Second Language Writing and Assessment: Voices from Within the Saudi EFL Context

Rana Obeid[1]

[1] English Language Institute (ELI), King Abdulaziz University (KAU), Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Rana Obeid, English Language Institute (ELI), King Abdulaziz University (KAU), P. O. Box 80200, Jeddah, 21589, Saudi Arabia. E-mail: robaid@kau.edu.sa

Abstract

This small scale, quantitatively based, research study aimed at exploring one of the most debated areas in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL); and that is, the perceptions and attitudes of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers as well as EFL learners at an English Language Institute (ELI) at a major university in the Western region of Saudi Arabia, King Abdulaziz University, towards second language writing assessment. The research study involved, randomly selected twenty-two EFL teachers and seventy-eight EFL students between the period of September 2016 and December 2016. Two, purposefully designed, twenty-item, Likert scale questionnaires were distributed amongst the teachers and students. One for the participating EFL teachers and one for the participating EFL students. Data analysis using descriptive statistical methods indicated several concerns which EFL teachers and students have with regards to the writing assessment in general and to the obstacles EFL teachers face when teaching and assessing writing. In addition, there was an indication of general resentments and strong feelings amongst the EFL students where the majority indicated that they are sometimes graded unfairly and writing assessment should take another, more holistic approach rather a narrow one. The study makes recommendations for future research.

Keywords: second language writing, writing assessment, Saudi context, quantitative methods, Likert scale

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The process of learning to speak and write in one's own native (first) language (L1) is usually a challenging endeavour; the acquisition of linguistics skills in a second language is even more challenging, requiring even more constant practice, commitment and higher order cognitive skills (Manchón, 2011). There is no doubt that learning second language rules is extremely difficult for the language learner since these rules are often blurred for the beginner second language (L2) learner trying to identify which set of rules to use. Thus, it is inevitable that L2 learners are often faced with a certain level of fear and anxiety while trying to learn this new language (Ellis, 2015; Horwitz, 2016; Oxford, 2017), especially if this process is also obstacled and aggravated by unfavourable atmosphere (Dewaele, Witney, Saito, & Dewaele, 2017; Rodriguez, 2017). Amongst the four skills to be taught and learned, writing seems to be one of the most complex and difficult skill to master (Alsamadani, 2009; Harmer, 2007; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Writing, as a product skill (Brandt, 2009), requires several parameters to be acquired by the L2 learners before mastering the skill and as such, it requires a wide range of strategies to be employed by the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) learner, such as, cognitive, interpersonal, and linguistic strategies which unfortunately, many ESL/EFL learners are generally unaware of (Hyland, 2004; Luchini, 2010). Second Language (L2) learners of English at universities in the Saudi context are generally faced with several unfavourable conditions such as: (1) rigid and sometimes static instructions in teaching writing, (2) lack of interesting genre, (3) over dependency on summative assessment, (4) lack of creativity writing instructions at high schools, (5) short span and duration of terms or semesters and (6) the general, time consuming and complexity of assessing writing which may materialise in raters' biases or subjectivity (as perceived by the L2 learners) (Hamouda, 2011; Javid & Umer, 2014; Mohammad & Hazarika, 2016). The aforementioned situation of writing and assessing writing in the Saudi context can even be exaggerated by the large class sizes and sometimes uncomprehensible writing rubrics which may or may not even be given to the students in the last minute before the final exams (Al-Jarf, 2011;

Ghalib & Al-Hattami, 2015). On the other hand, EFL teachers themselves face the harsh reality that many Saudi EFL learners admitted into universities (from high school), lack the knowledge and application of strategies in producing sound and acceptable quality writing texts as well as the general low proficiency English L2 levels of those admitted students who moved from government high schools to colleges and universities (Ezza, 2017; Ghalib & Al-Hattami, 2015). As such, the exploration of these specific important issues in the Saudi EFL context is quite crucial and it is hoped that this short research study can shed some light on them.

1.2 Importance of the Study

The study is significant in that it aims at exploring perceptions and beliefs from the teachers as well as learners' points of views, from within the EFL Saudi context, with regards to the specific area of assessment and what are the various elements of concerns that both, teacher and learners in the EFL Saudi context, may hold towards it. The lack of research studies that focusses on the writing assessment particulars in the Saudi EFL context makes it a necessity to conduct this research study which may hopefully, along with similar future studies, give precedence to such issues by the stakeholders at colleagues and universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).

1.3 Research Questions

Even though this research study has various important areas mentioned earlier that are worthy of exploration, the scope is limited to the following four questions:

1)   What are the general perceptions of the EFL teachers in the Saudi context on teaching at tertiary level?

2)   What are the general perceptions of the EFL teachers in the Saudi context on the writing assessment process at tertiary level?

3)   What are the perceptions of EFL learners in the Saudi context with regards to their writing assessment and grades they receive?

4)   What opinions do, EFL teachers and students, have with regards to the betterment of writing assessment?

2. Literature Review

In the past two decades, there has been a healthy surge of research studies that are tackling issues relating to the process of L2 writing and writing assessment as well as important related elements such as rubrics, written corrective feedback and rater's reliability (U. Knoch, 2009; Knoch, Rouhshad, & Storch, 2014; Rakedzon & Baram-Tsabari, 2017; Wang, Engelhard Jr, Raczynski, Song, & Wolfe, 2017). However, there seems to be a general lack of a desire to dig deeper into the issue of writing assessment since some may find it a slippery slope and a mount Everest to climb in terms of research efforts and perhaps, the common sense of sensitivity of the issue. However, there seems to be a positive change in tackling this issue where researchers are beginning to acknowledge the importance of exploring such an important issue affecting EFL/ESL learners worldwide, which has also recently become a much-debated area of research (Becker, 2016; Wu & Zhang, 2017; Zhang, 2017).

2.1 L2 Writing

Writing in L2 encapsulates numerous factors which affect the writing production of the L2 learner (Friedrich, 2008; Tang, 2012). It has a web of entangled foundations which makes it a tough area of research where some researchers would rather stay away from. Furthermore, L2 writing involves so many stages, which are not necessarily sequential or consecutive, but rather having different indicators than the other. For example, when L2 learners attempt to produce a piece of writing, it involves cognitive (Li, 2008), cultural (Myles, 2002), the relative proficiency in the target language (Allen & Katayama, 2016) and genre (Hyland, 2004). Writing in second language has also the sense of identity reflection in the L2 learner's writings. It involves and occasionally affect the identity of the L2 learner (Cox, Jordan, Ortmeier-Hooper, & Gray Schwartz, 2010; Riyanti, 2015). Matsuda and Tardy (2007) believe that second language writers bring their: "voice within a particular context of social interaction, bringing their own assumptions, beliefs, values, and expectations to bear on the writer's text" (p. 247).

2.2 Assessing L2 Writing

Despite the fact that some researchers view writing as having a minor role in L2 learning (Williams, 2012), a large portion perceive it as having a higher cognitive order skill (Frear & Bitchener, 2015). Thus, whenever a specific language skill is acquired by the L2 learner, it necessitates the testing of that skill as a predictor of proficiency level and academic achievement of that L2 as may be required by educational institutions (Crossley, Kyle, Allen, Guo, & McNamara; Weigle, 2002). However, writing assessment is an extremely complex and very entangled area where O'Neil (2011) stresses that: "writing is a complex, multidimensional, contextually situated

activity. Importing psychometric theory and practices, especially in terms of reliability, may undermine the very usefulness of a writing assessment's results. However, psychometric theory cannot be dismissed out of hand; instead, writing assessment scholars and practitioners need to draw on language, literacy and psychometric theories as well as other interpretive traditions to design assessments" (p. 9). It seems that every major tenant of second language writing assessment seems to be an area that has (and still is) witnessing discussions and debates among linguists and L2 experts. For example, *rubrics* which are: "Rubrics are seen as essential tools in standards-based education and have been credited with the capacity to perform multi-faceted functions such as providing accuracy, useful instructional feedback to students and enabling focussed curriculum planning for teachers" (Scott, Scott, & Webber, 2015, p. 89), is undoubtedly, one of the: "hotly debated issue and every aspect of how rubrics are used as well as claims to their reliability, validity, efficiency and effectiveness has been called into question" (Scott et al., 2015, p. 89). Similarly, rating in writing plays a pivotal role in L2 proficiency assessment where inter-rater reliability and subjectivity of raters have probably been the mostly researched topic in writing assessment (Knoch, 2009). Many L2 learners have strong feelings towards L2 writing assessment (Baik, 2014). Nevertheless, research into ESL/EFL teachers as well as students' perception and beliefs towards L2 writing assessment has been very scarce globally due to its complexity and controversiality. This research study attempts to explore such an important issue of research in the Saudi EFL context.

2.3 Assessing L2 Writing in the Saudi EFL Context

Numerous research studies have been carried out in the Saudi context which explored various issues relating to the teaching and assessment of writing (Alsamaani, 2014; Assalahi, 2013; Ezza, 2017; Ghalib & Al-Hattami, 2015; Grami, 2010; Hamouda, 2011; Hidri & Coombe, 2016; Javid & Umer, 2014; Mohammad & Hazarika, 2016). However, these aforementioned studies, and many more, seem to be focusing on the exterior parts of writing assessment without dwelling into the vital elements of perception and beliefs of both EFL teachers as well as EFL students, in the Saudi context, on L2 writing assessment.

3. Method

Due to the nature of this study, being a small scale one, the researcher decided to conduct a quantitative method study in the form of two questionnaires, one for the EFL teachers and one for the EFL students.

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were stratified random samples (teachers and students) which were selected without any means of personal bias for this selection or preferences by the research. Stratified random sampling is defined as: "the process of selecting sample observations from a population so that each observation has an equal and independent probability of being selected" (Lomax & Hahs-Vaughn, 2012, p. 110). The participants selected were twenty-two EFL teachers and seventy-eight EFL students studying at a major university in KSA.

3.2 Instrument

The instruments utilized in this study were two purposefully designed, twenty-item, Likert scale questionnaires were distributed amongst the teachers and students. The questionnaires were totally anonymous and did ask the participants to provide any personal information whatsoever. Each survey was divided into four sections: demographics, perception of writing assessment, perception about rubrics and ideas on the betterment of writing assessment. The items on both questionnaires (teachers and students) with slight variations of wording in some items to suit the teacher or student participants.

3.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data was collected via the web hosting www.surveymonkey.com® which the researcher developed online and collected the data file at the end of the study for data analysis where the main platform for the gathered data input and analysis of this primary data from the questionnaires' data were processed via IBM SPSS Statistics 23® and MS Excel® software packages since the features in these two software packages allowed for the ease of input and the processing of quantitative data via descriptive measurements.

Ethical considerations were taken into account where the researcher sought ethical approval from the university to collect the necessary data from the questionnaires.

4. Results

4.1 Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient

The result of the Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient calculation from the teachers' questionnaire is shown in table 1 below.

Table 1. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient – Teachers' Questionnaire

Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	18	100.0
	Excluded[a]	0	.0
	Total	18	100.0

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.950	18

Similarly, the result of the Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient calculation from the students' questionnaire is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient – Students' Questionnaire

Case Processing Summary

|		N	%
Cases	Valid	18	100.0
	Excluded[a]	0	.0
	Total	18	100.0

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.864	18

Both values of reliability coefficients indicate that all items are highly reliable as the overall reliability values were (0.950) and (0.864) simultaneously, which assured the researcher about the questionnaire items.

4.2 Demographics

Despite the fact that coeducation is not permitted in KSA, the researcher, being a female, managed to successfully send soft copies of the questionnaires to both campuses, men and women's campuses via email. Furthermore, and as mentioned earlier, all the responses of the participants were collected from the www.surveymonkey.com® website making sure that the data is secured and accessible only to the researcher herself. Table 3 below illustrates the gender of the participants in booth surveys.

Table 3. Genders of the participants in both surveys
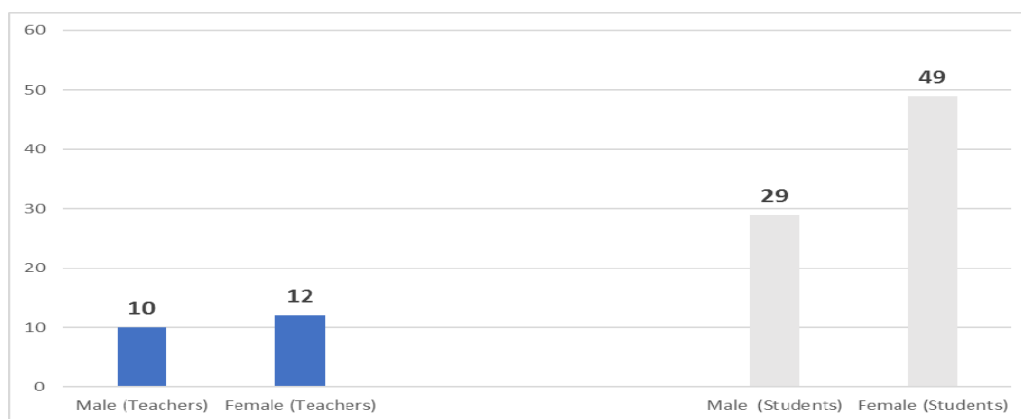
The table indicates the number of male and female teacher and student participants. It is the perception of the research to give a platform to both male and female participants to express their views and opinions about this important topic.

All the participating teachers were experienced, master degree holders, EFL teachers who had at least five years of teaching experience in Saudi Arabia. The student participants were all between the ages of 18 and 19 years old. The students (males and females) were all studying the preparatory year program (PYP) after finishing high school.

4.3 Perception of Writing Assessment

This tested construct seems to have various responses depending on the item asked. For example, when teachers, as well as students, were asked if they believed that written assessment should take place, the majority of teachers, 95% and the majority of the students, 89%, agreed to the item. However, when asked if the written assessment should be counted towards the final exam grade, the teachers had a majority of agreement at 94% while 36% of the students agreed to the statement, 31% did not have an opinion and 33% disagreed with the statement.

4.4 Perception of Rubrics

While the majority of the teachers (88%) and students (86%) agreed, that in principal, having a rubric will clarify the expectations teachers have of their students, a tool to identify the strengths and weaknesses in students' writing skills, and an opportunity to direct students toward self-evaluation; there were responses indicating that, for the teachers, there should be ample training and more realistic design of the rubrics. On the other hand, the majority of the students (94%) felt that they need to be involved in the development and application of those rubrics. Furthermore, the majority of the students (96%) also felt that they did not have sufficient time with their teachers to review the parts of the rubrics due to time constraints and the majority of the teacher participants (89%) seem to agree with this.

4.5 Ideas for the Betterment of Writing Assessment

In this section, there were various suggestions selected from the questionnaire items which had a selection menu for the participants to choose from. A large proportion of teachers (77%) felt that there needs to be a more structured training towards the application of rubrics which the majority (86%) also felt that they need to be involved in its design. On the other hand, the majority of the students (98%) felt that they need designated writing classes/clubs where they are taught the various elements in the rubrics and also, they are taught exactly what it is expected of them in that regard.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

While this study has been a small scale one, it touched on an important aspect of EFL in the Saudi context and that is writing assessment. The aim of the study was to explore the perceptions and beliefs EFL teachers and students have with regards to the writing assessment at a major university in KSA.

From the analysis of the data, we can clearly see that this is a very sensitive issue which has many factors contributing to its overall status. On one hand, we can clearly see that both teachers and students agree that there should be a system or a procedure to test the writing skill, however, teachers expressed that they do not have the

sufficient time to go through the rubric with their students, especially if they have big class sizes and they are not consulted in the rubric design in the first place. Furthermore, the students believe that they should learn the rubric and what it is expected of them to achieve in the writing skill from day one, so as to be equipped with the knowledge and preparations before the writing exam. Above all, the students' involvement in this process will have a positive result in improving writing performance.

6. Recommendations for Future Research

This study had its limitations in terms of the number of the participants and research method utilised. The researcher recommends that, for future research, perhaps a larger sample with semi structured interviews with a selection of volunteering participants, will be recommended.

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