

## Teaching EFL Writing: Students' Hidden Agenda

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The paper reports on the results of a questionnaire that was administered to sixty EFL students in a Tunisian Faculty of Arts to know about their writing preferences, habits, strategies, training, and difficulties. The results have shown in relation to students' preferences that writing is moderately liked and so is the argumentative essay in contrast with the personal and literary essay. Concerning their training, students avow that they do not often write and that the focus in the composition class is rather on the accuracy of form.

### 0. Introduction

Most teachers of English in tertiary education in Tunisia agree that students' primary problem is writing. This is reflected in the low grades in composition recorded every year. This affects students' performance in other subjects which depend on their writing ability. Despite this state of affairs, there has been little research that has tried to understand and hopefully remedy this problem.

The present paper reports on part of a project<sup>1</sup> that was undertaken to examine the issue and propose some solutions. It presents the results of a questionnaire that was administered to sixty EFL students in a Tunisian Faculty of Arts. The questionnaire gauged students' preferences, writing habits, training and difficulties.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first part states the objectives of the questionnaire and reviews the basic considerations and procedures followed in its design and administration. Then, it provides a full description of it. The second part discusses the findings. The last part proposes some implications for pedagogy.

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<sup>1</sup>The present paper is part of a larger research project that studied the writing processes and products of Tunisian EFL students (Mahfoudhi, 1999).

## **1.0 Questionnaire**

### **1.1 Objectives**

The questionnaire (see Appendix A) was designed and administered to sixty students to find out about:

- (i) Learners' preferences concerning writing in general and writing argumentative essays in English in particular.
- (ii) The subjects' writing habits.
- (iii) The subjects' schooling, i.e. their classroom habits and their instructors' techniques and expectations.
- (iv) The relationship between the composition course and the other courses: culture, literature, and reading comprehension; and the relationship between the writing skill and other skills.
- (v) The difficulties learners face particularly while writing argumentative essays.

These objectives later made up separate sections on which a set of questions converged. These objectives were sought while observing validity and reliability.

### **1.2 Validity and reliability**

#### **1.2.1 Validity**

Validity refers to "how appropriate a judgement (or score) is of whatever it purports to measure" (White and Gunstone, 1992: 177). One of the most important elements intervening in the validity of a questionnaire is its wording. The questions should elicit what they are intended to elicit. They should be closely related to the objectives set beforehand. The words of the questions should also be short, easy, and unequivocal (Mc Donough and Mc Donough, 1997: 173). To avoid such threats to validity, the questionnaire was written and rewritten several times. The reformulations were partly guided by the responses of a student who did not take part in the study and on whom the questionnaire was initially tried as well as by the comments of an expert. The questions were made as simple and clear as possible, since "all inessential words are potential sources of

confusion" (Low, 1996:1). In fact, some questions were rephrased since they were felt to be insufficiently clear. Some other items were omitted because they were judged redundant, biased or offensive, while others were added as they were deemed relevant to the objectives sought. In fact, a whole section on learners' attitudes was omitted since it was felt that attitudinal data were difficult to elicit. Besides, such information was judged unnecessary for the aim of the study. The sections concerning training of students and the relationship between the different courses and skills (see section 1.3, below) were combined because they were thought to be convergent.

Caution was taken to avoid "leading questions which suggest that there is one desirable or desired answer" (Mc Donough and Mc Donough, 1997: 177) by rewriting the questions after trying them out several times. Besides, respondents were given many possibilities to choose from and were asked to choose more than one alternative.

The presentation of the questionnaire is also necessary to the validity of the results. A good presentation is helpful to the field-worker in the quantification of the responses (cf., e.g. Casley and Lury, 1987: 74).

### **1.2.2 Reliability**

Validity is essential but has to be coupled with reliability. The latter "refers to the consistency of the judgement that follows from use of a test" (White and Gunstone, 1992: 182). A questionnaire is reliable when it yields the same results over a given time. To ensure reliability, the questionnaire was piloted on a small sample of sixteen students of the target community of informants twice over a period of three weeks. Though it did not yield drastic changes, the pilot study allowed to estimate the time to be allotted to answer the questionnaire and revealed some difficulties in the administration. In the cases where the questionnaire was left with the informants to answer at home, the difficulty to collect it came to the fore.

In the administration of the questionnaire, such problems were taken into consideration. Informants were requested to indicate their group number. Group specification was judged necessary to make a balance in the number of informants from the different five groups of second-year students enrolled in the English department mentioned earlier and see whether group membership had an effect on students' responses, especially in relation to their training. Three groups were contacted after their class time. They answered the questionnaire on the spot and handed it in either to their teacher or to the field-worker, who was the present author. The two others were also contacted after classes, but it was impossible to collect the responses immediately. The problem encountered in the pilot study could not be avoided, as many informants never gave back their responses to their teachers who volunteered to collect them. The field-worker had therefore to go back many times to collect some of them. Sixty out of one hundred questionnaires were eventually collected.

### **1.3 Description of the questionnaire**

The questionnaire (Appendix A) comprised, in addition to the cover letter, four sections set to investigate the objectives mentioned above. The first section, from item 1 to item 4, was set out to seek information about the informants' preferences concerning writing in the three languages (i.e. Arabic, French, and English) they know with varying proficiency. The aim of this section was to find out whether students' preferences had any effect on their performance in writing argumentative essays and whether these preferences were satisfied in the composition course.

The second section, from item 5 to item 9, gauged learners' responses about their writing habits either in class or outside it. These included the frequency of writing essays either in or outside of class, the number of drafts written, the writing and revising strategies, and the reader awareness.

The third section, from item 10 to item 20, tried to find out about the

training habits of the learners, i.e. what they do in their composition course, their teachers' expectations; the relationship of the composition course to the courses of literature, culture, and reading comprehension; and the relationship of the writing skill to other skills. The third section is relatively larger than the others because it was initially two sections: the schooling habits of the students on the one hand and the relation of the composition course to other courses and the relation of the writing skill to other skills on the other. These two sections were combined and condensed first because they were both related to the way writing is taught and second because the questionnaire in its initial form was qualified as being rather lengthy.

The fourth section, from item 20 to item 23, attempted to gauge the respondents' own writing difficulties and their sources mainly while writing argumentative essays. These sections consisted of closed questions. Open response questions were felt unnecessary after omitting the section on the attitudes of the students to their writing course, since such questions are often more appropriate to gather attitudinal information. Besides, they are often left unanswered. Furthermore, such questions cause problems in their recording and analysis (Mc Donough and Mc Donough, 1997: 173).

The closed questions in this study consisted of checklists which presented a number of alternatives either to choose from or to order on a scale. Multiple choice questions were used because they are safely direct and easy to answer by students and easy to quantify by the field-worker (177).

## **2. Results and discussion**

This section discusses students' answers to the questionnaire, summarised in Tables 1 to 24 (Appendix B). The discussion covers (i) students' writing preferences, (ii) their habits and strategies, (iii) their training in writing, and (iv) their difficulties while writing.

## 2.1 Students' writing preferences

Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 sum up the responses to the questions relative to students' preferences. The informants who answered the questionnaire make up a relatively homogenous group. They are familiar with at least three languages: Arabic (with its two varieties, i.e. Tunisian Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic), English, and French. They are all studying English as a subject of specialisation.

Table 1 shows that though students are majoring in English, there is a relatively large number of them who do not rank English as their preferred language (27.58% ranked French as their most preferred language and 13.33% ranked Modern Standard Arabic as their most preferred language).

Table 2 sums up responses to a more focused question that concerns learners' attitudes towards writing in English without comparing it to other languages studied. The results displayed in Table 2 are, however, similar to the ones summarised in Table 1. Table 2 also shows that many students (40.66%) like writing in English only moderately or a little, although English is the language they chose to study and specialise in. It is probable that those who did not rank English first (Table 1) and those who said they like to write in this language moderately or a little (Table 2) are those who found themselves in the English department owing to certain weaknesses in the *orientation system*. The orientation system consists in the fact that students who have passed their *Bac exam* (high school graduation national exam) can go to university but they must have high grades to be enrolled for the subject they like most. Consequently, students who have low *scores* (a score includes mainly the grades earned in the different subjects taken in the Bac exam) are underprivileged. For instance, students who are good at Arabic and who want to study it at university can find themselves in another department studying probably a subject they like less not because Arabic is reserved for the best achievers but because only the *first choices* of the better students (with the highest *scores*) are satisfied.

Despite the fact that there are many students who like English only moderately, there is a strong motivation to learn English and to excel in it (58.33% ranked it first before French, and Arabic (Table1) and 59.31% said they like to write in English (Table 2)).

Table 3 sums up students' attitudes towards writing in the three subjects: culture, literature, and composition. It is clear from the data displayed in Table 3 that literature is the most preferred subject as 56.89% of the respondents ranked it first. Writing in the composition class was ranked first by 35.08% and writing in the culture class was ranked first by 14.54% of the informants. Literature, as a subject, is much appreciated by Tunisian learners (similar results were found by Abdessalem, 1995), but we are not sure whether students write at all in their literature classes, apart from note-taking during lectures or while answering exam questions.

Table 4 reveals that like the literature course, the personal essay is the most preferred among learners: 71.66% of them ranked it first. This is probably because either in literature or in the personal essay students have, or think they have, a free space in which they express their own thoughts and feelings. Writing in culture studies, by contrast, does not seem to allow personal reflections and reactions. In culture studies, personal reflections and reactions are neither easy nor safe. Misunderstanding can creep in very easily.

The notion of freedom was reiterated by the informants in some of their preliminary informal responses in the retrospective comments or in the casual discussions with the field-worker. Ameen, one of the students whose protocols were recorded (Mahfoudhi, in preparation), avowed in a rather lengthy session of retrospective comments that he did not like what they did in their composition class. He explained that when writing on an assigned topic, he would feel "restricted"; but when writing something personal, he would write with "a different mood"(Ameen's words).

The argumentative essay is only very moderately liked. Only 21.42% of the

learners ranked it first (Table 4). They justified their choice by the fact that *discuss* topics are often ambiguous or uninteresting. They also traced this difficulty to the fact that these types of essays require original thinking in order to have a personal stand towards the ideas of others (Table 24).

The narrative essay is, by contrast, the least preferred with a mere 8.92% of the responses counted in the first position column (Table 4). There is, however, little evidence that may account for the reason why the narrative essay is not very much liked by learners. Narration is probably associated with primary school education and story telling. Future studies on the narrative mode in the academic context may tackle this question.

### 2.3 Students' writing habits and strategies

The following subsection discusses learners' writing habits and the strategies they employ in their writing process. The strategies include note-making, outlining, dividing (i.e. deconstructing) the prompt, reading, revising, and editing.

The data in Table 5 reveal that 18.33% of second-year EFL students write from one to three times a week and 46.66% of them write from one to three times a month either in class or outside it. This number is not sufficient if we know that 18.33% of the learners write from one to three times per term and 16.66% write only in exams. Students, therefore, still need more practice either in class or outside it.

Table 6 ostensibly reveals that students, as a group, use a wide range of strategies. But if every column is examined separately, figures show that there are many strategies which are very rarely used. A large number (41.67%) of students do not make notes<sup>2</sup>, 45% of them do not read what they have written, 60% of them do not write a plan, and 61.67% do not divide the prompt before writing.

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<sup>2</sup>Note-making does not include note-taking which is undertaken in lectures, tutorials, and while reading.

Yet, many respondents (61.67%) do not correct grammar or vocabulary while writing, a strategy often associated with skilled writers (e.g., Zamel, 1983).

Table 7, likewise, shows that a large number of students (43.40%) never rewrite. Those who rewrite are preoccupied essentially with minor changes of meaning, that is, changing words, sentences, and punctuation (Table 8). When redrafting, only 26.66% change ideas and 25% change paragraphs. Besides, 56.67% of the informants do not read their earlier draft(s) when rewriting. These strategies are often associated with unskilled writers (e.g. Raimes, 1985).

It is, therefore, clear that for most learners rewriting consists of making small changes in meaning, editing, and polishing (an) earlier draft(s). This is likely due to the effect of exam conditions with their time pressure and to learners' belief that correct grammar and vocabulary and mechanics are what matters most in their teachers' or examiners' assessment, as it is indicated in Table 20. Exam conditions have to some extent conditioned learners' writing behaviour and have consequently fostered certain habits including the lack of revising ideas, rewriting, note-making, and planning.

Table 9 indicates that the majority of respondents (73.33%) write to satisfy the aforementioned expectations of their teachers or examiners, and 20% of them write with no particular reader in mind. Only 15% of the informants write with the reader proposed in the prompt in mind and 11.66% of them imagine a reader for their writings.

The lack of reader awareness is probably a result of the deficiency of topics; for instance there is little specification of audience in some assigned topics. An extreme example of such topics is: "Freedom is a hard choice. Comment." The lack of reader awareness may also be due to the teachers' general disinterest in and response to learners' ideas and opinions. Most informants believe that their teachers are concerned with correctness of form and only 5.26% (Table 20) think that interesting ideas are the most important thing in their teachers' assessment. This increases the conviction among students that most academic writing is a

Table 1  
Question 1: In which language do you like to write most?

Language	French			English			M.S. Arabic			Totals		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	Fr.	Eng.	Ar
Order of preference												
Number of instances	16	16	26	35	20	5	8	22	30	58	60	60
Percentage	27.58	27.58	44.82	58.33	33.33	8.33	13.33	36.66	50	100%		

Table 2  
Question 2: Do you like writing in English?

Very much	Much	Moderately	A little	Not at all	Total
19	16	20	4	0	59
2.2	27.11	33.89	6.77	0	100%

Table 3  
Question 3: Where do you like to write essays?

Order of preference	Culture			Literature			Composition			Totals		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	Cul	Lit	Com
Nb. of instances	8	18	29	33	17	8	20	20	17	55	58	57
Percentage	14.54	32.72	52.72	56.89	29.31	13.79	35.08	35.08	29.82	100%		

Table 4  
Question 4: Which type of essays do you like to write?

Order of preference	Narrative			Argumentative			Personal			Totals		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	*Nar	Arg.	Per
Number of instances	5	22	29	12	22	22	43	12	5	56	56	60
Percentage	8.92	39.28	51.78	21.42	39.28	39.28	71.66	20	8.33	100%		

\*-Nar. : Narrative (essay) - Arg. : Argumentative. -Per. : Personal

Table 5

Question 5: How often do you write essays in English in or outside class?

1- 3 times a week	1-3 times a month	1-3 times a term	Only in exams	Total
11	28	11	10	60
18.33	46.66	18.33	16.66	100%

Table 6

Question 6: When writing, what do you do?

Write an outline	Divide the topic	Outline in mind	Make notes	Correct grammar or spelling	Read previous sentence or paragraph	Total
24	23	25	35	23	33	60
40	38.33	41.66	58.33	38.33	55	100%

Table 7

Question 7: Do you write more than one version (draft)?

Yes	No	Total
34	26	60
56.66	43.33	100%

Table 8

Question 8: When rewriting / redrafting, what do you do?

Read the first draft	Change ideas	Change paragraphs	Change words and sentences	Punctuate carefully	Total
26	16	15	42	42	60 each
43.33	26.66	25	70	70	100%

practice of form (i.e. grammar and vocabulary) and rhetorical structure and that there is no reader but the teacher or the examiner to please.

The shortcomings in the learners' writing habits and strategies are partly due to their training.

## **2.4 Learners' training in writing**

This part presents and discusses the results of the answers to the questions relative to learners' training in writing, summarised in Tables 10 to 20 (Appendix B).

### **2.4.1 The composition course**

The data in Table 10 show that students receive theoretical instruction concerning, for instance, how to write a paragraph and how to handle composition mechanics often at the beginning of the year or for a long time over the term. Only 10 % said that they were taught theory *incidentally*.

In addition to the theoretical lessons they receive, students sometimes do sentence-based exercises such as sentence combining or sentence transforming, as displayed in Table 11.

Classroom essay-writing practice is not very frequent as only 46.66% of the informants reported that they *sometimes* write and 20% of them said they *rarely* do (Table 12). These results corroborate the ones relative to learners' writing habits, either in class or outside it, displayed in Table 5.

Table 13 sums up the responses to the question of whether students rely on a model to imitate when writing. Only 33.89% of the informants responded with *yes*. This finding suggests that some teachers rely mainly on deductive theoretical lessons and fail to give learners the opportunity to discover genre specificities through reading and parallel writing.

Table 14 reveals that in classroom writing practice, different genres of essays – argumentative, narrative, descriptive, and personal – are not allotted

equal shares of attention in the composition class. There is actually a big advantage for the argumentative essay (with 40.35% of the respondents ranking it as their first choice) over the narrative essay which occupies the second position (28.07%) followed by the personal essay (24.56%) and the descriptive essay (8.77%).

The amount of time and attention devoted to the different genres does not coincide with the students' order of preferences displayed in Table 4, discussed above. In fact, the personal essay is by far the most preferred among students, but it is not very much practised in class. The argumentative essay is privileged in the composition class since it is the most common in the later stages of learning and is needed for other content subjects.

Table 15 sums up the answers to the question related to the frequency of treating, in the composition class, topics that learners study in their classes of literature, culture, or reading comprehension. The responses indicate that the comprehension course is relatively related to the composition course, with 37.28% of the responses equally distributed among the rubrics *usually* and *often*.

The literature and the culture courses, by contrast, have very little to do with what is treated in the composition course, with about 58.33% for the first (literature) and 77.19% for the second (culture) under the heading *rarely* or *never*. The composition course therefore needs to draw closer to other courses studied, especially those of culture and literature. Such marriage between subjects may make writing in culture topics more appreciated and satisfy learners' eagerness to write in literature.

#### **2.4.2 Teachers' and learners' behaviour and expectations**

Table 16 reveals that learners sometimes *discuss* the content and structure of the topic before they start writing. This result indicates that speaking is not very much related to writing. The fact that learners rarely read model texts to emulate

Table 9

Question 9: When writing, do you think of a particular reader?

Imagined reader	Reader in the prompt	No reader	Teacher or examiner	Total
7	9	12	44	Out of 60 each
11.66	15	20	73.33	100%

Table 10

Question 10: In your composition classes, do you normally receive theoretical lessons, for instance about how to write an introduction or to use linkers?

At the beginning of the year	At the beginning of every session	For a long time over the term	Rarely as passing remarks	Total
24	10	20	6	60
40	16.66	33.33	10	100%

Table 11

Question 11: In your composition classes, do you normally receive theoretical lessons for instance about how to write an introduction or to use linkers?

Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total
11	34	14	1	60
18.33	56.66	23.33	1.66	100%

Table 12

Question 12: How often do you write essays in composition classes ?

Always	Usually	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total
5	7	8	28	12	0	60
8.33	11.66	13.33	46.66	20	0	100%

Table 13  
Question 13: When you write, are you asked to read a text which you try to imitate?

Yes	No	Total
20	39	59
33.89	66.10	100%

Table 14  
Question 14: Which type of essay do you write or study as a model most often?

Order of frequency	Personal				Argumentative				Narrative				Descriptive				Total	
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	Per. Arg.	Nar. Des.
Nb. of instances	14	6	8	29	23	10	10	14	16	15	19	7	5	25	19	8	57	57
Percentage	24.6	10.52	14.03	50.87	40.35	17.54	17.54	24.56	28.07	26.31	33.33	12.28	8.77	43.85	33.33	14.03		100%

1 = Most often practised. 4 = Least often practised.

Table 15  
Question 15: How often do you write essays in your composition classes on topics you are studying in literature, culture (civilisation), or comprehension classes?

	Usually				Often				Sometimes				Rarely				Never				Total & %	
	2	3	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	Total	%
Literature	2	3	3	4	6	6	6	6	19	31	66	33	17	28	33	30	18	30	30	18	60	100%
Culture (Civilization)	2	3	3	4	6	6	6	6	10	17	54	23	23	36	84	21	21	36	84	21	57	100%
Comprehension	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	14	14	14	7	7	16	16	16	16	16	16	16	59	100%
	18.64	18.64	18.64	18.64	18.64	18.64	18.64	18.64	23.72	23.72	23.72	11.86	11.86	27.11	27.11	27.11	27.11	27.11	27.11	27.11	100%	100%

(Table 13) also shows that the writing in the composition class is very little related to the reading skill. The literature related to the Process Approach has suggested that discussing the topic is a very useful technique as it helps learners generate content and therefore spare them mental blocks. Reading helps learners discover the rhetorical characteristics of similar texts. It also makes them aware of other view points.

The data in Table 17 demonstrate that teachers do not often intervene in learners' preliminary drafts (42.37% answered with *sometimes*, and 30.50% answered with *rarely* or *never*) to help them for instance with finding the appropriate word or the wording of an idea. Besides, writing instructors do not often correct what their students write either in class or outside it. Only 25% reported that their essays were corrected *sometimes* and 25% said that their writings were corrected either *rarely* (15%) or *never* (10%) (Table 18). One could also deduce that few students write regularly in or outside class.

Moreover, learners very rarely discuss the remarks and recommendations on their corrected essays with their instructors. Nearly 59% of the responses are under the heading *rarely* or *never* (Table 19).

Table 20 summarises students' judgement of their teachers' or examiners' criteria for assessment. Students think that correct use of grammar and vocabulary is of great importance (50.87% of the respondents ranked it first). Logical organisation of ideas is judged important as 33.33% of the respondents ranked it first. Interesting ideas, on the other hand, are ranked first only by 5.26% of the informants. The belief among learners that ideas do not matter much in their teachers' criteria of correction is partly due to the teachers' lack of response to the ideas of their students.

Because there is often a discrepancy, though unconscious, between what teachers think and what they actually do (Currie, 1996: 122), teachers' remarks on students' products were used instead of their responses to a questionnaire or a formal interview to compare their expectations and those of their students

(Mahfoudhi, 1999). The comparison has revealed a discordance, though not very evident, between the expectations of both learners and teachers. Teachers, unlike their students, seem to grant more importance to coherence and ideas than to correct grammar and vocabulary, and mechanics respectively. Most of the teachers' remarks concern thesis statement and support of claims. Teachers also correct grammar and spelling but there is, indeed, little attention to ideas and opinions.

The data in Table 20 show that 5% of the informants are not aware of their teachers' criteria. This increases the discordance between the learners' and the instructors' expectations which can be taken with some caution to represent those of the academic community. This is partly explained by the fact that learners never see their exam papers in major exam sessions. Those who fail a subject are never told what went wrong.

### **2.5 Learners' judgement of their writing difficulties**

Tables 21, 22, 23 and 24 (Appendix B) sum up the responses related to learners' judgement of their writing difficulties. These difficulties are classified as prewriting difficulties, while-writing difficulties, and difficulties relative to writing argumentative essays in particular.

Table 21 sums up the answers to the question related to the sources of difficulties that learners encounter most often before they start writing their first drafts. The organisation of ideas is the least difficult according to the respondents. In fact, only 37.50% of the respondents ranked it first or second in a four-point scale. This is understandable because at this stage there are not many ideas which come to mind. Besides, learners are more concerned with generating ideas than with organising them. It is also because in writing in culture studies or literature, students tend to memorise ideas in the order provided in lectures.

Finding the appropriate words causes learners trouble (42.54% ranked this

difficulty first or second). This is a common source of difficulty among EFL writers, mainly those whose linguistic repertoire falls short of their aspirations to translate their ideas especially at the beginning of the writing process.

The quality of the topic constitutes a real problem for learners and is very likely an important reason behind students' difficulty in expressing themselves. Most of the informants think that the poor quality of the topic (i.e. uninteresting or ambiguous) is the first or second most frequent source of difficulty before actually beginning to write (uninteresting topic: 59.56% of the respondents ranked it first or second and 72.54% of them ranked *ambiguous topic* first or second among four proposed sources of difficulty, Table 21). This result implies that most topics assigned in class are neither very clear nor very motivating. The infrequency of discussing the topic's content and form before writing (see Table 16) increases such difficulty.

The data in Table 22 relative to learners' *while-writing* difficulties reveal that though the different types of difficulties proposed tend to occur in their writing process with relatively the same frequency, students believe that finding the appropriate word is what bothers them most frequently. About 55% of the respondents ranked *finding the appropriate word* as the first or second most frequent difficulty among five difficulties proposed.

Organising paragraphs into an essay (44.43% ranked it first or second) and to a less extent organising ideas into a paragraph represent a problem for learners (42.58% ranked it first or second). This is probably due to the fact that learners do not often make notes or rewrite (see Table 6 and 7, discussed above). Transition from one idea or paragraph to another does not represent a serious difficulty and so is writing in correct language (with 33.33% and 33.32% of the learners ranked each difficulty first or second respectively).

On the whole, learners face difficulties especially in finding the appropriate word and to a less extent in organising ideas either within or across paragraphs. Formal accuracy of grammar and spelling, by contrast, seems to cause students

little trouble.

The difficulties discussed above concern writing in general. Students were also asked if writing argumentative essays was particularly difficult. Most informants (69.49%, Table 23) answered in the affirmative. According to them, the difficulty of the argumentative essay is traced mainly to the fact that argumentative essays need more original thinking (66.66% of the respondents opted for the latter source of difficulty). This may be a result of the lingering effects of a learning tradition inclined to retention and reproduction of knowledge with little critical questioning (Dubleby-Evans and Swales, 1980: 93).

Essay organisation is not a major source of difficulty as only 35% of the informants opted for this alternative. Such difficulty is not specifically put down to the intricacy of the argumentative essay but is common in other genres as discussed above ( in relation to Table 22).

The learners' unfamiliarity with the argumentative genre is not considered a significant source of difficulty (30% of the informants said the lack of familiarity with the argumentative genre caused them difficulty, Table 24). The argumentative essay is actually given due attention and practice in class (Table 14).

It is, however, surprising that only 10% of the learners think that because of their uninteresting nature, argumentative topics are difficult to write on because this very deficiency is judged as the second most frequent source of difficulty in the prewriting phase (Table 21). This seeming contradiction can be explained by the fact that argumentative topics are more interesting than other topics and also because there are other factors for instance *original thinking* that are more important than the interesting nature of the topic.

## 2.6 Summary

### *Students' preferences:*

Though English is relatively the most preferred language, writing in English is only

Table 16

Question 16: How often do you discuss the topics of the essays before writing ?

Usually	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total
13	8	30	9	0	60
21.66	13.33	50	15	0	100%

Table 17

Question 17: While writing in class, how often does your teacher help you for instance to get the right word or to express an idea ?

Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total
16	25	13	5	59
27.11	42.37	22.03	8.47	100%

Table 18

Question 18: How often does your teacher assess (correct) the essays you write either in or outside class ?

Usually	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total
19	11	15	9	6	60
31.66	18.33	25	15	10	100%

Table 19

Question 19: How often do you discuss the remarks on your essay with your teacher ?

Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total
9	16	24	11	60
15	26.66	40	18.33	100%

Table 20  
Question 20: What do you think matters most in teachers' assessment either in class or in exams?

Order importance	Logical organisation of ideas				Correct spell. & handwriting				Correct use of gram. & voc.				Interesting ideas	Not sure	Totals					
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4			Org.	Spell	Gr. & Voc.	Org.	Spell	Gr. & Voc.
Nb. of instances	19	19	14	5	7	10	14	26	29	19	8	1	3	10	20	24	3	57	57	57
Percentage	33.3	33.3	24.5	8.7	12.3	17.5	24.5	45.6	50.8	33.3	14	1.7	5.2	17.5	35.1	42.1	5	100%	100%	100%

1 = Most important; 4 = Least important

Table 21  
Question 21a: What are the sources of difficulties you face before you start writing?

Order of frequency	Uninteresting topic				Lack of words				Ambiguous topic				Organising ideas				Totals			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4		Unint.	Lack of words	Ambig
Nb. of instances	18	10	9	10	15	5	12	15	16	21	8	6	9	9	15	15	47	47	51	48
Percentage	38.3	21.3	19.1	21.27	31.9	10.6	25.5	31.9	31.3	41.1	15.6	11.7	18.7	18.7	31.2	31.2	47	47	51	48

1 = 1 encounter most frequently; 4 = 1 encounter least frequently

Table 22

Question 21b: What difficulties do you face while writing?

Order of frq	Organise ideas in a paragraph					Find the appropriate word					Write in correct language				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Nb of just	16	7	17	5	9	17	12	8	11	5	4	14	8	12	16
Percentage	29.6	12.9	31.4	9.2	16.6	32	22.6	15	20.7	9.4	7.4	25.9	14.8	22.2	29.6
	Organise paragraphs in a coherent essay					Move from one paragraph to another					Totals				
Order of frq	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Nb of just	16	8	15	7	8	6	12	5	17	14	54	53	54	54	54
Percentage	29.6	14.8	27.7	12.9	14.8	11.1	22.2	9.25	31.4	25.9	100%				

= 1 encounter most frequently ; 5 = 1 encounter least frequently.

Table 23

Question 22 : Do you think that argumentative essays are particularly difficult ?

Yes	No	Total
41	18	59
69.49	30.50	100%

Table 24

Question 23: Why are argumentative essays particularly difficult?

Difficult to organise	Needs original thinking	Discuss topics are uninteresting	Not familiar	Total
21	40	6	18	Out of 60 each
35	66.66	10	30	100%

moderately liked and so is writing in the composition class. Writing in the literature class is, by contrast, very much appreciated. The personal essay is also very much enjoyed, but the argumentative essay is only moderately liked.

*Students' writing habits and strategies:*

Students do not write very often and most of what they write is classroom-bound. Their writing processes also lack necessary strategies. In fact, among the group, 41.67% do not make notes, 60% do not write a plan, 45% do not read back what they have written, and 20% write without a reader in mind. About half of them (45%) do not write more than one draft and most of those who rewrite concern themselves with local changes of words, sentences, and mechanics. Surprisingly, among those who rewrite 46% do not read the first draft. These deficiencies in the students' processes are partly due to their training.

*Students' writing training :*

On the whole, the composition class seems to be more product oriented where the focus is on the accuracy of form, but with more practice at the sentence level rather than on the process of writing. As teachers tend to rely on deductive teaching of writing mechanics (e.g., punctuation) and practice at the sentence level, students do not write very often. Teachers sometimes discuss the topic they assign with their students, and rarely intervene in the latter's writing processes to guide or help them. They also do not often correct their students' writings and very rarely discuss the remarks on the corrected products with their writers.

The composition course does not satisfy learners' preferences. They are not given opportunity to write on personal topics and/or topics related to the literature class. An effective composition course will try, in addition to satisfying students' preferences, to concern itself with their difficulties.

*Students' writing difficulties:*

Students seem to be aware of the difficulties they encounter and their sources. Before they start writing, students often stall especially because the topic is ambiguous or uninteresting and also because they cannot find the appropriate words to express themselves. While writing, learners' main trouble comes from their inability to find the

appropriate words to write their ideas down and to a lesser extent from their inability to organise their ideas. Learners think that the argumentative essay is particularly difficult essentially because it needs original thinking.

### 3. Implications

The results discussed above have shown that learners only moderately like writing in English and in the composition class. Students' motivation towards writing can be improved by treating topics in the composition class more preferred by students, particularly personal and literary topics. Probably more motivating is treating topics related to other courses of literature and culture. It allows learners to talk about themes they both know and like and familiarises them with genres they will be tested on. This goal can be optimally achieved through co-operation between the composition teacher and the instructors of other subjects especially in terms of syllabus design and methodology.

The questionnaire results have also shown that teachers do not often discuss with their students the assigned topics before writing, which increases students' diffidence towards writing. Discussing the topic coupled with note-making and/or quick writing can be very beneficial (e.g. Spack, 1984; Gertzman, 1995).

Partly because of training habits, learners tend to do very little planning, note-making, and rewriting. These behaviours may have detrimental effects on students' products. There should, therefore, be more focus on the process in addition to the product. This can be done by encouraging more writing in the class and outside it, encouraging teacher monitoring, peer review, more student-teacher interaction. These activities are found very rewarding in improving students' writing skills (Fathman and Walley, 1990: discussion of teachers' remarks on intermediate drafts; Conrad and Goldstein, 1990: negotiation of meaning, i.e. student-teacher conferencing, Urzua, 1987 and Mendonça and Johnson, 1994: peer review). On the whole, the writing class should be transformed into a workshop. Project work, for instance, done in pairs or in groups (e.g., Cramer, 1985; Reid, 1993; Rabkin and Smith, 1990) promotes the process of writing outside the classroom.

Students tend to face difficulties due to many causes. Students' prewriting

difficulties are partly traced back to the poor quality of topics which are often uninteresting and/or unclear. Topic choice should be based on certain criteria. An important criterion is interest. An interesting topic deals with an issue that students have different opinions about (Ramanathan and Kaplan, 1996: 26), a theme they like, or one that is related to their syllabus. Topics should not be trivial. Another criterion is clarity. This can be achieved by giving plain and specific instructions and/or guiding hints.

While writing, students' tremendous problem is finding words to express themselves. Learners are in need of as much vocabulary as possible. Reading and writing as often as possible provide learners with useful lexical items. Classroom prewriting discussions, teacher or peer help on earlier drafts, and consulting a dictionary (Harvey and Yuill, 1997) and a thesaurus are useful techniques to acquire useful vocabulary items.

In sum, students' (hidden) agenda including their preferences, opinions, habits, strategies and difficulties should be taken into consideration in any learning-teaching enterprise.

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**Appendices**

**Appendix A**

*Questionnaire*

Section I

**1/ In which language do you like to write most?**

Please order the alternatives from 1 to 3 ; that is, 1= I like most. 3= I like least .

French

English

Arabic

**2/ Do you like writing in English?**

Please circle the appropriate alternative.

Very much                    much                    moderately                    a little                    not at all

**3/ Where do you like to write essays?**

Please order your preferences from 1 to 3. 1= I like most. 3= I like least.

Culture (civilisation )

Literature

Composition

**4/ Which type of essays do you like to write?**

Please order your preferences from 1 to 3. 1= I like most. 3= I like least.

-Narrative: Where there are events told.

-Argumentative: Where there is a discussion

-Personal : Where I express my own feelings and thoughts

Section II

**5/ How often do you write essays in English in or outside class?**

Please circle the appropriate alternative.

-Once,                    -twice,                    -three times a week

-Once,                    -twice,                    -three times a month

-Once,                    -twice,                    -three times a term

**6/ When writing, what do you do?**

You may tick (✓) more than one item.

-I write an outline

-Divide the topic

-Make an outline in my mind

-Write my ideas down before organising them

-Correct structures, grammar or, spelling

-Read what I have written

**7/ Do you write more than one version (draft)?**

Yes

No

**8/ When rewriting / redrafting, what do you do ?**

You may tick (✓) more than one item.

-I read the first version

-Change ideas

-Change paragraphs

-Change words and sentences

-Punctuate carefully

**9/ When writing, do you think of a particular reader?**

You may tick (✓) more than one option.

- A reader I imagine
- The reader provided in the essay question
- No reader at all
- My teacher or examiner as a reader

**Section III**

Please circle the appropriate alternative unless you are asked to do otherwise.

**10/ In your composition classes, do you normally receive theoretical lessons for instance about how to write an introduction or to use linkers ?**

- At the beginning of the year
- At the beginning of every session
- For a long time over the term
- Rarely as passing remarks

**11/ How often do you practise writing single sentences and how to combine sentences in class?**

- often                      sometimes                      rarely                      never

**12/ How often do you write essays in composition classes ?**

- always    usually                      often                      sometimes                      rarely                      never

**13/ When you write, are you asked to read a text which you try to imitate?**

- Yes
- No

**14/ Which type of essay do you write or study as a model most often?**

Order the alternatives from 1 to 4. 1= studied most frequently, 4=studied the least

- Personal: Where personal feelings and thoughts are expressed
- Argumentative: Where there is a discussion
- Narrative: Where there are events told
- Descriptive: Where there are things or people described

**15/How often do you write essays in your composition classes on topics you are studying in literature, culture (civilisation), or comprehension classes ?**

(Put a cross in the right column.)

	Usually	often	sometimes	rarely	never
-Literature	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
-Civilisation	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
-Comprehension	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....

**16/ How often do you discuss the topics of the essays before writing ?**

- usually                      often                      sometimes                      rarely                      never

**17/ While writing in class, how often does your teacher help you for instance to get the right word or to express an idea ?**

- often                      sometimes                      rarely                      never

**18/ How often does your teacher assess (correct) the essays you write either in or outside class ?**

- usually                      often                      sometimes                      rarely                      never

**19/ How often do you discuss the remarks on your essay with your teacher ?**

- often                      sometimes                      rarely                      never

**20/ What do you think matters most in teachers' assessment either in class or in exams?**

Please order the alternatives from 1 to 4; 1= most important, 4= least important.

- logical organisation of ideas
- Good spelling and handwriting
- Correct use of grammar and vocabulary
- Interesting ideas
- I am not sure

Section IV

**21/You may sometimes encounter worries or difficulties before or while writing either in class or outside it. These may include the following:**

A/ Before I start writing.

I find it difficult to get started because:

Order the alternatives from 1 to 4. 1=The difficulty I face most frequently

a/ The topic is not interesting

b/ I do not find the words to express myself

c/ The topic is ambiguous (i.e. It has got more than one possible meaning)

d/ I do not know which idea to put first

B/ While writing

Order the alternatives from 1 to 5. 1= The difficulty I face most often.

I find it somewhat difficult:

a/ To organise my ideas in a paragraph

b/ To find the appropriate word

c/ To write in correct language

d/ To organise the paragraph in a coherent essay

e/ To move from one paragraph to the next

**22/ Do you think that argumentative essays are particularly difficult ?**

yes

No

**23/ Do you think they are particularly difficult because:**

( You may tick (✓) more than one alternative)

-They are difficult to organise

-They need more original thinking

-The discussed topics are not interesting

-I am not very familiar with them