

Promoting Critical Thinking Skill in the 21st Century: The Role of Saudi Female EFL Teachers in the Writing Classroom

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Abstract

The current quantitative and qualitative research study attempts to explore the role of Saudi female EFL teachers in promoting critical writing as a 21st century skill in classrooms. The sample size of the study is 145 (16.46 % of the entire population) female EFL teachers in government and private schools in Madinah, Saudi Arabia. For the purpose of the study, the researcher formulated a questionnaire that consisted of closed and one open-ended questions. The results show that 77.9% of the participants rated writing skills as “Difficult” for their students, and only 45 participants (31.0%) corrected students’ written materials “Every time”. Only 35 (24.1%) of the EFL teachers provided students with constructive feedback “Every time”. The results also demonstrate that the students of 68.28% of the participants relied heavily on their teachers’ correction and feedback, and counted on their teachers to provide analytical comments for their further improvement; 62.76% of participants used concept mapping in teaching critical writing skills. The majority of EFL teachers reported that students’ greatest obstacles to mastering critical writing are insufficient vocabulary, inability to express thoughts clearly, and inability to structure ideas logically. The results of the open-ended question show that Saudi female EFL teachers indicate full understanding of the importance of critical writing skills for their students, and as a result, they suggested wide variety of critical writing strategies. Some recommendations have been made based on the study results.

Keywords: Role of EFL Teacher; 21st Century Skills; Critical Thinking; Critical Writing

INTRODUCTION

Thinking, in general, is an active process that helps individuals to solve problems, make decisions, and possibly achieve their goals in life (Tosuncuoglu, 2018). Therefore, higher-order cognitive abilities of critical thinking are considered a benchmark for the development of global citizenship (Sellars et al., 2018).

With the new educational movements in the 21st century where all sorts of information are accessible and available to learners, attention has been shifted to developing learners’ capacity to think critically about acquired information. Moreover, the data collected between May 2016 and August 2017 from 152 countries reported that critical thinking is

listed as one of the four skills of the 21st century (communication, creativity, and problem-solving) and is most frequently identified in these countries' national policy documents (Care, Kim, Vista, & Anderson, 2018).

Accordingly, critical thinking is considered the backbone of effective teaching and learning process in all subject areas. Therefore, in response to the significance of critical thinking, Alnofaie (2013) recommended implementing critical thinking as a holistic pedagogy across all language skills. Clark et al. (2003) added that writing, as a productive skill, is seen as the most powerful means of communication because it provides a visual representation of language where writers can communicate their ideas to others. Furthermore, Flynn and Stainthorp (2006) described writing as "a highly complex task that requires the orchestration of a number of different activities simultaneously and thereby places great demands on the cognitive system" (p. 44). For Yoshimura (2009), writing is considered a means of developing ideas, reformulating knowledge, and discovering personal experiences. In other words, writing is a strongly goal-directed activity, and it is a metacognitively demanding process.

Cox (2005) found that written language serves many purposes both for individuals and for society (p.151). For individuals, writing can play cognitive roles in clarifying, conveying, and shaping thinking, and enhancing private thoughts. At the level of whole societies, written language serves the functions of storing works and transmitting culture. Moreover, Clark et al. (2003) considered writing a social activity because it both reflects and shapes thinking, while Young (2006) described it as a deeply social activity because writers are always writing for readers seeking their understanding, views, and feedback.

Al-Zubaidi (2012) stated that effective writing skill requires some multiple skills such as researching, reading complex contexts, comprehending concepts, synthesizing, analyzing, and responding critically to new and related information. Hashempour, Rostampour, and Behjat (2015) pointed out that writing stimulates students' thinking and enhances their ability to organize ideas, to summarize, analyze, and criticize, as well as strengthens students' learning and reflection on the learned language. As indicated by Mohammad and Hazarika (2016), writing is the most challenging language competence for learners, since it requires a thorough understanding of the language nature. In a way, it is a combination of various other skills, such as reading, listening, grammar, spelling, etc., which makes it a challenging process. Motallebzadeh, Ahmadi, and Hosseinnia (2018) emphasized the significant relationship between 21st century skills and students' writing skills due to the obvious and eminent role of writing in language learning.

Even though the review of the literature in the past two decades has revealed some challenges and factors that affect teaching critical writing skills for native and non-native language students, there are still some unrevealed challenges. Condon and Kelly-Riley (2004) reported that even though Washington State University (WSU) has developed two large-scale assessment programs to diagnose and evaluate students' writing abilities and critical thinking outcomes, the results showed some limitations of the measures and recommended further studies regarding aspects that affect writing and critical thinking.

In a qualitative study conducted by Al-Jarrah and Al-Ahmad (2013), they addressed the following challenges of writing instruction in Jordanian state and private schools: large class size, overloaded teaching schedules, lack of teacher professional development, multi-grade classrooms, and lack of integrating technology due to financial constraints. In a mixed-method design study, Rezaei and Jafari (2014) examined the levels, types, and causes of writing anxiety among Iranian EFL students. The results attributed the high level of writing anxiety to low self-confidence, students' fear of teacher's negative feedback, and poor linguistic knowledge. The results also indicated that judgmental and threatening classroom practices were also reasons beyond this deficit. In a similar study, Fareed, Ashraf, and Bilal (2016) investigated the factors that hinder Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners' writing skills. The results revealed that the major problems were insufficient linguistic proficiency, lack of ideas, reliance on L1, writing anxiety, and weak structure organization. The researchers attributed these problems to certain factors including inadequate teacher training, outdated teaching methods, traditional exam system, inadequate classroom practices, large class size, and low motivation.

In a case study design, Elachachi (2015) explored the effect of cultural barriers on the writing skills of Arab EFL learners. The findings suggested that the cultural experiences of Arab Algerian writers influence their writing. Thus, if the comparisons between L1 and FL writing structures are not made sufficiently clear, EFL teaching may not be effective. Likewise, Ahmed and Myhill (2016) have attempted to explore the impact of the socio-cultural context on EFL writing skills of Egyptian students. The results indicated that students' ability to write was affected negatively by certain issues such as writing traditional topics, directing students' thinking, the influence of L1, rote learning, lack of critical thinking skills, competitive learning, lack of reading skills, and the traditional examination system.

In the Saudi context, Mohammad and Hazarika (2016) investigated the challenges usually faced by EFL students in writing. The results of the contrastive analysis of students' writing samples and questionnaire items indicated that students commit grammatical and spelling errors. Moreover, they memorize written paragraphs to pass exams as they lack the confidence to write fluently and accurately on any new topic. Alidmat and Ayassrah (2017) examined self-reported perception and experiences of Jordanian students taking an ESP course to develop their critical thinking skills through carefully selected English language writing tasks. The results showed, among other issues, that there is little connection between writing tasks in the ESP program and critical thinking skills. Thus, one of the challenges in EFL classroom is teaching/learning critical thinking through writing in an EFL context.

Sharif and Zainuddin (2017) conducted a study to explore ESL students' perception of the problems, challenges, and contributions of reflective writing, which is considered a 21st century skill, and their perception of the effectiveness of teacher feedback. The results of the questionnaire and interview showed that reflective writing made little contribution to language learning. Although the teacher was generally perceived to be offering infrequent feedback and inadequate comments, the students showed a strong need for them.

For all the above-mentioned factors and challenges related to this productive skill, EFL students are hardly skilled in writing, hardly motivated during writing tasks, and rarely show critical thinking when dealing with writing tasks. In response to the above and in view of the little attention writing has received in many countries, the current study attempts to explore the role of Saudi female EFL teachers in promoting students' critical writing skills.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Over the last two decades, it has been noticed that the development of students' writing skills has been neglected in educational curricula (Leki, 2001). Hence, nowadays, one of the target learning outcomes of the EFL curriculum in Saudi Arabia is to provide students with some necessary writing mechanics and enhance their abilities to write accurately. Moreover, EFL teachers are required to use various writing teaching methods and techniques. Furthermore, they have to enhance students' critical thinking, an essential 21st century skill, as they produce written paragraphs. Accordingly, students should be exposed to techniques of searching for information, evaluating collected data, connecting ideas to form a paragraph, and developing a whole essay from small paragraphs.

As the researcher is an EFL university teacher-educator and a schoolteacher supervisor who usually oversees Saudi female EFL teachers in the field, she has noticed that EFL teachers have some problems in teaching writing skills to their students. They have problems in selecting writing teaching methods, strategies, activities, and quizzes. During the usual discussion sessions with the supervisor, Saudi female EFL teachers frequently express their inability to improve their students' writing performance. Likewise, they are unable to trace and locate writing errors of all the students. Moreover, they admit that they can't integrate remedial lessons, activities, or classes to enhance writing skills with their overloaded schedules and extra school tasks, and they lack administrative support. However, they are aware of the importance of correction, feedback, and assistance, although they utilize them in a limited manner.

Some research articles have explored similar difficulties and lack of competence in writing skills in the Saudi context. For instance, the study of Javid and Umer (2014) confirmed that Saudi EFL students have serious problems in their academic writing due to their weaknesses in using appropriate lexical items, in organization of ideas, and in grammar. The other weak points can be found in the use of prepositions, irregular verbs, articles, punctuation, suffixes, prefixes, and in misspellings. Almubark (2016) explored the various challenges encountered by EFL teachers in teaching writing skills to Saudi students in ordinary classrooms. The findings revealed some of the factors that contribute to the challenges as students' poor language proficiency, non-attractive writing skill activities, mother tongue interference, and overloaded classes. These factors negatively affect the teaching of writing skills since traditional methods are followed, there is lack of motivation, and a short time is allotted to reviewing students' work and providing feedback.

Like in other countries, the need to develop critical thinking abilities among Saudi students is evident. Al-Ghamdi and Al-Bargi (2017), Al-Roomy (2016), Alfahadi (2016),

Javid and Umer (2014), and Nejmaoui (2018) revealed that despite the nine years of schooling, Saudi EFL students fail to show satisfactory levels of writing skills or critical thinking skills when producing written texts. In response to the above situation, the researcher attempts to explore, in the current study, the role of Saudi female EFL teachers in promoting students' critical writing as a 21st century skill.

Research questions

The current study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How do Saudi female EFL teachers rate the difficulty level of writing to their students?
2. How frequently do Saudi female EFL teachers correct their students' written works?
3. How frequently do Saudi female EFL teachers give constructive feedback on students' writing skills?
4. What techniques and strategies do Saudi female EFL teachers usually use to reflect on their students' writing skills?
5. What techniques and strategies do Saudi female EFL teachers usually use to teach critical writing skills to their students?
6. What areas of critical writing, from the perspectives of Saudi female EFL teachers, do students find most challenging?
7. What are Saudi female EFL teachers' suggestions for improving students' critical writing skills?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Two areas of research underpinned the research questions and informed this paper: (1) a review of the relationship between critical thinking and writing skills; and (2) the methods, techniques, and strategies employed in teaching critical writing skills.

Critical thinking and writing skills

Nowadays, critical thinking theory has shifted from being a social theory to an educational philosophy that highlights the significance of identifying, confronting, and resolving problems through several cognitive processes of awareness, reflection, and argumentation (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). The essential nature of critical thinking involves the four higher skills of the cognitive domain in Bloom's taxonomy – applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating – while the lower-level abilities are considered its foundation (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). In language teaching, Richards and Schmidt (2010) defined critical thinking as the process that seeks to “engage students more actively with materials in the target language, encourage deeper processing of it, and show respect for students as independent thinkers” (p. 147). Therefore, Carlyle (2018) asserted that critical thinking involves higher-order cognitive processes such as evaluation, problem solving, and decision making, which are all necessary in writing. Likewise, Care, Kim, Vista, and Anderson (2018) reported that

critical thinking consists of a complex set of attitudes and skills such as task-engagement, open-mindedness, self-correction, reasoning, argumentation, hypothesizing, analysis, searching for proofs, and making decisions. Schafersman (1991) added that a critical thinker is a person who has the ability to ask appropriate questions, collect related resources, analyze information, and select reliable conclusions. Hillocks (2010) concluded that to be critical thinkers, learners need to be prepared to construct and defend arguments, to debate, and to interpret their works to convince an audience of the logical reasoning and relevant evidence of the claims being made. To summarize, Figure 1 represents critical thinking skills that an individual may practice.

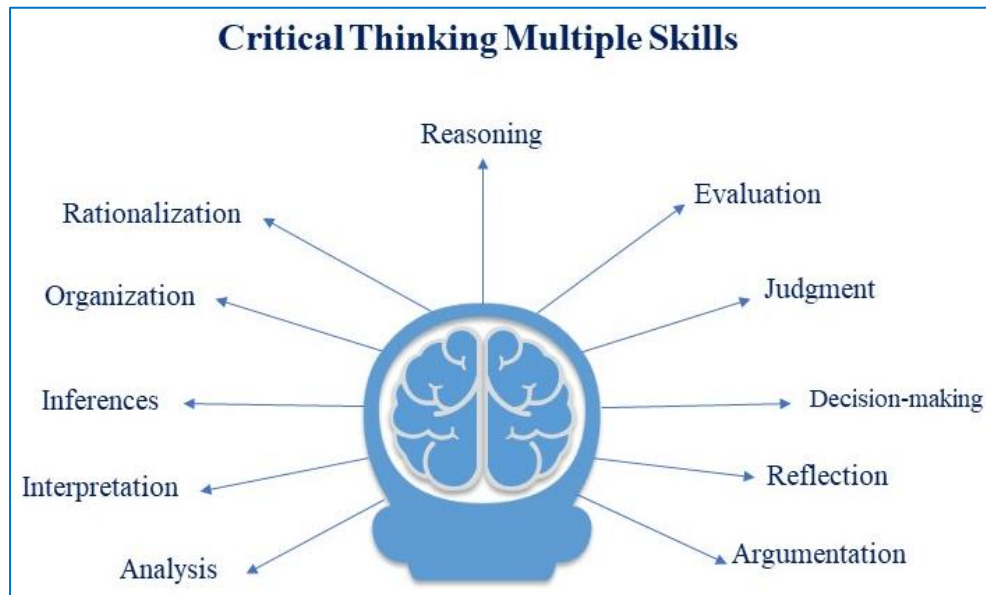


Figure 1. Critical thinking multiple cognitive skills

Hence, the statement by Reay (2018, para.1) that “critical thinking equals clear thought processing, which results in clear writing” reveals a strong link between critical thinking and writing. Moreover, Flower and Hayes (1981) reported that the cognitive process theory rests on certain key points. According to them, the cognitive process theory claims that writing is seen as a set of distinctive thinking processes that writers orchestrate during composition. Such processes are highly integrated into an organization that makes writing a goal-directed thinking process (p. 366).

A number of studies (Alnofaie, 2013; Crossman & Kite, 2012) have summarized some benefits of critical thinking skills. Obviously, critical thinking enables individuals to assess various issues, ideas, and arguments based on clear criteria. It also enables one to pose incisive questions and identify underlying problems. Moreover, critical thinking makes an individual open-minded about ideas and concentrate on the qualities of those ideas. It entails effective communication and problem-solving abilities. Critical writing requires learners to critically search, analyze and evaluate ideas. It enables learners to argue a claim and find solutions to problems. Besides, critical writing refines learners’ skills of being selective of thoughts, words, and paragraphs, before conveying messages to others. Moss (2002) stated that in the act of critical writing, “learners often make use of thinking processes such as: reflecting on what is known; connecting what has been understood

and what is new; analyzing and selecting material and ideas which are relevant to a purpose" (p.121).

According to Carlyle (2018) and Reay (2018), critical writing demands some tips to be accomplished. When writing critical essays, learners have to research by asking thoughtful questions, scrutinize sources of gathering reliable information, and evaluate and validate the reliability of information by establishing discernable criteria to differentiate between facts and opinions. Moreover, learners need to make decisions when they are writing an essay and be able to solve any encountered problems. Before students can draw their own conclusions, they must evaluate and verify arguments from others. Then, they have to break down their arguments about the opinions of others into smaller parts before reaching the stage where they present their own arguments. Carlyle (2018) added that critical writing is a good practice for students to learn to present their arguments after forming judgments and making their decisions. This means that, when engaging in the critical writing process, the learner is using their own judgments to evaluate their own text and make necessary changes to express personal ideas clearly and confidently.

An extensive body of research has accumulated to point to the connection between critical thinking and writing skills. Bernstein and Greenhoot (2014) described an experiment where progressive learning activities and written assignments based on critical thinking scenarios were designed and implemented. An evaluation of students' works showed that the students in the experimental group displayed more advanced critical thinking and writing skills than the students in the conventional courses. The results of an experiment conducted by Dumitrescu, Coman, and Nuțu (2015) confirmed that the assignment of interesting topics to students increases their ability to write functional texts in English. Furthermore, students' metacognitive awareness are stimulated and they show more confidence and become more critical in expressing their ideas and thoughts. In their analytical study, Al-Thani, Abdelmoneim, Cherif, Moukarzel, and Daoud (2016) assessed the value of a new general education program at Qatar University in achieving the outcomes of English writing and critical thinking. The findings showed that 135 freshmen and senior students in the program make progress in English, critical thinking and essay writing.

In a qualitative case study, Assaf et al. (2016) examined nineteen teachers' generative learning after participating in a professional development project in South Africa for six months. The results documented that the process of generative learning encouraged teachers to use the knowledge acquired to reinvent their writing instruction. Moreover, the teachers learned some innovative methods of teaching writing skills and implemented writing instruction that reflected their students' thinking skills, language competences, and needs. The study of Roulston, Teitelbaum, Chang, and Butchart (2016) aimed to present considerations for developing a writing community for doctoral students. The results indicated that doctoral students understand the importance of thinking critically and receiving feedback from others during seminar sessions.

The results of a study conducted by Balderas and Cuamatzi (2018) showed that students' writing skills, self-awareness, critical self-assessment of their writing, and responsibility

for their own learning were dramatically enhanced when self- and peer-correction strategies were implemented in writing instruction. The results of a study conducted by Şenel (2018) indicated that creative writing positively affected students' success level in academic writing skills. Moreover, the results revealed that creative writing helps students develop critical thinking skills. Also, students' problem-solving skills are enhanced when SCAMPER is used as a brainstorming technique. The results of a study conducted by Yusri (2018) revealed positive effects of problem-solving strategies, project based learning, linguistic intelligence, and critical thinking on the students' report writing.

Teaching critical writing skills

Teaching EFL skills requires using a variety of cognitive, metacognitive, and social language learning methods or strategies that fit the purpose of the teaching materials and consider the individual differences among learners – their attitudes and learning styles. In teaching critical writing, EFL teachers should be aware of certain factors essential to selecting appropriate methods. These factors include the type of knowledge, the 21st century skills to be emphasized, and the attitudes, traits, and characteristics of the 21st century learners. Figure 2 illustrates the essential factors that affect the teaching of critical writing skills.

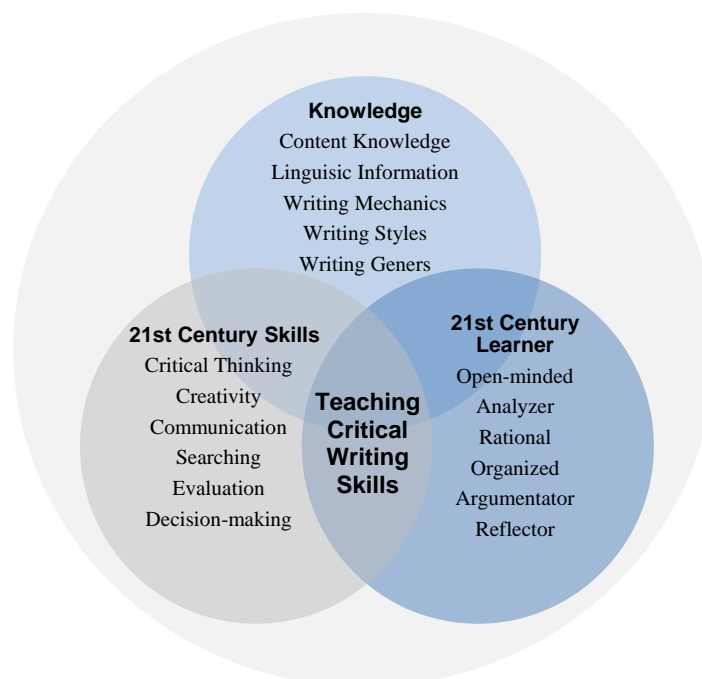


Figure 2. The essential factors that affect the teaching of critical writing skills

There are different contemporary trends that tend to foster higher-order thinking skills, such as integrating technology into the teaching-learning process (Ahmadi, 2018), using practices based on Multiple Intelligence Theory (MI) (Hewitt, 2008), and boosting essential 21st century skills (Beers, 2011). Even though proficiency in writing is viewed as being developed incrementally, there is a wide range of methods, techniques, and strategies that may improve critical writing skills. As reported by a great deal of research (Balderas & Cuamatzi, 2018; Hosseinpour, Biria, & Rezvani, 2019; Nejmaoui, 2018; Yusri,

2018), project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, collaborative learning, problem-based learning, peer review, self- and peer-correction, and online and blended learning are considered notable practical examples.

Doing various types of writing exercises that involve critical thinking such as mind mapping, storytelling, brainstorming, seminars, flipped classroom, reflective writing exercises, etc. may help EFL students do better in their critical writing tasks (Assaf et al., 2016; Babayigit, 2019; Bernstein & Greenhoot, 2014; Roulston et al., 2016; Şenel, 2018; Sharif & Zainuddin, 2017). In addition, Hughes (2014) added that these communicative activities and exercises usually involve the learners in interactive language situations that require effective language use and critical thinking skills.

For the enhancement of students' critical writing skills, some studies investigated the impact of certain teaching and learning methods in creating a conducive instructional environment and developing learners' higher-order thinking skills. For example, Al-Naqbi (2011) investigated the role of mind mapping in helping students to plan effectively for an EFL writing task under an assessment situation. The results revealed that mind mapping does help students to plan and organize their thoughts and ideas for writing tasks. Abbas and Al-bakri (2018) investigated the effect of pair writing technique on Iraqi EFL students' writing performance and anxiety. The results showed that pair writing technique has a positive effect on EFL students' writing performance and can be used effectively to reduce EFL students' writing anxiety. Moreover, pair writing positively affects students' written compositions which are found to be not only better in quality but also longer in size.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, data on the roles of Saudi female EFL teachers in enhancing students' critical writing as a 21st century skill is gathered via quantitative (i.e. questionnaire) and qualitative research (i.e. open-ended question).

Population and Sample of the Study

In this study, the population comprised all the Saudi female EFL teachers teaching in government and private schools (n=881) in Madinah, Saudi Arabia in the 2019-2020 academic year. The sample of the study was composed of 145 (16.46 %) Saudi female EFL teachers. The characteristics of the sample can be described based on their years of teaching experience as follows:

Table 1. Description of the study sample based on school types

Years of Teaching Experience	Types of School				Total
	Elementary	Intermediate	Secondary	More than one	
1-5 years	3 (2.07)	7 (4.83)	9 (6.21)	10 (6.90)	29 (20)
6 – 10 years	4 (2.76)	16 (11.03)	16(11.03)	6 (4.14)	42 (28.97)
11 – 15 years	8 (5.52)	6 (4.14)	9 (6.21)	2 (1.38)	25 (17.24)
16 – 20 years	8 (5.52)	4 (2.76)	14 (9.66)	1 (.69)	27 (18.62)
More than 20 years	3 (2.07)	9 (6.21)	7 (4.83)	3 (2.07)	22 (15.17)
Total	26 (17.93)	42 (28.97)	55(37.93)	22 (15.17)	n=145 (100 %)

It can be seen from Table 1 that the study sample consisted of 145 EFL teachers, 42 (28.97%) of whom reported 6 to 10 years of teaching experience. Regarding the school type, 55 (37.93%) of the participants taught in secondary schools, 42 (28.97%) in intermediate schools, 26 (17.93%) in elementary schools, and 22 (15.17%) in multiple school types.

Table 2. Description of the study sample based on school levels

Years of Teaching Experience	School Levels		Total
	One Level	More than one	
1-5 years	13 (8.97)	16 (11.03)	29 (20)
6 - 10 years	14 (9.66)	28 (19.31)	42 (28.97)
11 - 15 years	16 (11.03)	9 (6.21)	25 (17.24)
16 - 20 years	14 (9.66)	13 (8.97)	27 (18.62)
More than 20 years	12 (8.2)	10 (6.9)	22 (15.17)
Total	69 (47.59)	76 (52.41)	n=145 (100 %)
	n=145 (100 %)		%

Table 2 indicates that more than half of the participants 76 (52.41%) taught more than one level in their schools. This distribution may be attributed to the small number of EFL teachers relative to the number of schools. Besides, teachers in other specialties are not capable substitutes for EFL teachers. Still from Table 2, almost half of the sample – 69 (47.59%) – taught only one level in their schools.

Table 3. Description of the study sample based on professional qualifications

Years of Teaching Experience	Professional qualifications			Total
	Bachelor's Degree	High Diploma	Masters' Degree	
1-5 years	16 (11.03)	10 (6.90)	3 (2.07)	29 (20)
6 - 10 years	38 (26.21)	0	4 (2.76)	42 (28.97)
11 - 15 years	20 (13.79)	1 (.69)	4 (2.76)	25 (17.24)
16 - 20 years	23 (15.86)	0	4 (2.76)	27 (18.62)
More than 20 years	18 (12.41)	1 (.69)	3 (2.07)	22 (15.17)
Total	115 (79.31)	12 (8.28)	18 (12.41)	n=145 (100 %)
	n=145 (100 %)			(100 %)

The data in Table 3 shows that more than two-thirds of the participants – 115 (79.31%) – had bachelor's degrees, whereas 18 (12.41%) and 12 (8.28%) had master's degrees and high diplomas respectively.

Instrumentation

In response to the objectives of the study and based on a number of previously reviewed literature (Ahmed, 2019; Al-Roomy, 2016; Fareed et al., 2016; Javid & Umer, 2014), the researcher devised a questionnaire that was divided into two parts. In the first part, participants were asked to answer four questions about demographic information. The second part consisted of six closed questions. For the first question, the participants were expected to rank their preferences on a 5-point Likert scale (Very Difficult=1, Difficult=2, Neutral=3, Easy=2, & Very Easy=1). The second and third questions regarding frequency of teacher's correction and feedback were ranked using a 7-point Likert scale (Never=1,

Rarely=2, Occasionally=3, Sometimes=4, Frequently=5, Usually=6 & Every time =7). For the other three questions, items related to reflection strategies, teaching critical writing, and writing areas students find challenging were included. The participants were allowed to select as many items as represented their experiences teaching writing.

The last question in the questionnaire was open-ended and aimed to provide greater insight into teaching ideas, suggestions, and changes Saudi female EFL teachers would like to implement in their writing classrooms for effective learning in the future.

To ensure its construct and content validity, the questionnaire was sent to some expert EFL teachers. Accordingly, few changes were made following their suggestions on the 21st century strategies for teaching and reflecting on students' written works. The questionnaire was piloted on 11 EFL teachers to measure the internal consistency of all the items. The results of Cronbach's alpha indicate high levels of internal consistency and reliability among the closed questions in the second part of the questionnaire ($\alpha=0.79$).

Data Collection

The researcher converted the questionnaire to e-format and sent the link to the Saudi female EFL teachers on November 1st, 2019. The participants were clearly instructed to respond to the first and second parts of the questionnaire, as well as to the open-ended question. As noticed by the researcher, some participants responded to the open-ended question in their native language (Arabic), as this helped them to express their opinions thoroughly on suggested teaching ideas, techniques, and strategies to enhance students' performance in writing skills.

Data Analysis

To answer the research questions, the responses to the first part and to the six questions of the second part of the questionnaire were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program Version 25. Descriptive statistics (frequencies & percentages) were computed to analyze the data. The qualitative data obtained via the open-ended question were categorized and summarized using frequencies, followed by a demonstration of the suggested new teaching strategies for writing.

RESULTS

Based on the research sample description, it should be kept in mind that most of the responses in this study were from teachers who had 6 to 10 years of teaching experience, taught in secondary schools, taught more than one level, and held bachelor's degrees. These characteristics may affect the reserved responses to the research questions by giving real and authentic responses that reflect the teaching of writing skills in Saudi EFL classrooms.

Results of question 1

Table 4 reports the results of the first research question: "How do Saudi female EFL teachers rate the difficulty level of writing to their students?".

Table 4. Rating the difficulty level of writing to EFL students

Difficulty level of writing	Frequency	Percentage
Very difficult	12	8.3
Difficult	113	77.9
Neutral	7	4.8
Easy	12	8.3
Very easy	1	0.7
Total	145	100.0

As indicated above, more than two-thirds – 133 (77.9 %) – of the Saudi female EFL teachers who participated in the study rated writing as “Difficult” for their students. Besides, 12 (8.3 %) participants found it “Very difficult” for their students. A similar response, 12 (8.3 %), considered writing “Easy”, while only 1 participant (0.7 %) considered it “Very easy” for her students.

Results of question 2

Table 5 provides the summary statistics for question 2: “How frequently do Saudi female EFL teachers correct their students’ writing works?”

Table 5. The frequency of correction of students’ writing

Correction frequency level	Frequency	Percentage
Rarely (in less than 10% of the chances when I could have)	4	2.8
Occasionally (in about 30% of the chances when I could have)	20	13.8
Sometimes (in about 50% of the chances when I could have)	23	15.9
Frequently (in about 70% of the chances when I could have)	31	21.4
Usually (in about 90% of the chances I could have)	22	15.2
Every time	45	31.0
Total	n=145	100.0

Table 5 is quite revealing in several ways. It shows authentic responses from Saudi female EFL teachers regarding how frequently they corrected their students’ works. Only 45 (31.0 %) indicated correcting students’ works “Every time” and 31 (21.4 %) of them corrected “Frequently”. 23 (15.9 %) “Sometimes” corrected students’ works, 22 (15.2 %) “Usually” did, and 20 (13.8 %) “Occasionally” did. 4 (2.8 %) teachers “Rarely” did the correction.

Results of question 3

Table 6 below illustrates the results of the third question: “How frequently do Saudi female EFL teachers give constructive feedback on students’ writing skills?”

Table 6: The frequency of constructive feedback given to students

Feedback Frequency Level	Frequency	Percentage
Never	2	1.4
Rarely (in less than 10% of the chances when I could have)	5	3.4
Occasionally (in about 30% of the chances when I could have)	19	13.1
Sometimes (in about 50% of the chances when I could have)	31	21.4
Frequently (in about 70% of the chances when I could have)	24	16.6

Usually (in about 90% of the chances when I could have)	29	20.0
Every time	35	24.1
Total	n=145	100.0

The above results show the responses of Saudi female EFL teachers to question 3 of the research questions. They show that only 35 (24.1%) of the EFL teachers provided students with constructive feedback “Every time”, 31 (21.4%) “Sometimes” did, and 29 (20%) “Usually” gave feedback to students. 24 (16.6%) of the respondents gave feedback “Frequently” and 19 (13.1%) provided it “Occasionally”. The responses “Rarely” and “Never” show the least values: 5 (3.4%) and 2 (1.4%) respectively.

Results of question 4

To answer the fourth question, “What techniques and strategies do Saudi female EFL teachers usually use to reflect on their students’ writing skills?”, the participants were allowed to select multiple types of reflection and strategies they employed in their teaching. Figure 3 provides an overview of the EFL teachers’ choices.

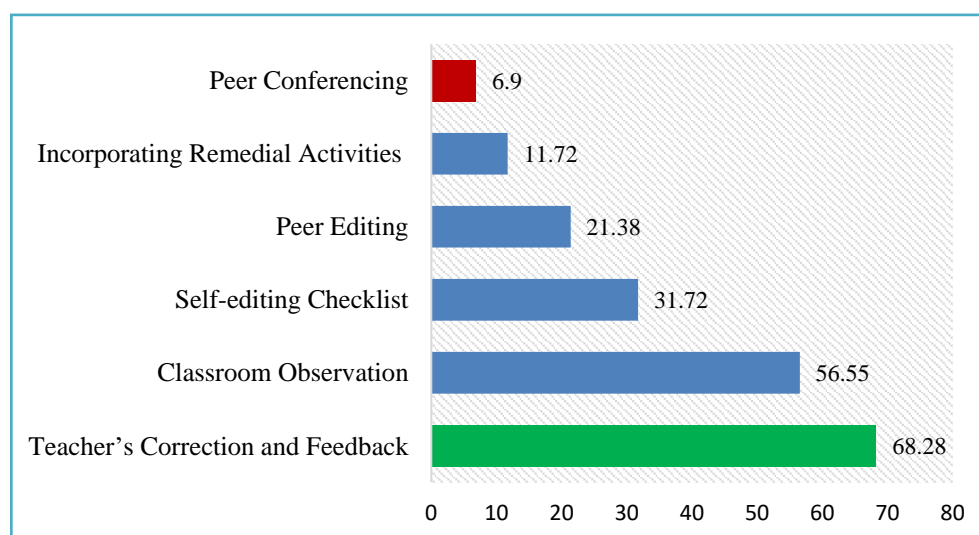


Figure 3. Implemented techniques and strategies for reflecting on students’ writing

The results described in Figure 3 show that about 68.28 % of the participants employed correction and feedback to convey thoughts, ideas, and analytical comments to students for the sake of further improvement. 56.55 % used classroom observation as a technique to reflect on students’ writing performance. About 31.72 % employed self-editing checklist as a self-reflection technique that could provide opportunities for the students to make long-lasting improvements. 21.38 % indicated their use of peer editing to reflect on students’ works. Two reflection techniques were used the least: remedial activities (11.72 %) and peer conferencing (6.9 %).

Results of question 5

To answer the fifth question, “What techniques and strategies do Saudi female EFL teachers usually use to teach critical writing skills to their students?”, the participants

were also allowed to select multiple strategies. Figure 4 provides the EFL teachers' responses.

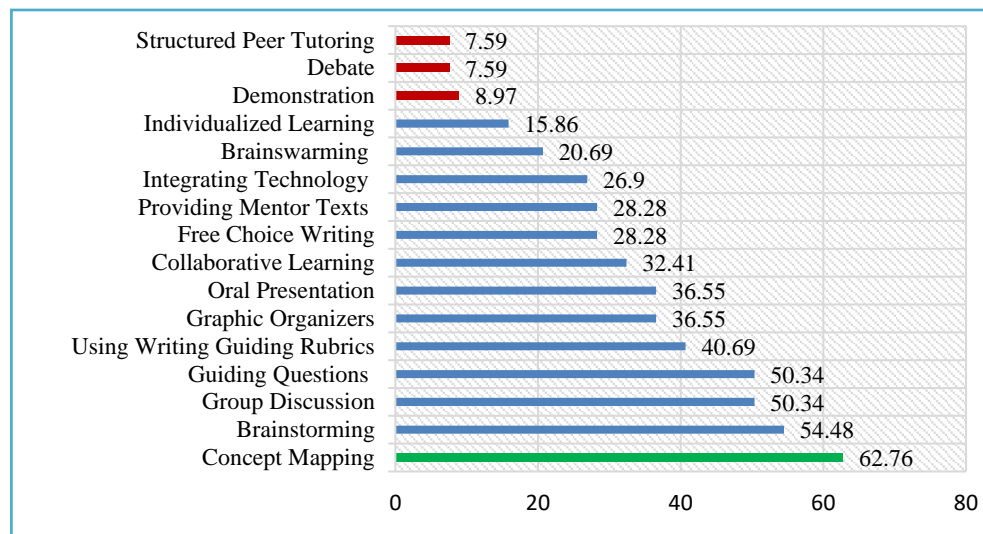


Figure 4: *Implemented techniques and strategies for teaching writing skills*

The overall response to this question was promising. Saudi female EFL teachers reported the positive use of multi teaching methods in teaching critical writing skills. The results seem authentic and reflect real implementation as 62.76 % of the participants reported their use of concept mapping in teaching critical writing skills. The researcher's field observation confirmed this to be true as she found that teachers preferred using concept mapping in their writing lessons. Similarly, the majority of those who responded to this question (54.48 %) selected brainstorming, which is also very popular in Saudi writing classes. Group discussion and guiding questions (50.34 % each) were fairly popular among EFL teachers as methods of teaching critical writing skills.

Moreover, the results show that rubrics, as a teaching but not an assessment method, was implemented by 40.69 % of the participants. The results demonstrate that 36.55 % of participants use graphic organizers and oral presentations in teaching critical writing skills. 32.41 % demonstrated an average use of collaborative learning as a strategy for teaching writing. The above results indicate limited use of certain strategies such as giving free topics (28.28 %), providing mentor texts (28.28 %), using technology (26.69 %), and brainstorming (20.69 %) to teach critical writing.

The results in Figure 4 show that the participants gave little attention and concern to some other strategies of teaching writing skills such as individualized learning (15.86 %), demonstration (8.97 %), debate (7.59 %), and peer tutoring (7.59 %).

Results of question 6

To answer the sixth question, "What areas of essay writing, from the perspectives of Saudi female EFL teachers, do students find most challenging?", the participants were allowed to select multiple critical issues to represent the writing challenges faced by their students. Figure 5 provides an overview of the EFL teachers' views.

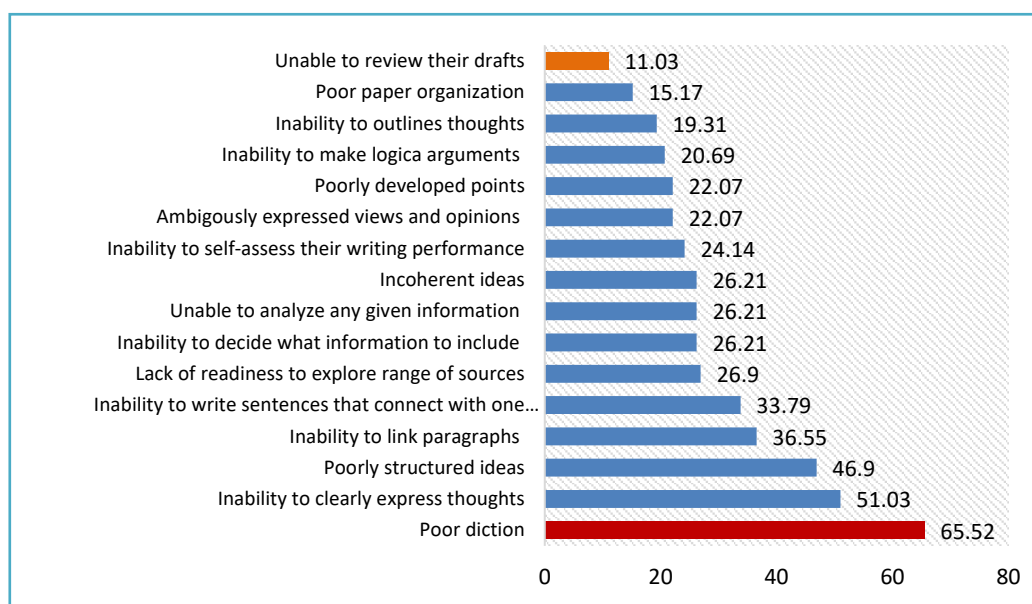


Figure 5: Writing challenges faced by students, from the perspectives of their EFL teachers

As shown in Figure 5, about 65.52 % of the participants reported that students' biggest obstacle to mastering writing was "poor diction". Slightly over half of the respondents (51.03 %) reported that "inability to clearly express thoughts" when writing was considered a challenge to EFL students. The EFL teachers ranked "poorly structured ideas" as the third biggest challenge, with a percentage of (46.9 %). Other responses to this question included students' inability to "link paragraphs" and "write sentences that cohere with one another", with percentages of 36.55 % and 33.79 % respectively. About 26.9 % of the participants added that another challenge EFL students encountered while writing was the "lack of readiness to explore a range of sources".

Furthermore, the EFL teachers ranked the following three challenges equally, with a small percentage (26.21%): "inability to decide what information to include", "inability to analyze given information", and "incoherent ideas". Likewise, they ranked the writing challenge "inability to self-assess their writing performance" low, with an approximate percentage of 24.14 %. Besides, the EFL teachers reported two issues that EFL students encountered occasionally when writing essays, with an equal percentage (22.7 %): "ambiguously expressed views and opinion" and "poorly developed points". Students' inability "to make logical arguments", with 20.69 %, was reported as one of the least challenges faced by students when writing. The results indicate that EFL students face extremely little challenges in "outlining their thoughts", "organizing their papers", and "reviewing their drafts", with the percentages 19.31 %, 15.17 %, and 11.03 % respectively.

Results of question 7

The analyses of the seventh question, "What are the Saudi female EFL teachers' suggestions for improving students' critical writing?", which was included to elicit the participants' teaching ideas, innovations, and suggestions, demonstrate interesting responses on how to enhance the teaching of writing skills.

Based on the qualitative data, one of the participants suggested that *“It would be more effective to have extra classes for writing. Students need to learn more about writing structures and know how to express themselves and their ideas.”*

Another participant expressed her belief that *“Short daily writing on free topics is one of the ideas that enhance students’ writing skills.”*

A third participant suggested using *“More feedback, different interesting strategies, and self-editing checklist.”*

Another participant identified the need to have *“More periods for writing practice and scaffolding activities.”*

A teacher added: *“I think the best way to capture ideas is by using graphic organizers. A good writer is constantly gathering creative input. We need to have a system for collecting them, a great tool to help students create their own paragraphs.”*

Based on her experience, one participant argued that *“The more vocabulary and phrases the students know, the better their writing will be. However, I think teaching the correct rules for writing and expansion of ideas may help students to write accurately.”*

While another EFL teacher commented: *“Students should practice the grammatical structures they have studied. In addition, they should write using different techniques such as cubing and fishbone diagrams that help them to be more specific in their writings. Not to forget that students should select topics which are related to their own interests.”*

Considering the many responses by the EFL teachers to the open-ended question, the researcher categorized the responses into: (a) new suggestions for teaching critical writing; (b) new strategies not mentioned in the questionnaire; and (c) experience-based strategies implemented by the EFL teachers in their writing classes. The first category has the least number of responses, as the EFL teachers provided only three new suggestions. They are: (1) providing extra reading practice (10.34%), (2) teaching extra writing classes (9.66 %), and (3) establishing more opportunities and activities for practicing writing skills (4.83 %). For the other two categories, Table 7 provides an overview of the EFL teachers’ responses that fall under them.

Table 7. Saudi female EFL teachers’ suggestions for improving critical writing

New strategies	Frequency & Percentage	Experience-based strategies	Frequency & Percentage
Vocabulary & grammar activities	9 (6.21)	Giving free topics	14 (9.66)
Gallery walk strategy	7 (4.83)	Using technology	12 (8.28)
Games	6 (4.14)	Mentor texts	8 (5.52)
Motivating students	4 (2.76)	Individualized topics	6 (4.14)
Peer correction	4 (2.76)	Frequent feedback	6 (4.14)
Role-playing	3 (2.07)	Collaborative work	3 (2.07)
Self-editing checklist	2 (1.38)	Graphic organizers	2 (1.38)
Round-robin	2 (1.38)	Guiding questions	1 (0.69)
Peer tutoring	2 (1.38)	Concept mapping	1 (0.69)
Using dictionaries	2 (1.38)	Rubric	1 (0.69)
Scaffolding activities	1 (0.69)		
Research	1 (0.69)		

Problem-based learning	1 (0.69)
Fishbone diagram	1 (0.69)
Digital stories	1 (0.69)

As can be seen in Table 7, EFL teachers suggested some new strategies for teaching writing, such as using supportive “vocabulary and grammar activities”, which at 6.21% is the highest reported response, “gallery walk” (4.83%), and using “games” (4.14%). “Motivating students” and “peer correction” have equal percentage values of 2.76%. “Role-playing” has 2.07%. The new suggested strategies – “self-editing checklist”, “round-robin”, “peer tutoring”, and “using dictionaries” – show equal responses (1.38%). The other strategies for teaching writing – “scaffolding”, “rubric”, “research”, “problem-based learning”, “Fish bone diagram”, and “digital stories”, each of with a low percentage (0.69 %) – were mentioned only once by the participants of the study.

The experience-based strategies suggested by EFL teachers were interesting. The participants stated their use of different strategies for teaching writing, such as “giving free topics”, which was the highest response (9.66 %), “using technology” to enhance writing skills (8.28 %), and providing “mentor texts” (5.52 %). Two strategies implemented by EFL teachers have equal response percentages (4.14 %), and they include: offering opportunities for “individualized topics” and providing learners with “frequent feedback” on their works. The results show that only 2.76% of the participants “motivated students”. About 2.07% of the EFL teachers indicated their average use of “collaborative work” in teaching critical writing. Similarly, a few responses (1.38 %) indicate the use of “graphic organizers” in teaching writing. The least number of responses (0.69 %) came from EFL teachers who reported using “guiding questions”, “concept mapping”, and “rubrics”.

DISCUSSION

This study set out with the aim of exploring the role of Saudi female EFL teachers in improving students’ critical writing, which is a necessary 21st century skill. Based on the research objectives and sample, the results need to be interpreted in the context of the general education framework.

Regarding the result of the first research question – that students consider writing “difficult” – one possible reason responsible for it is that EFL teachers can easily anticipate their students’ deficiency in writing skills and how writing in general, and critical writing in specific, is considered a difficult skill in EFL classrooms. From their long teaching experience, they can determine with confidence the serious challenges that hinder their students from becoming good writers. There are, however, other possible explanations resulting from the researcher’s field observations. For example, writing is difficult because teachers adopt inappropriate teaching methods and learning strategies. Moreover, some EFL teachers tend to teach the writing sections in the textbooks, like reading, speaking, or listening, when they could have used writing audio materials. Also, EFL teachers don’t seem to pay attention to the writing exercises and drills in the students’ workbooks. Another source of students’ writing difficulty is the teachers’ ready-

to-duplicate model that doesn't allow students to think, gather thoughts, write critically, or gain more proficiency. These results seem to be consistent with the results of other research (Al-Zubaidi, 2012; Alidmat & Ayassrah, 2017; Almubark, 2016; Fareed et al., 2016; Javid & Umer, 2014; Mohammad & Hazarika, 2016; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014), which found that writing is the most challenging language competence for learners as it requires such multiple skills as comprehending concepts, synthesizing, and analyzing related information. In addition, teaching writing requires the implementation of innovative teaching methods that evoke learners' abilities to think.

Concerning the second research question, the results seem promising as almost one-third of the participants corrected their students' written works every time. One possible explanation for this result is that EFL teachers are mandated to correct and give written feedback on students' works, which are frequently checked by their school principals and supervisors. Another possible reason may be the students' desire to learn through their mistakes and to improve their knowledge of writing mechanics. The findings could also be attributed to teachers' belief in the importance of correcting students' works and providing the necessary feedback to students, since the responses to the fourth and seventh questions show that giving corrections is a top priority for the teachers. These results are in line with those of Balderas and Cuamatzi (2018), which showed that students' writing skills are enhanced when different methods of correction are implemented.

Similarly, the results of question three also seem inspiring. The results show that most of the teachers provided their students with constructive feedback every time they did written assignments. Moreover, the rest of the responses ranged from "sometimes" and "usually" to "frequently" and "occasionally". The results could be attributed to the strong confidence of the teachers in their role and responsibilities when teaching writing classes.

Another reason could be the students' demands to be convinced of their mistakes and their grades. Thus, the teachers were often eager to provide frequent, constructive, and convincing feedback to them. Similarly, EFL teachers are mandated to give feedback to students and provide evidence to be reviewed by their school principals and supervisors frequently. The results of providing feedback are in accord with the results of some recent studies (Roulston et al., 2016; Sharif & Zainuddin, 2017), which reported how students value the importance of receiving feedback and indicate a strong need for it.

Regarding the results of question four, we can infer that the majority of EFL teachers prefer using concept mapping, brainstorming, group discussions, and guiding questions as teaching strategies. This may be due to a couple of reasons. First, these teaching strategies are suggested by the curriculum designers for use in teaching compositions in the students' textbooks. Hence, teachers find them fully explained and ready to be implemented in their writing classes. Second, due to the frequent use of these strategies, they have become easy for the EFL teachers to adopt and apply even when they are not suggested in the textbooks. The other strategies and techniques for teaching writing were moderately implemented, and some of them are rarely utilized in teaching writing, such as demonstrations, debate, and peer tutoring. One possible reason beyond their infrequent use is that EFL teachers lack the necessary training to introduce them into

their classes, or else their use is limited to very specific topics. These results match those observed in earlier studies (Abbas & Al-bakri, 2018; Al-Naqbi, 2011; Al-Thani et al., 2016; Bernstein & Greenhoot, 2014; Dumitrescu et al., 2015; Roulston et al., 2016; Şenel, 2018; Yusri, 2018), which accentuated the impact of utilizing various teaching strategies – such as projects, seminars, mind mapping, problem-based learning, progressive learning activities, etc. – in teaching writing skills.

When looking at the results of question five, it is obvious how EFL teachers rely on correction and feedback more than other reflection strategies. There are possible interpretations of this result. The heavy reliance on the strategy may be due to its possibility to be applied during class time. Moreover, it is one strategy that teachers are obliged to use, since their performance is monitored and discussed by both school leaders and the subject supervisors based on that. Besides, it is considered one of the teachers' obligatory duties that may affect their final job assessment. Based on the results, classroom observation comes in second place as a technique for reflecting on students' performance. This result seems convincing because teachers usually pay attention to the most common and frequent mistakes or errors committed by the students, and then, obviously, they reflect on these problematic areas. The other reflection techniques are occasionally or rarely used because of the necessity to train both teachers and students on how to implement them successfully in writing classes.

Based on the perspectives of the teachers, the greatest challenges faced by EFL students in critical writing are insufficient vocabulary, inability to clearly express their thoughts, poorly structured ideas. These responses recur maybe because of the teachers' ability to diagnose and analyze the basic problem areas that their students have. Accordingly, they understand that students are not capable of attaining a high-level proficiency in critical writing when they even lack surface information on how to build a complete written text. Moreover, it seems that teachers believe in fixing these three important challenges before introducing the students to critical writing. Hence, the EFL teachers give much attention to the other challenges such as the inability to link paragraphs, connect sentences, explore a range of resources, decide about needed information, analyze given information, and incoherence of ideas. The results regarding how critical writing seems challenging are in agreement with those of previous studies (Ahmed & Myhill, 2016; Al-Jarrah & Al-Ahmad, 2013; Alnofaie, 2013; Elachachi, 2015), which identified several and different reasons for its difficulty to students.

EFL teachers' ideas and suggestions for improving students' critical writing skills, coming as the responses to the open-ended question, indicate their full understanding of the importance of critical writing for their students. The analysis and categorization of their responses reveal that both newly suggested or experience-based strategies are promising and inspiring. The Saudi female EFL teachers seem keen on implementing a wide variety of strategies for learning critical writing, such as peer correction, peer tutoring, scaffolding activities, research, problem-based learning, giving free topics, using technology, and collaborative work, etc. These results are in agreement with the results of Abbas and Al-bakri (2018), Bernstein and Greenhoot (2014), Hughes (2014), and Şenel

(2018), who reported the significant effect of using different learning strategies for critical writing skills.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The current quantitative and qualitative research study aimed to explore the role of Saudi female EFL teachers in promoting critical writing as a 21st century skill. The sample of the study comprised 145 Saudi female EFL teachers (16.46 % of the entire population of Saudi female EFL teachers) in government and private schools in Madinah, Saudi Arabia. For the purpose of the study, the researcher formulated a questionnaire that consisted of closed and open-ended questions. The results show that the most female EFL teachers rated writing skills as “Difficult” for their students. Moreover, the results reveal that most EFL teachers correct students’ written materials and provide students with constructive feedback “Every time”. Regarding teaching strategies, the results demonstrate that female EFL teachers use concept mapping to teach writing skills and correction and feedback to reflect on students’ works for the sake of further improvement. The majority of EFL teachers ascribed students’ failure to master critical writing to insufficient vocabulary, inability to clearly express their thoughts, and poorly structured ideas.

The results of the open-ended question show full understanding of the importance of critical writing skills by female EFL teachers. Accordingly, they suggested using a wide range of strategies, such as peer correction, peer tutoring, scaffolding activities, research, problem-based learning, giving free topics, using technology, collaborative work, etc., to increase the act of critical writing among Saudi students.

Hence, one general conclusion that can be drawn from the findings of the current research is that some Saudi students have poor writing skills and have not reached adequate proficiency levels required for the 21st century. This study also shows that EFL teachers are aware of the writing deficiencies of their students, as the techniques of writing instruction and learning in Saudi schools suffer from lack of adequate teaching methods and strategies, the adoption of which could lead to improved writing mechanics and critical writing skills.

Furthermore, based on the findings of several previous studies (Al-Jarrah & Al-Ahmad, 2013; Almubark, 2016; Fareed et al., 2016; Javid & Umer, 2014; Mohammad & Hazarika, 2016; Rezaei & Jafari, 2014), which identified the critical issues, factors, or reasons beyond the necessity to place some focus on critical writing instruction, some practical recommendations have been derived. First, the Ministry of Education should pay attention to the heavy and frequently changeable administrative tasks that overload teachers’ schedules to the expense of their teaching performance. Second, it is essential for the Saudi educational system, which seeks to provide teachers with in-service professional development programs (PDP), to provide enough room for the subject supervisors to invent their own remedial training workshops and not depend only on ready-made PDPs by the Ministry of Education. Third, to be qualified in the face of the 21st century demands, teachers should participate in effective and frequent PDPs that include training, practice, and feedback. More specifically, Saudi teachers should rapidly register on the Saudi Digital Library (SDL) (<https://portal.sdl.edu.sa/>), a free online

training platform under the supervision of the Ministry of Education that provides both learning resources and various internationally certified PDPs.

Fourth, the Ministry of Education should ensure teachers' participation in the online professional learning communities (PLCs) established through the most popular Saudi educational platforms – the National Education Portal Ein (<https://ien.edu.sa/Home/dashbord>) and the Future Gate (<https://fg.moe.gov.sa/>) – where teachers can share their expertise officially and more systematically. Fifth, teachers need to be made aware of the importance of taking part in these PLCs, where they can ask questions and gain more knowledge to improve their teaching skills and performance. Besides, as Saudi EFL teachers are required to teach in multi-school levels and engage students in learning, PLCs are considered a valuable resource where they can adopt and implement innovative teaching strategies and scaffolding activities in their teaching.

Finally, EFL teachers should set up appropriate writing tasks, encourage learners to compose their own critical texts, and be flexible and supportive of learners as they draft, revise and proofread their works. Furthermore, EFL teachers must seek to improve learners' basic technical aspects of writing, e.g. spelling, grammar, and punctuation, before moving to other complicated critical writing skills. Likewise, they should supervise peer tutoring, peer correction, and self-correction. Besides, they should not only apply such techniques in their writing classes, but must train learners to utilize them, in pairs or in groups, to gain confidence and reduce writing anxiety.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has resulted in a number of significant findings. However, the participants consisted exclusively of female EFL teachers, and therefore the potential impact of gender on the finding is beyond the scope of this study. Moreover, this study has only provided data on teachers' perspectives; a broader study that includes the views and concerns of both EFL students and teachers could be conducted to add to the body of research in this area. Furthermore, the study was held only among Saudi female EFL teachers in Madinah. Hence, to generalize the results, further studies in a wider scale in the Saudi context are encouraged.

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