Efficacy of Journal as Free-Writing Technique: A Study of Saudi EFL Learners' Performance

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Abstract

This article is based on a longitudinal writing program to evaluate the efficacy of Journal as a viable free-writing technique in Saudi EFL scenario. Data taken from 54 students of English language major at a Saudi university is studied. Forty-five students participate in a six-week-long program during which an hour-long session is held every week. Students choose topics of their own interest, along with some prompts from teachers to write in English without fear of committing errors. A correlation is sought between fluency (measured in terms of the number of lines) and the number of errors. Results show an increase of written lines from an average of 9.86 to 15.24 lines per journal while a sharp decrease is observed in spelling errors from 6.1 per journal to 3.28. Capitalization errors also show a steep decline from 3.2 per journal to 0.33. A similar downward pattern is observed in the case of period (full stop) related errors whose average is noted 1.77 per journal initially and 0.86 by the end. Errors related to the subject-verb agreement also show a sharp dip from 3.42 to 1.83 till the middle of the program, however, move up to 3.61 which suggests that it is an area where Saudi EFL learners need more attention. The study shows that journal writing helped in improving writing output and controlling errors without being bogged down by the fear of error hunting. Students also showed 68.8 percent approval of free-writing journal as a viable technique to improve writing skill.

Keywords: Journal, free-writing techniques, Saudi EFL learners, Learners' performance

Introduction

Foreign language learning poses multifarious challenges to EFL learners, and they are required to considerably expose themselves to language learning practices to invigorate four basic skills including listening, reading, speaking and writing (Brown, 2000). Out of these skills, writing is an important as well as a complex skill. Francis Bacon, undrlining the importance of writing, opines that "Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man" (1908, p.234). Tribble (1997) believes writing is a basic requirement in the ever-enlarging global market wherein English is emerging as a lingua franca. Williams (2001) is of the view that writing is the most problematic area for EFL learners. The researcher's personal experience also shows that the writing skill is nothing less than a challenge for Saudi EFL learners . It demands conversion of ideas into sentences along with grammatic accuracy. In the modern age of speed and accuracy, one has to produce written language with minimum chances of errors. The only way to improve writing is to practice writing. According to Hamp and Heasley " even writing that nobody reads except yourself is good practice" (2006) . In this regard teachers must facilitate and encourage learners to write frequently and as much as possible (Eshghinejad, 2016). Free-writing Journal is

one such technique that provides ample freedom to the students to write on topics of their own interest, monitor their progress and be motivated. Ferris (2014) considers journal an effective technique for motivating the students to write more. In a journal, students write about their everyday experiences, feelings and observations. Such activity can become more fun if supplemented by picture prompts like maps, drawings and songs (Dyment & O'Connell, 2007). Hence, a free-writing program was launched for students of English major at a Saudi university so that they could learn writing in a fear-free environment. Students' writing progress is meassured in five areas adapted from previous researches: the number of lines they produce, spellings, capitalization, agreement of subjects and verbs, and period-related errors (Alahmadi 2019; Alharthi, 2020; Hamid, 2006). A correlation is sought between the number of lines and the errors, which is analysed statistically and presented graphically.

Hypothesis

Free-writing Journal is an effective technique for increasing the quantity and quality of academic writing of EFL students who have had enough exposure to the language.

Research Questions

1. What is the efficacy of the free-writing journal as a technique in improving students' writing?
2. How does journal writing motivate learners to maximize their writing output and reduce errors?
3. What is perception of Saudi EFL learners regarding free-writing journal as an effective technique for improving writing?

Research Objectives

- The basic aim of the study is to evaluate the efficacy of Journal as free- writing technique for improving the writing skill of Saudi EFL learners.
- Secondly, the study is to apprise students of the benefits of free-writing journals for maximizing their writing output and minimizing errors.
- Thirdly, it is a case study of a specific program launched to improve the writing of students and monitor their performance.
- Fourthly, the study will establish free-writing journal as an effective technique for incorporation in future study plans in Saudi EFL scenarios.

Significance of the Research

English language learning and teaching has gained tremendous popularity in the Gulf region over the past few decades. But, despite great efforts, funding, and reforms, government and private support, the standard of English language is facing great challenges in Arab countries (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2014; Alqahtani, 2018; Alrabai, 2018; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Ashraf, 2018; Javid & Al-Malki, 2018; Moskovsky, 2018). Elyas and Picard (2018), particularly singling out writing, held lack of motivation responsible for this failure. Many studies conducted in Saudi EFL scenario specifically underlined the need to improve writing (Gawi, 2012: Mustafa, 2012).

Alharthi (2021) opines that "mastering writing is the utmost complex task" for learners. Encouraging them to write more is one way to solve the problem. In this regard the current study evaluates the efficacy of journal writing as a remedial technique for helping students with poor writing output. It also aims at encouraging students to write without fear of being error hunted, think autonomously and monitor their performance. Besides, it will help teachers and students to set new priorities in future study plans by incorporating journal as regular feature of writing courses.

Literature Review

Because of its global role as lingua franca, English is fast becoming focus of attention in Saudi Arabia both for its educational as well as commercial value (Baker, 2003;Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). The development and progress in the country and arrival of international companies has opened the job market for the local Saudi people. Schutz (2011) believes that literacy requirements of societies will keep on increasing in future. English is the first foreign language that has made inroads into strictly Arabic dominated society. Hence, achieving optimum communicative proficiency in English is necessary for the Saudi youth (Loony, 2004). However, it is a difficult task (Al-Mahrooqi, 2014). Meanwhile, it is observed that more attention is given to spoken skill which gets further impetus by foreign scholarships which provide conducive environment for improvement of speaking (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). On the other hand, various studies suggest that mastering writing skill is one of the most difficult tasks for EFL learners (Burns & Richards, 2018; Marzec-Stawiarska, 2014; Szyszka, 2016). Particularly for Arabic speaking EFL learners it poses real challenge (Al-Hazmi, 2006; Al-Samdani, 2010; Ezza, 2010). But how to improve writing? The answer is simple and straight…by writing. Nation (2007) calls for applying "time-for-task" principle for improving writing. It means that the more you do, the more you learn. Free-writing is one such technique which gives the learner a sense of liberty without fear of committing errors and results in more fluency.

Filewych (2019) says that free-writing means writing any idea or thought that comes to one's mind at a particular moment without stopping. Its primary feature is flow of ideas expressed with optimum level of grammatic accuracy without distractions or apprehensions.We may define free-writing as writing without stopping and without consideration of editing or even fear of making errors. Peter Elbow (1973, 1998), who is credited with inception of the idea of freewriting, viewed it as a useful technique in which learners fully depend on their already learned vocabulary and write spontaneously without worry of finding the right word (Elbow, 1998).

Brown (1994) believes that fluency in writing means to have a steady flow of language without any "self-or-other correction at all" (p.113). It pertains to students' ability to "produce a lot of language" without "hesitations", or "interruptions" (Casanave, 2004, p. 67). In didactic and rule governed teaching atmosphere, Patterson (2014) believes that free-writing opens a new vista of experience for students. According to O'Brien and Baugh (2013), freedom to select a topic of their own interest gives student ample opportunity to write adequately. This gives them freedom to select words of their own choice and express freely.

Free writing can be guided, unguided (Hwang, 2010) as well as private and public (Elbow, 2008). If there is a pre-decided topic, it is guided free-writing, but when no topic is specified, it is unguided. (Belanoff et al., 1991). In recent years there has been a shift from Elbow's spontaneous writing to a more focused free-writing which is topic oriented. Such studies yielded immediate and successful results not only at certain discipline levels but also in the higher education (Fishman, 1997; Somerville and Crème, 2005). Free-writing Journal is a technique which provides ample freedom to the students to write on topics of their interest, monitor their progress and be motivated. Ferris (2014) believes that such a technique can be effectively motivating for the students to write more. In Journal, students write about their everyday experiences and observations. It can eb made more interesting by supplementing it with picture prompts like maps, drawings and songs (Dyment & O'Connell, 2007). Moreover, Journal as free-writing technique can be reflective and personal in nature. It can be used as self-motivated learning strategy for writing as well as a classroom method for teaching and improving writing.

Many researches uphold efficacy of journal as a viable free-writing technique for the improvement of EFL learners' writing skills. These researches advocate its benefits in improving students' ability to think, compose, and narrate their ideas. Spaventa defines journal as "notebooks in which writers keep a record of ideas, opinions and description of daily life and help writers develop their creativity" (2000, p.168). Casanave (2011), underlining the importance of Journal writing, opines that regular writing yields better results. Hamp and Heasley (2006) call for writing journal about anything interesting on daily basis. Many other pedagogues and scholars found a significant relationship between journal writing and improvement in the writing skills of the students. In this regard studies conducted by Holmes & Moulton (1997), Piazza, (2003), Cowler (2010), Peyton & Reed (1990), Peyton (1990), Casanave (2011) are of particular importance. Free-writing journal is an activity in which students are asked to write about a topic on regular basis within limited time span for improving their writing. It helps them put into practice the language they have already learnt. They have a chance to self-monitor their progress without having the fear of being error hunted. Delineating its various procedural steps, Patterson (2014) provides following four guidelines for students engaged in an effective free-writing journal activity.

- Plan what you want to say (i.e. brainstorm and outline).
- Don't worry about errors; don't stop to correct. Instead of erasing, just cross words out and continue writing.
- Wait until the writing time is over before checking your dictionary.
- Write as much as possible. Challenge yourself to continually write more than you did in your previous journal entry.

Brainstorming, selection of topic, continuous writing, and evaluation and monitoring of the output by students themselves as well as the teacher are some of the important steps. The main objective is to enhance fluency and maximize output. After formal research expanding over four

years, Patterson (2014) upholds the efficacy of free-writing journal as a technique for improving writing fluency and output.

Researchers like Cumming (2012) who have a critical approach towards free-writing, opine that focus on quantity and fluency may have negative effect on the quality of writing because accuracy is compromised in free-writing. Nevertheless, other researchers are convinced of the benefits of general practice of free-writing journal and gradual monitoring of the progress which can also be augmented by the teachers' feedback and class discussions.

Keeping all these things in mind the researcher believes that free-writing in the form of journal writing can be hugely beneficial for the Saudi students. And for this reason, this research is conducted to introduce the students with this writing technique and measure their outputs. For the purpose of this research, the researcher is going to use Journal as a type of free-writing and in this activity, guided as well as unguided public free-writing journal technique will be used because writings will be shared by the students and the teacher.

Research Methodology

This is a mixed method study that applies quantitative and qualitative approach. The study was conducted in the English department of a Saudi university. Three-pronged strategy has been adopted for data collection which includes: 1- Writing Program based on Journal free-writing technique. 2- Comparison of students' class exams. 3- A five grade Likert Scale based questionnaire consisting of 15 questions, circulated through Google Forms to evaluate students' motivational and behavioral response towards efficacy of the journal writing technique in improving their writing skill. Prior to that, a pilot study was conducted to evaluate the efficacy of questionnaire and consultation was sought from experts to remove some flaws and enrich certain areas. On the basis of expert's advice last two questions of the questionnaire were kept open ended allowing the researchers to collect general suggestions and ideas of the students regarding the writing program and the journal writing technique which are discussed qualitatively at the end of the study for future improvement.

The Free-Writing Programme

Using journal as free-writing technique a careful program was designed for effective results. As prescribed by Patterson (2014) well-stepped procedure is adopted to chalk out the writing programme. In this programme a session of one hour was held every week for six consecutive weeks. In total 270 pieces of free-writing journals were produced by 45 students and their output ranged from 4 to 38 lines. These pieces of writing were carefully evaluated for spelling, capitalization, subject-verb and period related errors. At the end of the programme a questionnaire was distributed among the students comprising Likert scale multiple choices as well as some open-ended questions to get students feedback regarding the effectiveness of the journal as free-writing technique.

The Participants

Forty five students (shown as S1-S45 in Graphs) from four different classes of writing courses majoring in English language participate in the free-writing program and their

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performance is graphically and statistically evaluated on the basis of average output under five variables including number of lines students wrote, spelling and capitalization errors, agreement of subject and verb in the sentence and placement of punctuation period at the end. As the students were from different levels of writing classes, the main focus was to measure their writing output by providing them motivation as well as a free environment without the fear of committing errors. The diversity of students was itself an impetus for them as students from any level could compete with others in terms of their writing output.

Procedural Steps

Before starting the writing activity, students were given ample time to think about their favorite topics for that particular day. They were also given some prompts to select a topic which may be from their class lesson or an event of their interest (Patterson, 2014). To enable them expand their imaginative capacities, they were encouraged to do pre-writing activities like brainstorming, clustering and outlining ideas regarding a particular topic. In line with Alliotta's (2018) suggestion, students were briefed about the importance of their task and need of focusing at it. They were motivated to write in English without being afraid of committing errors which excited them because in academic setting they had always been afraid of committing errors. To ensure that the students understood the procedure well, the researcher explained the idea of free-writing journal and its objectives. They were instructed to simply write without worrying about editing or producing a perfect piece of writing.

In the beginning of every hour students were also provided feedback on their performance in previous week's session. A writing booklet, specifically designed for this task, was provided to keep the record of the performance of each student (Appendix A). So, while embarking upon the new journal writing activity, students not only look at their previous errors but also listen to the teachers' feedback to avoid them in future. However, they were told that no marking or grading is going to be done on the basis of their errors and they have to take their performance as a challenge wherein they have to compare their performance with that of their fellows as well as compare each days performance with the previous day. For this purpose a Google sheet was developed and shared with each student on which he could monitor his performance graphically as well as numerically.

Finally,a correlation is sought between the overall output in terms of the number of lines and the number of errors they commit. The whole correlation is presented in form of graphs and evaluated through statistical data analysis showing average increase and decrease of the progress in specific variables.

Data Analysis

1: Results of the Program

Before the beginning of the program all the 45 participating students are briefed about the concept of Journal writing. They are guided about the one-hour weekly exercise and the time distribution. The time of the session is divided into three parts; review and feedback, brainstorming, writing. In review time, students are able to see their previous session's performance in graphic and numeric form. Moreover controlled feedback was given. Pedagogues

in EFL teaching have been expressing divergent views regarding feedback in freewriting. Some question its effectiveness (Truscott (1996, 2007), while others opine that it is desirable (Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2006; Truscott, 1996).Researcher also believes that feedback is necessary to keep the students apprised of their performance level which motivates them for further action. Students' output is calculated in terms of lines they write in every session and a correlation is developed with the number of errors they make in every line. Specially dedicated booklet with numbered lines helps students count lines they write and errors they make in four fields. Every field was given a code word like; Subject-verb agreement (SV), Spelling (SP), Period or Dot (D), Capitalization (Cap). First of all, the lines are counted to determine student's output. Later four types of errors are separately discerned, highlighted and counted for the frequency which is then mentioned at the specific space given at the end of the booklet page. The whole activity is then uploaded on Google sheet and shared with students.

Lines

The most basic purpose of free-writing is to enhance writing fluency. As previous researches have shown that after free-writing student's output increased considerably (Tahseldar, 2018; Casanave, 2011). The same result we find in our research.

The following Table 1 shows day-wise performance of students during the writing program. Students' average (mean) output ranges from about 6 to 20 lines. Mean of overall lines per day from day 1 to day six reflects an impressive overall improvement from 9.86 lines to 15.24 lines. It means that all the students who produced average 9.86 lines on the day 1, wrote average 15 lines on day 6.

Name	day1	day 2	day 3	day 4	day 5	day 6	Mean IndividalLines/day	Differene column Day1-Day6	Percentage Improvement
S1		12	2	12	16	19	11.33333333	12	171.43%
S2		11	8	12	17	20	12.5	13	185.71%
S3		6	11	13	18	20	11.83333333	17	566.67%
S4		12	13	8	9	7	9.5	-1	-12.50%
S5		6	9	10	11	21	10.83333333	13	162.50%
S6		8	7	7	9	10	8	3	42.86%
S7		11	12	14	16	18	13.16666667	10	125.00%
S8	11	14	11	6	7	11	10	0	0.00%
S9		10	13	12	11	15	11.66666667	6	66.67%
S10		8	9	11	10	17	10	12	240.00%
S11		10	9	9	11	20	10.66666667	15	300.00%
S12		9	7	3	6	6	6.5	-2	-25.00%
S13	19	14	17	15	12	17	15.66666667	-2	-10.53%
S14		12	9	15	15	22	13.33333333	15	214.29%

S15	0	9	10	12	14	22	12.83333333	12	120.00%
S16	7	12	15	16	12	15	14.5	-2	-11.76%
S17		9	6	7	5	4	6	-1	-20.00%
S18	2	9	8	4	10	11	9	-1	-8.33%
S19	0	6	6	9	7	10	8	0	0.00%
S20	3	10	8	7	6	11	9.166666667	-2	-15.38%
S21		10	7	9	11	13	9.333333333	7	116.67%
S22	4	14	8	10	11	12	11.5	-2	-14.29%
S23		10	9	14	19	23	14	14	155.56%
S24		7	8	10	14	18	10.5	12	200.00%
S25	3	10	12	11	13	12	11.83333333	-1	-7.69%
S26	5	11	13	14	10	13	12.66666667	-2	-13.33%
S27	1	10	9	8	10	8	9.333333333	-3	-27.27%
S28		7	5	8	6	7	6.833333333	-1	-12.50%
S29		10	5	4	6	5	5.833333333	0	0.00%
S30	0	13	35	14	18	22	20.33333333	2	10.00%
S31		13	20	20	21	22	17.5	13	144.44%
S32		12	17	18	17	21	15.33333333	14	200.00%
S33	4	14	19	20	21	21	18.16666667	7	50.00%
S34	8	19	9	12	14	15	17.83333333	-23	-60.53%
S35	9	12	10	18	16	17	15.33333333	-2	-10.53%
S36		12	9	15	15	22	13.33333333	15	214.29%
S37		12	2	12	16	19	11.16666667	13	216.67%
S38		11	8	12	17	20	12.5	13	185.71%
S39		10	13	8	8	7	9	-1	-12.50%

S40		8	10	9	11	20	10.83333333	13	185.71%
S41		8	6	9	10	11	8.333333333	5	83.33%
S42		12	11	16	14	18	13	11	157.14%
S43	0	13	12	7	6	12	10	2	20.00%
S44		11	12	13	11	16	11.83333333	8	100.00%
S45		7	10	11	0	16	9.83333333	11	220.00%
Mean Overall Lines/ day	.86	10.53	10.42	11.2	12.15	15.24			

Table 1: Overall performance of students from day 1 to day 6.

This improvement of fluency is graphically shown in the Graph 1 in which we see a steady upward trend in the average daily output of the lines written by students. This analysis reflects that the overall average of lines written by each student on day 1 was 9.86, which, after going up to 10.53 on day 2, observes a slight dip on day 3 with 10.42 lines. However, the momentum continues increasing and the output reaches up to an average of 15.24 lines on the day 6 which shows a sharp increase in fluency of students.
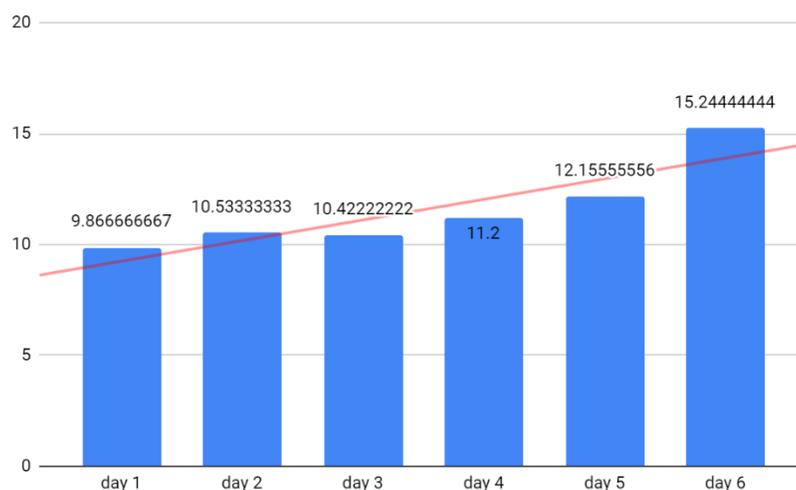
Graph 1: Average lines written by student in each session every week.

On day 6, students make a remarkable jump of 5.38 lines on average as compared to the day 1, which is an impressive evidence of their improved fluencyl with the passage of time. As this progress was uploaded on a Google sheet (see Graph 2) shared with students, they could see it on weekly basis which proved a great impetus for enhancement of their interest in writing. The Graph 2, shows an upward trend which means more writing. It exhibits a steady progress from low

to prolific output in case of most students. Inspite of increase and decrease in the number of lines on day2,3,4, and 5, the output increases on day 6 as compared to day 1 in most cases.
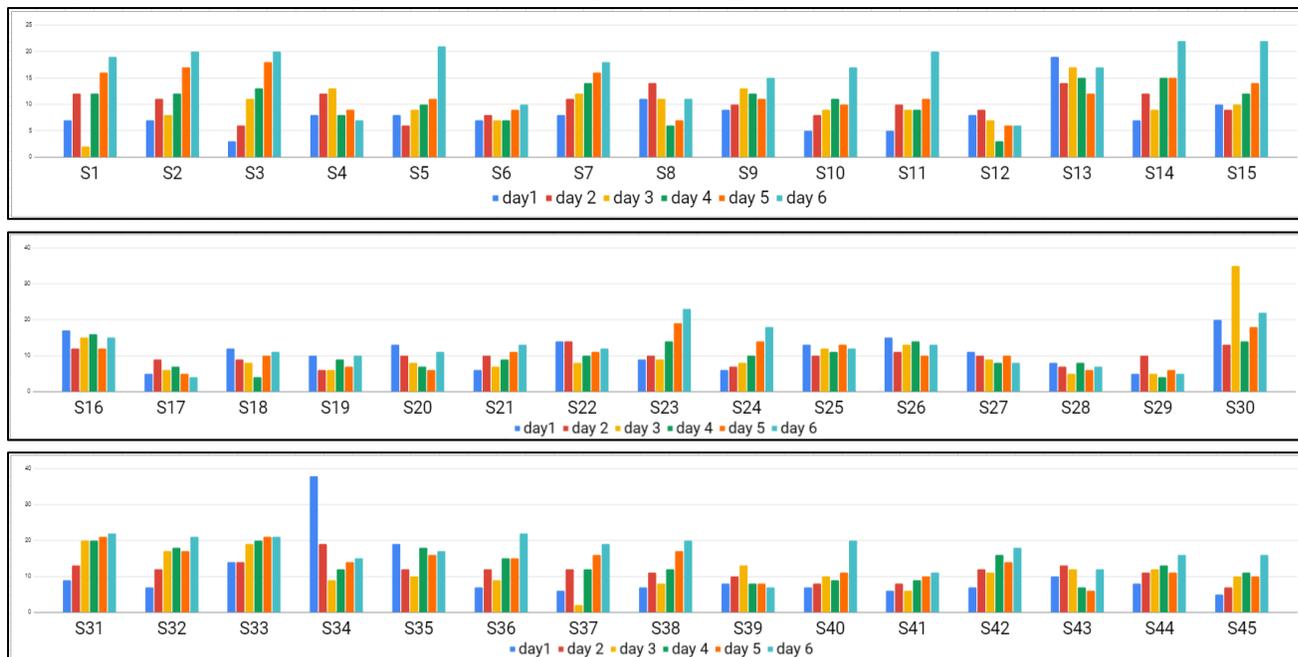
Graph 2: Number of Lines written by students in each session and progress trends.

Day 1 and day 6 were treated as pretest and post test days. The Table 1, difference column shows how much difference is seen in the writing output of students on these two days. 27 students out of 45 improve their output while 3 remain stable (shown as 0 difference) , whereas 15 students show a decline in writing output. The improvement of output on day 6 ranges from 2 lines to 17 lines which is an impressive gain. In terms of percentage, students' improvement ranges from 10% to 566%. Graph 3 exhibits the overall gain of the free-writing journal program.
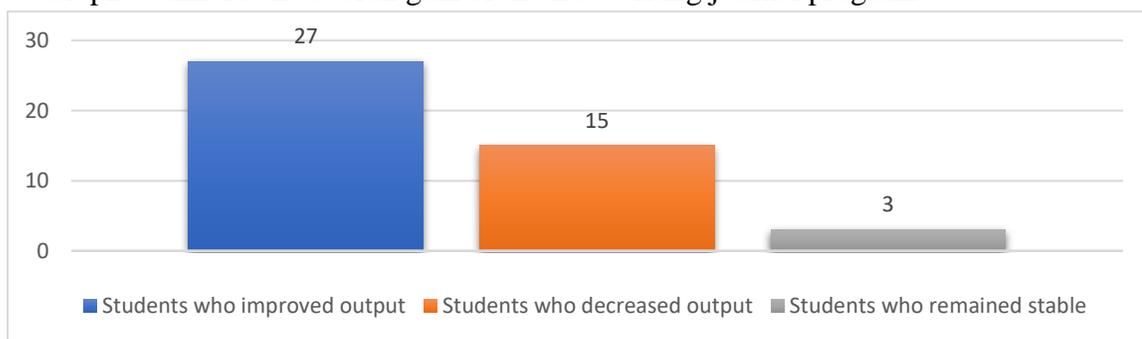
Graph 3: Overall improvement level based on Graph 2 and the difference column of Table 1.

Studetns who remained stable on the pretest and postest days also show improvement. We can see on Table 1 that student (S8) produced similar number of lines on day 1 and day 6, but he wrote more on day 2 and produced 14 lines as compared to 11 on day 1. Similarly, student (S29) also wrote 10 lines on day 2 as compared to 5 lines on day 1. Same can be seen in case of student (S4) who, showed regressive writing output from 8 lines on day 1 to 7 lines on day 6, however, he

showed improvement by writing 12 lines on day 2 and 13 lines on day 3 consecutively. Similar is the situation of student (S39). During the discussion and feedback time prior to every week's writing activity the researcher asked the students about reasons behind this sudden proliferation. Resultantly it transpired that students may write more if the topic is of their interest and a considerable brainstorming is done before the activity. However, free-writing itself was an impetus to write more. Thus the analysis yields that majority of the students gained benefit from the writing activity. The researcher believes that if implemented consistently, such an activity may yield further improved results.

Spellings

English spellings is a complex area for EFL learners because English is a non-phonetic language. It means that spellings of English words are not always the same as they are pronounced. In other words the sounds and spellings of many English words are not the same. Alzamil (2020) is of the view in his study that 15% errors conducted by Saudi students are related to spellings. The researcher finds that writing more, continuous feedback and self-monitoring of one's own performance reduces spelling errors. Hence, alongside steady increase in the number of writing lines as seen earlier in Graph 1, the overall trend of the number of spelling errors as shown on Graph 4 reflects decrease of spelling errors from an average of 6.1 on day 1 to 3.28 on day 6.
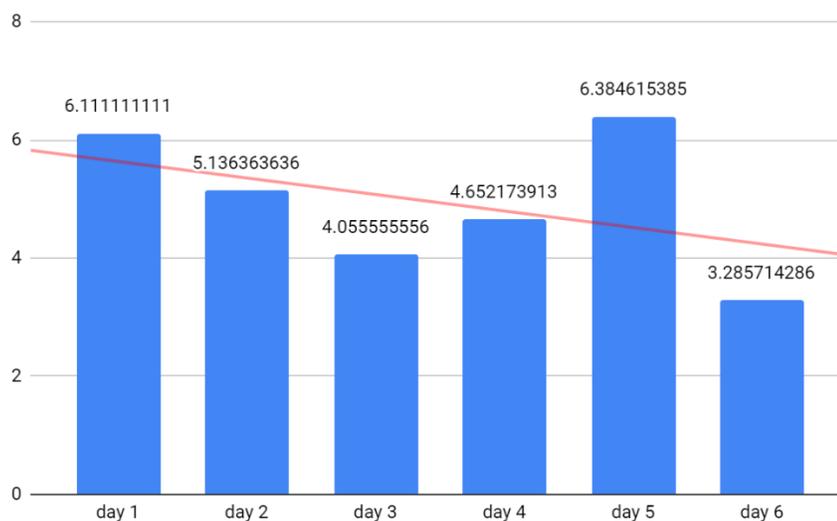
Graph 4: Average spelling errors made by students.

This decrease is, however, not steady and shows an up and down pattern. During first three days it shows downward trend and students make less spelling errors on day 2 and day 3 as compared to day 1. Average of spelling errors was 5.13 on day 2, and 4.05 on day 3. But day 4 and day 5 outnumbered previous days. During these two days there is an upward trend and on day 5 students make 6.38 spelling errors on average. According to post-activity discussion of the researcher with students, following two reasons caused this. The first reason was that students wrote on new topics from day 2 to day 5. The second cause was the increase of the writing fluency

itself. As students were writing more, they were making more errors. As the topics given to students on day 1 and day 6 were the same, the familiarity of topics resulted in reduced number of spelling errors which shows that students were learning from their reflective experience. Moreover, if we look at the overall trend of spelling errors, except day 5, there is a clear downward trend as students keep on learning from their writing activity.

Capitalization

Capitalization is yet another area where Saudi students face problems. Alzamil (2020) in his study shows that 26% errors are related to capitalization. It is a micro yet important feature of English writing wherein students have to use upper case and lower case in English letters according to the rules of English language (Siddiqui, 2015). In this study capitalization errors show a steep decline from an average of 3.2 per student on day 1 to 0.33 by the end of the program on day 6.
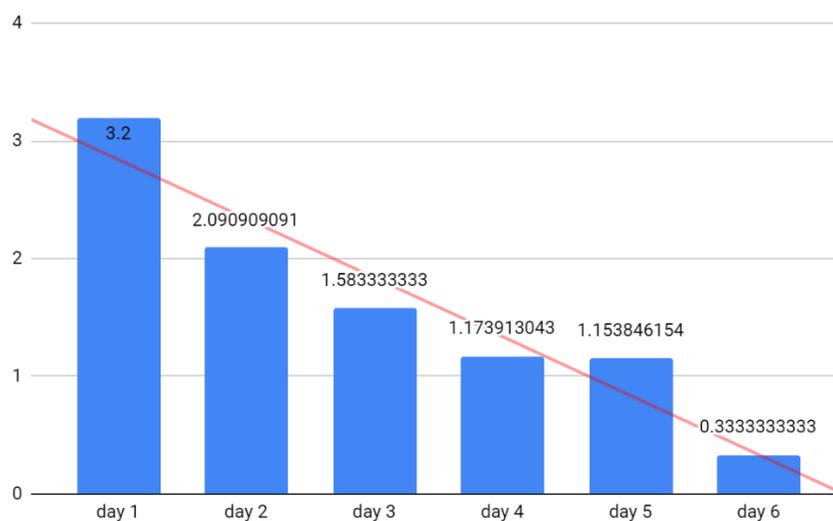
Graph 5: Average Capitalization errors made by students.

In this regard the researcher focused on capitalization of first letter of the first word in a sentence and capitalization of proper nouns, besides, names of days, months and places. Students were given detailed feedback and rules of capitalization which they internalized quickly keeping in view the competitive nature of the activity. Students gradually learnt from their writing activity, feedback and visual representation of their performance in Google sheet. Resultantly, they were motivated to put more effort to control their capitalization related errors.

Period (full stop)

This category also follows the same pattern. Period (full stop) related errors decrease from an average of 1.77 by students on day 1 to 0.86 by the end.
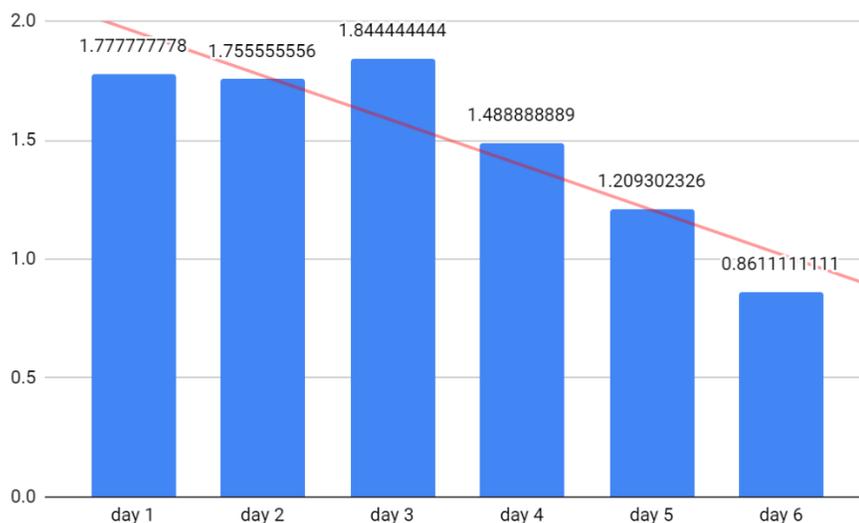
Graph 5: Average full stop errors made by students.

Keeping in view the overall increase in lines from 9.86 to 15.24 on average from day 1 to day 6, The Graph 5 reflects an impressive decrease in number of period (full stop) related errors and exhibits gradual learning on part of the students wherein overall output of lines is increasing while full stop related errors are decreasing. During the sicussion, it transpird that failure to put a full stop at the end of the sentence is rather an error which students were committing unknowingly. Once they were able to see their performance results on the Google sheet, they paid attention to what was told to them in the feedback sessions. Hence, an impulsive desire was inclulcated in them to focus on this issue.

Subject-Verb Agreement Errors

Subject-verb agreement is one of the most challenging areas of grammar for Saudi EFL learners. Pedagogues highlight it as special category which poses challenge to new learners (Ferris, 2001; Bushong and Mihai, 2014). Following Alahmadi (2019), focus was given to verb erros with singular and plural subjects. Errors were carefully marked and counted. Results reveal that free-writing does help students improve in this regard but as the approach of the free-writing method is not focused on error hunting, increase in fluency and output may lead to more errors. The data reveals that students made more errors on the first day of writing activity. But when they were briefed about their performance next time before the activity, their errors show a sharp decrease.
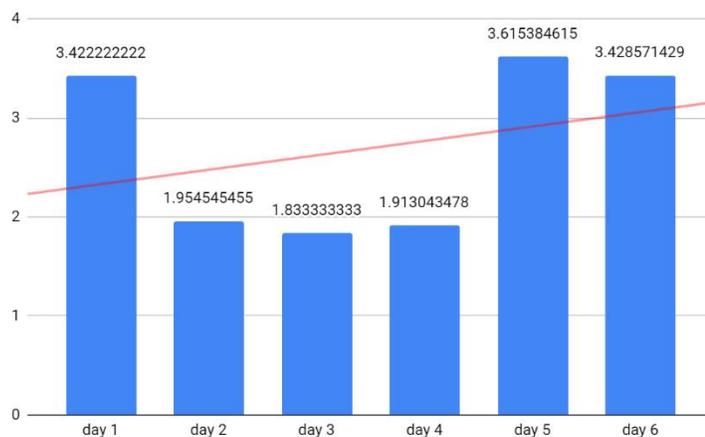
Graph 6: Subject-Verb agreement errors.

The graph reflects a deep dip from 3.42 on day 1 to 1.95 on day 2 and 1.83 on day 3, however, the number of errors starts increasing from day 4 and resaches 3.61. On day 6 it reverts to lower position of 3.42 which is samde as the day 1. On day 2 and 3 students were making some conscious effort to control the errors, however, the compulsion to write more led them to commit more subject-verb agreement errors. In order to increase their output in terms of lines, they compromised their grammatical accuracy for which they perhaps required more time to think and ponder. Moreover, new topics posed new challenges to writers. But as the free-writing activity is supposed to be time bound without paying much attention to deeper grammatic rules, students committed more errors in this field. Keeping in view the performance in writing output, it can be evaluated positively because the more you do something, the more chances you have to make a error until you learn and correct. Overall, graphic and statistic data show that journal writing helped students in improving their output and control their errors without being bogged down by the fear of error hunting.

**Comparison of Students' Final Exam Results**

This section is based on the comparison of final exams' grades of students who participated in free-writing program and those who did not and only attended regular writing classes. For this purpose two groups were established; The free-writing group (FWG) and the class group (CG). Both these groups include total 19 students of the writing classes. The free-writing group has 11 students while the class group comprised of 8 students.

Grades

The free-writing group (FWG), who attended the writing program along with regular writing class, achieved higher grades in the final exam as compared to the class group (CG) who did not attend free-writing program and only depended on regular classwork. As the Graph 7 shows free-writing group 100 % occupied the A+ and A grade slots while the class group could not achieve these grades. Free-writing group is also present in B+ and C grades which reflects that free-writing group maintained its presence in higher grades. Whereas, class group begins to show

up from B+ and is absolutely absent in B grade. While it resurges in grade C+ again and remains present in all the lower grades even till grade F.
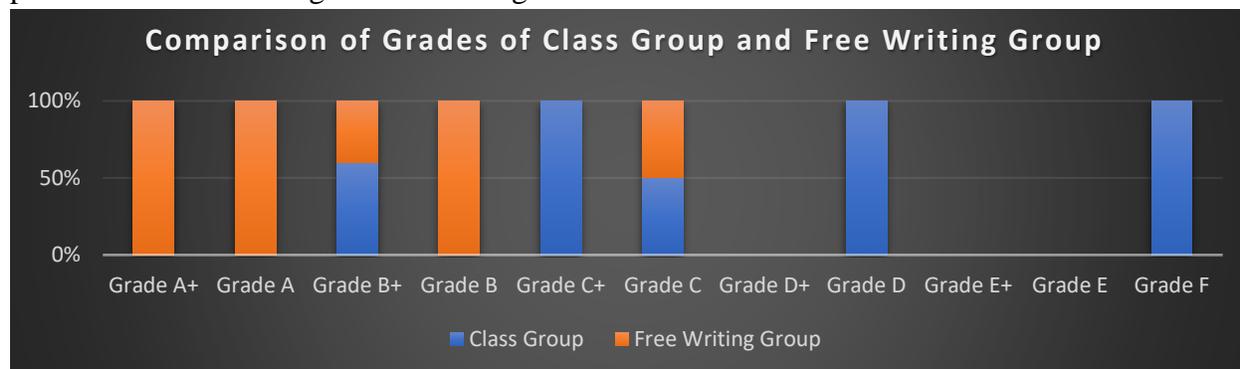
Graph 7: Comparison of Grades of Class Group and Free-Writing Group

Marks Range

The marks range of both the groups also reflects that free-writing group achieved more marks. The Graph 8 below exhibits range of marks of students belonging to the two groups. A list of marks attained by students of both groups was prepared in which duplicates were mentioned once. This graph reflects that the marks of free-writing group range from 70 to 95 well above the class group whose range begins from meager 40 and reaches up to 87 only.

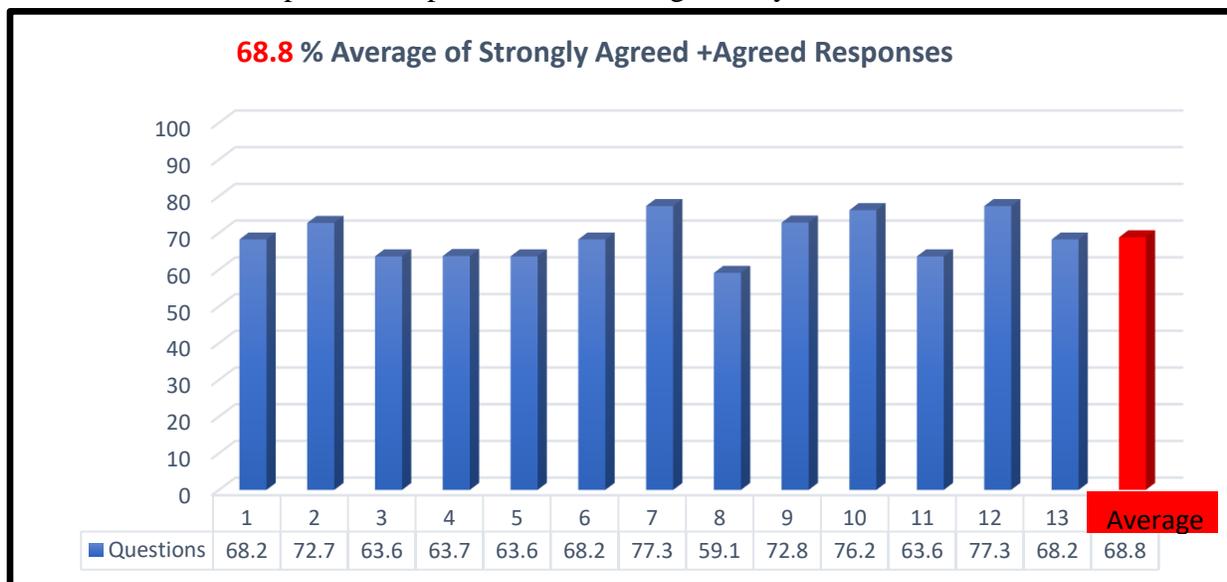|	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Class Group	40	60	70	77	85	87	
Free Writing Group	70	80	82	85	86	90	95
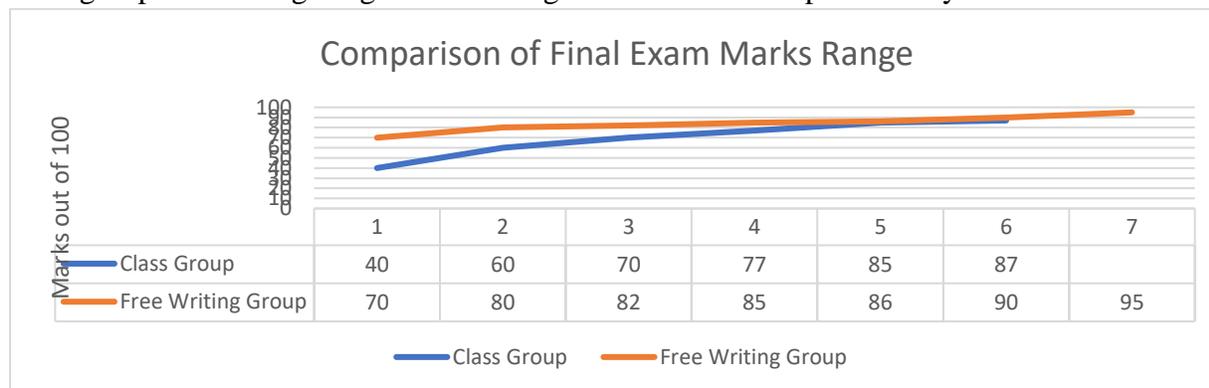
Graph 8: Comparison of marks range of Class Group and Free-Writing Group

Hence, this analysis shows that the students who attend the free-writing journal program not only increased their output from day 1 to day 6, but also achieved higher grades and marks in the final exam of their respective levels. It also reflected in exams papers of both the groups that the free-writing group is more prolific and fluent in writing as compared to the class group. Free-writing group's understanding of capitalization, punctuation and spelling is much better than the class group. As an example (Appendix B) we can see the same task solved by two students of free-writing group and class group. The answers to the task reflect that the student of free-writing group is prolific in his writing as compared to the student of class group. The paragraph written by the student of class group makes little sense, has fewer lines and abounds in errors.

Students' Response to the Program

The third stage of analysis is based on data collected through a survey prepared to know the students' response to free-writing journal and their opinion about the program. The survey comprised of 15 questions including two open-ended questions to provide freedom to students to express their ideas in detail. The survey results in Graph 9 show an aggressive 68.8 percent approval for free-writing journal as a viable technique to improve writing skill among Saudi EFL learners as well as its positive impact on their writing fluency.

68.8 % Average of Strongly Agreed +Agreed Responses

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Average
Questions	68.2	72.7	63.6	63.7	63.6	68.2	77.3	59.1	72.8	76.2	63.6	77.3	68.2	68.8

Graph 9: Overall positive perception of students towards the free-writing journal activity.

Besides, the researcher also collected students' opinions, problems, issues and suggestions in the researcher's diary after every session of writing for a better understanding of their experience of the free-writing journal program. Students' feedback and response to the whole activity is sreally helpful in getting better insight into their ideas, their problems and ways of handling them (Pietrikova,2015). Following is the summery of the students perception regarding the free-writing journal activity.

Better Awareness of Free-writing Journal

The program was a new experience for the students in the sense that for the first time they were doing the writing activity in a stress-free environment in which they were not being hunted for errors. At the end of every session they were having a sense of engagement, accomplishment and productivity. It was a self-monitoring activity wherein they could track their own progress. Hence, while responding to questions regarding the efficacy of the free-writing journal most of them responded that it was enjoyable and engaging experience.

The program also enhanced confidence level of the students as their hesitation of writing was replaced with sense of achievement. Most of them reported increased comfort level while during the writing activity which earlier always gave them anxiety and perplexity. The Hence, they appreciated free-writing journal's technique because it was an activity without teachers' direct criticism, overt didacticism and absolute correctness.

Efficacy of Journal as Free-Writing Technique: A Study of Saudi EFL Learners' Performance   **440**

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They felt improved sense of curiosity and analysis as new topics compelled them to think deeply about things and events around them. Some students confided that now they could relate their life with their writing experience and write about things they loved. One student opined "the activity not only enhanced my writing proficiency but also my thinking efficiency".

The idea of Google sheet, showing students' output in form of graphs, and exhibiting their performance in comparison with other students was a massive success which students appreciated and liked most because they could monitor their performance and have a sense of competition with other participants. They also expressed their positive opinion about the post and pre-activity feedback and evaluation. Although error hunting is not the target of free-writing activity, the feedback highlights errors and students become unconsciously cautious about them resulting in improved writing. Students also found the activity good for finding areas wherein they needed improvement. Hence, it brought self-realization and awareness about their abilities as well as their shortcoming vis a vis writing skill.

In terms of fluency and proficiency, the program worked wonders for students and they were surprised to see their progress in form of increased writing output in short time during the program. As the activity was timebound, students had to really stretch their abilities of writing and thinking to their limits. Some of them reported that they had improved their fluency which, earlier, was always blocked by the idea of "correctness". They said that finding the best word was always difficult for them but now they could express themselves through words which could express their ideas in a simple way as the activity made them proficient writers if not accurate ones.

Results and Conclusion

Besides proving the efficacy of the free-writing journal as a viable metheod for writing improvement, results of the study show that students increased their writing output as well as awareness about errors. During this program students were not hunted for their errors but through a regular and relative feedback without fear of losing marks or any other punishment, they made progress. Students put their ordinary vocabulary into use and expressed their ideas in simple way. It also created motivation and inculcated a sense of competition in students. Results stand in conformity with previous researches which uphold free-writing journal as an important technique for writing improvement (Alharthi, 2021; Brown, 1994; Casanave, 2004; Patterson, 2014; O'Brien & Baugh, 2013; Fishman, 1997; Somerville and Crème, 2005; Ferris, 2014; Spaventa, 2000; Casanave, 2011; Hamp and Heasley, 2006; Holmes and Moulton, 1997; Piazza, 2003; Cowler, 2010; Peyton and Reed, 1990; Peyton, 1990; Casanave, 2011). The research also highlighted the beneficial impact of free-writing journal on the students' grades and performance in exams. Moreover, the results highlighted the areas of language wherein Saudi EFL learners needed more attention.

Recommendations

On the basis of this research, it is recommended that free-writing journal must be incorporated as a regular segment of writing courses because it promotes fluency, increases motivation and enhances consciousness of grammatical errors leading to self-accountability and

self-monitoring. The journal writing may also be considered as a regular co-curricular activity. It is also important that the efficacy of free-writing journal should also be studied in other courses as it can also help improve reflective thinking and efficiency of thought processing. The researcher also recommends trainings and workshops for teachers to implement journal writing technique as part of the regular writing classes or as a co-curricular activity so that they should be in a better position to guide their students in writing.

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Appendix   A   (Notebook   )

Date_____ Name_____ Student ID No. _____

1_____

2_____

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18_____

19_____

20_____

RESULTS:

Lines_____ SV_____ Sp_____ Dot(D)_____ Cap_____

Appendix B

Writing performance of the student who attended free-writing program.

Writing performance of the student who did not attend free-writing program.