awareness of and involvement in the learning process. What is actually observed is that by the end of general education, many Algerian learners face challenges in expressing themselves fluently or accurately in English in the written mode, even after an English learning experience of seven years - in the Middle

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School and later in the Secondary School. This situation arises many enquiries about the real causes of their low achievement in writing. Therefore, this paper attempts to provide an investigation into learners' difficulties in EFL writing skill at secondary-school level, more particularly with a sample of 150 third year learners, 50 teachers, and 03 inspectors, in Blida and Tlemcen cities. Practically speaking, this paper aims to discuss the following questions:

- What are 3rd year learners' difficulties in EFL writing at secondary school level?
- What do these learners need to improve their competence in EFL writing?

The ultimate purpose of this study is to uncover the major causes of third year pupils' low achievement in the writing skill and ways of remedying this situation. What is actually needed is a reconsideration of writing as a major language and learning skill. To this end, teacher and learner roles have to be redefined and reform should be introduced at different levels. In fact, in Algeria, a considerable number of studies have tackled this issue mainly at university level; hence, it is important to lead research at pre-university levels, precisely in secondary education. This can be done by consulting relevant theory, and conducting an investigative study to reach the core of the problem, and by so doing, appropriate remedies could be suggested.

1. Theoretical Background

Writing is a basic language skill. It is taught last (after listening, speaking, and reading), whether in the first or in the second/foreign language, on the ground of its relative difficulty and for its consolidating role in language learning. We need to define what writing is, and what its relationship with learning is, before moving to the difficulties learners usually encounter in this skill.

1.1 Writing in EFL Instruction

According to Harmer (2001), writing is a productive skill in the written mode. It is often referred to as 'the most difficult skill' even for native speakers of a language. It involves the graphic representation of speech as well as the expression and organisation of ideas according to the conventions of the language. These conventions concern grammar, vocabulary, handwriting, spelling, layout and punctuation. Writing is a creative process too; it enables learners to describe facts, express ideas and impart knowledge to an 'unseen' audience. The essential idea is that "Writing involves knowledge about language, knowledge of the context

in which writing happens and especially the purpose and skills in using language” (Badger & White, 2000, pp.157-158). Thus, writing requires from the writer (or the learner) the mastery of conventional rules of mechanics and of organisational devices in order to write effectively. What is more, it is a discovery process which involves discovering ideas and ways of organising them to convey a message to the reader (White, 1988). Most crucially, this skill can be a way to promote academic learning since it reinforces language use, enhances understanding and memory, and further promotes learners’ thinking and learning strategies (Kern, 2000).

In short, the importance of writing leads us to use it for a wide range of communicative purposes: expressing feelings, telling stories or reporting events, writing e-mails, writing formal/informal letters, or keeping a diary. It is equally used to consolidate learning and to check whether learning has taken place, as in answering questions after a reading passage, summarising a text or writing a composition on a given topic, as well as in written exams and homework. This requires from learners the development of their discourse competence (Hedge, 2000) in terms of awareness about cohesion, coherence, text structure, rhetorical organisation according to text type and to differences between written and spoken discourse.

1.2 Teaching and Assessing Writing

Learning to write does not result from mere exposure to written language; it has to be taught and practiced. Thus, teaching students to write demands from the teacher has to be a *motivator*, a *resource* and a *feedback provider* (Harmer, 2001, pp.261-262). Focus should be primarily on the objectives of the course, the level and needs of learners, and the working conditions. According to various researches, teaching writing effectively depends on the choice of the appropriate method and approach, the careful planning and presentation of the lesson, striking a balance between accuracy and fluency, sequencing the activities from the easiest to the most complex and from guided to free writing, taking into consideration the four skills, and the objective assessment of the writing performance.

Generally, and mainly in secondary education, teachers choose between the product approach and the process approach, or they combine both. The product approach focuses on accuracy, i.e., on lexical and on grammatical correctness rather than on the composing process. With the process approach, the teacher spends more time with learners generating ideas, organising information, selecting appropriate language, making a

draft, reviewing, revising and editing (Hedge, 2000). The teacher has to integrate the two approaches by giving equal importance to form, content, purpose and audience during teaching and testing practices.

In what concerns writing evaluation, assessing learners' productions and providing them with feedback is part of the learning process. The aim is to raise learners' awareness of their mistakes and of possible ways of correcting them. Many educationalists suggest that while correcting written work, the teacher has to strike a balance between accuracy and fluency, and to respond positively to learners' efforts through useful comments and remarks at various stages of the writing process (White, 1988). More importantly, the teacher has to vary correction modes, keeping in mind that "self-correction is preferable to peer-correction and peer-correction to teacher-correction" (Brookes & Grundy, 1990, p.54). Finally, it is necessary for teachers, especially for those who have many large classes, to assign pupils short writing activities at frequent intervals, so that to carefully correct and discuss learners' errors.

Overall, it is maintained that to ensure successful writing, learners should be habituated to write and re-write their works as necessary. They should focus first on the ideas to be expressed, and ways of organising them before moving to spelling, punctuation and correctness in grammar. Furthermore, learners would write better if they were made familiar with principles of rhetoric as coherence and cohesion, and with the various types of discourse: expository, descriptive, narrative and argumentative. All these principles, according to many research studies, weigh heavily on the shoulders of both teachers and learners and make of writing a daunting task.

1.3 Learners' difficulties in EFL writing

Many educationalists note the fact that writing is difficult even for native speakers, and that a large number of native speakers never achieve a high level of expressiveness in writing their first language. Causes of low achievement in this skill are various.

Linguistically speaking, many students face form- and content-related challenges in EFL writing which concern the use of appropriate vocabulary, grammar, mechanics (spelling and punctuation), and organization of ideas. Mahana et al. (2021), for instance, found that many students in Odisha (India) face difficulty in using correct tenses, in producing varied grammatical and vocabulary structures, and in producing simple and complex sentences. Comparably, Alzahrani et al. (2020) study results in Saudi Arabia indicate that female EFL learners'

struggle mainly with mechanics, use of proper vocabulary, and organization of texts. In their review of the literature about challenges faced by students and teachers in ESL writing, Moses and Mohamad (2019) point similarly to difficulties in vocabulary mainly, in addition to grammar, poor spelling, and basic sentence structures. Besides, Peter and Singaravelu (2020) report Tamil learners' grammatical weaknesses pertaining to the usage of subject-verb agreement, active and passive voice and tenses, articles, and pronouns, as well as syntactical errors. They add the problems of redundancy of content, the inability to conform to the required genre, and the lack of cohesion, coherence, and unity in their essays. This idea is shared by Salih (2018) who found that secondary school students in Khartoum (Sudan) face trouble in arranging sentences into a meaningful text and in using the appropriate strategies in the composing practice.

Culturally speaking, most studies about writing acknowledge the impact of learners' cultural background (Shukri, 2014). In fact, writing in English for foreign language learners may imply a completely different script, different word order, and a different culture; the fact that represents great challenges for teachers and learners. To illustrate, Peter and Singaravelu (2020) assert that Tamil Nadu students' performance in writing is highly affected due to the challenging difference in the sentence structures of Tamil and English. In Saudi Arabia, Alluhaydan (2016, cited in Alzahrani et al, 2020) believe that ESL learners have various grammatical and content issues when composing in English because they are thinking in Arabic; this is particularly apparent in word repetition, parallel constructions, and overuse of specific grammatical structures. In the same vein, Alzahrani et al. (2020) observe the impact of L1 on Arabic learners' writing in what concerns subject-verb agreement, word order, and mainly spelling, explaining that "Arabic spelling represents the exact sounds of the words, which makes spelling Arabic more intuitive, while English spelling does not always directly represent the sounds of the words" (p. 352).

Psychologically speaking, many educationalists have noted the existence of a writing anxiety from which learners suffer deeply. Not only learners are deprived from help and encouragement, but also "teachers expect them to write accurately and meaningfully about an imposed topic in a limited amount of time" (Tsui, 1996, p. 97). Consequently, causes of anxiety mainly concern grammatical, lexical, and spelling accuracy (Moses & Mohamad, 2019). Learners are afraid of making mistakes and so getting low grades; as a result, they find it

difficult to get started or to finish a paragraph. In this context, Hedge (1998) argues that “The process of marking with its traditional focus on error-correction by the teacher needs review and modification” (p.10). Likewise, learners are worried of organising ideas into a well-structured outline comprising: introduction, body and conclusion. What further adds to their anxiety is to write about a topic of no interest to them, and so they do not find much to write about. Another cause is the absence of a supportive environment; writing is a lonely activity which has to be done in a very short period of time, often with a critical and unsympathetic teacher. Moses and Mohamad (2019) equally contend that learners' lack of motivation is likely to prevent them from undertaking the writing tasks in the first place

To conclude, learners' difficulties in EFL writing can be classified into three broad categories: Linguistic (form/content), Cultural (L1 interference), and Psychological/Affective (anxiety/motivation). These are found to be caused basically a lack of training in writing (Alzahnari et al., 2020), and lack of readiness to do the writing tasks, lack of reading practice as a source of lexical knowledge and use (Moses & Mohamad, 2019). With regard to the above studies in different contexts, it is highly significant to understand Algerian learners' difficulties in EFL writing, by carrying out an investigative study that would lead, from different viewpoints, to practical evidence about the source of the issue and eventually to alternative remedies.

2. Research Methodology

This research is exploratory in nature within a mixed-method approach for data collection and analysis. The study has relied on different research tools and has required the contribution of three partners in the teaching/learning context: 150 third year learners, 50 teachers, and 03 EFL inspectors. The third-year level is targeted because it is decisive for the Baccaalaureate examination. The investigative phase is conducted through two questionnaires and a semi-structured interview. The questionnaires were distributed in different secondary schools in two cities, Blida and Tlemcen. The first questionnaire was intended to third year pupils, and the second to Secondary-School EFL teachers. In both questionnaires, the questions were of three types: close-ended, open-ended, and combined questions. Besides, increasing the reliability of this research required the viewpoint of a third partner: EFL inspectors. To this end, a semi-structured interview was held with two Middle School inspectors and one Secondary School inspector. The interview was meant to extrapolate data from these two-level-informants for two main reasons.

First, inspectors are 'observers' of both teachers and learners with a scrutinizing eye. As they attend lessons and take notes of teachers' methodology and competence as well as of learners' involvement and level of output, they were asked in the interview to give their point of view as 'observers' and not as former practitioners. Second, the choice of inspectors of two levels stems from the fact that EFL teaching/learning begins first at Middle-School level, before continuing in the Secondary-School. Accordingly, the researcher strives to know causes of third year level low achievement in writing by investigating conditions of teaching and learning from the very beginning of their schooling. Data gathered via this triangulation procedure was interpreted quantitatively and qualitatively in a way to answer the formulated research questions.

3. Results

3.1 Learners' Questionnaire

The age of the 150 pupils, 53 males and 97 females, ranged from 17 to 20. The questionnaire was meant to elicit from 3rd year learners' information about the causes of their low achievement in EFL writing particularly.

Question 01: Do you like studying English?

This question was interested in the attitudes towards EFL study. Most of the respondents (84%) said they liked studying English, even those who admitted they were not good at it. They gave different arguments for their positive attitudes explaining that English was an essential subject-matter in the Baccalaureate exam and for their future studies and careers. They saw English as an international language needed in communication, travelling and tourism. In addition, they reported the necessity of learning English to understand notices and technical equipment, or simply to understand their preferred songs. A few learners recalled the Prophet Mohamed's (MPBH) citation "He who learns a community's language is safe from their evils." The rest of the respondents (12%) affirmed they did not like English because they could not speak it. Others found English rather boring or even useless since there were many channels in Arabic in which English programmes were translated.

Question 02: Do you think it necessary to your success? Why? Or Why not?

This question further explored pupils' motivational drives in learning English. Most of the informants (83%) assumed that English was necessary; they referred to its importance as a subject-matter in the school curriculum and in the Baccalaureate exam. Other informants perceived EFL utility in the future, mainly in further studies or in the

professional domain. However, (4%) of the respondents expressed their carelessness about English as they foresaw a failure in the Baccalaureate exam or a future unemployment.

Question 03: Which skill appears to you most difficult?

This question inquired about the skill that posed the greatest difficulty for learners. As predicted, (57%) of the pupils confirmed that writing was the most difficult among the four skills, followed by listening (38%), speaking (37%), and reading (10%). To note here, learners' difficulties did not lie principally in productive skills only, but in receptive skills as well.

Question 04: How do you assess your level in writing?

This question explored learners' self-assessment in writing proficiency, by evaluating their level as good, average or weak. Of the total number of respondents, (51%) honestly admitted they were weak, while (44%) presumed they were rather average, and only (2%) thought they were good. At the level of this question, some learners pointed to their fear of making mistakes, and made allusion to their poor lexical luggage/background.

Question 05: What are the causes of your difficulties in writing?

This question gave learners an opportunity to analyse the causes and aspects of their low achievement in writing stating the following reasons:

- bad teaching of writing
- learners' misuse of vocabulary and grammar resulting in a bad style
- influence of Arabic and French languages
- inability to write a correct sentence, and even less a whole paragraph

Question 06: What do you suggest to your teacher to help you learn writing?

To begin with, many pupils expressed their happiness and gratitude for being asked their viewpoint, and being able to have their say. To alleviate the trouble, most of them gave invaluable propositions for both teachers and pupils that should be really taken into consideration. First of all, most respondents expressed their great difficulty in understanding the meaning of words. Such a hurdle prevented them from grasping the topic, from expressing their ideas in English, and even from comprehending the teacher when he/she spoke. Therefore, they suggested to their teacher(s) to use Arabic or French to explain the meaning of difficult words. They also asked for the explicit teaching of grammar, vocabulary and writing rules. In like manner, they believed they would be able to express and organise ideas in their written prose. Many pupils pointed to the necessity of devoting more time to

learn English, and intensifying writing activities in class, under the teacher's guidance. They affirmed the lesson should be completely guided and preceded by a speaking or a reading phase. They thought of the use of translation of texts, using Arabic or French, the use of dictation to learn spelling, and the use of summarizing as a consolidating technique. Likewise, many learners made allusion to the correction of written assignments in class, with pupils. Some respondents proposed remedial sessions to help weak pupils, as well as supplying them with model paragraphs.

Furthermore, some learners included some advice for both teachers and pupils. They noted the good relationship that should exist between teachers and learners, and the fact that both must collaborate to achieve success in writing; this shows the importance of the affective dimension for learners, in the language classroom. Some informants mentioned equally the necessity for teachers to acknowledge differences between pupils in terms of learning capacities. In the end, they advised pupils to improve their English and their writing performance by reading short stories and watching programmes broadcast in English.

3.2 Teachers' Questionnaire

The 50 informants, 14 males and 36 females, have a teaching experience that ranges from 2 to 30 years. The teachers' questionnaire aimed at investigating teachers' viewpoints about learners' attitudes and involvement in the English learning process, their level of proficiency in writing skill, and the causes of their difficulties. It strove to shed light on teachers' teaching practices, evaluation procedures and improvement suggestions.

Question 01: In which skill(s) are your pupils most involved?

According to the teachers, learners are most involved in reading and least in writing, while listening and speaking skills seem to have approximately equal status. Thus, involvement in the four skills is ordered as follows: reading (75%), speaking (37%), listening (33%) and writing (8%).

Question 02: In which skill are they least performing?

Teachers reported that pupils were worst in writing and best in reading. It is noteworthy that these teachers believed learners' production to be better in receptive skills (reading 10% and listening 12%) than in productive skills (speaking 32% and writing 82%); the fact that contradicts results in learners' questionnaire (see Question 03 above).

Question 03: How would you assess your pupils' level of performance in writing?

This question required from teachers to evaluate their pupils' performance in particular. Most of the informants (62%) admitted that their pupils were rather weak at writing, while the remaining respondents (37%) thought their level was average.

Question 04: How much time do you devote to the teaching of writing? Do you think it is enough?

Most respondents (57%) confirmed devoting 2 hours per pedagogic unit. This reveals a lack of practice that might certainly underlie low achievement. A small minority of teachers (8%) said they devoted more than 3 hours to teach writing, while (26%) of them revealed they allotted 3 hours. More than half of the informants were satisfied with the amount of the allocated time, while the remaining ones were not, and thought this skill needed more time to be fostered.

Question 05: Which approach do you follow/adopt while teaching the writing skill?

Most teachers reported that they mostly advocated a combined process-product approach.

Question 06: What type of discourse do you usually deal with in writing?

A great majority of informants said they usually dealt with 'cause-effect' and 'comparison-contrast' or with 'problem-solution' and 'argumentative composition'. To a lesser extent, they mentioned 'descriptive' or 'narrative' discourse.

Question 07: What are the different types of composition dealt with?

Most respondents confirmed dealing mainly with essays, paragraphs and dialogues at equal rates. To a lesser extent, teachers reported dealing with letters, and a few dealt with articles.

Question 08: Do you ask your pupils to do homework related to the writing skill?

(91%) of the informants asserted they assigned writing homework to their pupils regularly, either at the end of each unit or each fortnight. Some respondents confirmed the rate of 3 or 4 writing assignments per month.

Question 09: How do you correct your pupils' writings?

Results of this question showed that most teachers (55%) preferred to underline the mistakes and use a code indicating the type of mistake. Many teachers (37%) affirmed correcting every mistake, while no teacher handed back the written work without any correction.

Question 10: What do you focus on while correcting pupils' writings?

Most teachers seemed to agree that grammatical accuracy, mechanics and ideas organization were the criteria on which to base writing correction, (70%) mentioned meaningfulness as an important criterion, while very few respondents (20%) focused on rich vocabulary.

Question 11: What type of errors do your pupils generally make?

Teachers reported learners doing errors of all kinds: (82%) are related to grammatical accuracy, (76%) to other languages interference, and (74%) to spelling, (62%) to punctuation, (58%) to ambiguous sentences, (48%) to word choice, and (44%) to word order.

Question 12: After correcting pupils' writings, do you suggest a remedial work to help pupils overcome their weaknesses?

A great deal of teachers (70%) confirmed not organising any remedial work after that correction phase. They explained that such activities took too much time, and that collective correction and writing a model composition in class was sufficient enough.

Question 13: According to you, what are the main reasons behind pupils' writing weaknesses?

A great majority of respondents (75%) believed their pupils' lack of motivation or interest was the primary cause of their low achievement in writing. They attributed this failure to lack of materials or of necessary time to foster this skill into learners. Many teachers (42%) pointed to the difficulty of the writing skill itself. Many informants mentioned other reasons that seemed of great relevance:

- lack in oral and written language practice in English
- pupils' inability to recognise different parts of speech and even less to write meaningful sentences or paragraphs
- the influence of pupils' educational background and social level on their language proficiency
- lack of a supportive English linguistic environment
- absence of new techniques in teaching writing

Question 14: What do you suggest to improve your pupils' writing competence?

All teachers agreed on the fact that writing was a major language skill that had to be reconsidered. (85%) of the informants formulated suggestions concerning methodology, classroom practice, lesson plan, and ways in enhancing motivation as well as building the writing habit in learners. Teachers' proposals were meant for teachers, learners, and policy makers.

Most of the respondents proposed to promote reading as an effective means to enrich learners' vocabulary, to feed into their

imagination, and to prepare them to the composition phase. As for classroom practices, teachers suggested devoting more time to teach writing. They believed it should be taught gradually: from simple to complex and to compound sentences until pupils are able to generate whole paragraphs. Some informants advocated the explicit teaching of writing rules and recommended recycling basic knowledge about grammar, vocabulary and writing, even for advanced learners. Other respondents advised to encourage pair/group work, as well as motivate pupils by selecting activities and topics that would suit their age and interests. Furthermore, many teachers recommended correcting and grading writing homework, as well as organising collective correction sessions of pupils' written products.

As to what concerns learners, most (if not all) informants advised them to read more in order to develop as good writers. They recommended the use of dictionaries, and keeping a notebook of difficult or interesting words and expressions. Additionally, they urged pupils to learn English outside the school by listening to people speaking in English, on T.V or on the radio. Finally, one of the respondents made allusion to the benefits of diary-keeping. About other reforms, the teachers suggested devoting more time to EFL teaching, avoiding overcrowded classes, and reconsidering EFL writing instruction since Middle-School level to reduce the gap between Middle- and Secondary-School teaching objectives and methodologies.

3.3 EFL Inspectors' Interview

The inspectors' contribution was aspired for a twofold purpose: evaluation and suggestions. Thus, the semi-structured interview included three open questions which centered on the evaluation of EFL writing skill instruction at the two school levels. These questions were fairly formulated as follows:

- As an observer, how do you evaluate the teaching of writing skill? (in terms of methodology, practice, assessment)
- What is the cause of failure in writing? (teacher-training, pupils' motivation or other)
- What solutions do you suggest?

Middle-School Level Inspectors' responses

The first EFL inspector reported that pupils showed weaknesses basically in handwriting, and in recalling and mastering English alphabet because of differences between Arabic and English scripts. In other words, the first difficulty lied in the graphic representation of the language. On the part of teachers, the respondent affirmed that they were

not prepared to teach writing adequately as a consequence of a lack of training in the pre-service stage. In schools, he added, the teaching of writing was not done appropriately; focus was on 'reproduction', practice was insufficient and writing as a 'skill' was neglected. He advised to give more attention to this vital skill, and teach the 'composing' skill, not just reproduction.

The second informant maintained that EFL instruction in Algeria was below the average on account of a number of methodological aspects. He assumed that concentration was still on '*teaching*' and on learners' '*products*'. M, the teaching of writing was done uniformly for all pupils; learning styles and strategies were not, as such, taken into account. The respondent confirmed that failure in EFL was essentially caused by a mismatch between teachers' teaching style and learners' learning styles. He further pointed to reasons of weakness in writing as follows:

- learning styles and learner needs are neglected.
- the topics suggested to pupils do not trigger their interest;
- a crucial element in writing is disregarded: the audience.
- insisting on grammatical correctness inhibits learners.
- teacher-training (at university level) is very insufficient.

To deal with the problem, the respondent recommended a reconsideration of teacher-training and development, beginning with university-level students. He affirmed that professional development was crucially important and essential to level up teaching and thus learning. He added that teaching had to be varied according to pupils' styles, with an emphasis on group work.

Secondary-School Level Inspectors' responses

The third inspector reported that teachers did not usually devote much time on teaching the writing skill. He observed that it was generally dealt with at the end of a lesson for 10 or 15 minutes, though both formal and informal assessments were done in the written mode (tests, quizzes, essays, end of term exams and Baccalaureate/BEM exams). He added that failure in written expression was due to many reasons. First of all, not enough sessions (time load) were devoted for teaching English at school. Furthermore, the methodology used in class required from teachers to devote more time to speaking or reading skills, and that learners did not have opportunities to write or even read in English outside class. What is more, though reading would prepare pupils to write, there is a lack of reading material in the surrounding environment: easy readers, stories, books in general, newspapers,

magazines, etc. As a possible remedy, the informant suggested the following:

- devote more teaching time for English,
- avoid crowding the classes; groups of 15 to 20 pupils would enable the teacher to correct their written products (paragraphs, essays, letters, articles, projects, dialogues...) more often,
- make learners read authentic materials so that they develop their writing skill,
- encourage learners to read in the library,
- give learners opportunities to correspond with foreign learners, and
- at an advanced level, make learners familiar with the different types of discourse: narrative, descriptive, argumentative, expository, and prescriptive.

4. Discussion

We can deduce from the results of the first questionnaire that most learners held positive attitudes towards the English language and were extrinsically motivated to study it, as they were aware of its importance at personal, national and international levels. These pupils were conscious of their weaknesses and were willing to study this language, provided it was made easy for them to understand. They seemed to face linguistic and cultural difficulties in writing rather than affective ones. They struggled principally with spelling, grammar, and vocabulary, and most importantly with the inability to express themselves meaningfully in sentences and paragraphs, in addition to the influence of Arabic and French languages. These results are considerably in line with research findings cited above (Alzahrani et al, 2020; Salih, 2018; Shukri, 2014). Despite their motivation to learn English in general, they were observed to be reluctant to write because not only of their linguistic weaknesses, but also of the uninteresting writing topics as well as teachers' focus on accuracy, corroborating findings in (Tsui, 1996). These learners' responses showed that their differences and needs were not taken into consideration. Moreover, the prevalence of teacher-centredness, and teachers' language of instruction particularly prevented them from understanding or achieving any progress. It is then a question of difficulty in reception (input) before being a difficulty in production (output). Besides, teachers' lack of competence in teaching writing (which is clearly felt by pupils) may be due to an inadequate teacher-training.

On the part of teachers, they appeared to be aware of their learners' low-achievement in EFL in general, and in writing in particular.

They mostly believed learners' difficulties in this skill were mostly linguistic in nature, about language form and content, and to a lesser extent cultural and affective. We can note here some differences between teachers' and learners' perceptions regarding these difficulties. Likewise, the reported challenges pertaining to the mastery of and manipulation of grammar and mechanics, the production of meaningful sentences and paragraphs, and language interference are similar to the ones faced by Indian, Sudanese, and Saudi Arabian learners as mentioned respectively in Mahana et al. (2021), Peter & Singaravelu (2020), and Salih (2018). Moreover, the teachers maintained that the lack of motivation and of reading and writing practice were at the origin of the problem, though learners' answers showed that they did not suffer from lack of motivation.

What can be noticed so far is a scarcity in classroom writing practice, assessment, and remedial work. More importantly, teachers' focus on grammatical correctness, while giving little importance to content, may signify they advocate a product-based rather than process-based (or a combined) approach to writing instruction. This fact may lead pupils to believe that writing means error-free composition, and so, they may be unwilling to take risks (Moses & Mohamad, 2019). Additionally, teachers did not consider learners' differences in terms of learning abilities or strategies, and they assumed that pupils were good at receptive skills. Therefore, these teachers seemed not to be aware of learners' weaknesses in listening comprehension and their hardship in understanding the language of instruction.

The three inspectors, for their part, agreed on the fact that EFL writing instruction and teaching methodology were not satisfactory. According to them, the insufficient instruction time load, teacher-centredness, and the focus on grammatical accuracy and on learners' end-products left few chances for the promotion of learners' competence in written expression, a fact that may cause or worsen their writing anxiety as posited by Moses & Mohamad (2019). They provided valuable suggestions about classroom management and writing skill development. As to EFL teaching/learning, they asserted pupils are in need of an explicit instruction, with enough time, a lot of practice, adequate correction, constructive feedback and more exposure to the language through different media, mainly that little exposure to English is available for learners outside the school setting. They equally referred to the promotion of complementary skills, such as speaking and reading,

and the mastery of lexical and syntactic knowledge via vocabulary and grammar study.

Consequently, these inspectors recommended reconsidering the importance of writing skill in foreign language learning by first re-evaluating pre- and in-service teacher-training and development programmes. They advised to acknowledge differences in learning styles and strategies and make of them a basis for teaching practices. Moreover, the interviewees proposed some classroom management procedures similar to those of teachers, such as avoiding crowded classes where learners' individual differences constitute challenges for both teachers and learners (Prodromou, 1992) and the emphasis on collaborative learning through group-work. Subsequently, the informants suggested promoting the reading skill and emphasising the role of libraries in schools.

Conclusion

This paper has strived to clarify types and causes of secondary school learners' difficulties in EFL writing. Despite some mismatches in learners', teachers', and inspectors' viewpoints, the findings converge towards some common implications. Algerian EFL learners at secondary school level face linguistic, affective and cultural hurdles in EFL writing which is apparent in their lack of linguistic and composing competency in English. These difficulties are largely similar to those encountered by secondary school learners in different contexts (India, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan). However, Algerian learners expressed their particular frustration in listening comprehension, the fact that constitutes a major obstacle not only for lexical acquisition but for lesson understanding in general. These challenges are due to an inappropriate writing instruction, cultural impact of Arabic and French, as well as insufficient exposure to and practice in the English language. Consequently, there seems to be a lack of coherence between teaching objectives, classroom practices and evaluation norms, in addition to teacher-centredness and the inadequacy of teacher training programmes. It follows that in order to cater for learners' needs and achieve success in writing, there should be a reconsideration of EFL objectives, learner training, and teacher development. Nevertheless, writing cannot be developed in isolation from other language skills: speaking, reading, grammar, vocabulary, and mainly listening. Besides, learners have to be provided with a safe learning environment in which collaborative learning is encouraged and where their needs, aptitudes, and interests are taken into account. Teachers, for their part, have to be better trained

before and during their professional life in order to ensure an effective EFL and writing instruction. Finally, this work is hoped to contribute in reevaluating EFL writing instruction with an ultimate goal of making of writing a fruitful and an enjoyable practice for both teachers and learners.

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