Writing Difficulties Encountered by Jordanian EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT--- *The current study aimed at exploring difficulties that university students face when they write in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It also aimed at proposing solutions to help EFL learners overcome writing difficulties.*

The sample of the study comprised 82 English majors from the World Islamic Sciences and Education University in Jordan.

Instruments of the study included a questionnaire on difficulties that may face English majors while they write in English. The questionnaire also included an open-ended question on suggestions and solutions that can help the students overcome writing difficulties.

The results revealed that "lack of ideas" topped difficulties faced by Jordanian EFL students in writing class, followed by "the incorrect use of mechanics of writing". The study also revealed that "lack of clear assessment instruments and marking schemes" occupied the third rank, while "time restriction" ranked fourth.

"The unsuitable methods of teaching writing" and "vocabulary restriction" occupied the fifth and sixth ranks respectively, while "topic inappropriateness" and "lack of materials for consulting" occupied the seventh and eighth ranks. Finally, "grammar difficulties" and "lack of teacher's help" ranked ninth and tenth respectively.

The study proposed a number of suggestions and solutions to help EFL learners overcome writing difficulties.

Keywords--- writing difficulties, university students, Jordan, EFL

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1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the main language skills. It plays an essential role in expressing one's ideas, opinions, and attitudes. Through writing, people are capable of sharing ideas, feelings, persuading and convincing others.

Abu Rass (2015) indicated that "writing is a difficult skill for native and nonnative speakers alike because writers must balance multiple issues in their writing such as content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary and mechanics which means using the right punctuation, spelling and capitalization.

Alsamadani (2010) pointed out writing in a second language is even more demanding because it is "a complex, challenging, and difficult process" since writers are expected to produce written samples that are syntactically accurate, semantically acceptable and culturally appropriate.

Nunan (2003) noted that "writing is both a physical and mental act. At the most basic level, writing is the physical act of committing words or ideas to some medium. On the other hand, writing is the mental work of inventing ideas, thinking about how to express them, and organizing them into statements and paragraphs that will be clear to a reader".

Byrne (1988) and Heaton (1990) pointed out that "writing is a complex process because it requires the mastery of grammatical devices, conceptual thinking and judgmental elements".

According to Davies (19985), "writing is essentially a creative process and good writers must learn to communicate their ideas clearly to an unseen audience".

Researchers in the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) stressed that both the content and the form are important aspects of writing a composition. Writing requires appropriate language use, text construction, lay – out, style and effectiveness (Harmer, 2007).

On the other hand, specialists in the field of language teaching pointed out that confidence in writing ability is a must. They found that students' lack of confidence in their writing ability made it harder to make revision decisions and explain these decisions to the feedback providers. This was especially the case when there was conflicting feedback from different faculty (Can, 2009).

Kereni (2004) indicated that one of the difficulties of writing in a second or additional language is that it is generally believed to require some mastery of writing in the first language. There seems to be a perception that once learners can write sentences and paragraphs in their first language, they will automatically transfer such skills to other languages. However, it has to be noted that this may be possible only if a certain degree of proficiency in the first language is attained.

Moreover, studies conducted in Jordan on various writing-related issues pointed out that most EFL learners face difficulties when they write in English. Tahaineh 2009 (cited by Al-Sawalha and Chow 2012), said that "the overwhelming majority of Jordanian students come to the university with varying proficiency in English and they are reluctant to write since writing in English is an extremely difficult task by itself. The difficulties are usually linked to the mechanics of writing, grammar, organization of ideas, starting to write, writing a strong conclusion, generating the right ideas, expanding the ideas and using the appropriate vocabulary".

Consequently, the current study comes to investigate the main challenges and difficulties that face Jordanian EFL learners when they write in English, and to propose solutions to overcome writing difficulties.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Based on the researcher's experience in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), he observed that most students are incapable of expressing themselves in a clear, correct and comprehensible manner in writing and they are hesitant and show less self – confidence when they are asked to write a piece of writing.

Al-Khotaba 2010 (cited by Al-Sawalha and Chow 2012) indicated that EFL Jordanian university students spend several years pursuing basic writing courses at the university but still encounter many problems when attempting to produce a piece of writing and many of them ask their high school teachers or more competent friends to help them complete the assignment.

Nunan (1999) stated that "the most difficult task to do in language learning is to produce a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing, which is even more challenging for second language learners".

Students' problems in writing may occur because of many factors, including psychological, linguistic and cognitive aspects. Raimes (1983) thinks that "when students complain about how difficult it is to write in a second language, they are talking not only about the difficulty of finding the right words and using the correct grammar but also about the difficulty of finding and expressing ideas in a new language".

Thus, the current study is an attempt to identify the kind of difficulties that Jordanian university students face when they write in English and to propose solutions to overcome writing difficulties.

3. QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

The current study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main writing difficulties encountered by EFL university students in Jordan?

2- What solutions, techniques and strategies can be followed to overcome writing difficulties?

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The current study aimed at identifying university students' writing difficulties. In addition, the study attempted to explore solutions that can help students overcome writing difficulties.

5. DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- The current study was confined to investigating difficulties that English majors at the World Islamic Sciences and Education University in Jordan face when they write in English.
- The current study was conducted in the first semester of the academic year 2016-2017.

6. SIGNIFICANE OF THE STUDY

It is hoped that the results of this study would be of benefit to language instructors, syllabus designers, and EFL learners. The results could help in guiding EFL instructors and syllabus designers to effectively address writing difficulties that may encounter EFL learners. In addition, the results could help EFL learners be aware of difficulties that may face them while writing in English, a fact that is expected to be reflected positively on the educational outcomes in general, and writing in EFL in particular.

7. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Writing is one of the productive language skills that need to be mastered by EFL learners. Graham (1997) identified the following four vital areas in the writing process:(1) knowledge of writing and writing topics,(2) skill for producing and crafting text,(3) processes for energizing and motivating participants to write with enthusiasm, and (4) directing thought and actions through strategies to archive writing goals.

Byrne (1988) classified the writing complexities into psychological, linguistic and cognitive problems. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) indicated that "since writing does not come naturally but rather gained through continuous effort and much practice, it becomes a complex skill".

Traditional methodologies in teaching writing do not help a lot. Unless the teacher is able to create an interest in the minds of the learners, the teacher can't expect the desired results.

According to Zamel (1997) the writing class should take into account the learners' purposes for writing. Writing tasks can be developed rapidly when students' concerns and interests are acknowledged, when they are given numerous opportunities to write and when they are encouraged to become participants. Davies (1998) thinks that learners will be encouraged to write if writing tasks motivate them and keep them interested.

Hadifield (1992) noted three areas of difficulty for the learner in relation to the productive skill of writing. He pointed out that "the first difficulty is that the writer cannot consult the reader, for the audience is not immediately present as in the case with speaking. Second, learners suffer from linguistic difficulty in that language used in speech is not the same as writing. In some cases it is simpler-like a shopping list, in others it is more elaborate and formal like in an academic report. The difficulty is more evident for EFL learners who are unaware of the discourse patterns inherent in particular types of writing. The last difficulty is cognitive, this relates to the ability to organize ideas on the paper".

As for approaches followed to teaching writing, researchers in the field of language skills teaching indicated that there are two main trends: the product approach to writing and the process approach.

The product approach to writing focuses on the finished products of the writing work rather than the process. Nunan (1989) stated that "the product approach to writing focuses on the end result of the act of composition, and the writing teacher who uses the product approach will be concerned to see that the end product is readable, grammatically correct and obeys discourse conventions relating to main points, supporting details and so on".

As for the process approach, Hedge (1988) stated that "good writers appear to go through certain processes which lead to successful pieces of written work. She has proposed the following steps that good writers follow in the process approach of writing. a. The writers start with an overall plan in their head. b. They think about what they want to say and who are they writing for. c. They then draft out sections of the writing and as they work on them, they constantly reviewing, revising and editing their work".

Gebhard (2006) indicated that "the process approach to writing is based on several stages as follows: A- pre – writing (brainstorming). This stage usually begins with an introduction to a topic by the teacher and then asking the students to think deeply of the title or the topic to collect their thoughts, list all the ideas related to the topic and think of all the words they know connected with the topic. B- drafting: (writing) building appropriate sentences which convey the thoughts. C- revision: shaping meaning and improving language. D- editing: editing requires recognizing problems in grammar and mechanics."

As for studies conducted to investigate challenges that face students while writing in English, Ridha (2012) examined Iraqi college students' errors in English essay writings of EFL students. The errors were categorized according to the following taxonomy: grammatical, lexical, semantic, mechanics, and word order types of errors. The grammatical and the mechanical errors were the most serious and frequent ones. The most of the students' errors were led by the Arabic interference.

Al Fadda (2012) conducted a study to explore difficulties that King Saud University students encounter when learning to write academic English. The sample consisted of 50 postgraduate students enrolled in King Saud University during the academic year 2009-2010. Analysis of the data showed that English as a second language (ESL) students face many difficulties and stresses in their academic writing, such as difficulty in distinguishing between spoken and written English, making an outline before writing a draft, identifying the skills needed for successful writing, and avoiding plague words and phrases.

In addition, findings of a study conducted by al-Khsawneh (2010) indicated that the students identified that the teaching method and the environment are the main causes of their weaknesses in English.

Lee & Tajino (2008) examined students' perceptions of difficulty with academic writing in English. The sample of the student comprised 95 first-year Japanese university students. A questionnaire was used to obtain the students' perceptions of difficulty. A total of 18 Likert-type scale items (5=very difficult; 1=very easy) were used together with four open-ended questions. The results of the study showed that the students tended to perceive academic writing to be difficult. In particular, they perceived language-related components of academic writing to be more difficult than structure/content-related components.

Sugita (2003) measured the level of university students' writing anxiety before and after one month of learning process writing. The results of the questionnaires in this study suggested that teaching how to plan is an effective method to improve their writing.

According to Asmari (2013), students with high anxiety do not take sufficient time to prepare for writing and set goals for writing. Therefore, learning a way of planning might be an effective strategy for students with high anxiety.

Bani Younes & Albalawi (2015) investigated the most common types of writing problems among English language and translation major sophomore female students at Tabuk University. The study was conducted in the Department of English and Translation at Tabuk University. Forty students participated in this study; they were asked to give a sample of their own writing modules and to answer a questionnaire about what they think the reasons behind the types of writing problems they face when they write in English. The data revealed that there are different types of writing problems among English language and translation major sophomore female students at Tabuk University. The findings of the study showed that most language problems which manifested themselves in the students' writing were as follows: 1- Grammatical problems in the field of tenses, prepositions, syntactic, subject – verb agreement and the use of articles. 2- Punctuation problems at the level of the absence, the misuse or the addition of punctuation marks.3- Spelling problems in the field of substitution, omission, addition, disordering, segmentation and unrecognizable words. The findings also revealed the reasons behind students' writing weaknesses from their perspectives.

Another study was conducted by Al-Khatib (2001) who examined Jordanian students' personal letter writing in English and found that Arab learners' sentences are very lengthy. Earlier studies show similar findings such as the study conducted by Koch (1983) who analyzed English essays by Arabic-speaking English learners and found that majority of the learners made extensive use of devices such as parallelism and the repetition of the most powerful words and phrases.

7. METHODOLOGY

7.1 Design of the Study

Having reviewed the related literature in the field of TEFL in general, and writing in EFL in particular, the researcher designed a questionnaire comprising a number of proposed writing difficulties that may face EFL learners.

The questionnaire was submitted to a number of experts in the field of curriculum and instruction (TEFL) to ensure its validity. In addition, Cronbach's alpha was used to determine the reliability of the questionnaire. The reliability coefficient was found to be 0.88, which indicates that the tool is reliable. The final form of the questionnaire included the following proposed writing difficulties:

- Lack of ideas.

- Grammar difficulties.

- Vocabulary restriction.

-Topic inappropriateness.

- Lack of materials for consulting.

- Lack of teacher's help.

- Incorrect use of mechanics of writing (spelling, punctuation, quotation, and capitalization)

- Unsuitable methods of teaching writing.

- Time restriction.

- Lack of clear assessment instruments and marking schemes.

In addition, the questionnaire included an open-ended question on suggestions to overcome writing difficulties facing EFL learners.

7.2 participants

The sample of the study comprised 82 English majors from the World Islamic Sciences and Education University in Jordan. The students were randomly chosen from the third and fourth year English majors.

7.3 Instruments

Instruments of the study included a questionnaire on difficulties that may face EFL learners while they write in English. In addition, the questionnaire included an open-ended question on suggestions to overcome difficulties facing the students while they write in EFL.

7.4 Procedures

To answer the questions of the study, the researcher:

1 - Reviewed the related literature in the field TEFL in general, and writing in EFL in particular.

2 - Designed a questionnaire on proposed writing difficulties encountered by EFL Learners.

3 - Ensured the validity and reliability of the questionnaire.

4 - Chose the sample of the study.

5 - Administered the questionnaire to the sample.

6- Collected and analyzed data.

7- Presented results of the study.

7 - Discussed the results.

8 - Introduced conclusion and recommendations of the study.

8. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The current study aimed at exploring writing difficulties and challenges that face Jordanian EFL learners. To achieve the purpose of the study, a questionnaire comprising a number of writing difficulties was designed and distributed among the participants. The students' responses to the items of the questionnaire were collected and the data obtained were processed statistically. Table 1 shows frequency and percentage of students' responses.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage of students' responses to the questionnaire's items

No	Item	Disagree		Uncertain		Agree	
		Count	N %	Count	N %	Count	N %
1	Lack of ideas	16	19.5%	9	11.0%	57	69.5%
2	Grammar difficulties	40	48.8%	17	20.7%	25	30.5%
3	Vocabulary restriction	22	26.8%	27	32.9%	33	40.2%
4	Topic inappropriateness	30	36.6%	14	17.1%	38	46.3%
5	Lack of materials for consulting	27	32.9%	23	28.0%	32	39.0%
6	Lack of teacher's help	49	59.8%	21	25.6%	12	14.6%
7	Incorrect use of mechanics of writing (spelling, punctuation, quotation, and capitalization)	22	26.8%	11	13.4%	49	59.8%
8	Unsuitable methods of teaching writing	31	37.8%	6	7.3%	45	54.9%
9	Time restriction.	20	24.4%	21	25.6%	41	50.0%
10	Lack of clear assessment instruments and marking schemes	23	28.0%	13	15.9%	46	56.1%

Table 2 highlights the mean and standard deviation of each item. It also shows the rank and level of each item.

Table 2: Mean, standard deviation, rank and level of items

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank	Level
VAR00001	2.50	.805	1	High
VAR00002	1.82	.877	9	medi
VAR00003	2.13	.813	6	medi
VAR00004	2.10	.911	7	medi
VAR00005	2.06	.851	8	medi
VAR00006	1.55	.740	10	low
VAR00007	2.33	.876	2	medi
VAR00008	2.17	.953	5	medi
VAR00009	2.26	.829	4	medi
VAR00010	2.28	.879	3	medi
total	2.12	.788		medi

The results, as shown in table 1 and 2, indicate that item number one, which reads " lack of ideas " ranked first in difficulties faced by Jordanian EFL students in writing, followed by item number seven, which reads " incorrect use of mechanics of writing such as spelling, punctuation, quotation, and capitalization".

Item number ten, which reads" lack of clear assessment instruments and marking schemes " occupied the third rank, then item number nine, which reads "time restriction".

Items number eight and three ranked in the fifth and sixth ranks respectively. Item eight reads "unsuitable methods of teaching writing", while item number three reads "vocabulary restriction".

Item number four, which reads " topic inappropriateness " ranked seventh in difficulties facing EFL learners in writing, followed by item number five, which reads" lack of materials for consulting".

Finally, item number two, which reads "grammar difficulties" occupied the ninth rank followed by item number six, which reads "lack of teacher's help".

Figure 1 shows that 69.5% of the sample believed that "lack of ideas" is considered to be the main problem facing them while writing in English.
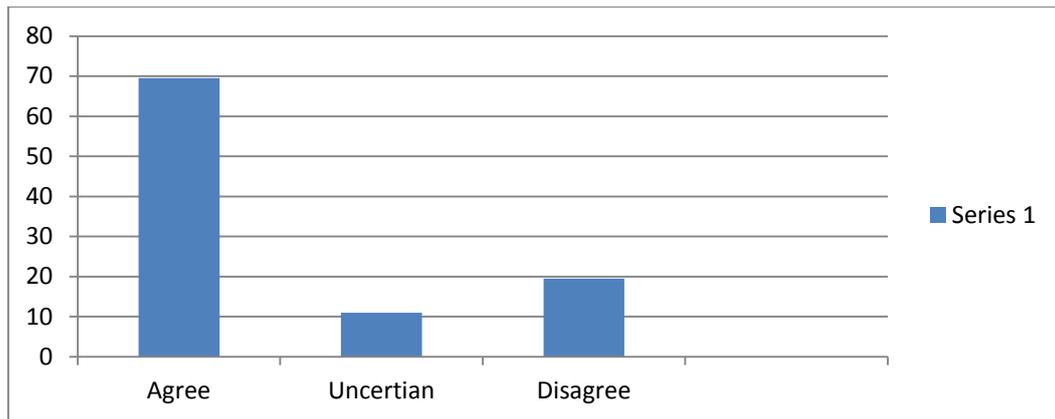
Figure 1: Lack of Ideas

On the other hand, 59.8% of the participants, as shown in figure 2, thought that "the incorrect use of mechanics of writing (spelling, punctuation, quotation, and capitalization)" is one of the major difficulties facing them while they write in English.
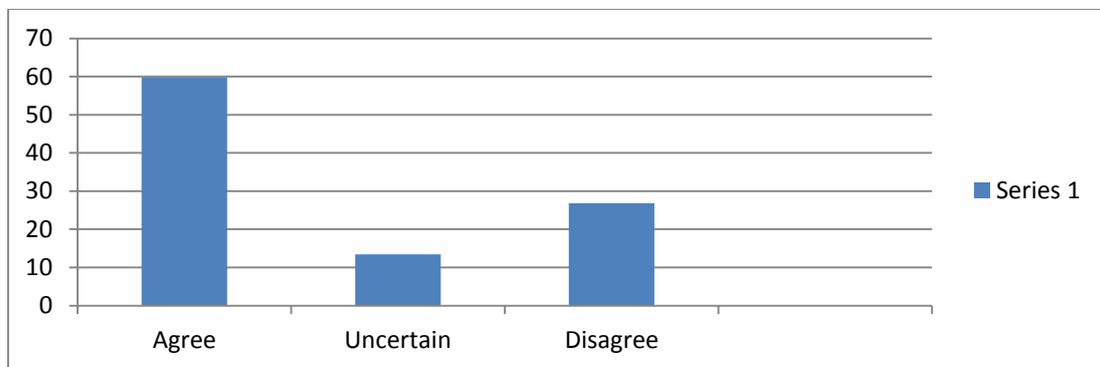

Figure 2: Incorrect Use of Mechanics of Writing

The results, as shown in figure 3, indicated that 56.1% of the sample believed that "lack of clear assessment instruments and marking schemes" is one of the main challenges facing them while they write in EFL, noting that "the availability of well-designed assessment instruments can help them better their writing skills".
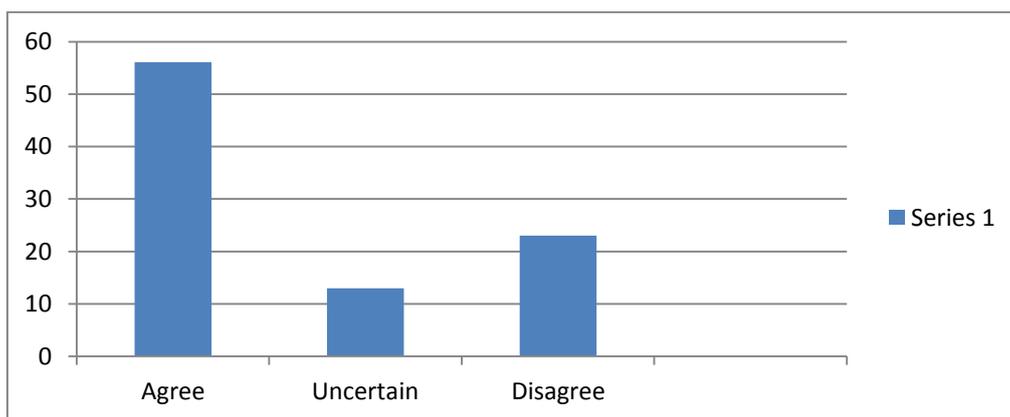

Figure 3: Lack of Clear Assessment Instruments and Marking Schemes

Figure 4 shows that 50% of the participants pointed out that "time restriction" is a major problem in writing; stressing that providing them with enough time to think and generate ideas is a key to better their writing.
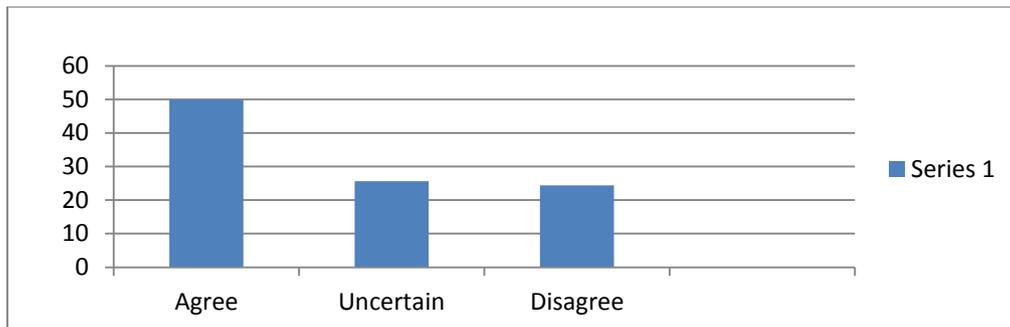
Figure 4: Time Restriction

Figure 5 shows that 54.9% of the students believed that "the unsuitable methods of teaching writing" is considered to be one of the problems facing them while writing in English.
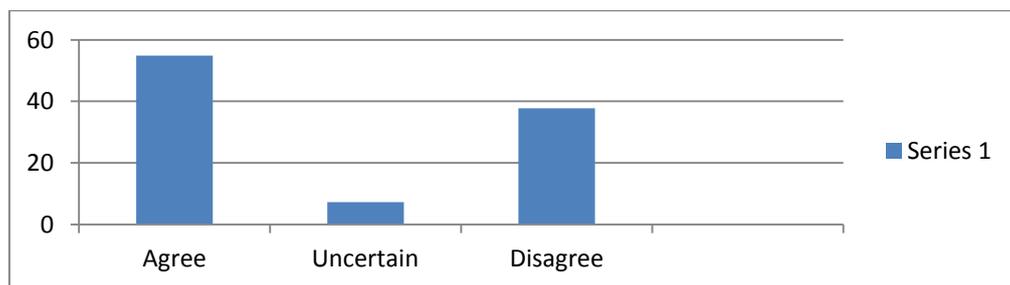

Figure 5: Unsuitable Methods of Teaching Writing

9. DISCUSSION

The present study aimed at identifying university students' writing problems. In addition, the study attempted to explore solutions that can help students overcome writing difficulties. The results revealed that "lack of ideas" topped difficulties faced by Jordanian EFL students in writing, followed by "the incorrect use of mechanics of writing".

The results also revealed that "lack of clear assessment instruments and marking schemes" occupied the third rank, while "time restriction" ranked fourth.

"The unsuitable methods of teaching writing" and "vocabulary restriction" occupied the fifth and sixth ranks in writing difficulties, while "topic inappropriateness" and "lack of materials for consulting" occupied the seventh and eighth ranks. Finally, "grammar difficulties" and "lack of teacher's help" ranked ninth and tenth respectively.

The results of the current study agree with results of Raimes (1983), which pointed out that "when students complain about how difficult it is to write in a second language, they are talking not only about the difficulty of finding the right words and using the correct grammar but also about the difficulty of finding and expressing ideas in a new language"

Moreover, the results were in line with findings of Bani Younes and Albalawi (2015), which indicated that the incorrect use of mechanics of writing was among the main difficulties that face students in writing class. In addition, the results were in harmony with findings of Asmari (2013), which noted that "students with high anxiety do not take sufficient time to prepare for writing and set goals for writing, a fact that entails providing students with enough time to express their ideas in a proper way".

Furthermore, the results were in line with findings of al-Khsawneh (2010), which stressed that "the teaching method and the environment are the main causes of students weaknesses in writing in English".

As for solutions that could be followed to overcome difficulties in writing in English, students' responses to the open-ended question were collected. The students suggested providing them with enough time to collect ideas about the topic through reading or watching a short movie so as to help them generate ideas and activate their previous knowledge about

the topic. A fourth- year English major student said "*sometimes I don't have enough ideas to start writing, so I spend too much time thinking and trying to generate ideas* ".

The students suggested training them on the appropriate use of mechanics of writing, noting that their fear of making spelling and punctuation mistakes prevents them from expressing their ideas with confidence. *"I think we need to be trained on the appropriate use of mechanics of writing, this training may help us spare time and express our ideas confidently"*, a third- year student suggested.

In addition, the students pointed out that having clear assessment instruments that clearly indicate marking criteria would help them better their writing. *"Having clear assessment instruments can help us plan, set goals, and improve self-regulation and self-assessment needed to successfully manage the writing process",* a fourth -year student said.

Furthermore, the students stressed the need to provide them with an opportunity to choose topics to write about. "*Sometimes, the instructor gives us a topic to write about without providing us with a chance to choose topics that we are interested in*", a third –year English major student said.

10. CONCLUSION

The present study aimed at identifying university students' writing problems. In addition, the study also attempted to explore solutions that can help students overcome writing difficulties. The results revealed that "lack of ideas" topped writing difficulties encountered by Jordanian EFL learners, followed by "the incorrect use of mechanics of writing".

The study also revealed that "lack of clear assessment instruments and marking schemes" occupied the third rank, while "time restriction" ranked fourth. "The unsuitable methods of teaching writing" and "vocabulary restriction" occupied the fifth and sixth ranks respectively, while "topic inappropriateness" and "lack of materials for consulting" occupied the seventh and eighth ranks. Finally, "grammar difficulties" and "lack of teacher's help" ranked ninth and tenth respectively.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have been made on the basis of the findings:

- Teachers should place more emphasis on the pre-writing stage so as to help learners generate ideas through brainstorming sessions, reading about the topic, watching a film, listening to a text related to the topic or even describing a picture about the topic.
- Students should be trained on how to appropriately use and implement mechanics of writing (spelling, punctuation, quotation, and capitalization).
- Teachers should help students be aware of the assessment instruments and marking schemes upon which they will be marked.
- Students should be given enough opportunities to choose topic to write about, and should be given enough time to gather ideas, link them together and get involved with the different stages of the writing process (pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing).

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