Exploring Negotiation Pedagogy of EFL Writing Teachers in the Saudi Context

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the challenges that face EFL teachers in applying negotiation for meaning pedagogy in teaching writing skill. To collect qualitative data, classroom observation and semi-structured interviews were employed as data collection methods whereas for analyzing the data, a thematic analysis technique was used. The findings of the study evidently suggest that negotiation for meaning pedagogy helps students to know their writing mistakes and correct them through oral interaction with teachers; however, it is difficult for teachers to apply this strategy in virtual classrooms for several reasons. The findings further suggest that it is not possible to use the negotiation for meaning pedagogy with low-level students. The final challenge that hinders the application of negotiation for meaning pedagogy is time constraints. Based on the findings, the study puts forward recommendations for EFL teachers and suggests further research on the subject.

Keywords: EFL context, online teaching and learning, negotiation for meaning pedagogy, qualitative research, writing skills

I. Introduction

In the past few years, there has been a spate of interest among linguists and educationalists in using negotiation pedagogy in English language teaching. It is a pedagogy that has been proposed by the Western community to be as an approach that could help English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to overcome writing challenges in teaching writing skill (Alrawas, 2014). However, Barnawi (2016) mentioned that scholars in this field urge teachers to pay attention to the context they are going to use this pedagogy in because they might be different from the Western context and needs some modifications accordingly. Morell (2004) defined negotiation for meaning as "an aspect of interaction that occurs when at least two interlocutors work together to arrive at mutual comprehension of their utterances". Negotiation for meaning focuses on improving the social interaction between teachers and students which will help students to overcome their writing challenges. Classroom interaction and involvement in oral discussion, according to sociocultural theory, promote language learning. At the end, using this pedagogy enables EFL students to think critically and write autonomously. Moreover, in this pedagogy, students can negotiate their pedagogical needs with their teachers and negotiate with their peers and develop their writing identity thus they will develop the sense of autonomy in their writings (Barnawi, 2016). Jiang (2016) investigated the negotiation mechanism in the EFL classroom and offered recommendations on how to use the negotiation pedagogy in the EFL classroom in China. It seems that negotiation for meaning can have a positive effect on teaching writing skill.

1.1 Rationale of the Study

Apparently, the importance of a critical awareness of EFL learners in writing has been discussed in previous studies whether inside the Saudi context or outside it (Barnawi, 2011; Grabe & Zhang, 2013; Liaw, 2007; Obeid, 2017; Alkubaidi, 2019); however, little attention is given to examining the challenges of implementing negotiation pedagogy in the EFL writing classrooms. In general, the number of studies that tackled negotiation pedagogy in teaching writing is very limited. So, there is a need for more investigation of this topic on Saudi EFL classrooms particularly. To the best of my knowledge, it is going to be the first study of its kind in the Saudi context. This study

attempted to fill the gap in literature by exploring the challenges that EFL teachers experience when they apply negotiation strategies in their writing classrooms in an English Language Institute (ELI) at a public University in Saudi Arabia.

1.2 Theoretical Underpinnings

Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist, originated the sociocultural theory (SCT) of development in 1978. As mentioned by Lantolf et al. (2015), there are four key concepts in the sociocultural theory (SCT): a) mediation, b) Zone of Proximal Development, c) scaffolding, and d) languaging. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is at the core of this study in which development can be achieved through the guidance of a more capable person, such as the teacher. Vygotsky (1987) gave an accurate definition of the ZPD of a child as "[T]he distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

In relation to teaching and learning, Vygotsky's theory is indicative of the fact that teachers should adopt cooperative learning exercises to develop students' skills (McLeod, 2018). In writing classes, negotiation for meaning usually happens when the instructor gives feedback to explain some issues in L2 writing (Elbelazi, 2013), which helps learners improve their ZPD.

The more teachers interact with their students, the more students realize their writing mistakes and think about correcting them. Therefore, the adopted theory in this article is the socio-cultural theory. The aim of this study to develop an understanding of negotiation pedagogy in EFL writing classes in the Saudi context. By examining the challenges that EFL writing teachers encounter when applying negotiation for meaning, this study can fill the gap in the literature.

1.3. Research Questions

This study aimed to answer the following research question:

1) What are the challenges that the EFL writing teachers encounter while using the negotiation for meaning pedagogy in the Saudi EFL virtual classrooms?

Since the nature of the study is an exploratory study, the main purpose is to explore EFL teachers' practice in their teaching of writing by examining whether they use the negotiation for meaning pedagogy in teaching writing or not. What is more, to spot the challenges that may face EFL writing instructors when attempting to implement negotiation pedagogy. As been reported in Abdul Haq (1982) that the majority of Arab pupils struggle with writing skills in general.

The following table shows the performance of non-Arabs and Arabs from different Arab countries, including Saudis, in all language skills in IELTS test in the year 2019. The least scores among the four language skills was in writing.

Table 1. IELTS Results by Country in 2019. (Source: IELTS Test Taker Performance 2019 www.ielts.org)

	Reading	Listening	Writing	Speaking
Saudi	4.4	5.1	4.8	5.5
Germany	7.7	7.9	6.3	7.4
U.A.E	4.8	5.0	4.7	5.4
Italy	7.3	7.0	5.9	6.6
Qatar	5.1	5.6	5.0	5.8

The value of this study lies in the fact that it will contribute to the EFL writing teaching pedagogy by looking into the importance of negotiation pedagogy in EFL writing classroom. In addition, it will increase teachers' knowledge and skills in teaching writing. Also, it will shed the lights on the challenges and obstacles that may hinder the use of this pedagogy from the teachers' experience and point of view.

2. Literature Review

This section illustrates the meaning of negotiation for meaning pedagogy and the related studies of it. Before moving to talk about negotiation for meaning pedagogy in detail, an overview of the obstacles that Saudi EFL learners face in learning writing within the Saudi context is presented.

2.1 Difficulties of Teaching Writing for Saudi Students

Several studies investigated the writing of EFL learners in the Saudi context (Ahamed, 2016; Al-Kadi & Madini, 2019; Alkubaidi, 2019; 2013; Javid & Umer, 2013; Mohammad & Hazarika, 2016; Mugableh & Khreisat, 2019). Findings revealed that Saudi EFL learners have serious problems and difficulties in writing. In the Saudi EFL context, learners face difficulties with writing skills in terms of paragraphs, structure, capitalization, spelling, and punctuation (e.g., Khan, 2011). Anxiety as well may be a cause for hindering EFL learning. Al-Asmari (2013) explored the connections between the apprehension of the foreign language, achievement learning, and writing strategies. The results showed that students with low writing anxiety used strategies of writing more than the high anxious ones.

Research relates these difficulties to the Saudi learners' lack of motivation, the influence of their L1, a shortage of English language learning opportunities outside the classroom, insufficient input at the school level, and less focus on writing in comparison to other skills (e.g. Javid & Umer, 2013; Khan, 2011; Ankawi, 2015). Another study conducted by Javid and Umer (2013) found that Saudi EFL students memorize the writing answer(s)/paragraph(s) instead of using the proper strategies for developing their writing just to pass the exams. Similarly, Al-Khairy (2013) conducted a study in Taif to find out the level of English major learners and found that their level is very weak as they make a lot of mistakes in sentence-level. This study indicated that although the participants in this study are English language major students, they still have serious problems in having basic writing skills.

According to Ahamed (2016), the problems of the Saudi EFL context is summarized in four points; teachers' teaching practices, lack of motivation, lack of creativity, and inappropriate curricula.

Furthermore, Benahnia (2016) found it difficult to teach writing for EFL Arab students, specifically in Saudi Arabia, and he relates this to three reasons. Firstly, the late exposure to the second language at schools in which students, at public schools, are introduced to English at the age of 12 before the new reform in the Saudi educational system. Secondly, overlooking the sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds of the pupils by some tutors. Thirdly, inappropriate teaching materials which are not suitable for the Arab context.

According to Benahnia's experience in teaching a foreign language, he pointed out a difference in Arab EFL learners writing in the gulf countries, particularly, in which they have serious problems with the actual formation of letters and cursive handwriting (Benahnia, 2016). On the other hand, EFL teachers in the Francophone countries, for example, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia do not face letters and handwriting issues with their students because they have been exposed intensively to handwriting in French at an early age. It seems that teaching writing in the Saudi context, especially, is quite more challenging, troublesome, and tiresome for many language instructors.

A suggested solution for enhancing EFL writing ability from a sociocultural perspective is through negotiating for meaning. In other words, interacting in social conversation whether with teachers or competent peers. This reminds us again of the ZPD concept of the sociocultural theory, where the independent party (teacher or proficient peer) helps the dependent one to become independent and improved in EFL writing. This cannot be done without negotiating meaning and analyzing the given piece of writing. The following part displays negotiation pedagogy in teaching writing skill.

2.2 Negotiation in Teaching Writing

In this study, the negotiation concept is the main keyword. Consequently, this section explains in detail the meaning of negotiation, SLA theories that are related to negotiation, negotiation for meaning and feedback, and the importance of negotiation as a pedagogy in improving EFL writing skill in particular. Negotiation for meaning has been present in the area of language learning for more than 20 years (Bitchener, 2004). Negotiation for meaning is substantial in foreign language classes because it offers learners the ability to produce languages in a non-threatening atmosphere (Yuan & Wang, 2006). Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova (2011) strongly believed that through negotiation of meaning, learners are encouraged to produce language and to make their arguments intelligible to attain comprehensibility.

The literature reviewed assumed that negotiation for meaning notion is related to the sociocultural theory. It is so because negotiation signifies social interaction, which is the core emphasis in sociocultural theory. The importance

of negotiating for meaning manifested in facilitating L2 writing through both teacher/peer feedback and discussing learners' mistakes. Ignoring this practice would make students' levels remain the same. Moreover, misunderstanding or vague feedback in EFL writing teaching may occur and lead to negative results. As a consequence, Elbelazi (2013) believed that interaction and discussion can be preferred as an approach to enhancing the ability of ESL students to write during the feedback process. Negotiation for meaning has been proposed as a conversational tool that facilitates second language acquisition (SLA) as Foster and Ohta (2005) said. As suggested by Michael and Andrew (2002), there are three intermingled levels of negotiation in EFL classrooms. Namely: Personal negotiation, Interactive negotiation, and Procedural negotiation. Personal negotiation refers to the process of mental and personal reflection that the student undergoes to understand the meaning of a new word. Interactive negotiation refers to the interaction between two parties. It occurs when people say whether or not they grasp the interpretation of people's meaning (Jiang, 2016). The last dimension is considered to have a more critical role to play among the three dimensions as Jiang (2016) put it. Procedural negotiation is mostly about how class teaching should be. The primary purpose is to effectively organize the teaching process. For example, deciding who cooperates with whom? the means of cooperation, the purpose of cooperation (Jiang, 2016). Next section explains negotiation for meaning and how it is defined.

2.3 Definition of Negotiation for Meaning

This section illustrates the meaning of the main construct which is negotiation for meaning and how different researchers defined it. Elbelazi (2013) posited that negotiation for meaning has been defined in the Interaction Hypothesis by Long (1980) as the "work that triggers interactional adjustment by the NS or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive way" (p. 23).

This definition assumes that negotiation for meaning occurs when there is interaction or conversation between the native speaker (NS) or a skillful interlocutor in which the learner activates his/her selective attention to something that might be new to him/her; therefore, the development of the second language is facilitated (Gass & Mackey, 2007). Morell (2004) defined negotiation for meaning as "an aspect of interaction that occurs when at least two interlocutors work together to arrive at mutual comprehension of their utterances". It can be inferred from this definition that interaction helps EFL learners and teachers in avoiding misunderstanding or misinterpretation because meaning is not fixed. Gee (2012) argued that meaning is not fixed and vary according to the context. He stated that "meaning is primarily the result of social interaction, negotiations, contestations and agreements among people. It is inherently variable and social". Evidently, social interaction is a very crucial factor in learning process. According to the sociocultural theory, interaction, and engagement that happen in classrooms facilitate language learning. Yang, Badger and Yu (2006) argued that the negotiation for meaning that occurs during peer interaction and feedback may lead to an improvement in EFL writing even in cultures that give great authority to the teacher.

Other researchers who proposed a definition of negotiation for meaning are Michael and Andrew (2002). They viewed negotiation as a kind of social activity that is originated from the interactive movement of daily conversations. Again, society has a significant role in creating chances for social interaction, and conversation as the sociocultural theory suggested.

Pedagogically speaking, Foster and Ohta (2005) considered negotiation for meaning as a method for giving feedback through interaction. Thus, this can encourage learning and contribute to better L2 writing. To illustrate more, the sociocultural theory and its emphasis on using interaction and negotiation for meaning in language teaching support what Foster and Ohta (2005) said. Indeed, in order to consider what the student needs to write and what the reviewer wants to ask, feedback, negotiation, and discussion are required.

2.4 Negotiation for Meaning in SLA

This section presents SLA theories that are related to negotiation for meaning concept. Based on the literature reviewed, negotiation for meaning notion seems to be familiar in cognitive approaches to second language acquisition and the sociocultural theory. Foster and Ohta, (2005) stated that negotiation for meaning is a very common concept in cognitive approaches to second language acquisition and is based on Krashen's (1981, 1982, 1985) hypothesis of the comprehensible input. Krashen hypothesized that second language learners should be exposed to what he calls the 'i+1' level which means a level that is beyond the learner's current L2 knowledge. It seems that this can be obtained only if students enroll in conversation with a more advanced speaker. Also, Krashen stressed the importance of making the input comprehensible and understandable so that learners can learn. Negotiation for meaning is considered to be a comprehensible input in which L2 learners interact with a competent interlocutor who could be the teacher or advanced peer. Long (1985, 1996 as cited in Foster and Ohta, 2005)

suggested that the most useful way to get a comprehensible input is through interactional adjustments when learners attempt to overcome comprehension difficulties through negotiating meaning during conversation.

It is worth mentioning here that even though comprehensible input plays an important role both in Krashen's input hypothesis and Long's interaction hypothesis, there is still a difference in how these two researchers view comprehensible input. Tran (2009) mentioned that Ellis (1994) outlined the difference between the two views as Krashen argued that feedback or input becomes comprehensible through simplification and with the help of contextual and extra-linguistic hints, while Long argued that interactive input is more important than non-interactive input. . Long (1980) also claimed that attention is another act that is needed during the negotiation process.

On the other hand, negotiation for meaning is believed to be attached to the sociocultural theory through the concept of the zone of proximal development ZPD (Elbelazi, 2013; Foster & Ohta, 2005; Lantolf, 2000a). As the gist of ZPD lies in the crucial role of learners' assistance at a certain phase. The meaning of assistance in this context is the social interaction that happens between learners and their tutors or peers.

2.5 Studies of Negotiation for Meaning in EFL Context

Negotiation pedagogy has been proposed by the Western community to be an approach that could help English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to overcome writing challenges in teaching writing skill (Alrawas, 2014). In this approach, students can negotiate their pedagogical needs with their teachers and negotiate with their peers and develop their writing identity thus they will develop a sense of autonomy in their writings (Barnawi, 2016). In other words, using this pedagogy enables EFL students to think critically and write autonomously.

Jiang (2016) provided suggestions on how to implement the negotiating process in the EFL classroom in China. He summed up the advantages of negotiation in the EFL classroom as a) helping tutors make a better decision, b) promoting interactivity in the classroom c) prompting students' autonomy of learning. Liu (2008) believed in the remarkable role of negotiation pedagogy. He urged Taiwanese EFL teachers to be open minded about their students' negotiations and to give students an active role in their learning.

Barnawi (2016) wanted to explore the impact of negotiating pedagogies in EFL writing classrooms in a Saudi college. The negotiation pedagogies he used in his study involved "negotiation for the refining of course objectives, the selection of teaching materials, text modeling and constructing, joint construction of texts, independent construction of texts, student-teacher conferencing, and linkage of related texts" (Barnawi, 2016, p.5). The results indicated that these negotiating pedagogies play a significant role in constructing students' own knowledge of EFL writing, thus the goal of improving students' writing ability is achieved. Kabooha (2018) puplished an article on negotiating pedagogies in Omani writing centers. She talked about using negotiation pedagogy in teaching writing and gave practical examples from previous studies on how to implement it. The results of the studies seemed to be encouraging in which the students' writings and their critical thinking improved. Also, she pointed out some challenges of negotiating pedagogy in EFL classrooms and writing centers. She mentioned that negotiation can be in risk because of sociocultural factors. Meaning, in cultures where people are not allowed to question or engage in dialogue as in a non-democratic society; negotiation is prohibited. Another challenge is the institutional requirements such as inflexible curriculum and the academic or language requirements that students must meet. Also, when learners regard the information in the textbook as non-negotiable, this will make it difficult to practice negotiation. Teachers' perception on negotiation as well is a very important factor if they want to implement it in their EFL writing classes. Finally, because of time constraints, it may not be appropriate for applying the negotiation pedagogy. The following section identifies the methodology of the research.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative design since the nature of it is exploratory. Mackey and Gass (2005) defined qualitative research (henceforth QR) as the "research that is based on descriptive data that does not make (regular) use of statistical procedures". They also expressed seven major characteristics that distinguish qualitative research from quantitative one. QR gives us rich and detailed descriptions, provides natural and holistic representation, and tends to use few participants. QR also aims to adopt emic perspectives, that is, when interpreting a certain phenomenon, researchers take into account the categories that are meaningful to the participants of the study. Another interesting characteristic of QR is the cyclical nature and open-ended processes which allow new categories to emerge. In addition, qualitative researchers may take ideological positions unlike quantitative researchers who view impartiality as a goal of the research. The final feature of QR mentioned by Mackey and Gass (2005) is concerned with the general and open-ended nature of research question. According to the sociocultural theory, social

interaction leads to learning. So, as we seek to explore the challenges that EFL writing teachers encounter when using negotiation pedagogy, we believe that the qualitative approach was deemed suitable for this research, since the aim was to investigate a real-life classroom. We need to get detailed description and natural representation by examining the learning environment using the qualitative design.

3.1 Participants

The targeted population was eight female English language teachers who teaches preparatory year students at a Saudi university. However, we were able to reach only five teachers because of time constraints. We received the approval from the university nearly at the end of the semester and also, there were senior instructions to bring forward the final exams than its appointed time. The participants shared the same language background which is Arabic and they all were Saudis. All of them are in service teachers with more than two years of experience. We chose experienced teachers assuming that they might be more familiar with the strategy of negotiation for meaning in teaching EFL writing than novice teachers. The classroom observations that we conducted were for the same teachers interviewed to compare between their answers in the interview and their actual performance in the classroom. Teachers' information and qualifications are illustrated in the following table.

Table 2. Participants' Information

Name	Nationality	Degree	Teaching experience	The Track
Teacher A	Saudi	Ph.D.	13 years	Science track
Teacher B	Saudi	Ph.D.	15 years	Science track
Teacher C	Saudi	Master's	3 years	Art track
Teacher D	Saudi	Master's	11 years	Science track
Teacher E	Saudi	Master's	5-6 years	Science track

3.2 Data Collection

This section displayed how the data was collected as well as the procedures followed in collecting the data. Also, research instruments employed for this research is discussed.

3.3 Procedures

We started to conduct the study in March 2021, the second term of the semester, after receiving approval from the university. We received permission from the English language institute authorities to make interviews with five female EFL writing teachers and to observe their virtual writing classes. Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in closing schools and universities and replacing attendance education with online education in Saudi Arabia. We made the interviews on phone as it was hard to meet the teachers outside the campus for the same reason mentioned earlier.

For the classroom observations, the ELI authorities told me that they will give me a "guest password" that enables me to join the virtual classrooms. We contacted the teachers on emails to allocate suitable dates for observing their classes, at first, then the interviews. They were notified that we will remain silent during the observation. Also, We attached the consent form and asked them gently to sign it after reading the interview's and classroom observations' guides. Before each virtual class, We were given a link to join and observe the writing session.

3.4 Instruments

The data collection instruments that were used are classroom observation and semi-structured interviews as displayed in Graph 1. The reason for choosing these instruments is because they are suitable and appropriate for seeking answers to the research question. Additionally, they provide an in-depth data which will add a lot to the findings of the study. The main purpose of my study is to explore and examine the difficulties EFL writing teachers encounter when applying negotiation for meaning in their writing classes. This purpose can be achieved through classroom observation and interviews.
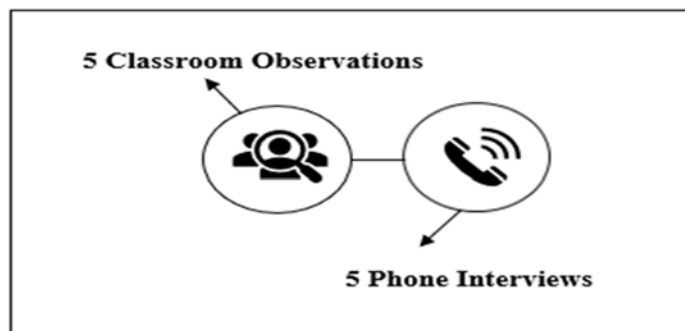
Graph 1. Research Methods

In the following paragraphs, we will address each approach in terms of why and how it has been implemented.

3.4.1 Classroom Observation

Classroom observation is a good instrument in exploring a research phenomenon. Mackey and Gass (2005) suggest that this tool gives an opportunity to achieve a deeper perception of how participants act in a real context. By observing classrooms, we can see day-to-day activities and experiences (Dornyei, 2007). Ennis (1996) argues that evaluating performance in 'life-like' scenarios is a preferred approach for assessing dispositions. Halim et al. (2018) view classroom observations as a powerful tool for teachers' continued professional development.

In fact, this instrumental research tool is very significant to the current study as it helps in exploring the obstacles that hinder EFL writing teachers from implementing negotiation for meaning pedagogy in their daily practice in classrooms. Interviews are also useful to obtain the purpose of the study, yet they are not sufficient as they may retrieve ideal answers that may not reflect the teachers' actual performance. Therefore, observing classrooms could deeply examine dispositions and gather reliable data that reflect the reality of writing teachers' practice in classrooms. We were able to observe five classrooms of five EFL writing teachers to obtain a clear view of their pedagogical practice. Although we were planning to observe 10 classrooms to collect a large amount of data, We only accessed five teachers who were interested in taking part in my study. All observations were conducted online because of Covid-19 pandemic. we monitored teachers' negotiation strategies and interactions between teachers and students. While observing, we took some notes on the strategies the EFL teachers used in teaching writing skills.

In addition, it is worth mentioning that to ensure the reliability of the data, we conducted the observations before the interviews to make sure the teachers' usual way of teaching was not affected.

3.4.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Dornyei (2007) stated that semi-structured interviews are the most commonly used type of interviews in the field of applied linguistics and it is suitable for exploring interesting information from the participants. Semi-structured interviews encourage the interviewer to formulate open-ended questions in advance and give him or her some freedom to build on the responses of the respondents (Robson, 2011).

As due to Covid-19 pandemic, it was not possible to conduct face-to-face interviews, We chose to carry out interviews using phone calls. According to Groves and Kahn (1979), the information gathered on telephone was similar to that acquired through face-to-face interviews (as cited in Wishart, 2003). Wishart (2003) reported the value and limitations of phone interviews, which were highlited by previous researchers along with suggested strategies to overcome the limitations.

The method of telephonic interviews eliminated the boundaries of time and space and helped me reach particpants who were difficult to meet face-to-face as in the current situation. One of the disadvantages of telephonic interviews is that acquiring detailed information from the participants can be a bit challenging. Another limitation of this method is the lack of visual cues over the phone which often results in a loss of contextual and nonverbal data, as well as a compromise on developing rapport, questioning, and answering interpretations (Novick, 2008).

In this study, five female EFL writing teachers participated and were interviewed over the phone. Prior to the interviews, the teachers were informed that the interviews would be audio recorded. All five interviews were conducted after observing the teachers' writing classrooms. The interview protocols consisted of nine open-ended

questions (see Appendix A & B). It started with four demographic questions about the participants' qualifications, years of experience, nationality, and the track of students they teach at the ELI. Then, there were five descritive questions. All five interviews were conducted in English langauge.   The data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis in the following section.

4. Results

This section exhibits the findings of the research that were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The answer to the research question is indicated in the *coding scheme.*

4.1 Coding Scheme: Challenges Hinder Negotiation

This part presents the data to answer the research question that is related to the challenges the EFL teachers face while applying the negotiation for meaning pedagogy in teaching writing skill. Figure 1 summarizes the emerged themes.
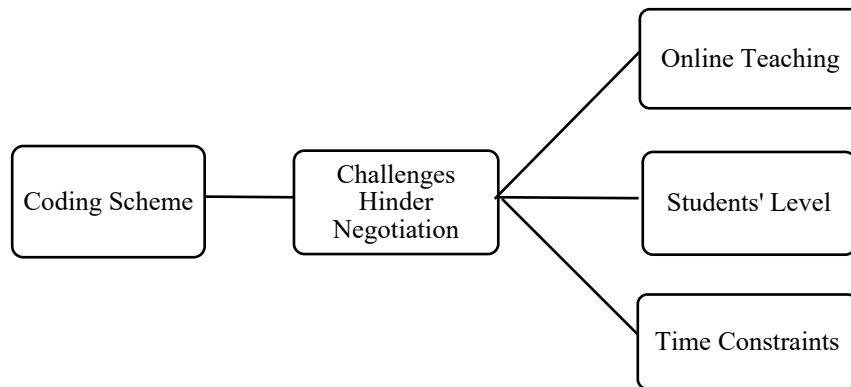

Figure 1. Coding Scheme

Obstacles always occur when implementing new techniques in a new context. In applying negotiation pedagogy, the participants kept mentioning three main challenges that hindered its implementation in their writing classes. The challenges are online teaching, students' level of proficiency and time constraints.

4.1.1 Online Teaching

The findings indicate that almost all the interviewed teachers agreed on the negative impact of online classes on the teaching process. The following excerpts clarify this point:

> In online classes*, I cannot negotiate with students because I cannot see their faces. Most of the students don't participate. It's very difficult in online classes to negotiate with students. It is a very big problem to negotiate with students who do not want to participate in online classes.* (Teacher A)

Teacher C confirms that she used to apply the negotiation pedagogy before the online classes were started:

> I don't use it a lot now. I used to use it before the Corona virus because that helped the students understand me more. I think that the challenging part is not only negotiation, but also all the skills of teaching online. It is not as easy as teaching in actual classes.* (Teacher C)

Regardless of the difficulties of online teaching that teachers face, Teacher D suggests trying to create a balance:

> I'm trying to create a balance. I cannot say that I'm an expert in online teaching now. I've taught online before the pandemic and I've taught during the pandemic, but I'm still learning. Some of the things are still difficult to do online. I think they are possible to do but they are still difficult and challenging and take more time. So, I don't do them. I think negotiation is one of the things that are not very easy to do because sometimes you ask them normal and easy questions and they cannot reply, they cannot say anything. So, yeah this is one of the difficult things. It's good for them, but it's difficult in online classes.* (Teacher D)

According to the five classrooms we observed, it was evident that the EFL teachers were struggling to encourage students to interact and negotiate in virtual lessons.

4.1.2 Students' Level

The second challenge reported by the EFL teachers was the proficiency level of the students. Teacher E clarifies how students' level can be an obstacle in applying negotiation for meaning in the following extract:

> *Well, the challenge is that when you have many levels of students, like you have A students, the B students, the C students and then you have the really weak students, it's hard to come to a certain point because there is a fluctuation in the learning process itself. So, there are students who could agree upon a technique or a process itself and there are others who don't have any idea about what you are talking about and here you find the gap.* (Teacher E)

Similarly, Teacher C stated that she applies the negotiation for meaning pedagogy depending on the students' proficiency level.

> *I think it depends on the level of the students. I guess if they are high level and they can talk and express their ideas, it will be great to negotiate any element of the writing in class.* (Teacher C)

Even though Teacher B who does not agree with using the negotiation strategy, she states that:

> *It is challenging and depending on the level. So, some students get when you try to stimulate their thinking and they go with it. It is challenging if the students are not following.* (Teacher B)

In the classroom observation of Teacher D, 23 students of level 2 attended the writing class. It was observed that the teacher explained some key points of the process paragraph using students' L1 because of their low proficiency level. She also used the learners' L1 when students were not responding. The instructor made every effort to encourage her students to participate by reminding them to answer either by writing in the chat box, using microphones, or by writing in their textbooks. The teacher was compelled to use the learners' L1 to engage with the students because of their lower proficiency level. This shows how challenging it is to implement the negotiation for meaning pedagogy with lower level EFL students.

4.1.3 Time Constraints

The findings show time as an obstacle in the learning process in general and in implementing the negotiation for meaning pedagogy. The following excerpts are illustrative of what the participants stated:

> *It does take more time than planned and therefore it makes me as a teacher not to go for it.* (Teacher B)

> *Also, time. Sometimes, you cannot feel free to give them lots of examples or feedback on every mistake.* (Teacher C)

> *I think time, the nature of the class whether it is online or face to face, we need to follow the syllabus. Because I teach at the ELI, we have things that are set. You know we do not have any choice or option. We have assigned syllabus so all this can be counted as challenges which might not be very easy to do.* (Teacher D)

> *Sometimes you find time to give the knowledge, but you don't have the time for the feedback. Like you give the process itself and the students start doing it and they send it back to you, but you don't have the time for feedback. So, time management is a chaos either online or in class.* (Teacher E)

From the classroom observation of Teacher D and E, it seems that both the teachers could not cover all the lesson points that they had to deliver due to time constraints.

5. Discussion

The main purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the challenges that EFL writing teachers encounter when they implement negotiation for meaning pedagogy in their writing classes. In this section, the findings of the study is discussed in relation to the previously published findings on this topic.

Q1: What are the challenges that the EFL writing teachers encounter while using the negotiation for meaning pedagogy in the Saudi EFL virtual classrooms?

This question elicited a range of responses about the implementation of the negotiation for meaning pedagogy when teaching writing in the Saudi EFL context. Some of the findings suggest that this pedagogy is a good tool to improve a productive skill such as writing. However, it is also considered a very challenging task in online classes. Figure 2 shows the major themes for the research question.
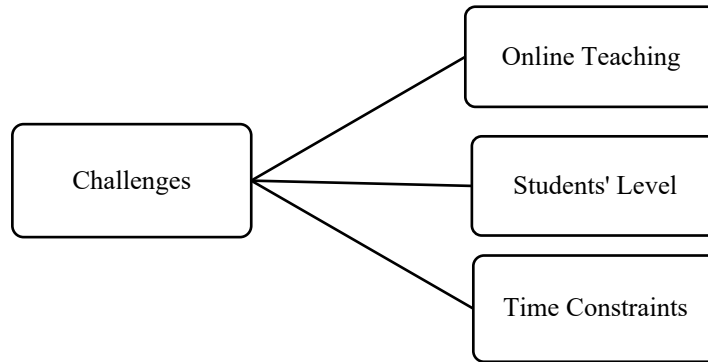
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                    ┌──────────────────┐
                    │  Online Teaching │
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│  Challenges  │────│  Students' Level │
└──────────────┘    └──────────────────┘
                    ┌──────────────────┐
                    │ Time Constraints │
                    └──────────────────┘
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Figure 2. Major Findings Emerged from the Research Question

There was common consensus among the participants that teaching writing while using the negotiation for meaning pedagogy helps students to develop their writing. However, all of them agreed that this negotiating with students is almost impossible in online teaching.

One of the teachers described her experience in actual classes and online classes:

> *In actual classes, I can see them face to face and I would encourage them to participate and negotiate more often. Whereas in online classes, I cannot do that. There is no control. If she does not want to participate, that's it, end of the story.* (Teacher A)

It appears from the teacher's example that online teaching causes a lack of communication as the teacher cannot see the students face to face, which hinders negotiation. It was also apparent in the classroom observation that EFL teachers found it difficult to get even a short answer from the students. This suggests that the occurrence of negotiation for meaning was very low in EFL writing classes. This is consistent with Foster' and Ohta' (2005) findings that revealed that negotiation for meaning was extremely rare even though their observation was in actual face to face classrooms.

Another important challenge that all teachers agreed on was the students' proficiency level. The instructors shared that the application of the negotiating technique can be more difficult if the proficiency level of the students is low while it would be possible if their level is high. For instance,

> *I think it depends on the level of the students. I guess if they are high level and they can talk and express their idea, it will be great to negotiate any element of the writing.* (Teacher C)

This point of view makes sense because when you have students who have a wide range of vocabulary and skillful in grammar, it would be much easier to negotiate with.

The last key finding of this study was the third challenge for implementing negotiation for meaning in EFL writing classes, which is time constraints. Likewise, there was broad consensus among the five participants on the inadequacy of time for using negotiation pedagogy appropriately. This is in line with what was mentioned in Kabooha's (2018) findings that made a list of the challenges related to negotiation pedagogy, and time constraints was one of them. Meeting course objectives and prioritizing linguistic correctness and fluency may limit instructors' ability to provide opportunities for proper negotiation or dialogue in the classroom (Jabur, 2008)

In sum, negotiation for meaning seemed to have advantages to enhance students' writings, but it demands a conducive learning environment and adequate time for effective implementation. The findings of the second research question support the theoretical framework of the study. According to the sociocultural theory, people learn a second language through social interaction. In order to achieve a proper chance for social interaction, it would be better to negotiate in actual classrooms with adequate students' level without time constraints. The absence of social interaction in the classrooms seemed to impede the process of students' learning in the light of the sociocultural theory.

6. Conclusion

This study has aimed to enhance the EFL learners' writing skill by examining the negotiation for meaning pedagogy in the Saudi EFL context. In general, the prevalence of negotiation for meaning was relatively low in the EFL writing

classes. The theoretical framework of the study, the sociocultural theory, emphasizes the role of social interaction in classrooms to develop learners' communicative competence. It appears that the teachers have recently been unable to use it due to online teaching.

Another main finding of the study is that it is not possible to use the negotiation for meaning pedagogy with low-level students, especially in online classroom environment. The participants suggested the use of scaffolding with their low-level students to practice negotiation with teachers and other students. Overall, based on the findings, it can be concluded that the negotiation for meaning pedagogy, if applied in face-to-face classrooms, and if the students have a high proficiency level, may be a major tool for enhancing EFL students' writing. In addition to these two main challenges that impede the implementation of this pedagogy, time constraint is the third factor that complicates negotiation for meaning.

To summarize, negotiating for meaning seems to have benefits for improving students' writing; however, it requires a conducive learning atmosphere and a significant amount of time for EFL teachers to ensure its effective implementation in virtual classrooms. Moreover, to ensure a suitable opportunity for social interaction, it would be preferable to negotiate in actual classes where students have an adequate level of proficiency and teachers have no time constraints.

6.1 Limitations of the Study

This study was carried out during the period of online teaching, which was launched as a result of the closure of educational institutions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Owing to the lack of face-to-face education, the interaction was difficult between teachers and students, hence, negotiation for meaning was absent in the writing classes. Moreover, the classroom observations were conducted a week prior to the mid-term exams, where the attendance of students was very low. Furthermore, the educational condition of online learning influenced the methodological choices, therefore, We could observe each class only once. The findings might have been different if the observations were conducted more than one time.

6.2 Recommendation for Future Research

More research is needed to understand the pedagogy of negotiation for meaning in teaching EFL writing since there is a scarcity of previous research on the subject. Future research can uncover possible solutions for the challenges that hindered the use of negotiation for meaning pedagogy. A comparative study of female and male EFL writing teachers using negotiation for meaning pedagogy in the Saudi EFL context may be undertaken as future research. It might also be possible to conduct a study on a different participant group as exploring EFL students' perceptions of the negotiation for meaning pedagogy in learning writing. Another theoretical framework may also be used, such as the Bakhtinian dialogic concept in language learning process as future research. Conducting classroom observations in face-to-face classrooms may yield different and more interesting findings. Finally, a different methodology with a variety of data collection tools can gather valid and reliable data to investigate the research phenomenon in a rigorous manner.

6.3 Pedagogical Implications

The current study's findings have the following pedagogical implications for EFL teachers, policymakers, and EFL students:

For EFL teachers: Using different forms of scaffolding in order to engage lower-level students in practicing negotiation for meaning in EFL writing classrooms.

For policymakers: Teaching EFL writing skills without integrating it into other skills may facilitate the negotiation and help teachers to overcome the challenge of time constraints.

For students: To courage students for seeking the teacher's feedback even outside the classrooms during teachers' office hour.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Dear EFL teachers,

Thank you for your interest in taking part in my research study entitled "**Exploring Negotiation Pedagogy of EFL Writing Teachers in the Saudi Context**". This open-ended interview consists of 4 demographic questions and 5 main questions that aim to explore deeper insights into EFL teachers' perceptions of using negotiation for meaning in teaching EFL writing, and the challenges they may face when attempting to implement it in a writing classroom. It will take you approximately 10 minutes to complete the questions. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Mai Almutwakkil

E-mail: malmutwakkil@stu.kau.edu.sa

Demographic information:

1. Please indicate your nationality: _____
2. Please indicate your qualification: _____
3. Please indicate your year(s) of teaching experience: _____
4. Please indicate the track you are teaching currently: _____

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. How do you perceive negotiation for meaning pedagogy in teaching writing?
2. How do you integrate negotiation for meaning pedagogy in teaching writing?
3. In what way do you think that negotiation for meaning in teaching writing can benefit EFL learners?
4. What are the challenges you may face when attempting to implement negotiation for meaning technique in a writing classroom?
5. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this interview.