

The Impact of Corona-19 Pandemic on Students' Collaborative Learning in Writing, a Case Study of 3rd Year Students at Dr.Moulay Tahar University

تأثير جائحة كورونا 19 على التعلم التعاوني للطلاب في الكتابة ، دراسة حالة لطلاب السنة الثالثة بجامعة الدكتور مولاي طاهر

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Abstract:

The present research paper is an investigation of the negative influence of the pandemic on the writing skill, the case study of third year students at the department of English at Saida University. It primarily endeavours to divulge the role of collaborative learning to overcome the major challenges facing learners when writing, and how this process was negatively affected by the lockdown due to covid-19 pandemic. A questionnaire was directed to third year students to identify their major writing difficulties. Also, a checklist was used to prove the role of collaboration in improving the writing skill. Findings showed that EFL learners have a clear insufficiency when writing because of the total absence of interaction and collaboration with the teacher and peers in real classrooms. Hence, a number of effective strategies are suggested for better production of English written forms.

Keywords: Collaborative learning-corona virus pandemic-English students' writing difficulties- negative impact- writing strategies

الملخص:

الورقة البحثية الحالية عبارة عن استقصاء للتأثير السلبي للجائحة على مهارة الكتابة ، دراسة حالة لطلاب السنة الثالثة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة سعيدة. يسعى في المقام الأول إلى الكشف عن دور التعلم التعاوني للتغلب على التحديات الرئيسية التي تواجه المتعلمين عند الكتابة ، وكيف تأثرت هذه العملية سلباً بالإغلاق بسبب جائحة covid-19. تم توجيه استبيان إلى طلاب السنة الثالثة لتحديد الصعوبات الكتابية الرئيسية لديهم. كما تم استخدام قائمة مرجعية لإثبات دور التعاون في تحسين مهارة الكتابة. أظهرت النتائج أن متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لديهم قصور واضح عند الكتابة بسبب الغياب التام للتفاعل والتعاون مع المعلم والأقران في الفصول الدراسية الحقيقية. ومن ثم ، تم اقتراح عدد من الاستراتيجيات الفعالة لتحسين

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1.Introduction:

Writing is one of the hardest skills to acquire even for ones' mother tongue. This is basically due to the complexity of the skill since the process of writing goes through many steps and requires the application of a set of rules and the inclusion of different elements. For instance, when having a writing task, learners are required to make use of capitalization, punctuation and grammar rules, at the same time, they need to consider spelling, vocabulary and word selection that seems more daunting. Writing has a strong connection with the other skills; in fact, it is a collection of all the skills, i.e. when writing learners are supposed to exploit all what they heard and read and learnt from the lessons, this is on one hand. On the other hand, listening, speaking and reading skills are usually practised outside the classroom, while writing is practised inside the classroom. The last mentioned is the best and appropriate place to practise writing under the control and guidance of the teacher.

1.1.E-learning in Higher Education

To respond to the demands of 21st century learners, higher education embraced technology and took advantage of online learning in parallel with traditional instruction. Furthermore, during the Corona virus pandemic that swept the world, the Algerian University was urged to adopt blended learning approach. The resort to such style of education was above all for the sake of meeting the students' needs during the crisis. Blended Learning came to support traditional education not to replace the teacher and real classroom.

In Actual fact, E-learning played an important role in the progress of education especially high education and learning languages; online learning proved its effectiveness for better learning and teaching processes since it allowed students to experience learning in different settings and it increased their motivation and autonomy to learn. For teachers, online courses saved their time and money and guaranteed flexible accessibility and successful evaluations of students. Nevertheless, it can never replace the teacher and the traditional way of teaching in the classroom.

As previously mentioned, it was necessary to adopt hybrid learning to solve students from losing their studies during the pandemic. However, after about three years far from the classroom and the atmosphere of learning, learners showed a catastrophic deficiency in the writing skill and the basics of writing were forgotten.

1.2. The Nature of Writing Skill

The most challenging fact about writing is that a set of issues should be taken into consideration to ensure a successful writing product; *Collins and Genther* claimed:

Much of the difficulty of writing stems from the large number of constraints that must be satisfied at the same time. In expressing an idea the writer must consider at least four structural levels: Overall text structure paragraph structure sentence structure (syntax), and word structure ... clearly the attempt to coordinate all these requirements, is a staggering job". Collins and Genther (1980: 62)

First, what to write: a sentence, paragraph or an essay, to decide the form and elements to be included. Second, why to write: to define something, describe, narrate or argument, in order to follow the directions for writing one of each. Then, to whom to write: to identify the level of formality. Next, it is necessary to apply capitalization and punctuation rules for the organisation of the written work. In addition, it is considerably required to pay attention to grammar rules and the appropriateness of spelling and word selection. Last, learners are supposed to provide outstanding information and valuable ideas taking into account all what was mentioned above without deviation from the main topic. In the table below, Raimes (1983) portrays the development of the writing process through the involvement of different qualities.

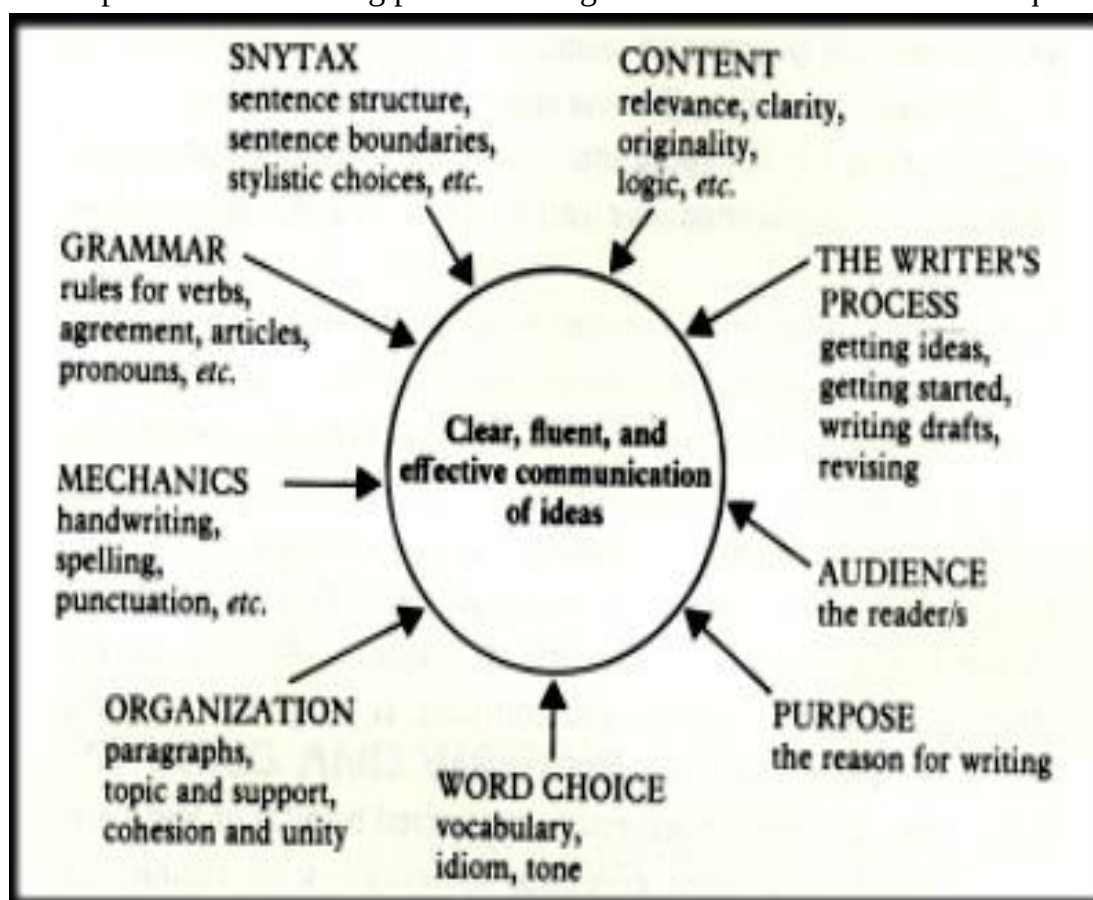


Figure 1: Producing a Piece of Writing (Raimes,1983)

Furthermore, there are a number of steps or different stages that the writer goes through before the accomplishment of the final written product such as prewriting, drafting, revising, editing and publishing (see Figure 2).

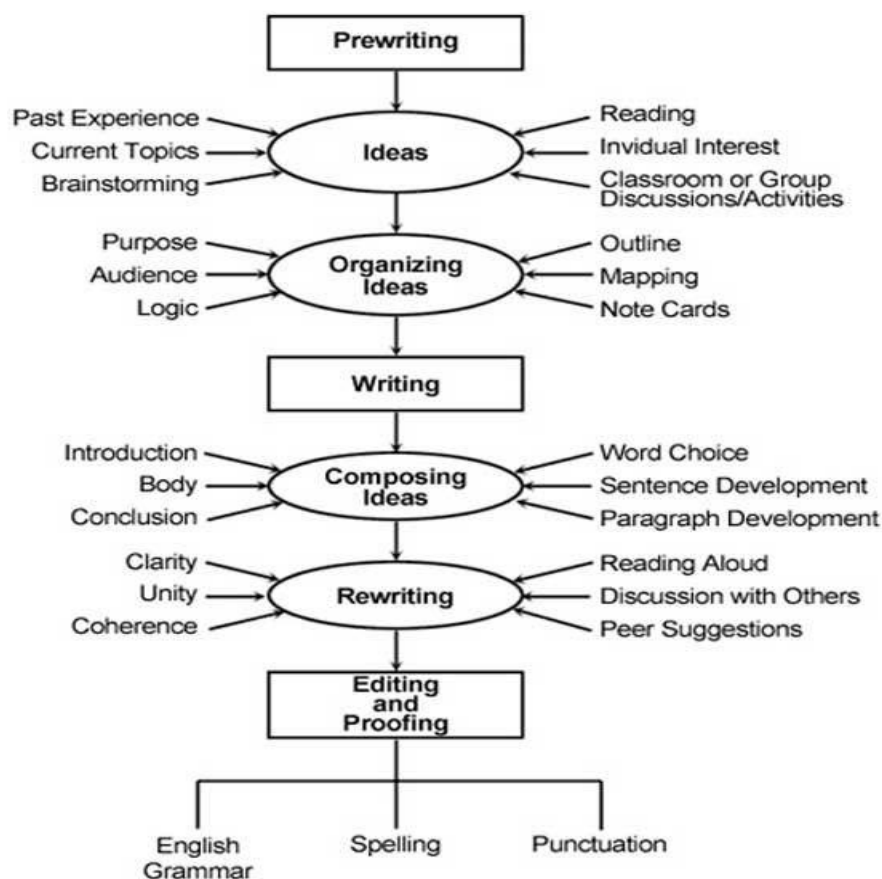


Figure 2: Stages of the writing process

For the reasons stated above, writing is considered to be the most difficult as well as complex skill to be learnt not only for learners of English as a foreign language but also for native speakers.

1.3. The role of Classroom Interaction in the Learning Process

Actually and as a personal belief, classroom is the perfect place to learn and practice writing, so they should make profit the maximum from it. Commonly, learning is to make errors and get corrected by the teacher. Besides, writing on the board is also very important and essential for learning a foreign language. In addition, doing different activities in class will enhance the learners' vocabulary and knowledge of the appropriate spelling of words as well as expressions selection. It is also about learning the main elements and different forms of writing, starting from phrases, clauses and sentences to paragraphs and essays. Moreover, one of the privileges of the classroom is the opportunity to study in pairs and groups in an authentic atmosphere for learning through peer interactions.

1.4. Collaborative Learning

None can ignore the immense role of group work at university; actually students learn better from their peers rather from their teacher. Students learn from their peers whether through working together in the classroom when doing different activities or having discussions in pairs or in groups. That is so called collaborative learning, which is considered to have a substantial influence on learners' writing production. In a collaborative environment, Learners can interact freely without borders and can exchange vocabulary, ideas as well as techniques for learning that enhance their autonomy in learning. The absence of this crucial element of learning during the pandemic resulted into a clear struggle with the writing skill among learners of third year students.

In fact, online learning offered lessons and was an important source for information for learners yet it prevented them from making profit from the different learning experiences taking place in class. Furthermore, no interaction and communication in the target language was likely at that period, neither with the teacher nor with peers. Peers collaboration does not only facilitate learning but also helps learners to grow intellectually and heighten their self-confidence as well as their learning motivation.

2. Statement of the Problem

The written production of English students has been always the concern of almost all teachers at the department since final examinations, projects and dissertations are in the written form. Students have been struggling to write correctly and their deficiency in the writing skill was clear. Both their struggle and their deficiency were intensified after the pandemic and the lockdown. Thus the present research paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the actual level of 3rd year English learners after the pandemic?
2. How the absence of collaborative leaning due to the lockdown has affected negatively the writing skill.

In accordance with the questions above and to carry out the investigation, the following hypotheses are proposed:

1. 3rd year students at the department of English have a low level and demonstrate a clear deficiency in the writing skill.
2. The absence of collaborative learning because of the corona virus pandemic has a negative impact on learning the writing skill.

3. Data Collection

The current research work is an exploratory study as it attempts at exploring learners' major writing hindrances after the pandemic through diagnosing the situation under study. Qualitative research methods were used for collecting the data necessary. First, as a teacher of Written Expression, the researcher had the opportunity to examine the situation of teaching and learning written expression in real contexts as a participant-observer. Second, in order to understand the students' lacks and needs along with the main difficulties encountered when writing, an examination and analysis of writings of some third year English students at Saida University was carried out by the researcher,

Both Classroom observation process and the examination of students' writings provided qualitative data that put forward a profound analysis of learning the writing skill and thus, to identify students' real level in writing as well as their major difficulties after the lockdown caused by the corona-virus pandemic.

5. Participants and Methods of Selection

The participants of the present research study are third-year students at the Department of English, Dr. Moulay Tahar University of Saida. The sample population selected for this investigation is 30 students from different groups. The motivation behind the selection of third-year students is to uncover the level of students whom their first experience at University was distance learning which prevented them from learning the language in its proper communicative context. Moreover, third year students would be more conscious about their existent language writing difficulties.

6. Data Analysis

Data gathered from the different sources cited above, classroom observation and worksheets' analysis is analyzed. Through classroom observation and worksheets' analysis, 50% of the students demonstrated low level in the writing skill, and 20% had an intermediate level, while only 30% of the students were successful at writing good enough essays. So far, there are three levels in the classroom, a category of students had an advanced level in writing with fertile imagination and stimulating style, a category with an intermediate level and a category with a low writing level.

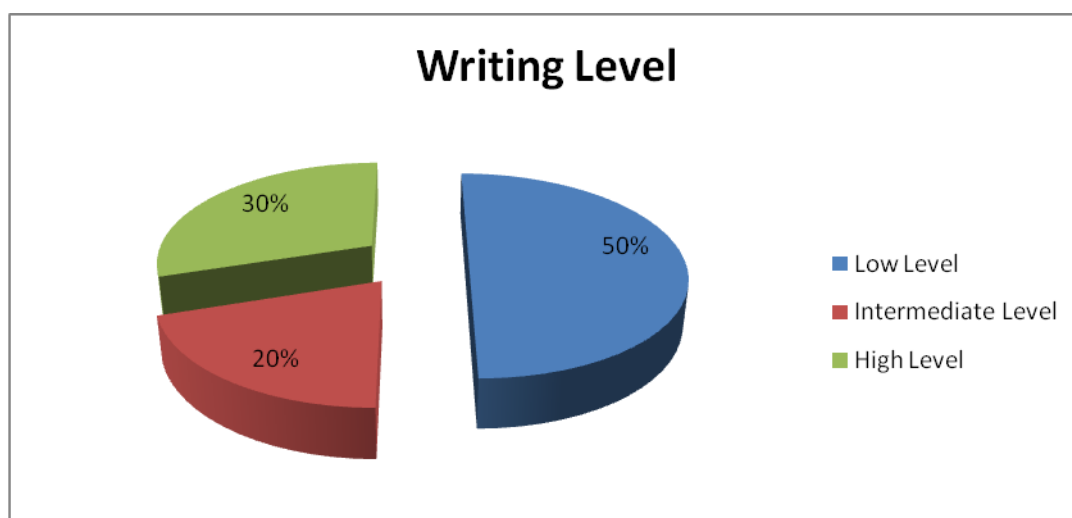


Chart 1: Students' writing level after worksheets analysis

Through classroom observation, the researcher could classify the major difficulties encountered by students in the course of writing after the pandemic. First, most of the students have troubles in the first place with finding the equivalents to words and ideas from their mother tongue in the target language, English. The second problem that students face when writing is the application of grammar rules, mainly verb tenses. Also, students have a difficulty with the use of conjunctions and coordinators. Some students have troubles with vocabulary; their papers were full of spelling mistakes. Finally, the majority of students find a difficulty to make use of the appropriate capitalization and punctuation marks.

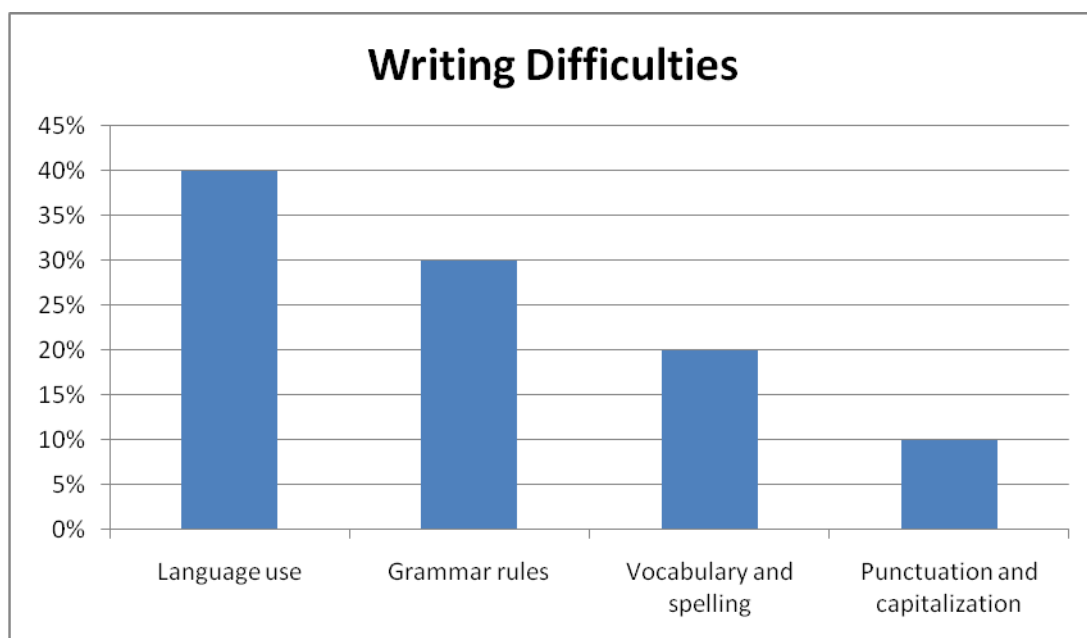


Diagram1: The major difficulties encountered by students when writing.

The investigation proved that the common mistakes encountered in students' sheets were related primarily to word choice and suitable expressions in English, the use of the appropriate verb tense, the use of punctuation marks, the majority of students are not able to write an accurate paragraph free of mistakes connected to language use, grammar, spelling and punctuation rules. That is primarily due to the lack of the different interactions as well as communications taking place in the classroom because of the lockdown during the corona-virus pandemic.

During classroom observation sessions, students showed different levels of motivation to write. There were only 5 students who were highly motivated to learn Written Expression subject and to apply the rules and their teachers' instructions in their writings. Another category was formed of 13 students who were less motivated and 7 students were passive, showing neither interest nor neglect to the process of writing. Moreover, there were 5 students who were out of the subject, with no motivation and concern to write and even to talk in English.

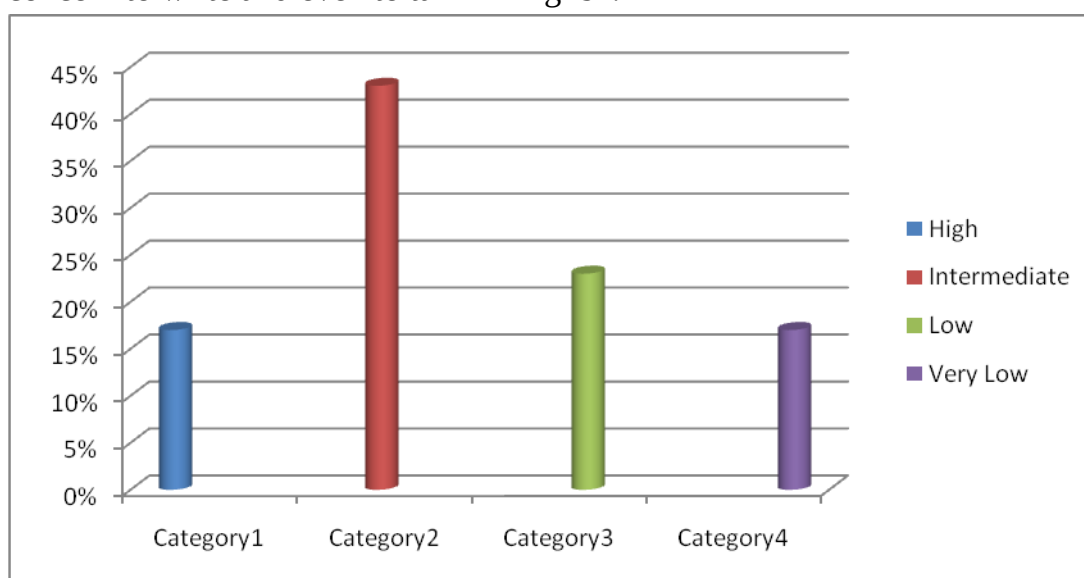


Diagram2: Students' degrees of motivation

The results attained helped in the truthful depiction of the learning situation in Written Expression classrooms with its facts, lacks, and difficulties; the process that paved the way to set the foundation for new methods and strategies to be adopted in teaching the writing skill.

7. The impact of Collaborative learning: A Real Classroom Experience

To verify the power of collaborative learning on learners' writing productivity, the researcher used a checklist as an assessment tool. The second semester was devoted to the study of paragraph writing and the main elements of a paragraph. The checklist, then, was meant to ensure learners' understanding of the topic sentence, supporting sentences, and the concluding sentence. Learners were asked to work in groups and

that made them highly motivated to do the prompt. First, they were asked to select from a list the criteria of the topic sentence, as well as the supporting sentences and concluding sentence. Also they had lists of sentences from which they select the best topic sentences and concluding sentences. Working on groups made the learners very active and enthusiastic, unlike when it is an individual task they seem passive and perplexed. In addition, watching students' interaction when doing the task made the teacher satisfied about the efforts they were showing in the classroom. Moreover, the results were satisfactory and proved that collaborative learning has a positive impact on learners' writing Skills. For example, they were sharing ideas about the lesson, discussing the main elements of paragraph, in addition to correcting errors for each other either about the content, vocabulary or the pronunciation of words. Furthermore, learners' had an opportunity to communicate and interact with their peers in the classroom which is a valuable experience that enable them to enhance their self confidence and their sense of leadership. Additionally, learners had a chance to acquire different skills such as learning skills, social skills and communication skills which are very important to extend learners' knowledge and responsibility for learning. Most importantly, team work allowed students to improve their writing skill through practice with peers; they may even improve their handwriting through time. This experience confirmed that collaborative learning is a rich and rewarding experience that has a big influence on the learning process as a whole and the writing skill in particular.

8. Recommendations

In regard to the findings obtained from the investigation, the researcher proposes the following suggestions that might enhance the learners' writing level, and that might also help them overcome their deficiency caused by the lockdown:

- First of all, reading books, novels and short stories should be imposed as part of the students' schedule and not only the subject of study. Libraries should be available at the faculty to encourage students for reading.
- Moreover, teachers ought to increase students' awareness about the significance and importance of practicing writing in the classroom, through, for example, free writing technique and tasks of ten minutes to express an idea or opinion in English.
- Policy makers should afford spaces for students to practice writing outside the classroom, so that to work in pairs and groups, and to develop collaborative learning.
- Along the course of written expression subject, every student should have different assignments, checklists and projects collected in a portfolio.
- Finally, the approach adopted in teaching writing should be revised and new techniques and strategies should be executed, also material should be provided

at the department of English. There should be frequent study days to enhance students' awareness about main issues related to their studies such as the essential role of self-confidence, autonomous learning, and the use of learning strategies in the achievement of success in their studies and at their future workplaces.

9. Conclusion

The objective of this research work is to examine the teaching/learning context in Written Expression subject at the Department of English. Besides, the investigation attempts to identify the major difficulties encountered by students and consequently to suggest the appropriate strategies to be adopted. The research revealed the noticeable deficiency in producing correct written forms in English among third year English students after the pandemic. The lack of classroom interactions and collaborative learning impacted negatively the writing skill, and an apparent deficiency was noticed among third year students when writing. Accordingly, some recommendations are required to overcome the negative impact of the pandemic and to boost the learners' level in writing, such as to reinforce the reading skill among learners, to increase their awareness about the importance of practicing writing, to afford more places and opportunities where to practice writing, and finally, further researchers should take place to develop new strategies and methods for teaching and learning writing.

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