

Investigating Teachers' Beliefs about the Issues Affecting their Assessment of the Writing Skills: The Case of First-Year EFL Teachers at the University of Algiers 2

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Abstract

The current study intends to investigate teachers' beliefs about the issues encountered by writing teachers when they assess writing skills at the University of Algiers2. It also examines the factors which lie behind these challenges. Understanding the nature of the perceived challenges of assessing writing is very important to rethink the assessment practices of writing skills. Therefore, this study addresses the following research question: what are teachers' beliefs about the issues encountered when assessing students' writing skills? In this concern, the researcher adopted mixed method research to collect data by using a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview with ten teachers of writing selected randomly in the English department at the University of Algiers 2. Findings revealed that almost all teachers viewed the process of assessing writing as a very challenging task. Examples of the difficulties identified in this research include students' language problems, teachers' confusion between focusing on the content or the form, time pressure, overloaded classes, and lack of sufficient time to assess students' writing skills. Regarding the reasons behind these perceived challenges, teachers believed that the abovementioned issues stemmed from the lack of participation in a professional development program, low teaching load, and students' lack of intensive practice. This research provided a set of pedagogical implications to overcome these issues by calling for an emphasis on the importance of teachers' participation in a professional development program, reinforcement of teachers' training in the field of assessment, and the encouragement of students' intensive practice, and a sufficient teaching load.

Keywords: Assessment, EFL teachers, writing skills, teachers' beliefs, university of Algiers2

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Introduction

Research on teachers' beliefs witnessed a rising interest in foreign language instruction. The construct of "teachers' beliefs" gained significant importance as explained by Zheng (2009) pointed out that teachers' beliefs are remarkable ideas in understanding teachers' thinking mechanisms, instruction methods, and techniques of learning to teach. He (2009) further explained that teachers' beliefs are central subjects in foreign language teaching as they assist teachers in developing their ideas and principles. Similarly, beliefs are personal interpretations generally constructed around ourselves, other people, and the world around us. Beliefs are individual thoughts established on observations or logical thoughts (Khader, 2012). Since teachers' beliefs are central in the context of the foreign language classroom, Mansour (2009) illustrated that beliefs had a significant impact on teachers' ways of understanding and dealing with issues of teaching practices. In the same vein, teachers' beliefs have been concerned with teaching, learning, and assessing language skills, like writing which plays a remarkable role in foreign language instruction. Writing is a significant assessment vehicle at all levels of education as well as a necessary tool through which the teaching and learning process occurs. When Zamel (1983) explained the nature of writing, he pointed out that writing is a process that helps writers have an insight into their thoughts, ideas, and information to make meaning in the shape of a graphic representation. The study took place in the English department, where the teaching of writing skills is emphasized in the under- graduation program since it is a fundamental teaching unit to help students to write very well by starting from simple sentences to extended paragraphs. The assessment of writing is a crucial step in evaluating how students understand the task of writing any piece of work. Teachers generally assess their students' summative by the end of the term according to the guidelines established in the first-year syllabus. The nature of writing skills is not likely to be mastered without difficulty; that is why Raimes (1994) pointed out that writing skill is a thorny task filled with anxiety. The evaluation of writing is a difficult task for teachers and a real dilemma for foreign language students due to its complex nature. In this respect, our interest in tackling this subject stems from the researcher's discussions with some teachers of writing who seemed to find the assessment of writing skills a challenging task. They kept complaining about students' low marks in the writing module and the shortage of sufficient time to assess their students' writing skills. Also, the researchers' observations of teachers revealed that some teachers lacked enough knowledge about test design and scoring, and there was diversity in teachers' scoring approaches. The same teachers explained that the assessment of writing skills became a burden. It is important to note that exploring teachers' difficulties in assessing students' writing skills does not appear to have gained much interest in the literature and particularly at the level of the Algerian context. The different issues triggered the researcher's curiosity to explore teachers' beliefs about the challenges encountered when assessing writing as a productive skill.

This study is crucial since it endeavors to make a humble addition to the existing body of knowledge by helping teachers to understand the challenges faced when assessing writing skills. It also allows teachers to improve the quality of their assessment practices. Furthermore, it appeals to the importance of teachers' professional training as a step to overcome the hurdles encountered in assessing writing skills. More notably, the significance of this study lies in the suggestions and recommendations provided to teachers, modular pedagogical teams of writing modules, and academic institutions to improve the assessment practices of writing. Besides, it urges all these stakeholders to find possible ways to overcome these issues to facilitate the task of assessment for

teachers. According to the previously expressed problem, this research will investigate the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' beliefs about the issues encountered in assessing students' writing skills?
2. What are the factors for teachers' issues in assessing writing skills?

The chief purpose of this study is to have an insight into the difficulties experienced by teachers when assessing writing skills, and it investigates the primary factors that negatively influence teachers' success in evaluating students' writing skills.

The first part of the paper will endeavor to define the concept of assessing writing and understand the interrelation of literacy with the key construct of teachers' beliefs. We will also attempt to shed light on the nature of writing as a productive skill and the methods used to assess it. The first part will end with a discussion of the main issues encountered by teachers in the evaluation of writing, and we shall discuss the factors for these issues. The second part will be concerned with the practical side of this study consisting of the methodology used, an analysis of the results, and a discussion of the main findings.

Literature Review

Assessment Literacy

One of the concepts that have gained concern recently is assessment literacy. The latter was first coined by the American Federation of Teachers (1990), though the concept of "assessment literacy" was not used yet. A literate teacher had to possess a set of competencies such as choosing assessment methods, designing assessment tests for the classroom, doing and scoring tests, using tests to decide about teaching, communicating the results to stakeholders, and developing consciousness of inappropriate and unethical ways of using tests. The Seven competencies were the keystones that paved the way to put a label on the concept of assessment literacy. Davies (2008) narrowed these competencies and proposed skills and knowledge as the two main components of assessment literacy. The former refers to the practical familiarity with the different ways to examine and construct tests. In contrast, the latter refers to teachers' ability to possess the appropriate background in testing and linguistic explanation. Lately, Crusan, Plakans and Gebriil (2016) explained that assessment literacy did not involve only the subject and the assessment method. Still, it was also concerned with problems of teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practices.

Crusan Plakans and Gebriil's view (2016) did not limit assessment literacy to teachers' familiarity with assessment methods but extended to teaching practices. Consequently, Vogt and Tzagari (2014) emphasized the significance of teachers' training to improve students' achievement. After discussing the nature of assessment literacy, we shall now turn our discussion in the next part to the central concept of the study, "teachers' beliefs."

Beliefs

The term "*beliefs*" has been understood differently by various researchers who gave it the labels of personal knowledge and values (Ernest, 1989; Robson, 1991; as cited in Pajares, 1992; Wang, 1996). Pajares (1992) defined a belief as an "*individual's judgment of the truth or falsity*

of a proposition" (p.316). Pajares' definition, we may consider beliefs as attitudes, personal judgments about the degree to which any proposal can be either true or false. He further argued that studying teachers' beliefs was challenging since it was difficult to define its nature adequately, and its conceptual aspect was not well established. There was a variety in the understanding of beliefs and how they function. Similarly, Borg (2001) claimed that a belief is having an intentional or unintentional judgment of an idea that is considered accurate. Borg (2006) used the term: "Teachers' cognition" to refer to teachers' beliefs, and he defined cognition as the

"often a tacit, personally-held, practical system of mental constructs held by teachers... which are dynamic—i.e., defined and refined based on the educational and professional experiences throughout teachers' lives."(p.35)

Borg's definition highlighted that beliefs were cognitive, implicit, personal, and possessed constructs that were active or subject to identification and readjustment depending on the instructional and professional context. According to Buchanan (2015), beliefs are the personal theories made by individuals when they infer the different features of a specific phenomenon from their understanding and views of the world based on their observations or personal experience of real life. Hapsari and Kusumawardani (2017) maintained that beliefs established the basis for teachers' "goals, procedures, materials, and classroom interaction patterns" and even "their roles, their students, and the schools they work in" (p. 3). This definition shows the importance of beliefs in shaping classroom practices, their significant impact on defining teachers' and students' roles, and the formal settings in which they teach. Peacock (2001) pointed out that beliefs are appreciations kept psychologically, suppositions, and theories that center on the world and which they believe to be true. Borg (2001) viewed belief as: "a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, it serves as a guide to thought and behaviour" (p.186). Borg's definition highlights that beliefs can be conscious or unconscious since they make their holders form judgments, and they influence teachers' thoughts and classroom practices. Therefore, we will adopt Peacock's definition of beliefs in this study within the theoretical framework of Socio-Constructivist Theory which indicates that context and culture play a role in framing teachers' understanding and beliefs (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010). These definitions explain the importance of teachers' beliefs in assessing their students' writing skills. The following part will tackle the nature of writing skills.

Writing

In an attempt to define the nature of writing skills, a myriad of views was put forward, mainly by Zamel (1992), who viewed writing as an investigative, dynamic process that involves the interaction between the writer and his written language to achieve a specific purpose. According to Lado(2000), writing is the capacity to use structures, vocabulary items, and their predictable demonstration in normal matter-of-fact writing. In addition, Richards and Schmidt (2002) believed that "writing is viewed as a result of complex processes of planning, drafting, reviewing, and revising" (p.529). Furthermore, writing is said to be beneficial as it may help thinking and problem-solving since learners are exposed to a topic and asked to discuss it and even find solutions to the proposed issue (Krashen, 2003). All these definitions demonstrate the

importance of writing as a productive skill. Now, we shall turn our discussion to the evaluation of writing in the following part.

Assessing Writing

Before discussing the different ways to assess writing, it is crucial to define assessment as an organized approach to gather data about the learner's progress and achievement in learning in multiple parts of the course. Assessment can be attained through formal tests, essays, interviews, questionnaires, standardized examinations, or informal observations (Hyland, 2003). In the same respect, evaluating the writing skill might seem simple, but it is a source of disturbance for teachers (Brown, 2003). To clarify this issue better, Williams (2003) highlighted that the bias in assessing writing was due to standard discrepancy in assessing writing that results in an unfair evaluation. Also, he asserted that the object of writing assessment created confusion for teachers regarding either the assessment of writing content (topical knowledge) or the general capacity to write and evaluate their students' performance on certain specific tasks. Weigle (2002) linked the difficulty in assessing writing as a productive skill to its different genres, objectives, and writing styles. As far as the scoring of writing is concerned, we find two main approaches in the literature that are: holistic and analytical. The first refers to using a single scale that incorporates all the writing qualities and considers it one single unit. However, the second entails raters' judgment of a written text against a well-structured devised set of criteria that are important for a good piece of writing, and each aspect has a specific mark (Hyland, 2003).

Teachers' Difficulties in Assessing writing skills

In the studies we shall review in this section, researchers tried to investigate teachers' difficulties when they assess their students' writing skills. To begin with, Fleming and Chambers (1983) did a study in the context of the United States, and they found that teachers' writing tests were low in quality since the test items were vague. Therefore, the two researchers could understand that teachers lack enough knowledge to design good tests.

Sihombing (2016) conducted a qualitative interview-based study at an Indonesian senior high school level with a group of English teachers. The Results revealed that assessing writing was a complex task for teachers due to many issues like teachers' lack of sufficient time to correct their students' written works because of the large number of students. Teachers also reported that students wrote short paragraphs because of their shortage of using the appropriate lexis. Additionally, teachers pointed out that they did not have a scoring rubric to assess their students' writing, so they relied only on a holistic marking; that is to say, they gave an overall intuitive response to students' writing. Teachers also found that some students' written tests were unclear and difficult to read.

Investigating the same issue in the Mexican context, González (2017) conducted a qualitative study by administering a background questionnaire to teachers and a semi-structured interview with EFL program managers. The results revealed that almost all teachers found it challenging to teach and assess writing since they thought it was time-consuming. In addition, the latter reported that students had poor writing abilities since they struggled to study writing in the classroom. Furthermore, teachers expressed their difficulties coping with the scoring rubric used. The researcher took the views of language program managers into account, and they reported that

teachers have problems with subjectivity and reliability. Moreover, they asserted that large amounts of time required, lack of trained teachers, their shortage of writing habits, and the intimidation between teachers and managers were the main challenges in assessing writing skills.

In the Algerian context, Nedjai and Ghouar (2017) did a study to explore the moral considerations in assessment practices at the University of Banta 2. Their research was an exploratory study that relied on using oral and written tests. Teachers seem to lack one shared scoring scale when evaluating writing and speaking skills and confirmed their unawareness of the different testing criteria.

As for the reasons which underlie these difficulties, a set of factors that influence the assessment of writing are assessment literacy, shortage of teaching qualifications, teachers' specialization, teacher-student power relations, high-density classrooms, teaching load, and a few socio-cultural issues (Ahmed& Troudi, 2018). Barkaoui (2007) shared this view when he did a study to explore raters' scoring of Tunisian students' EFL writing. The researcher used qualitative and quantitative approaches where four EFL teachers scored 24 EFL essays silently. Similarly, they used the thinking aloud technique by relying on holistic scoring and eventually multiple trait-marking scales. The findings revealed that teachers marked writing skills impressionistically without scoring criteria or instructions. Their assessment was a combination of norm and criterion-referenced, which shows that teachers who did not have enough apprenticeship in the assessment of writing skills may affect their assessment and make it a complex task for EFL writing teachers.

As we observed beforehand, only a few studies dealt with teachers' beliefs about the difficulties in assessing their students' writing skills. The Reviewed studies focused mainly on exploring students' challenges when they write; their attitudes towards their teachers' assessment methods; and teachers' issues in assessing writing skills without trying to shed light on the reasons for having these issues. However, to the best of our knowledge, no study has investigated the challenges encountered by teachers when assessing writing in the Algerian context. Hence, this study aims to explore the difficulties experienced by teachers when evaluating writing skills. It also endeavors to have an insight into the factors inhibiting teachers' success to assess students' writing skills appropriately.

Methods

This research followed a mixed-methods approach which involved the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods. It attempts to investigate teachers' beliefs about the issues faced in assessing writing skills and then identify the factors contributing to these difficulties. Regarding the research design, the researcher adopted an exploratory case study to go hand in hand with the nature and purposes of this study.

Participants

This study took place in the department of English at the University of Algiers during the academic year 2021–2022. The sample of the study consisted of 10 teachers of writing whose teaching experience ranged between three and 20 years, and their selection was random. We

referred to every teacher as 'T' followed by a number to ensure confidentiality for the participants. Table one shows the information about the profiles of the participants:

Table1. *Teachers' profiles*

Teachers' Codes	Gender	Academic Degree	Years of Teaching Experience
T1	Male	Doctorate	2-8
T2	Female	Doctorate	2-8
T3	Female	Magister	2-8
T4	Female	Magister	9-15
T5	Female	Magister	9-15
T6	Female	Magister	9-15
T7	Female	Magister	9-15
T8	Female	Magister	9-15
T9	Female	Magister	16-22
T10	Female	Magister	16-22

Research Instruments

The researcher carried out the current study by relying on two main research instruments a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview with first-year EFL teachers of writing.

Teachers' Questionnaire

The mixed questionnaire aimed to unveil the various issues encountered when assessing writing skills and the factors behind these difficulties. It contains 11 items that aim to explore teachers' background information, their beliefs about the issues encountered in their assessment process, and the factors for these challenges. The first section of the questionnaire was devoted to collecting information about the background information of the teachers, such as gender, degree, and years of experience. The second section was developed based on the review of the studies mentioned above by Sihombing(2016) and González(2017). As for the third section of the questionnaire, the researcher constructed it by using some items from Ahmed and Troudi's study (2018),

Teachers' Semi-Structured Interview

The semi-structured interview strived to probe further our understanding of the participants' challenges, which they believe to occur within the assessment process of writing as a productive skill. It consisted of three main questions that are mainly concerned with identifying other difficulties associated with the scoring of writing skills, the factors which cause them, and teachers' suggestions to overcome these issues.

Research Procedures

To answer the research questions, we administered a questionnaire, and later we conducted a semi-structured with ten teachers of writing skills. Before giving the questionnaire to teachers, it was first piloted to three teachers to check for any wording or redundancy in the questionnaire, all of them found it easy to answer, and all the items were understandable. After its piloting, the researcher gave the questionnaires to ten teachers of writing, who took 30 minutes to answer them carefully. The results yielded by using close-ended items of the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively and presented in charts and tables. As for the open-ended questions, they were

coded using content analysis and classified. Before interviewing teachers, the researcher asked the participants for their agreement to participate in this study. The researcher took 40 minutes to ask and interview every teacher was asked about other perceived issues encountered when they evaluate writing skills, the reasons behind these issues, and their suggestions to overcome these difficulties. The interviews were subject to recording and transcription. We used Codes as shown in Table 1 to protect the teachers' identities. The data obtained from the semi-structured interview was analyzed qualitatively by first doing a within-case analysis to have a thorough insight into every teacher's verbal data and try to understand the relationship between the ideas and themes generated by each teacher. Second, we did a cross-case analysis to shed light on the common themes among all the participants. Lastly, the researcher compared the data obtained from the two sources for cross-checking the findings to explore the researched issue thoroughly.

Results

Results of Teachers' Questionnaire

Background Information of Teachers

As stated earlier, the majority of the respondents to the questionnaire are females (9), whereas one respondent is a male. Also, eight teachers who answered hold a degree of magister while two of the respondents have a doctorate. As for the experience of teachers, five teachers have considerable experience between nine and 15, while three teachers have moderate experience ranging between two and eight years. We noticed that only two teachers are the most experienced ones in the instruction of writing skills.

Teachers' Beliefs of the Issues Encountered in the Assessment of Writing Skills

The following figures and tables tackle beliefs of beliefs about the issues they encounter when assessing writing skills.

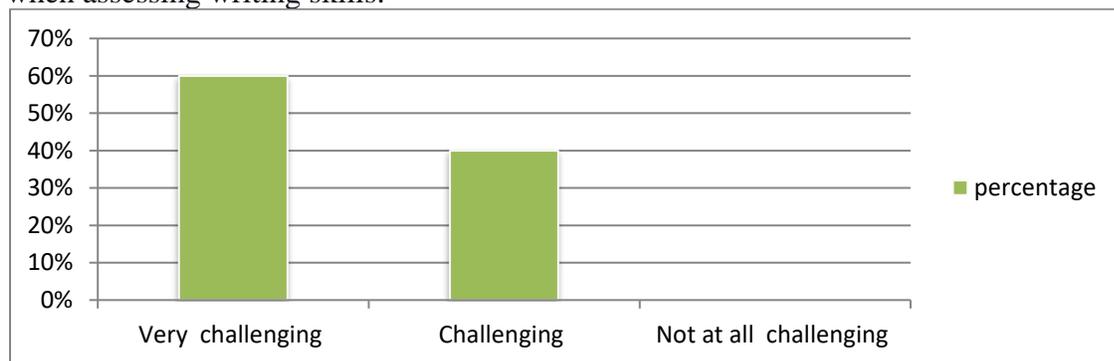


Figure 1. Teachers' beliefs about the difficulty of assessing writing

Figure one shows that more than half of the teachers (60%) viewed the process of scoring writing skills as very challenging, whereas four teachers (40%) believed it was a difficult task. We noticed that no teacher viewed the scoring as an easy task.

The Reasons for Viewing Assessment as a Very Challenging Task

The analysis of the verbal data linked to the fourth question of the questionnaire led to the emergence of two main categories:

- All teachers believed that their students' low writing abilities were the main reason for finding it challenging to assess writing tests. All of them explained that all types of mistakes, mainly grammar, spelling, and punctuation, were found in the writing tests. They also pointed out that students had various language problems, not only grammar, but some of them failed to write relevant sentences, in addition to using some structures transferred from Arabic or French into English. They have a weakness in grammar, a lack of vocabulary, and their basic knowledge of the English language is deficient. One teacher (T1) said, "when I start correcting the copies of my students, I find all types of language problems, such as fragmented sentences and problems of grammar." Another teacher (T5) stated that "almost all students have an issue with language when I teach them how to write. It is not just about the instruction of writing; I find myself teaching them about the language, and this is a real dilemma.
- Some teachers viewed the process of scoring writing skills as very challenging due to the complex nature of writing skills. They also explained that marking writing tests required full concentration and objectivity to mark writing skills, particularly when the assessment form was extensive or free writing topics. In this respect, one teacher (T9) clarified that "it is a productive skill which requires our full concentration and time to mark the exams of students, and it involves several readings of the written piece to mark it." Also, another teacher (T1) pointed out that "wherever I start scoring writing skills, especially when it takes the form of a free writing or direct free questions, it is hard to mark the way students write.

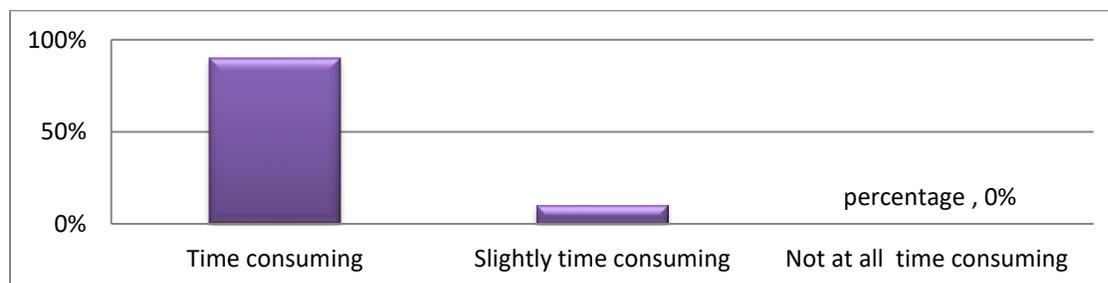


Figure 2. Teachers' beliefs about scoring writing skills

Figure two demonstrates that a large proportion of teachers (90%) viewed the assessment of writing skills as time-consuming. On the other hand, one teacher (10%) believed that it was slightly time-consuming.

The Reasons for Viewing Assessment as very Time – Consuming

The analysis of the verbal data linked to the fifth question of the questionnaire led to the emergence of two main categories:

- All teachers (10) argued that a large number of students is a factor in making the marking process a time-consuming one. One teacher (T2) clarified that "the number of students is large, so it takes a long time to score their tests." Another teacher (T5) asserted that "we correct more than 80 copies per group. It takes much time and energy to correct this huge number of copies."

- Three teachers explained that they used a detailed analytical scheme with different criteria to make their scoring fair and reliable. Moreover, they asserted that writing all the criteria on students' tests made their assessment very time and energy-consuming. In the same vein, two teachers (T4 and T5) said: "because I use a scoring scheme which has many criteria, that is why it is very time-consuming for me." Another teacher (T3) stated that "because I have ten aspects which I am looking at, such as coherence, cohesion, mechanics, spelling, content, originality, language use, use of the topic sentence, concluding sentences, the use of transition words. Considering this type of scoring, it takes me much time to correct writing tests.

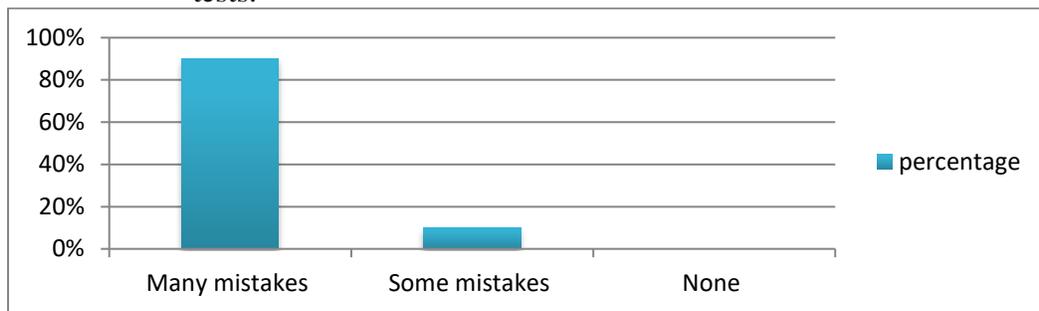


Figure 3. Teachers' beliefs about the number of students' mistakes in writing

Figure three displays that 90% of teachers believed that their students made many mistakes when writing on a test, while one teacher (10%) reported that her students made some mistakes on their writing tests.

Table 2. Teachers' beliefs of mistakes as an issue in the marking of writing skills

Answers	Yes	No
Frequency	10	0
Percentage	100%	0%

Table Two reveals that all teachers (100%) viewed the many mistakes made by students as the main obstacle faced when assessing writing skills. Consequently, it made the process a very challenging one. Conversely, no teacher denied that mistakes inhibited the scoring procedure.

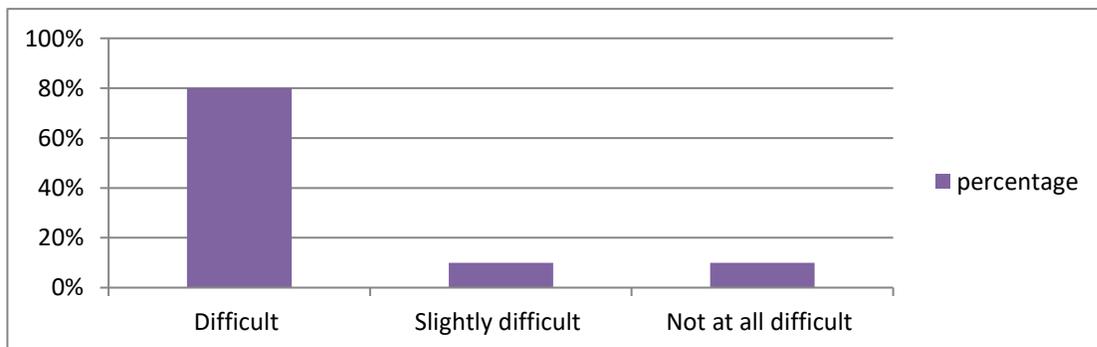


Figure 4. Teachers' beliefs on the degree of difficulty in setting criteria for assessment

Figure four shows that 80% of teachers believed setting criteria to mark written tests was difficult, while one teacher (10%) thought it was slightly easy. Another one (10%) viewed it as an easy task to set criteria to mark writing tests.

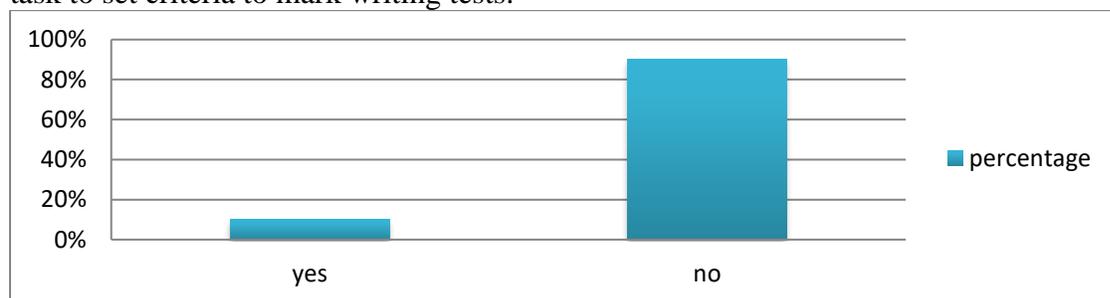


Figure 5. Teachers' involvement in a professional development program

Figure five demonstrates that almost all teachers (90%) denied participation in a professional development program. However, only one teacher (T10) confirmed that she participated in a professional development program.

T

Table 3. Teachers' beliefs about the suitability of timing in the instruction of writing

Answers	Yes	No
Frequency	10	0
Percentage	100%	0%

Table three shows that all teachers (100%) viewed the time allotted to the teaching of writing skills as insufficient for them. The researcher noticed that all teachers agreed on the lack of enough time to instruct writing as a fundamental unit.

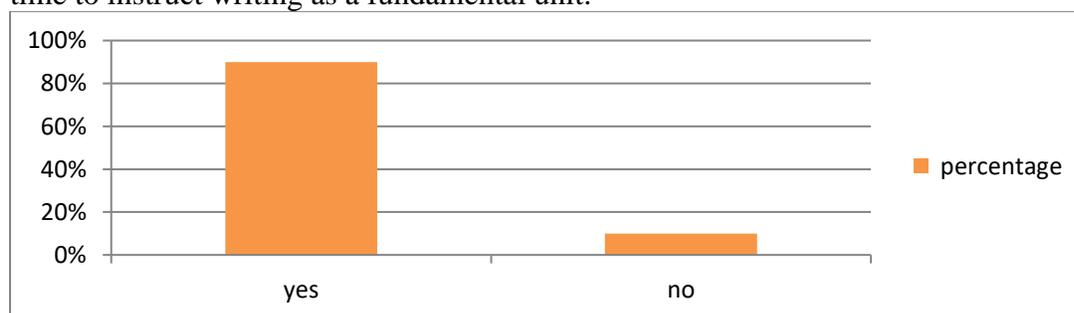


Figure 6. Impact of teaching load on teachers' assessment process

Figure six demonstrates that 90% of teachers believed that teaching load influenced their assessment process, while one teacher (10%) thought it did not affect the evaluation of writing skills. We shall present the findings of the first interview question in the following section

Results from the Teachers' Interview

Challenges Encountered by Teachers in their Assessing Writing Skills

The First interview question: what other issues do you experience when you assess writing skills? The first question aimed to identify the type of issues which teachers encounter when they

score writing skills. The theme for this question is: "the type of issues faced by teachers in the assessment of writing skills." The analysis of the verbal data linked to the first question of the interview led to the emergence of three main categories.

The first category is called "confusion between assessing content and form." The results related to the first question revealed that three teachers (T1, T3, and T2) pointed out another issue of feeling confused between focusing on the writing content or the form. One teacher (T3) said: "When I start marking tests, I find myself with students who write good content with awful language or the opposite. So, it is hard to decide whether I should focus on content or form." Another teacher (T4) claimed there was always a gap between teaching and scoring writing skills, considering their level and the type of tasks to be included.

The second category is "challenges in deciding the criteria of assessment." The analysis of the first main question revealed that the majority of teachers (6) believed that they found it challenging to set criteria to analyze exam copies. Two teachers (T2 and T3) claimed that it was challenging and time-consuming to establish norms to assess the writing tests of different students. Two other teachers (T4 and T5) pointed out that their difficulty is related to the necessity to consider all the aspects of writing and, thus, teachers need to establish criteria according to them. To illustrate, one teacher (T4) stated: "Well, my major issue is that I do not know how to set criteria to suit all the needs and aspirations of my students." It seems easy, but it is difficult. Therefore, I find myself fighting to establish clear criteria for every aspect of writing." Two other teachers (T6 and T8) explained that the agreement was on the format and the content, but deciding on the type of scoring, holistic or analytical, was the concern of each teacher.

The third category, which appeared from analyzing the verbal data linked with the first question of the interview, is known as "time pressure." All teachers believed that time pressure and administrative deadlines to return and submit the results presented a significant challenge when they assessed an important module like writing. Moreover, all teachers explained that the time between exams, correcting them, and giving back final results to the administration was short and constrained. Similarly, it made the scoring procedure very challenging. In the same respect, two teachers said: "time pressure causes them to feel frustrated, lack of concentration, and time to assess writing skills fairly."

Factors Behind Assessment Difficulties

The results, linked with the second question of the interview, are presented in the following section. The second interview question is: what are the reasons behind these challenges in assessing writing skills?

The theme of this question is known as "the factors that are responsible for the emergence of these issues." When analyzing the teachers' answers, three different categories have emerged concerning the second question of the interview. The first category is entitled "students' shortage of practice." All teachers believed that students did not have sufficient practice was the paramount factor behind their low language abilities. They further explained that students seem to lack motivation or interest in writing. Hence, five other teachers stated, "when we give them

assignments, students show no sign of interest or motivation. Some students do the homework, while most do not practice what we generally do in the classroom.”

The second category is entitled "insufficient hours of teaching writing skills." Most teachers (8) explained that the low teaching load, or in other words, teaching a crucial module like writing, was currently two hours per week, and teachers believed it to be insufficient for both teachers to cover all that was essential. As a result, students lacked enough writing practice and relied on previous input in written assignments. In the same vein, one teacher (T4) said: "I think that students do not have enough practice due to short sessions and thus hinder the process of teaching, assessing, and eventually giving feedback."

The third category that emerged from the analysis is "teachers' lack of participation in a professional development program." Almost all teachers (9) explained that the absence of a teachers' professional development program made the marking of writing skills very hard. It was the reason behind some teachers' inability to decide what to include and how to assess students on the input they studied previously. In addition, some teachers(6) argued that their inability to set criteria for evaluating writing skills was the result of their lack of training or literacy in the different concepts of assessment, methods, and types of tasks that they used to assess writing skills. Besides, some teachers (T1) explained that the absence of a professional development program for some teachers whose specialty was in literature and civilization made it very difficult to decide about the nature of testing and keep their knowledge in the assessment field limited.

Teachers' Suggestions to Overcome Assessment Issues

The results, linked with the third question of the interview, are presented in the following section. The third interview question is "what suggestions do you have for overcoming these issues with assessing writing skills? "

The theme for this question is "teachers' suggestions to overcome the issues of assessing writing skills." When analyzing teachers' answers, two categories have appeared concerning the second question of the interview. The first category that emerged from the analysis is "students' intensive practice." All teachers (10) emphasized the necessity of intensive practice for their students by writing small paragraphs, doing many assignments at home, and doing extensive reading as a preliminary step to developing their writing skills. Moreover, teachers argued that they needed more practice in the classroom, and they suggested an increase in the teaching load to help students improve their writing and enrich their vocabulary. In the same respect, one teacher (T2) highlighted the importance of using the process approach to teach writing skills to show students the main steps and train them to write in the classroom. And teachers can do it by starting from brainstorming to producing a final draft. One teacher said, "I think that practice is the only way for students to improve themselves."

The second category is "the necessity of participation in professional development programs." Almost all teachers (9) pointed out the importance of their participation in helping teachers develop and become familiar with the concepts of assessment and scoring methods. They also explained that their involvement in professional development programs would allow teachers to enrich their knowledge and familiarity with assessment practices and permit them to

reflect on their assessment methods. Moreover, it helps them improve their practices in designing a good writing test, using a reliable scoring scheme, and finding suitable ways to give feedback on writing tests, especially for literature teachers.

The study revealed that more than half of the teachers (60%) found assessing writing skills very difficult, and they linked these difficulties to various issues such as low language abilities of the students, feeling confused about focusing on the content or the form, time pressure, large classes, and lack of enough time to score writing skills. Regarding the reasons for these perceived issues, the majority of teachers associated them with multiple sources, like their shortage of participation in professional development programs or assessment workshops; low hours of teaching writing, and students' lack of intensive practice either by themselves or at the level of the classroom due to time constraints. We shall tackle the discussion of the main findings and strive to answer the research question of this research in the next section.

Discussion

Our study focused on teachers' beliefs about the issues experienced when they assess writing skills. As far as the first research question is concerned, the results obtained from teachers' questionnaires and interviews revealed that most teachers believed that scoring writing skills were a difficult task, and this was explained by Brown (2003), who argued that assessing writing may look easy. Still, it can be a source of frustration for some teachers since it involves having a clear vision of the objectives and the criteria to be used to assess writing abilities. As we previously found out in the results section, teachers believed that scoring writing skills was time-consuming, and required much time and concentration to correct students' writing skills. This issue is aligned with González's result (2017) that assessing writing skills take much time and effort to score correctly. Another major issue that hindered the scoring of the writing skills was students' language problems and their lack of mastering language mechanics like indentation, capitalization, spelling, and punctuation. Students had a shortage of using sound grammar like pronouns, subject-verb agreement, problems with using the appropriate tenses, misuse, overuse, or underuse of grammatical conjunctions, and poor vocabulary. In addition, teachers believed that most students wrote unstructured sentences without having a logical connection between them. These results are likely to align with Gonzalez's interview (2017) with teachers who confirmed the students' weak English by explaining that students have poor writing skills and they do not manage to connect their ideas. Besides, students' linguistic problems and their inability to use a variety of vocabulary items were also reported by Sihombing's study (2016), in which students lacked the appropriate vocabulary to improve their writing skills. Another issue that emerged from the data was teachers who felt confused between focusing on the form, particularly the test organization, and the linguistic aspects of the content. This result is in line with Williams' argument (2003), who explained that deciding about the object of writing assessment or 'what to measure' leads to teachers' confusion about whether they should assess the content (topical knowledge) or students' overall capacity to write or perform on a specific writing task. In addition to the previously mentioned challenges, some teachers had the issue of the inability to set clear criteria, especially with activities of open questions, paragraphs, or essays. This result is in line with the studies of Sihombing (2016) and González (2017), which demonstrated that teachers found problems in setting clear criteria and their inability to use an analytical scheme; hence, they used holistic scoring to evaluate their students' whole performance. Moreover, teachers related their difficulty

in setting clear criteria to the absence of one shared scoring scheme. Their collaboration with colleagues focused on agreeing on the format and content, not the scoring method. This result is in line with Nedjai and Ghouar's study (2017), in which they explained that the absence of a shared scheme to assess writing and speaking skills caused the difficulty in evaluating two skills fairly. The last issue reported by teachers was time constraints, namely, their shortage of sufficient time to mark students' skills. They explained that the time load to administer an exam and score writing tests was short, and it put significant pressure on teachers' abilities to adequately assess the skills of their students. This result corroborates with the study by Sihombing (2016) that reported teachers' lack of time to evaluate writing skills.

As for the second research question, it tried to shed light on the factors that cause teachers' issues when assessing writing skills. Among these factors, there is first the complex nature of writing; that is to say, teachers need to read several writing tests when they take the form of an open question, a paragraph, or an essay. This result goes in line with what Weigle (2002) explained as an aspect that adds to the complexity of writing as a skill with different genres, aims, and writing styles. Second, large classes ranging between 50 to 60 students per group seemed to influence how teachers scored their students' writing skills; therefore, it took them a lot of time and effort to assess the exam copies attentively. This reason was also found in the studies of Sihombing (2016) and González (2017). Likewise, Ahmed and Troudi (2018) also explained that high-density classes affect the assessment process negatively and make it quite challenging. Third, a Low teaching load or teaching the module of writing for an insufficient time affected the quality of assessing writing skills. In this regard, Ahmed and Troudi (2018) explained that assessment was affected by the low teaching load, which hindered the evaluation process and feedback delivery. Another factor for the issue of students' low language abilities was the lack of enough practice, as teachers explained in their interviews, which stemmed from the passivity of students, lack of motivation, and carelessness. Teachers claimed that students were used to rote learning and memorization of topics, which reduced their capacity to write and think critically. We discussed this factor from the answers given by teachers in the different interviews due to the scarcity of research on this specific aspect. Lastly, another factor responsible for the confusion of some teachers regarding what to include and their failure to set clear criteria was their lack of participation in professional development programs, or in other words, they did not have enough training concerning assessment methods, testing background, and test design except for their discussions of test format in pedagogical teams just before exams. This result aligns with the findings of both Fleming and Chambers (1983) and González studies (2017).

Despite its attempt to explore the issues above, it has some shortcomings that need to be considered by future researchers. One limitation is that the findings of this study cannot be generalized to the context of other universities since the sample was small and due to the subjective nature of teachers' beliefs. Another limitation was the scarcity of studies that tackled this specific issue. Therefore, some challenges were faced when we tried to discuss the results of our research with the previous ones. The Last limitation was that our focus was on how teachers perceived the scoring of writing. Therefore, Future researchers can look at this research again by considering the perspectives and attitudes of students about the assessment methods and practices of their teachers. Besides, Researchers can replicate again this study by making a cross-comparison between different contexts to check if the same issues exist.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study aimed to investigate teachers' beliefs about the issues faced when scoring writing skills and tried to investigate the reasons for these issues. After carefully analyzing the data, it revealed that almost all teachers found it challenging to assess writing skills. Teachers' difficulties were feeling confused between focusing on the content or the form, time pressure, large classes, and a lack of sufficient time to score students' writing skills. Accordingly, it is necessary to make teachers aware of the importance of having an apprenticeship to facilitate their assessment process, as it prepares teachers to become agent teachers to deal with stressful classroom conditions such as large classes and low teaching load. It tries to call humbly for the reinforcement of professional development programs to help teachers master or develop more literacy in the assessment field, mainly through the organization of assessment workshops and seminars by experts in the domain. As for the factors that caused the different issues, teachers reported their lack of involvement in professional development programs or assessment workshops, low hours of teaching writing, and shortage of intensive practice for their students. As a result, teachers should encourage students to practice intensively within and outside the classroom to reinforce students' writing skills in general. It is necessary to emphasize the importance of teamwork to add to the richness of teaching and assessing writing. Teachers should focus more on giving constructive feedback to make students aware of their weaknesses and reward their strengths. Last but not least, adding more hours of teaching writing skills is a step to ensure intensive practice for the students and enough time for teachers to improve their students' writing abilities.

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