

First-year Students' Perceptions, Challenges and Performances of Writing: A Study on Ethiopian Defense University

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Abstract

The main objective of this study was to investigate first-year students' perceptions, challenges and performances of writing at the Ethiopian Defense University. To achieve this study, the researcher employed explanatory sequential mixed method design in which both quantitative and qualitative data were mixed. Data for the study were gathered from first-year students and English language instructors of the university. The participants were selected specifically from the university's College of Engineering and College of Resource Management. As a result, one hundred eight first-year undergraduate students filled in two questionnaires, which were used to determine the students' perceptions of writing and their challenges of writing. The same number of students took a paragraph writing test, which was used to determine the students' writing performance levels. Moreover, eight students and six English language instructors were interviewed. The results showed that majority of the students had positive writing perception, and their writing performance was below average. In addition, the students were encountered linguistic, psychological and cognitive challenges, and the results of the correlation analysis showed that the students' writing perceptions, challenges and performances were not statistically significant. On the basis of the results of the study, having poor writing background, lack of motivation, negligence in writing, unsupportiveness of the English courses and modules, traumatic effect of past experiences, lack of writing practices were some of the revealed reasons for the students' low writing performance. Lastly, offering remedial English language trainings, revising the current English courses and the course modules, creating awareness on the adverse effect of traumatic past experiences on writing to the university community, implementing focused training programs to English instructors, preparing supportive materials for teaching writing which consider the writing challenges that the military students are in, and revisiting the lower grades English language curriculum to prepare students for higher education were recommended.

Keywords perceptions of writing; linguistic challenges of writing; psychological challenges of writing; cognitive challenges of writing; performances of writing

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary Ethiopian education system, English language is taught in all Ethiopian schools, from primary to tertiary levels, as an essential subject. Therefore, the Ethiopian students are required to take the language as a subject or a course for their academic success and future career development. Since Ethiopia is the hub of Africa's diplomatic communities, English language is highly required to work in these international organizations, where English is used as a working language. Consequently, having a good English language can open up opportunities for many Ethiopians to communicate and work with these people from all over the world. It is also a platform used to promote creativity and critical thinking. As the result of this, writing is one of the main language skills that needs the highest concern more importantly in the language learning and teaching practices (Koay 2017).

Though ELT should be a major concern for university students, it is too difficult to bring it into practice. Seime (1999) confirms that students with low level of English acquired in their secondary schools is very low for them to continue their higher-level education where English is the medium of communication. In this regard, (Hailom, 1993: 10) reasons out, "English language teaching is difficult since the students are from diverse linguistic and cultural background which need professionally dedicated teachers who are capable in teaching sensitive classroom events, and intelligent enough to handle situations flexibly, and to take proper decisions."

Students in all academic stages, from rudimentary to tertiary, need to be engaged with adequate mastery of writing development practices. Particularly, a good writing ability is very essential for professional military duties including operational planning, report writing, policy development, peace-keeping mission, international purchasing, diplomatic engagements and the like. Subsequently, Likaj (2015:102) explains about the importance of acquiring writing skills from the context of Armed Forces Academy of Albania, "writing in military English is considered as a difficult skill for cadets and officers who come from non-native English countries. Regarding military students, of any army branch, writing skill is always used as a tool to communicate with their international counterparts. These professionals cannot operate and carry out their jobs properly without acquiring this skill." In educating qualified military professionals, therefore, military universities have a vital contribution to equip learners with sufficient knowledge and skills for successful military missions. the introduction part, the study should be introduced, literature should be reviewed and discussed on the narrow line of the research topic in relation to relevant theories and the gap filled by your research should be stated clearly.

1.1. *Challenges of Writing*

Writing as major language skill, which is a key for academic success, is perceived as difficult task for many university students. This is, of course, due to multiple factors that affect students to produce effective pieces of writing. Regarding how challenging writing is, Meseret (2012) remarks that writing is a crucial yet challenging skill for individuals studying English as a

foreign language (EFL). It's a difficult procedure that calls on writers to investigate ideas and concepts and give them a visible, tangible form. In order to enhance communication and make thought available for reflection, it promotes thinking and learning. Berne, D. (1988), Classified the causes of writing problems under three categories: psychological, linguistic and cognitive problems though the problems are overlapping to some extent.

1.1.1. Linguistic Problem

The common linguistic problems of writing can include problems with grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and style of tone, voice, and manner of expressions. Linguistic problems of writing can negatively impact the writing's effectiveness by making the written ones harder for readers to comprehend and enjoy. (Al Murshidi, 2014:93) confirms in his study on Emirati and Saudi students, "English vocabulary and grammar are linguistics aspects which Emirati and Saudi students emphasized as creating difficulties.

(Aldabbus & Almansouri, 2022:3) referring another study conducted by Al-Khairy (2013) reaffirm, "On several higher education students showed that the inability to choose the appropriate academic words, incorrect punctuation, linguistic and grammatical errors are the main source of difficulties encountered by the students." Mostly, the common obstacles that students face in writing include linguistic ones, which might affect the communication's efficacy, coherence, and clarity. These linguistic problems can occur at several stages of language usage, including the choice of vocabulary, the creation of grammar, the organization of syntax, and general stylistic components. Addressing these issues, therefore, requires attention to language use and seeking feedback from peers or teachers. In this respect, Berne, D. (1988:4) adds, "we have to keep a channel of communication open through our own efforts and to ensure, both through our choice of sentences are linked together and sequenced, that the text we produce can be interpreted on its own."

1.1.2. Psychological Problem

Writers may experience a variety of emotional and mental difficulties in writing. These psychological obstacles have the potential to have a substantial influence on writers' productivity, creativity, and writing process. (Rusinovci, 2020:366) states, "Many exams and tests, being graded the way they are, all of these have a negative effect and give the students a great stress." The other might be a condition known as "creativity stagnation," in which people find it difficult to come up with ideas or put them in writing. Perfectionism and self-doubt are also psychological roadblocks that can impede confidence and literary growth. For students, the anxiety of being judged and criticized by teachers or others may also be a major psychological burden.

Lack of motivation, an excessive effort on perfection, and stress caused by shortage of time can be of the psychological problems that originates from fear of failure or insecurity, which can lead to evading behavior and undesirable self-talk. Berne, D. (1988:4) clarifies how lack of feedback can

affect psychologically, “(writing) is essentially a solitary activity and the fact that we are required to write on our own, without the possibility of interaction or the benefits of feedback, itself marks the act of writing difficult”. Therefore, in order to help students overcome challenges, improve their writing experience, and maintain their mental health, it is imperative to recognize and address these psychological issues.

1.1.3. Cognitive Problem

Writing is a cognitive activity that requires a variety of mental exercises, cognitive abilities, and problem-solving techniques in addition to being a creative form of expression. Writers frequently have cognitive difficulties that might affect their capacity to produce ideas, arrange ideas, and successfully put notions into written form. Working memory can also be more problematic in the presence of distractions. In this case, the ability to recall and process information in the presence of distraction is referred to as working memory (Engle, 2002). The discovery that working memory capacity is a very accurate predictor of performance on a variety of complex cognitive tasks, including tests that test language comprehension skills, provides empirical evidence for the function of working memory in complex reasoning (Daneman and Merikle 1996).

A mental illness that can arise from a particularly dangerous or tragic experience is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) according to (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2005). It impairs a number of cognitive processing ability necessary for learning. In this regard, different scholars have associated the cognitive challenges with PTSD. For example, attention deficits which is difficulty of maintaining focus due to intrusive memories or hyper arousal (Aupperle et al., 2012), working memory impairment which is limited capacity to retain and manipulate information (Schonfeld et al., 2009), executive dysfunction that causes challenges in planning, problem-solving, and decision-making (Hayes et al., 2012), and emotional regulation issues which heightened emotional reactivity can interfere with cognitive tasks (Shipherd & Beck, 2005). Thus, writing skills, which needs students' processing ability, can seriously be affected by PTSD. Writing, therefore, is not something given for granted, but it is multifaceted and effortful cognitive task in which writers have to manipulate their thoughts, language rules (spelling, grammar, etc.), content, genre, the reader, motor (holding a pen), etc. while concurrently writing a text.

1.2. Students' Perception about Writing

Perception is so important and affects how well students do. It influences later acts as well. Perception, according to George (2002), is the way the brain organizes and interprets sensory information. It is the process by which an individual interprets their surroundings. Furthermore, perception is a knowledge of things as they are, whereas cognition links with an independent reality, according to Bakhrust and Shanker (2001). Any stimulus can have a variety of meanings based on the individual's interpretation of it. Perception, to put it briefly, is the process by which a person arranges and reacts to information according to their senses and opinions about certain items that they encounter in their environment.

These are the two forms of perception that Eka et al. (2021) say exist. They are positive and negative perceptions. A positive perspective is one in which the individual believes they have a good chance of winning their particular case. A person's favorable interpretation, comprehension, or assessment of a person, thing, circumstance, or idea is referred to as positive perception. It includes the positive, helpful, and grateful prism that people use to see and assess their environment and situation. Positive perception may help people develop a constructive and appreciating view that improves their social interactions, personal well-being, and adaptive coping mechanisms. This can result in a more contented and upbeat response to life's situations.

On the other hand, negative perception: describes situations that the individual rejects since they don't align with their own beliefs. An individual's negative interpretation, assessment, or comprehension of a person, thing, circumstance, or idea is referred to as negative perception. It includes a critical, negative, or pessimistic lens that people use to see and assess their environment and situation. People may work toward developing a more balanced and positive view, improving their emotional well-being, social connections, and adaptive coping mechanisms by addressing and controlling negative perception using a variety of ways (Eka et al. 2021).

For language instructors, knowing how their students see their writing abilities is essential because it helps them provide supportive learning environments, tailored writing instruction, and individual feedback. Language teachers can adjust their methods to encourage motivation, self-efficacy, and a positive attitude toward writing by identifying and correcting students' views of their writing skills. (Rusinovci, 2020) further noted how important is studying students' perceptions in writing classrooms. He said, "In order to explore the writing classroom and students' experiences with it, students' perceptions and opinions are tremendously important in writing classes, serving as indicators for change or intervention.

1.3. Previous Studies on Students' Writing Skill

In relation to writing skills development, there are different researches conducted world-widely on every level of education. Since it is too difficult to present all the studies conducted across the globe, the researcher tries to present some of the studies that are somehow related to this research selectively. To begin with some of the studies here in Ethiopia, Haregewoin (2008) conducted her research on the effect of communicative grammar on the accuracy of students' academic writing. She concluded that when the teaching/learning of the writing skills was backed by communicative grammar activities, students can produce efficient and accurate writing. Alamirew (2005), in his survey-based study on teachers' and students' perception of writing instruction, and the writing performances of grade 12 government school students, brought to light that both the teachers and students have a positive attitude towards teaching/learning writing, but they give less attention to writing lessons in particular. As a result of this, the students have low writing performance.

On the other arm, there are a number of researches conducted globally in relation to writing skill. For example, Schnee (2010) researched to identify the impact of teaching students to revise their stories on writing production, and the result indicated that instruction in revising increased students' interest, attitudes and their writing accuracy. Devi et al., (2017) researched on strategies for improving writing skills of elementary English language learners. They finally suggested that writing can be improved through the use of technology, pre-taught vocabulary, various teacher influences and the application of positive varied learning practices. Lastly, Sapkota (2013) conducted action research on how peer and teacher correction can improve students' writing skill, and finally, the peer correction and teacher correction were found to be productive in teaching writing. Anastasiadou (2010) investigated whether the process writing approach can enable young learners of the sixth grade to become more independent writers in their second language in the case of Greek State Primary. The finding showed that the process approach supported the students to improve their writing skills.

1.4. *Theoretical Framework*

A theoretical framework, according to Liehr and Smith (1999), refers to the theory that researchers choose to use as a guide for their study. In other words, it is the use of a theory, or a collection of ideas taken from a single theory, to provide an explanation for a research topic. The theoretical foundation of this study, therefore, is social cognitive theory (SCT). The fundamental tenet of social cognition theory, as stated by Bandura (1962), is that social settings are the primary sites of human learning. Human functioning is the result of a sequence of mutually reinforcing interactions between personal influences (such as: ideas and beliefs), environmental factors, behaviors (Bandura, 1986). By watching others, people pick up new knowledge, customs, abilities, methods, beliefs, and attitudes.

According to SCT, for example, students who have strong self-efficacy are more likely to participate in writing assignments and endure through writing challenges, which improves good performance. On the other hand, those with low self-efficacy could shy away from writing assignments, which would lead to less practice and worse results. It also highlights the importance of observational learning, in which students learn to write better by watching instructors, classmates, or role models. Research may examine how these elements work together to influence students' writing growth and how interventions, such offering helpful criticism or setting an example of good writing techniques, might improve their abilities. Moreover, environmental and contextual variables also have an impact on the problems students have while writing in English as a foreign language (EFL), such as a lack of exposure to the language, grammatical issues, or a restricted vocabulary. Students' perceptions and practices may develop a reciprocal relationship as a result of these difficulties. For instance, a student who has trouble with grammar would feel nervous in writing assignments, which would limit their practice chances and affect their writing performance.

1.5. Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is a network of related ideas that when taken as a whole offer a thorough comprehension of phenomenon or phenomena. A conceptual framework is made up of ideas that express their respective phenomena, support one another, and build a philosophy specific to the framework (Jabareen, 2009). Therefore, this conceptual framework helps to give the work a distinct focus. It guides the collection and analysis of data by delineating the links between variables: students' perceptions of writing, students' challenges of writing, and students' performances of writing. Moreover, it makes concepts easier to comprehend by revealing the predicted connections between the variables, which are represented graphically. Therefore, a visual model can effectively demonstrate the influence of independent variables, students' perceptions and challenges of writing, on the dependent variable, students' performances of writing. For this research, the researcher crafted the conceptual framework as presented below.

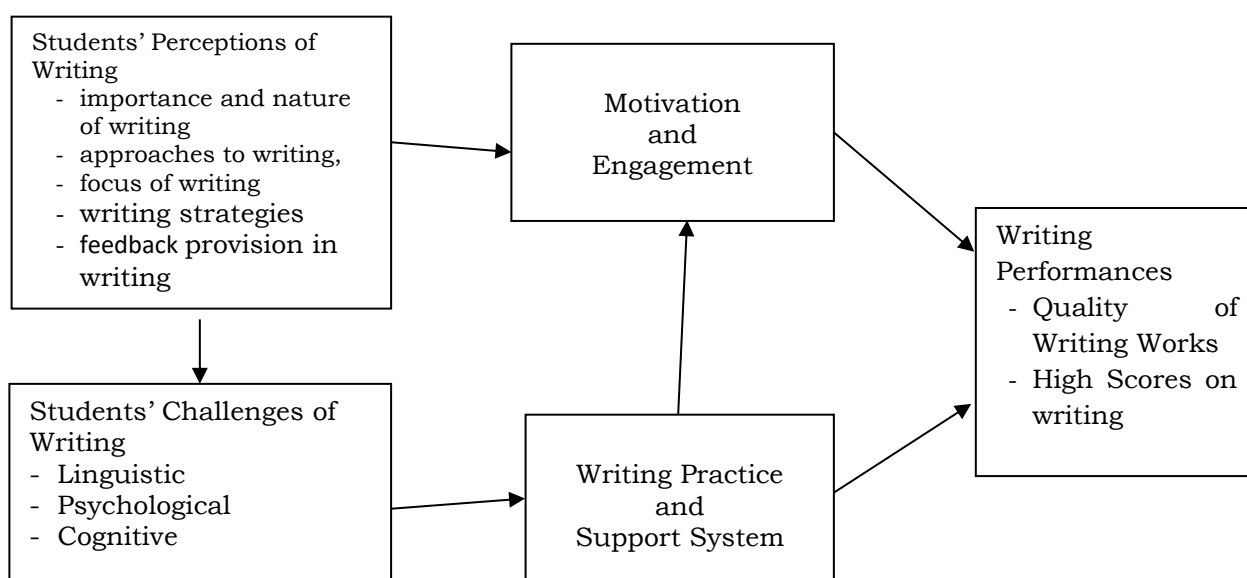


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

The above conceptual framework emphasizes the interrelated dynamics among first-year university students' perceptions, challenges and performances of writing. It implies that students' motivation and engagement are significantly influenced by how they view writing. For example, students are more inclined to devote time and energy to improving their writing skills if they believe that writing will be a useful skill for both their academic and professional prospects. On the other hand, those who have low self-efficacy or unfavorable perception could find it difficult to participate in writing assignments, which could result in below average performance. This emphasizes how crucial it is to help students develop good attitudes and writing confidence at an early stage of their academic careers.

Similarly, first-year students' writing performance is greatly impacted by writing challenges they face, including linguistic, psychological and cognitive challenges. While linguistic difficulties like poor grammar and vocabulary might impair their capacity to communicate ideas clearly, cognitive difficulties like organizing ideas or critical thinking may influence the quality of their writing works. These problems are also exacerbated by psychological challenges like anxiety or fear of failure, which causes stress and poor performance. But according to the framework, these difficulties may be lessened with the help of support networks and efficient writing techniques. For instance, students may overcome these challenges and improve their writing performance with regular writing practice, helpful criticism, support system and collaborative learning. Therefore, interventions aimed at enhancing writing skills should address components: reshaping perceptions, providing resources to overcome challenges, and fostering consistent improvement in writing performance should be implemented.

1.6. *Research Questions*

Among all the studies conducted, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is no any research conducted on students' perceptions, challenges and performances that university students have in improving their writing skills particularly in a military university context. Subsequently, this research addresses the following questions:

1. What are students' perceptions about writing?
2. What are the main writing challenges students face?
3. How proficient are students in writing?
4. How do students' perceptions, challenges and performances of writing relate?

2. Methodology

2.1. *Research design*

As it is referred recurrently in the above sections, the main purpose of this study is to investigate students' perceptions, challenges and performances of writing. Thus, the current study employed explanatory sequential mixed method design, which is a two-phase design, where both quantitative and qualitative data are collected and analyzed, then interpreted sequentially. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) explains, the design is crucial to link the quantitative results to the qualitative data results since the primary goal of this design is to use the qualitative data to assist and explain the quantitative results in greater detail. The main concept is that the quantitative findings are directly expanded upon by the qualitative data collection and analysis. One of the main advantages of this design is that the concept of providing a more in-depth explanation of the mechanism how the variables interact through the qualitative support.

Thus, employing explanatory sequential mixed method design provided the researcher with better understanding of the research findings through the incorporation of both qualitative and quantitative data. The design allows triangulation that the researchers can use different methods to collect data

on the same topic, and increase the accuracy of findings. Therefore, the quantitative data that were collected from questionnaires and writing test, and the qualitative data that were collected from interviews were interpreted.

2.2. *Research Sample and Sampling Techniques*

A variety of sampling techniques had been used to figure out how many colleges, sections, students and English instructors took part in the research. Primarily, EDU is the only university that admits military students and trains in different fields of study under three colleges it oversees: the College of Health Science, College of Engineering and College of Resource Management. Therefore, the university was selected using convenience sampling technique to specifically study about students with uniform.

Next, to determine sections from each college, the researcher used a lottery method so as to give equal chances to all sections and departments. From the two colleges: Engineering College and Resource Managements College, a total of 120 students were selected. That means, 60 students from each college or 20 students from each section filled in the questionnaires and took the paragraph writing test. In order to randomly select the participants from one section, the researcher used the students' mark list, which was alphabetically arranged, to pick the students systematically. However, 120 students filled in the questionnaires and sat for paragraph writing test, only 108 students, in which 18 of them were females and 90 of them were males, returned the questionnaire and fulfilled the minimal criteria of the assessment rubric tool used to assess the writing test papers. Table 1 shows sample respondents who filled in the questionnaires and took the paragraph writing.

Table 1
Sample Respondents' Profile

NO	Colleges	Departments	Gender		Total
			Female	Male	
1	Engineering	D01	2	12	14
		D02	4	8	12
		D03	3	6	9
		D04	4	13	17
2	Resource Management	D04	1	9	10
		D05	1	14	15
		D06	-	14	14
		D07	2	4	6
		D08	1	10	11
Total			18	90	108

As it is shown in the above table, 39 male and 13 female students were selected from Engineering College, and 5 female and 51 male students were chosen from the Resource Management College. From the total of 108 respondents, 16.67% of them were females and 83.33% of the students were males.

Moreover, using purposive sampling technique, first-year students and English language instructors were deliberately selected for interviews. From each college, 4 students were selected. Therefore, from the two colleges, a total of 8 students, were selected to get students who were believed to express their views without fear. In addition, out of 10 English language instructors who were active on duty, 6 of them were taken for interview intentionally for the study.

2.3. Data Collection Procedures

This research was sequential with two phases. In the first phase, quantitative data collection and analysis had taken place. First, before the interviews were conducted, general direction on how to fill in the questionnaires was given to the student participants, then questionnaires for students were administered to determine the students' perceptions of writing and their writing challenges. Next, the paragraph writing test was given to know the level of students' writing performances. The researcher used SPSS version 26 software to interpret the quantitative data that were collected from the questionnaires and paragraph writing test by running descriptive statistics and correlational analysis to know how the three variables (students' writing perceptions, challenges and performances) were related. The second phase was about qualitative data collection and analysis. In this stage, after the quantitative data collection and analysis, the researcher prepared guiding questions for interviews with students. Then, the interview guide for English language instructors was also designed after the results of interviews with the students revealed. Lastly, the researcher explained how students' perceptions, challenges and performances of writing were related each other in order to address the fourth research question.

2.3.1. Research Instruments

This study employed three instruments for gathering information to serve the purpose. The instruments were: questionnaires, paragraph writing test and interviews. Using multiple instruments was believed to help produce results that were more vigorous than using a single instrument. Questionnaires help the researcher to collect huge amounts of data in a comparatively short period of time (Gay et al., 2012). Therefore, two questionnaires: on students' writing perceptions and students' writing challenges were filled in by student respondents at the same time because it has no any impact on the results.

2.3.1.1. Questionnaire on Students' Writing Perceptions

The purpose of this questionnaire was to collect information about the perceptions students had about writing. In order to determine the students' perceptions, the questionnaire helped to reinforce and triangulate the quantitative results with data obtained through other research instruments.

It also served as one of the major instruments used for the study. The questionnaire was a slightly modified version of Habtamu, 2018 that he adapted it from White & Bruning (2005). The researcher added five additional question items in order to include a sub-category on students' perception about the English courses. The researcher believed that without knowing students' perceptions towards the English courses, they had taken, it would have been incomplete to know the general perceptions the students had about writing. Using SPSS software, the degree of internal consistency of all the question items was verified by the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (0.804).

The questionnaire was used mainly to address the first research question, 'what are students' perceptions about writing?' It contained six sub-categories: students' perceptions about the importance and nature of writing, students' perceptions about the approaches to writing, students' perception about the focus of writing, students' perceptions about writing strategies, students' perceptions about feedback provision in writing and students' perceptions about the English courses. Therefore, the questionnaire with 40 question items in Likert-scale format was used to determine the range of alternatives on the students' writing perceptions. The range of responses in the five-point Likert-scale was: (1), strongly disagree, (2), disagree, (3), undecided, (4), agree, (5), and strongly agree.

2.3.1.2. Questionnaire on Students' Writing Challenges

The purpose of this questionnaire was to address the second research question, "what are the main writing challenges students face?" The questionnaire contained 26 question items with four categories. The first category was about the background information of the participant, part two was about students' linguistics challenges of writing that encompassed 8 question items. Then the third category was about the students' psychological challenges of writing which contained 10 question items, and the last one was about the students' cognitive challenges of writing with 8 question items.

All the question items were crafted by the researcher based on the idea of Berne, D. (1988) that classified the causes of writing difficulties under three categories: linguistic, psychological and cognitive problems nevertheless the problems were overlapping to some extent. Similarly, the five-point Likert scale was used that included response options: (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) uncertain, (4) agree, (5) strongly agree. Consequently, using the SPSS software, it was discovered that the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, 0.951 proved the presence of high level of internal consistency reliability of a group of items. Thus, the total results of the question items were expected to address the main writing challenges that first-year students faced.

2.3.1.3. Paragraph Writing Performance Test

The main purpose of the paragraph writing test was to address the third research question, "How proficient are students in writing?" The test was one of the major instruments so as to determine the students' level of writing

performances. As referred in the previous section, paragraph writing test was the aspect of writing that the study primarily focused on. This aspect of writing was chosen because, the current English courses have dealt with paragraph writings as a maximum writing achievement, and it was through paragraph writing that other language aspects could be included to determine the students' level of performances. Therefore, in order to examine the writing performance of the students, the study used the paragraph writing test as an instrument.

The writing test assessment focused on the students' ability to organize their ideas, content, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics. The categories were believed to determine the writing level of students. Based on the referred categories, thus, the researcher asked students to write a paragraph of about 150 words on "The Advantages of Learning English Language" in an hour. The topic was selected intentionally that the students could be familiar with because topic familiarity would help the students to put more effort onto the writing in order to share their ideas and opinions to the reader (Raimes, 1983). All the paragraph writing test papers were evaluated based on analytical rubric tool which divided the paragraph assessment into five components, and evaluated each component separately. The performance assessment rubric tool was an adopted version of Agan & Deniz, (2019). In the process of marking the students' writing paper, the researcher assigned two raters who had similar academic status and work experience in ELT. Assigning other raters was believed to avoid the researcher's bias. Finally, the average of the two rated results were taken to determine the level of the students' writing performance as below average, average, and above average.

2.3.1.4. Interviews with Students and EFL Instructors

For this research, first-year students and English language instructors were interviewed. For this to happen, the researcher employed semi-structured interviews. In mixed methods research, semi-structured interviews can be valuable as a helper to complement and add depth to other approaches (Adams, 2018). It also allows the researcher to guide, and compare and contrast the information gathered from other instruments as well. To organizing and find meanings from unstructured or non-numerical data that were gathered through interviews, a qualitative data analysis program, NVivo 10 software, was used. When the interview with the student participants, therefore, were held in Amharic language /local language/ and then translated into English, the interview with the English instructors were held in English whereas all the interviews were audio recorded.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

Research ethics is essential for scientific integrity, human rights and dignity, and collaboration between science and society. Defying research ethics lower the credibility of a research, even if it is valuable to society. It is also used for protecting the rights of research participants, enhancing research validity, and maintaining scientific or academic integrity (Bhandari, P. 2022). Therefore, ethical considerations in research are fundamental principles that guide the conduct of research involving human subjects or sensitive data. In this vein, the research participants conformed their

agreement by signing up on a consent protocol form which comprised a code of conduct. Respect for participants' independence involved acknowledging their right to make independent decisions about their involvement in the research, and to ensure that they were treated with high dignity and respect. The researcher made participants to understand the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the research before conducting them to take part. To safeguard the confidentiality and privacy of participants, protecting their personal information and ensuring the data obtained from them were used solely for the research purpose only.

3. Results

3.1. Results of the Students' Perceptions of Writing

The study showed that most of the students were aware of the value of writing skill and how important it was to their academic success. They also valued the process approach in writing because they saw it as a means of refining their work and increasing clarity. Furthermore, the overall findings indicated that even in the presence of meaning-focused assistance, a large number of students thought that teachers should prioritize grammar and structure in their comments. Moreover, the English instructors' and peers feedback were highly important to enhancing their writing skills. Receiving positive criticism, which could promote critical thinking and group learning, could improve their writing. They also recognized the value of assessing their own work to know their areas of strength and weakness in writing, which can help them improve their performances of writing.

Furthermore, many students expressed a desire to write outside of formal academic contexts. This demonstrated their adaptable approach to improve their writing skills. In addition, the majority of students thought that enrolling in English classes would benefit for their academic growth. This implies that the students were aware of the ways in which the current English courses help them succeed academically. Correspondingly, many students reported that they had learnt a lot in English lessons. Nonetheless, a lot of students revealed that English courses were challenging. This highlighted how important it was to handle the different levels of difficulty and look at ways to make the courses more approachable and engaging for the students. The following pie-chart shows the overall results that the students' perceptions about writing.

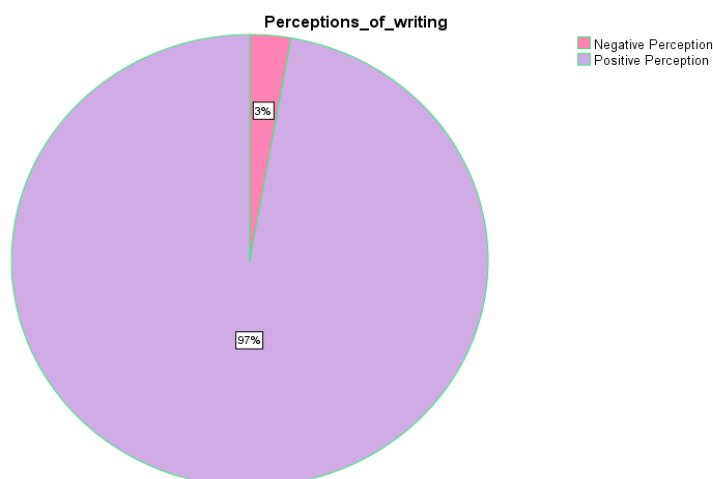


Figure 2.
Perceptions of
Writing

Generally, nearly all students (97%) had a positive perception of writing may be due to their understanding of the importance of writing for their academic and occupational development. These findings demonstrated how important it was to maintain and enhance the factors that contribute to students' positive attitudes. It is also necessary to engage the (3%), minority, who had negative perception.

3.2. Results of Students' Writing Challenges

The purpose of this section of the study was to identify students' writing challenges by analyzing the data collected from the second questionnaire. First, 108 first-year students of Engineering College and Resource Management College at the Ethiopian Defense University (EDU) completed the second questionnaire with 26 question items under three subcategories. The three subcategories, included students' linguistic challenges of writing, psychological challenges of writing and cognitive challenges of writing, were examined to answer the second research question, 'what are the main writing challenges students face?'

Regarding linguistic problems, the study revealed that consistent verb tenses, proper grammatical usage, and cohesive thought organization are among the primary problems. These difficulties affect their capacity to write well-organized and refined works. Which indicate lack of fundamental language skills. Other problems are also derived from mechanics and word choice, as students frequently struggle to use proper punctuation and capitalization. These limitations affect their capacity to express their ideas precisely and concisely. This emphasizes the necessity of targeted training in fundamental writing.

In addition, the study showed that the majority of the students regularly suffered from writer's block, which was usually brought on by a lack of creativity, self-doubt, PTSD which are caused by external factors. These problems made it difficult for the students to generate ideas and keep the flow of writing. Furthermore, students frequently worry about the quality of their work and fear of criticism from others. This worry might have hindered their writing engagement and output. Managing the stress caused by strict deadlines and high expectations was one of the main problems that students dealt with. Students, who had trouble managing their time and rearranging priorities, couldn't give enough time to writing development. This lack of attention and practice affected their skill development and academic success. As a result, when assigned writing projects with unclear goals, students usually lose interest and confidence and get discouraged. With the use of consistent monitoring, practical objectives, and tailored feedback, these issues could be resolved in a more effective and positive learning environment.

The study also indicated that many students struggled to organize their ideas logically before starting to write. Their inability to come up with concepts that were coherent and pertinent caused poor writing performance. To solve this issue, targeted treatments that improve their ability to think critically and generate ideas are required. Additionally, the students have trouble focusing when writing, which affects the consistency in writing. This

emphasizes how important it is to use strategies that help them focus better when writing.

Furthermore, the study demonstrated that students found it difficult to keep a smooth transition between sentences, which could break the paragraphs' coherence. This problem highlights the need of teaching logical sequencing and consistent writing. The creation of more coherent and flowing paragraphs can be facilitated by providing students with focused instruction. The logical flow of ideas may also be hampered by the students' incapability to generate original and compelling ideas. This highlights the significance of teaching topic creation techniques. Structured education in these areas may help them write more effectively. For further understanding, Table 3 shows the mean of the students' challenges of writing per precategories.

Table 3

Mean of Challenges of Writing

Challenges of Writing	N	Mean
Linguistic Challenges	108	3.5556
Psychological Challenges	108	3.4880
Cognitive Challenges	108	3.5127
Average	108	3.5188

According to the study, linguistic issues were the most prevalent, with a mean score of 3.5556, suggesting issues with vocabulary, grammar, content, language structure, and mechanics. Cognitive issues, such as organizing and maintaining coherent thinking, were equally prevalent and ranked second with a mean score of 3.5127. Psychological difficulties including insecurity and failure-related anxiety had the lowest mean of all, at 3.4880.

3.3. *Results of Students' Writing Performances*

This section is mainly about identifying the students' writing performance level. For this to happen, the students had taken paragraph writing test to address the third research question about how proficient the students are in writing. In order to ensure the reliability of the results, and to check the degree of agreement between the results given by the two raters, coefficient of Cohen's Kappa was used. The calculated Cohen's Kappa result showed high degree of agreement, ($k=0.621$), which is between 0.61-0.80. This suggests that despite the paragraph writing test's subjective nature, there was very little scoring disparity between the two raters. Therefore, it is believed that the high level of agreement increases the trustworthiness of the paragraph writing test ranking. The following bar-chart shows the level of students' writing performances.

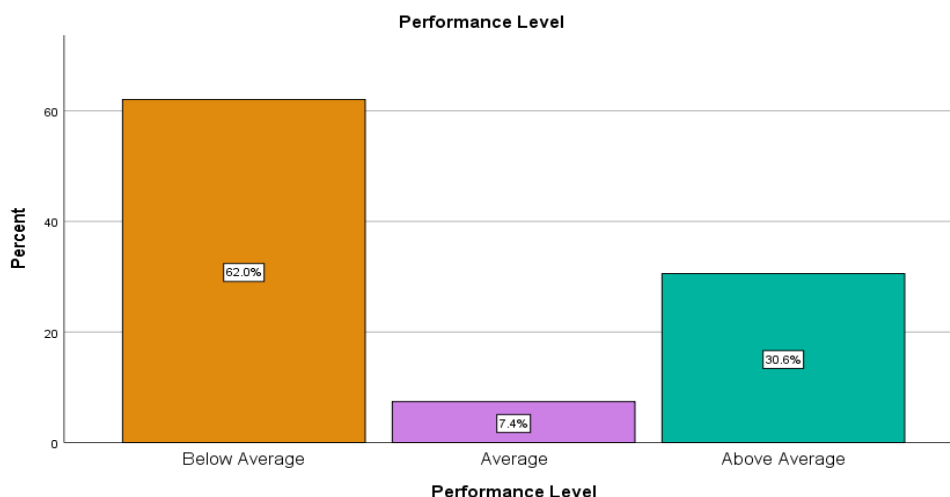


Figure 3. Students' Writing Performance

Figure 3 effortlessly summarizes that the majority of students (62%) scored below average, and only a small number of the students (30.6%) have above average writing performance while a very small number of students (7.4%) are average scorers. With a significant percentage of scores going below average, this distribution points to a need to struggle towards above average. A high-performance trend within the sample, suggesting competence in writing skill, may be shown in the high proportion of above average scores. Nonetheless, a sizable percentage of below average scores draw attention to the sample's heterogeneity and point out potential areas to help students write effectively.

Table 4

Mean of Students' Paragraph Writing Test Scores Per categories

		Students' Writing Performance per Categories				
		Content	Structure	Grammar	Vocabulary	Mechanics
Mean	Rater 1	1.7593	1.5648	1.6759	1.6296	1.4259
	Rater 2	1.6944	1.5370	1.7315	1.6111	1.4537
Grand Mean		1.72685	1.5509	1.7037	1.62035	1.4398

As the data in Table 4 shows, the mean of students' writing test results per categories as marked by the two raters, Rater 1 and Rater 2. Each category was marked out of 4 points based on the criteria given in the assessment rubric tool. The grand mean was used to infer in which writing competences or categories the students were more challenged. Based on the grand mean, the test scores from higher to lower were: content (1.72685), grammar (1.7037), vocabulary (1.62035), structure (1.5509) and mechanics (1.4398). According to the ranges of the performance level scores set by (Agan & Deniz, 2019), the students' paragraph writing test score in all categories: content, structure, vocabulary and mechanics were insufficient, (1-1.75). Generally, the results indicate that the students' writing

incapability is a serious problem for them to study at university level unless proper interventions are in place.

3.4. Correlation Analysis between Variables

3.4.1. Correlation Analysis between Students' Perceptions and Performances of writing

Correlation refers to the association or link between two or more quantitative variables; it is also used to refer to correlation analysis (Gogtay & Thatte, 2017). For this study, the correlation analyses were used to show interactions between students' perceptions about writing and their performance of writing. The following data in able 5 shows, the correlation between the results of students' perception about writing and their writing performance.

Table 5

The Spearman's rho Correlation between Students' Perceptions of Writing and Performances of Writing

			Perception of Writing	Performance of Writing
Spearman's rho	Perceptions of Writing	Correlation Coefficient	1	-0.133
		Sig. (2-tailed)		0.169
		N		108
	Performance of Writing	Correlation Coefficient	-0.133	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.169	
		N	108	108

There is a modest negative association between students' views of writing and their actual writing performance, as indicated by the Spearman's rho value of 0-0.133. This shows that when perceptions improve, performance marginally drops (or vice versa), although the association is modest. The typical cutoff point of 0.05 is exceeded by the p-value (Sig. 2-tailed) of 0.169. This indicates that there is no convincing evidence as the correlation is not statistically significant.

Students' perceptions of writing skills may not match their actual performance, as seen by the weak and non-significant association.

3.4.2. Correlation Analysis between Students' Challenges of Writing and Performances of Writing

According to Spearman's rho, the data in the given document point to a weak positive correlation (0.111) between writing challenges and writing performance. Nevertheless, this relationship ($p = 0.253$) is not statistically significant. Following Table 6 below, the results and its implications are presented.

Table 6
The Spearman’s rho Correlation between Students’ Challenges of Writing and Performances of Writing

			Challenges of Writing	Performance of Writing
Spearman's rho	Challenges of Writing	Correlation Coefficient	1	0.111
		Sig. (2-tailed)		0.253
		N	108	108
	Performance of Writing	Correlation Coefficient	0.111	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.253	
		N	108	108

There is a very weak positive association between students' writing challenges and their writing performances, as indicated by the correlation value of 0.111. This suggests that there is little correlation between an increase in writing difficulties and an increase or decrease in writing performance. The results are not statistically significant since the p-value of 0.253 is higher than the standard cutoff of 0.05. This indicates that there is no enough evidence to draw the conclusion that writing challenges and writing performance are significantly correlated. Perhaps as a result of students’ use of compensating techniques or outside support networks, the small connection indicates that these difficulties do not significantly impact overall performance. Additionally, writing performance here may demonstrate things like content quality, grammatical precision, lack of vocabulary, and organizational problems or coherence and other psychological factors. Given the limited correlation between challenges and performances, it is possible that other elements like motivation, feedback, or past learning might have a greater influence on performance. English instructors should have to think about tackling the writing difficulties that directly affect student performance. Specific interventions, which targeted writing exercises or targeted feedback, may improve writing skill. Further insights may also be obtained by looking into additional study factors, such as the learning environment or the resilience of the students.

3.5. *Regression Analyses of the Influence of Perceptions of Writing and Challenges of Writing on Students’ Writing Performance*

In this analysis, multiple linear regression is used to describe the relationship between two independent variables (perceptions of writing and challenges of writing) and one dependent variable (students’ performances of writing). By adding more than one predictor, it goes beyond basic linear regression and enables a more comprehensive analysis of the ways in which various variables work together to influence the performance.

Table 7
Model Summary of Perceptions of Writing and Challenges of Writing
 Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.206a	0.043	0.024	18.08718

a. Predictors: (Constant), perceptions and challenges of writing

Writing performance and the predictors of writing problems and perceptions had a slightly positive connection (R value of 0.206), according to the regression study, with the model only accounting for 4.3% of the variation (R Square of 0.043). Poor model fit is shown by the low Adjusted R Square (0.024) and large standard error (18.08718), which imply that writing ability is greatly influenced by other unmeasured factors. It also highlights the need for comprehensive, integrated interventions to improve writing skills and academic achievement, highlighting the inadequacy of addressing writing issues and perceptions alone.

Table 8
Parameter Estimates of Independent Variables
 Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(constant)	65.033	19.563		3.324	0.001
	Perceptions of Writing	-9.692	5.180	-0.182	-1.871	0.064
	Challenges of Writing	3.231	2.265	0.139	1.426	0.157

Dependent Variable: Writing Performance

The results show that the predictors of writing perceptions and challenges have little effect on the baseline level of writing performance, as indicated by the significant constant (B = 65.033, p = 0.001). Writing challenges have a marginally significant positive connection (B = 3.231, p = 0.157) with writing performance, but the first perception measure has a statistically insignificant negative link (B = -9.692, p = 0.064). Additionally, the t-values (-1.871 and 1.426) and normalized coefficients (Beta = -0.182 and 0.139) show that neither predictor had a significant effect on writing performance. These findings imply that writing difficulties and perceptions are not significant predictors of performance, underscoring the necessity of investigating other elements like effective writing training, better writing techniques, and support networks in order to produce appreciable gains in writing results.

4. Discussion

4.1. Discussion of Students' Perceptions of Writing

Based on the first questionnaire, with its six sub-sections, the results explore how students view writing. Most students see the value and nature of writing favorably, which can result in a more positive perception as well as better social interactions and general wellbeing. Nevertheless, despite this favorable view, many students find writing to be a challenging ability. They attribute this difficulty to a lack of motivation, distractions, a weak foundation in writing fundamentals, and irregular practice. These difficulties cause poor writing performance, which may hamper communication and academic success. Therefore, students should practice writing a lot if they want to excel in college.

When it comes to writing strategies, the majority of students think that a process-oriented strategy that incorporates planning, drafting, and editing is helpful for enhancing writing abilities. This result is consistent with previous research result of Anastasiadou (2010) that students have positive perception towards process approach in writing, almost all of the students didn't try to convert their believe into practice in their paragraph writing test. Despite their favorable opinion of this method, students frequently do not put it into practice, as seen by their poor performance on paragraph writing assessments. Additionally, while writing, students frequently place more emphasis on language forms than meaning.

Students believe that getting criticism from classmates and teachers is beneficial, and they also think that self-evaluation helps them write better. Since feedback increases motivation and learning capacity, it is thought to be crucial for the development of second language writing abilities. Instructors observe that although students value feedback, they frequently fail to apply it to their real writing processes. During the interview with the English instructors, they said that students didn't get adequate writing practices, so they gave incomplete paragraphs in writing tests and exams. However, the students have positive views about process approach, it is contrary to their practice in writing. In addition, they think that the English courses are unfit to first-year students, so if the courses are revised, students might be encouraged to write well.

4.2. Discussion of Students' Writing Challenges

This section focuses on the different writing challenges that students encounter. It is said that writing is a challenging process that takes a lot of work, and students struggle mostly in three areas: linguistic, psychological, and cognitive challenges. The most prevalent difficulties are linguistic problems, that the students having trouble with vocabulary, grammar, structure, and punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Even while students understand the value of mechanics, they frequently perform poorly in these areas, as seen by their low writing test results. Grammar and vocabulary are also major obstacles, since many students lack the skills and experience needed to write well. This issue is made worse by a lack of writing practice in lower grades.

The students writing is also significantly influenced by psychological issues. Since writing is frequently a solitary work, the absence of immediate feedback can make the writing challenging as well. Although both teachers and students concur that peer and teacher comments may enhance writing, students frequently do not put this feedbacks into practice. The other psychological problem is motivation. Many students lack the self-confidence because they are afraid of being judged by others.

Students' writing skills are also hampered by cognitive issues such trouble focusing, organizing their thoughts, and managing their working memory. Many students wrote incomplete or off-topic paragraphs on their paragraph writing test, demonstrating poor structure and content. Resolving these cognitive problems is essential to assisting students in producing high-caliber writing. According to Berne (1988), writing necessitates instruction-based learning, where students must master the proper use of grammar and vocabulary as well as how to arrange their thoughts logically so that readers may comprehend them. Although instructors did not go into great detail about it, traumatic experiences, like those military students encounter, can also have an effect on the students' confidence and writing skills.

4.3. *Discussion of Students' Writing Performances*

The results of paragraph writing test showed that a smaller proportion of first-year students achieved above average, maybe as a result of their own skill or outside assistance, whereas the majority scored below average, suggesting that writing ability problems are prevalent. The tendency for female students to do better than male students indicate the necessity for gender-sensitive teaching methods, such group projects and focused assistance for male students who need it. The continent-based study revealed that although students struggled greatly with mechanics, grammar, vocabulary, and structure, they did comparatively better in the content. This emphasizes how crucial it is to concentrate on technical writing abilities, such grammar and punctuation exercises, in order to strengthen these areas of deficiency.

Moreover, practical applications and skill-oriented interventions are crucial for enhancing writing performance. Students, especially those who are performing below average, might benefit from peer review sessions, vocabulary-building exercises, and support networks like writing centers and tutoring programs. Students' understanding about effective writing may also be improved by involving them in the evaluation process. The conversation highlights the necessity of focused approaches to deal with the writing difficulties as well as the difference between students' perspectives and their true level of writing skills.

4.4. *Discussion of the Relations among Students' Perceptions, Challenges and Performances of Writing*

With the aim of addressing the fourth research question, the relationship among the students' writing perceptions, challenges and performances is discussed. The complex character of writing performance is shown by the examination of the connections among students' perceptions,

challenges and performance of writing. None of these associations achieved statistical significance, despite the presence of slight trends. This implies that the variables analyzed in this study do not fully convey the complexity of the underlying factors impacting students' writing abilities. In relation to challenges of writing and its influence, Spearman's rho analysis indicates weak positive correlations between writing challenges and performance, too. However, none of these associations are statistically significant. These findings suggest that challenges are insufficient predictors of writing outcomes. This implies a need for a broader perspective that integrates multiple dimensions of writing. The lack of significant correlations between writing challenges and performances highlights how inadequate it is to treat these difficulties separately. Writing is a highly integrative talent that is impacted, for example, by societal, emotional, and cognitive elements.

The regression model's weak explanatory power reaffirms that a complex interaction of unmeasured factors influences writing performance. These may include educational strategies, cultural perspectives on writing, student motivation, and access to writing resources. This claim is further supported by the large residual variability. Towards the contributions of independent variables, the results of the regression analysis show that the two predictors, (challenges and performances of writing), have different impacts on writing performance. There is a slightly positive influence on one perception measure and a marginally negative influence on the other. There is no statistical significance in either of these effects. This difference implies that perceptions are complex, multifaceted phenomena that need more analysis.

5. Conclusions

On the basis of the summary of this study, the following conclusions were drawn.

The study revealed that first-year students of EDU have positive perception about writing. It might be due to their understanding about the importance of writing for their academic and occupational development. However, the students have positive perception of writing, they couldn't change it into practical application in producing effective paragraphs. Moreover, the study revealed that the students' writing performance is below average. The students couldn't write paragraphs with minimal standard of content, organization, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics. In addition, the study showed that the students have faced linguistic, psychological and cognitive challenges in writing. It is also revealed that none of the challenge significantly predicts writing performance, as seen by the weak and non-significant correlations found among linguistic, psychological and cognitive challenges.

6. Recommendation

Remedial English language trainings should be given to first year students before they start regular classes at the university. This may fill in the gap between the writing competency required at university level and the students' poor writing background. In addition, the current English language courses, Communicative English Language Skills I and II, and the courses'

modules that are prepared for first-year students should be revised to align with the current knowledge and educational standards so as to ensure effective writing skills.

The Ethiopian Defense University's community should be aware of the traumatic past experiences that the military students had passed through, and its adverse effect in academic setting in order to take appropriate measures to enhance students' writing performances. Implementing focused training programs that address the particular requirements of military students to improve English instructors' ability to teach writing to military students. The English language instructors should prepare supportive materials for teaching writing which consider the deep-rooted writing challenges that the military students are in, and which focuses on fundamental language skills: mechanics, structure, vocabulary, grammar and content.

Students should also be aware of putting much effort, and deal with a variety of writing challenges including mind block, time restraints, and obstructions, all of which might lower their writing performances understanding that writing is not given for granted. Last but not least is that the Ethiopian Ministry of Education should revise English language curriculums at the lower levels in order to improve students' writing skills and get them ready for the demands of higher education. To provide a solid foundation, early education must successfully teach and reinforce fundamental writing skills. Without this foundation, students who are admitted for university education fail to satisfy academic writing requirements.

7. Implications of the Study

This study is the first of its type to look into first-year students' perceptions, challenges and performances of writing at Ethiopian Defense University. The implications of this study are multifaceted and have the potential to influence educational practices. First of all, this research pinpoints the specific areas of challenges of writing: linguistic, psychological and cognitive where students believed to be challenged. In order to solve these inadequacies, English instructors should use this knowledge to modify their teaching strategies and offer focused assistance. The university may create writing programs and instruments that are more successful understanding the typical difficulties that the students encounter. In addition, the study directs the curriculum of the current English language courses to be revised to better suit the needs of first-year students.

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