
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Classroom Practices, Writing Enhancement and Creativity Among EFL Struggling Students: A Systematic Review

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| ABSTRACT

This study aimed to conduct a systematic review (SR) of the author's own writing research in EFL published between 2004 and 2025. The 20-article corpus was categorized into five clusters: (i) Engaging and motivating instructional writing techniques, (ii) writing about untraditional themes (global themes), (iii) practicing writing for creativity, (iv) combining writing with reading and grammar, and (v) writing assessment and feedback. Across these clusters, the findings confirmed that writing is not an isolated skill but is a cognitive–linguistic process shaped by a wide range of instructional strategies and pedagogical factors that include the use of technologies and social media platforms (such as Facebook, blogs, online courses, mind mapping tools, and iRubrics), writing about global and untraditional themes, task based writing, online writing tasks, and the integration of writing and reading and grammar. Teacher qualifications, assessment practices, error correction techniques, and methods for generating and organizing ideas also play a significant role. The five clusters were defined to capture these instructional dimensions and to highlight the specific practices through which writing improvement and creativity were achieved. The findings show that students write more confidently and competently when cognitive load is reduced and idea generation is supported through familiar, meaningful, and contextually relevant tasks. Writing difficulties among EFL learners stem not only from linguistic limitations but also from challenges in generating ideas, limited exposure to authentic writing, and anxiety produced by exhaustive error correction. Instructional models that foreground meaning, scaffold the writing process, and provide selective, actionable feedback help students develop fluency, accuracy, and self monitoring skills. Overall, the findings call for writing instruction that is process oriented, learner centered, and authentic communication. When students are given time, support, and meaningful topics, they develop not only stronger writing skills but also greater confidence and motivation as writers. This review provides a foundation for future research and practice aimed at creating writing classrooms where learners can think, express, and grow with clarity and purpose. This SR contributes a clearer, more integrated understanding of writing pedagogy and offers educators evidence based insights for designing writing instruction that is both pedagogically sound and responsive to learners' needs.

| KEYWORDS

c review (SR), writing instruction, writing pedagogy, writing practices, creative writing, practice with technology, EFL students, writing difficulties, writing skill enhancement

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1. Introduction

Second Language (L2) writing research investigates how people learn to write in a non-native language, focusing on cognitive processes (planning, revising, pausing), linguistic features (complexity, meaning), instructional methods (feedback, task design), and learner factors (mindsets, motivation). Key areas in writing research include examining writing behaviors via keystroke logging, analyzing complexity beyond form, applying theories like the Sociocultural Theory and Cognitive Models, and exploring learner beliefs (mindsets) to improve teaching and understanding of L2 writing development.

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Building on this conceptual overview, the historical development of L2 writing research over the past five decades shows how these themes gradually evolved into a distinct and mature field. In the early 1980's, L2 writing research¹ became a recognizable field, when scholars began treating L2 writing as distinct from first language (L1) composition studies and general second language acquisition (SLA) research. In the 1990s, it became a formal discipline with salient research areas as contrastive rhetoric, focus on form and accuracy, writing assessment research, and feedback studies (teacher, peer, written corrective feedback). The 1990's gave L2 writing its identity, separate from SLA and composition studies. In the 2000s, the L2 writing research expanded theoretically. Major research themes included written corrective feedback, corpus-based writing research, identity and voice in L2 writing and sociocultural perspectives. This period marked the shift from "how do students write?" to "how do context, identity, and discourse shape writing?" In the 2010s, L2 writing research became global and interdisciplinary with a focus on technology, multimodality, and global expansion. Writing research themes in this decade included online writing platforms, collaborative writing, digital feedback tools, multimodal composition, genre-based pedagogy in EFL contexts, and writing assessment and rubrics. This is when EFL writing research, especially in Asia and the Middle East, exploded in volume. In the 2020s, it entered the AI-based era. This phase is defined by AI-assisted writing (ChatGPT, Grammarly, AWE systems), automated feedback and scoring, ethics and academic integrity, hybrid and online writing instruction, and digital literacies (Manchón, 2016).

A review of the literature revealed a plethora of systematic reviews (SRs) of L2 writing research including writing in EFL/ESL. Recent SRs and thematic syntheses on EFL/ESL writing covered a wide range of learner challenges, instructional approaches, and discourse features. Prior studies examined interventions to improve university students' EFL writing competence and genre-based pedagogies (Zhang, Tan & Roy, 2023; Zhai & Razali, 2023; Aulia, 2024), teaching and learning practices in school contexts (Geng, Yu, Liu & Liu, 2022), and challenges and solutions associated with academic writing (Akhtar, Hassan, Saidalvi & Hussain, 2019). Other studies focused on critical thinking and writing apprehension (Yin, Saad & Halim, 2023; Hamamah & Junining, 2022; Nurkamto, Prihandoko, Putro & Purwati, 2024), error patterns in learners' writing (Mohammadi & Mustafa, 2020), and the role of peer feedback, teacher feedback, and collaboration in developing writing (Iswandari & Jiang, 2020; Zhang, 2022; Liang, Singh, Mulyadi & Singh, 2025). Additional reviews addressed assessment practices and writing evaluation (Zhang, Tan & Roy, 2023; Taufiqulloh, Fadhly, Rosdiana, Ferrer, Ratsamemonthon, Nindya & Irawan, 2025), as well as discourse-level features such as stance and citation practices or the integration of cultural background in writing instruction (Zhang, Lee & Chan, 2024; Jarkovská & Kučirková, 2020; Baresh, 2024). These studies synthesize research conducted by multiple authors and typically focus on specific techniques, constructs, or proficiency-neutral populations. None offered a longitudinal, SR of a single researcher's classroom practices with struggling EFL students, nor do they foreground the ways in which such practices can simultaneously enhance writing proficiency and foster creative expression.

Another line of recent SR of writing research examined the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital tools into EFL/ESL writing instruction and assessment. Some SRs explored the affordances and challenges of ChatGPT in writing pedagogy (Alsaedi, 2024; Feng Teng, 2024; Mali, 2025), while others synthesized evidence on automated writing evaluation systems such as Grammarly, ProWritingAid, Pigai, Criterion, and broader AWE platforms (Llausas et al., 2024; Damayanti & Santosa, 2024; Aldosemani et al., 2023; Huawei & Aryadoust, 2023; Ding & Zou, 2024). Additional SRs focused on technology-enhanced collaborative writing and online learning environments, including WhatsApp-mediated writing, e-portfolios, CMS-assisted instruction, and computer-based writing tools (Khurram et al., 2024; Aygün & Aydın, 2016; Tsai, 2015; Tusino et al., 2024; Pardede, 2024; 2025). Further SRs synthesized immersive and module-based digital writing instruction (Chen et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2022), online collaborative learning (Al-Yafei & Mudhsh, 2023), and the effectiveness of automated writing evaluation programs (Geng & Razali, 2022). Collectively, these studies highlight the rapid expansion of AI-driven and technology-mediated writing support, emphasizing benefits such as increased feedback immediacy, improved accuracy, and enhanced learner engagement, while also noting concerns related to over-reliance, academic integrity, and uneven digital literacy. However, despite their breadth, these reviews focus primarily on tools and technologies rather than on classroom-based pedagogical practices, and they rarely address the development of struggling writers or the role of creativity in writing improvement.

Across these SR studies, the focus is on specific interventions, skills, or constructs (e.g., genre-based instruction, peer feedback, critical thinking, academic writing challenges, assessment, stance, citation practices). They synthesize dispersed studies by many researchers, usually with neutral or mixed-proficiency populations. They rarely address struggling writers as a central group. None of them offers a longitudinal, researcher-centered synthesis of a single scholar's classroom practices, nor do they foreground creative writing outcomes emerging from pedagogical work with low-achieving EFL students. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by conducting a systematic review of the author's own writing research in EFL published between 2004 and 2025 that focuses

¹ [Second language writing](#)

on classroom practices with struggling EFL writers, blogging and digital platforms, combining reading and writing, feedback and assessment and other teacher-designed interventions that lead to writing improvement and creativity.

This SR is significant because it brings together more than two decades of scholarship that spans writing pedagogy, L2 writing development, feedback practices, assessment, technology-mediated writing, and cross-linguistic issues. By tracing these themes across the author's publications from 2002 to 2025, the review documents the evolution of an entire field through one scholar's lens. This period witnessed major transformations in L2 writing research—from early skills-based approaches to process-oriented instruction, from genre-based pedagogy to corpus-informed writing, and from digital writing practices to the integration of emerging technologies. The author's work reflects these shifts in real time, situating her contributions within global developments such as the rise of digital writing, the expansion of EFL writing research, and the globalization of English writing instruction. In doing so, the review makes this evolution visible, coherent, and historically meaningful.

At the same time, this SR consolidates scattered contributions into a unified narrative. Over 24 years, the author's articles appeared across diverse journals, conferences, and research contexts. This review gathers, organizes, and synthesizes them to reveal the thematic threads that connect her work. It highlights the gaps she identified, the questions she raised, the methods she pioneered, and the directions she opened, providing a foundation for future research agendas. As a scholarly self-audit, it is both rare and powerful, demonstrating reflexivity, methodological rigor, transparency, and intellectual maturity. It positions the author not only as a contributor to the field but also as a meta-analyst of her own scholarly work. Ultimately, this SR becomes a reference point, a teaching resource, and a historical document that preserves the author's legacy, clarifies her scholarly impact, and maps the maturation of her ideas over time.

Finally, the current SR is also part of a broader series of SR/MA projects by the author, that has so far included an SR of studies on pronunciation instruction and practice in L2 (Al-Jarf, 2026a); English–Arabic and Arabic–English translation error studies (Al-Jarf, 2026b); Arabic–English transliteration of personal names and public signage (Al-Jarf, 2026c); children's language acquisition in Saudi Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2026d); innovative word formation and pluralization processes in Arabic (Al-Jarf, 2026e); and AI-assisted Arabic translation, linguistics, and pedagogy (Al-Jarf, 2026f).

2. Methodology

2.1 The Study Corpus

The present SR is based on twenty research articles published by the author between 2004 and 2025. Although the studies vary in focus, they share a common methodological orientation: All examine aspects of L2 writing development and report quantitative data such as frequencies, percentages, error rates, or performance gains. The studies address a wide range of instructional strategies, such as technology-mediated writing practice, writing about global themes, creative writing, integration of grammar and reading with writing, and assessment and feedback. For the purpose of synthesis, the studies were grouped into five thematic clusters, each representing a distinct strand of the author's research program on writing instruction and writing-skill enhancement.

Cluster 1 — Engaging and motivating instructional writing techniques

This cluster includes five studies that demonstrate how varied instructional techniques—multimodality, online tasks, mind-mapping, task-based learning, and web-based instruction—enhance student engagement and motivation in writing: how EFL, linguistics and translation instructors engage students in distance learning during the Covid-19 second wave (Al-Jarf, 2022c); what ESL teachers should know about online writing tasks (Al-Jarf, 2014c); enhancing freshman students' writing skills with mind-mapping software (Al-Jarf, 2009c); task-based instruction for EFL struggling college writers (Al-Jarf, 2005b); the effect of web-based learning on struggling ESL college writers (Al-Jarf, 2004b).

Cluster 2 — Writing about untraditional themes (global themes)

This cluster includes six studies that use global, cultural, and societal issues as writing prompts to stimulate critical thinking, engagement, and meaningful written expression: blogging about sustainable development in the EFL college classroom (Al-Jarf, 2025b); blogging about current global events in the EFL writing classroom (Al-Jarf, 2022); blogging about the Covid-19 pandemic in EFL writing courses (Al-Jarf, 2022b); integrating ethnic culture Facebook pages in EFL instruction (Al-Jarf, 2014a); integrating global themes in writing instruction (Al-Jarf, 2011d); integrating participation goals in writing activities for EFL college students (Al-Jarf, 2021d).

Cluster 3 — Practicing writing for creativity

This cluster contains four studies that highlight the factors and strategies that lead to creative writing as: exploring discourse and creativity in Facebook creative writing by non-native speakers (Al-Jarf, 2018); discourse and creativity issues in EFL creative writing

on Facebook (Al-Jarf, 2015); social networks and creative writing in EFL (Al-Jarf, 2014b); and online instruction and creative writing by Saudi EFL freshman students (Al-Jarf, 2007b).

Cluster 4 — Combining Writing with reading & grammar

This cluster includes three studies that demonstrate how integrating writing with reading, and teaching writing and grammar simultaneously by the same instructor strengthens linguistic competence and writing performance: enhancing freshman students' performance with online reading and writing activities (Al-Jarf, 2013); and integrating RCampus in college reading and writing for translation students (Al-Jarf, 2010a) and the role of instructor qualifications, assessment and pedagogical practices in EFL students' grammar and writing proficiency (Al-Jarf, 2022h).

Cluster 5 — Writing Assessment and Feedback

This cluster includes two studies that focus on assessment-driven strategies - rubrics, error correction, and feedback -that improve writing accuracy and quality: creating and sharing writing iRubrics (Al-Jarf, 2011b); and a model for communicative error correction in Saudi EFL freshman students' writing (Al-Jarf, 2021a).

Together, the five clusters capture the full instructional and pedagogical spectrum represented in the author's work. They encompass diverse technologies and social media platforms, writing about global and nontraditional themes, task-based and online writing practices, creative writing development, and the integration of writing with reading and grammar. They also reflect the influence of instructor's qualifications, assessment practices, error-correction approaches, and idea-generation techniques on writing performance. Organizing the studies into these clusters highlights the instructional dimensions through which writing improvement, engagement, and creativity were achieved, and provides a coherent framework for understanding the author's contributions to L2 writing pedagogy over two decades.

2.2 Eligibility (Inclusion & Exclusion) Criteria

To be included in the corpus, studies had to be authored by Reima Al-Jarf, published between 2004 and 2025, and contain extractable data relevant to classroom practices, writing enhancement, or creativity development among EFL learners. Because the dataset is a closed, author-bounded corpus, all publications were retrieved from publicly accessible academic databases in which the author's work is fully archived. These include Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Semantic Scholar, Academia.edu, SSRN, ERIC, EBSCO, ProQuest, Scopus, Web of Science, institutional repositories such as the King Saud University repository, and publisher platforms (Brill, IGI Global, Routledge, Lulu Publishing, Asian EFL Journal). Together, these sources provide complete coverage of the author's publications across journals, conferences, book chapters, and digital repositories. All included and excluded studies were verified manually to ensure accuracy, remove duplicates, and confirm alignment with the eligibility criteria. No external database search was required. The following types of articles were excluded:

- 1) Duplicate studies as conference presentation that have similarly published articles such as effect of online learning on struggling ESL college writers (Al-Jarf, 2002); multimodal teaching and learning in the EFL college classroom (Al-Jarf, 2024b); how students were engaged during the second wave of COVID-19 by EFL, linguistics and translation instructors in distance learning (Al-Jarf, 2022g); how EFL, linguistics and translation instructors engaged students in distance learning during the COVID-19 second wave (Al-Jarf, 2021c); the role of communicative feedback in correcting students' writing errors: (Al-Jarf, 2011a).
- 2) Studies that use social media for teaching all EFL skills, not writing per se: learning English on Facebook (Al-Jarf, 2012).
- 3) Studies in which writing serves primarily as a medium for reading-skill development, rather than as an instructional target for writing-skill improvement. This includes online collaborative activities designed to enhance reading comprehension rather than writing accuracy, fluency, or creativity such as effects of online collaborative activities on second language acquisition (Al-Jarf, 2009b).
- 4) Pedagogical framework articles that are not empirical writing studies as: multimodal teaching and learning in the EFL college classroom (Al-Jarf, 2024a), is internet-based learning effective in EFL (Al-Jarf, 2008b), and differential effects of online instruction on a variety of EFL courses (Al-Jarf, 2004a).
- 5) Although spelling accuracy is part of the writing process, studies that focus solely on phoneme-grapheme correspondence, spelling strategies, orthographic errors, or decoding skills rather than writing instruction were excluded as: EFL freshman students' difficulties with phoneme-grapheme relationships (Al-Jarf, 2019); teaching spelling with mind-mapping software (Al-Jarf, 2011e); spelling error corpora in EFL (Al-Jarf, 2010b); auditory and visual problems of good and poor EFL college spellers (Al-Jarf, 2009a); listening-spelling strategies in EFL Arab college students (Al-Jarf, 2008c); phonological and orthographic problems in EFL college spelling (Al-Jarf, 2008d); sources of spelling errors in EFL Arab college students (Al-Jarf, 2008d); faulty strategies of EFL freshman spellers, Saudi Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2007a); the effects of listening comprehension and decoding skills on spelling achievement of EFL freshman students (Al-Jarf, 2005); the

relationship among spelling, listening and decoding skills in EFL freshman students (Al-Jarf, 2005); and listening-spelling strategies of freshmen students (Al-Jarf, 1999).

- 6) Transliteration studies that focus on Arabic–English transliteration conventions, orthographic variation, or social-media spelling practices rather than writing instruction. Excluded studies include: Arabic transliteration of borrowed English nouns with /g/ by Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Al-Jarf, 2025a); semantic and syntactic anomalies of Arabic-transliterated compound shop names in Saudi Arabia (Al-Jarf, 2023f); absence of vowels in the English spelling of Arabic personal names on social media (Al-Jarf, 2023a); English spelling of the glottal stop and voiced pharyngeal fricative in Arabic personal names by educated Arabs (Al-Jarf, 2023c). English spelling of Arabic compound personal names by educated Arabs (Al-Jarf, 2023b); English transliteration of Arabic personal names with the definite article /al/ (Al-Jarf, 2022d); deviant Arabic transliterations of foreign shop names in Saudi Arabia and decoding problems among shoppers (Al-Jarf, 2022c); gemination errors in Arabic-English transliteration of personal names (Al-Jarf, 2022e); and variant transliterations of the same Arabic personal names (Al-Jarf, 2022i).
- 7) Even though grammar is part of writing, studies about grammar instruction per se were excluded such as: grammar podcasts for ESL college students in distance learning (Al-Jarf, 2023d); how EFL college instructors can create and use grammar iRubrics (Al-Jarf, 2020); what teachers should know about online grammar tasks (Al-Jarf, 2017); integrating Elluminate webconferences in EFL grammar instruction (Al-Jarf, 2013b); freshman students' difficulties with English adjective-forming suffixes (Al-Jarf, 2019); integrating Elluminate web-conferences in EFL grammar instruction (Al-Jarf, 2013); empowering EFL teachers and students with grammar iRubrics (Al-Jarf, 2011c); teaching grammar for professional purposes (Al-Jarf, 2009d); acquisition of adjective-forming suffixes by EFL freshman students (Al-Jarf, 2008a); plural acquisition by EFL freshman college students (Al-Jarf, 2006); the effects of online grammar instruction on low-proficiency EFL college students' achievement (Al-Jarf, 2005a).
- 8) Arabic writing and spelling studies as non-conventional spelling in informal, colloquial Arabic writing on Facebook (Al-Jarf, 2023e).
- 9) AI studies that focus on the publication of AI-generated articles and AI-generated students' assignment such as editors and publishers' views on the publication of AI-generated research articles in scholarly journals (Al-Jarf, 2025) and Arab instructors' views on students' assignments and research papers generated by Artificial Intelligence (Al-Jarf, 2024).

2.1 Corpus Characteristics

The dataset in the current corpus represents a closed writing research program spanning two decades (2004–2025). It is both comprehensive and internally coherent, reflecting the author's sustained scholarly trajectory in writing classroom practices, writing skill enhancement, and creativity development among EFL struggling students. The studies vary in methodological design, ranging from qualitative analyses and quantitative error counts to technology-based intervention studies and descriptive investigations. They collectively examine a wide range of instructional strategies and pedagogical factors that contribute to writing improvement. These include the use of diverse technologies and social media platforms (such as Facebook, blogs, online courses, online tasks, mind-mapping tools, and iRubrics), writing about global and untraditional themes (e.g., sustainable development, Covid-19, current global events, ethnic culture), task-based writing, online writing tasks, and the integration of reading and grammar with writing. Additional dimensions such as instructor's qualifications, assessment practices, error-correction techniques, and idea-generation methods also feature prominently across the studies. To facilitate synthesis, the 20 studies were organized into five thematic clusters, each representing a distinct dimension of the author's research program. Together, these clusters provide a comprehensive overview of the author's contributions to EFL writing pedagogy and reflect a longitudinal, multimodal exploration of writing challenges and instructional solutions relevant to EFL language learning.

2.2 Information Sources

The information sources were limited to platforms that index the author's complete scholarly output. No external database search was required, as the aim was not to identify all studies on EFL writing, but to synthesize all writing-related studies within a single, self-contained research program. All records were retrieved from publicly accessible academic databases in which the author's publications are fully archived. These include Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Semantic Scholar, Academia.edu, SSRN, ERIC, EBSCO, ProQuest, institutional repositories such as the King Saud University repository, and publisher platforms. Together, these sources provide comprehensive coverage of the author's publications across journals, conferences, book chapters, and digital repositories. All included and excluded studies were verified manually to ensure accuracy, remove duplicates, and confirm alignment with the eligibility criteria described in Section 2.2.

2.3 Data Extraction

For every study, the following information was extracted from the full text: publication year; research focus (e.g., writing instruction, creative writing, technology-mediated writing); participant characteristics (e.g., EFL undergraduates, struggling writers, freshman

students, EFL Arab social media users,); methodological approach (qualitative analysis, descriptive error analysis, corpus-based mapping, technology-mediated intervention, experimental design); data sources (e.g., spontaneous writing samples, blogging tasks, classroom assignments, online writing activities); and key findings relevant to writing achievement, error patterns, creativity, and pedagogical implications. These elements were essential for thematic synthesis and cluster-level comparison, as the corpus consists primarily of descriptive, qualitative, and technology-enhanced writing studies, with few experimental investigations. Coding was conducted manually to preserve conceptual accuracy and to ensure that each study was classified according to its primary writing-related contribution. Studies that addressed overlapping themes (e.g., writing + technology, writing + global themes, writing + grammar) were assigned to the cluster that best reflected their central research question. All extracted data were entered into a structured matrix to ensure consistency across studies and to facilitate comparison within and across the five thematic clusters. Because the corpus is limited to a single author's research program, terminology, methodological framing, and analytical categories were highly consistent, reducing the likelihood of coding discrepancies. This systematic extraction process ensured that all included studies were analyzed using uniform criteria, enabling a coherent synthesis of writing-related findings across two decades of research.

2.4 Data Synthesis

Given that the corpus consists primarily of descriptive, qualitative, and technology-enhanced studies, the synthesis adopted a combination of narrative and cluster-based approaches to reflect the heterogeneous nature of the data. The synthesis proceeded in three stages. (i) All studies were first grouped into five thematic clusters based on their primary focus and the instructional strategies they employed to enhance writing skills and creativity (see Section 2.1). This classification enabled the review to synthesize findings within conceptually unified domains while preserving the distinct contributions of each study. (ii) Within each cluster, studies were compared according to the writing aspect examined (e.g., assessment and feedback, global writing themes, technology-mediated writing, creativity-oriented tasks, integration of writing with reading and grammar), learner populations and instructional contexts, data sources (e.g., learner writing samples, blogging tasks, classroom assignments, online writing activities), methodological procedures (e.g., error analysis, corpus-based mapping, qualitative interpretation, technology-based intervention), recurring error patterns, and pedagogical implications. (iii) Findings were then synthesized across clusters to identify broader patterns in the author's writing research, including convergence in writing tasks across instructional domains, the interaction between writing practices and improvements in accuracy and fluency, cross-context consistency in learner difficulties, pedagogical recommendations supported by multiple studies, and the central role of technology as a source of writing input, practice, and engagement. This cross-cluster synthesis provided a coherent picture of writing challenges and instructional solutions relevant to EFL learners, supported by a corpus that is methodologically aligned and conceptually interconnected.

2.5 PRISMA Flow Description

Because this review is based on a closed, predefined corpus consisting exclusively of twenty studies published by the author between 2004 and 2025, the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow reflects a streamlined identification and screening process. All publications within this time frame were retrieved from the academic platforms listed in Section 2.4 and manually screened for relevance. After removing duplicates, all records were assessed against the eligibility criteria. Studies were excluded if they focused primarily on grammar instruction, spelling and phoneme-grapheme correspondence, transliteration, or other topics outside the scope of the EFL writing instruction and writing-skill development. Following full-text evaluation, only studies directly addressing EFL writing-related phenomena, such as writing strategies and activities, technology-enhanced writing practice, creative and global-theme writing tasks, and cognitive foundations of writing, were retained. The final set of 20 studies was subsequently organized into five thematic clusters for synthesis. The PRISMA flow therefore documents the progression from the identification of all publications within the author-bounded corpus, through screening and eligibility assessment, to the final inclusion of studies contributing directly to EFL writing instruction, writing enhancement, and creativity development.

3. Results

3.1 Overview

The 20 studies reviewed in this paper examine instructional strategies and pedagogical factors that contribute to writing skill enhancement and creativity development among EFL learners. These strategies encompass the use of diverse technologies and social media platforms, such as Facebook, blogs, online courses, mind mapping tools, and iRubrics, alongside writing about global and unconventional themes, task-based writing, online writing activities, and the combining writing and reading or grammar instruction. In addition, several pedagogical factors play a significant role, including instructor's qualifications, assessment practices, error correction techniques, and methods for generating and organizing ideas. To capture the breadth of these instructional dimensions, the study organized the reviewed research into five thematic clusters, each designed to highlight the specific practices through which writing improvement and creativity were fostered.

3.2 Study Characteristics

Cluster 1 — Engaging and motivating instructional writing techniques

Study 1: How EFL, linguistics and translation instructors engage students in distance learning during the Covid-19 second wave (Al-Jarf, 2022c)

Although the article examines a wide range of distance learning (DL) activities related to multiple language skills—such as reading, speaking, writing, and translation, only the writing-related components were extracted for the purposes of this review. The study shows that instructors integrated several meaningful writing tasks into DL as summarizing research papers, composing written responses to linguistic or translation problems, writing essays linked to the Kingdom's Vision 2030 themes, preparing written posts about plant and flower names and their metaphorical meanings, and completing project-based written assignments. Students also practiced writing through chat-based contributions, reflective written responses, and written preparation for online oral presentations. Instructors observed increased engagement and improved writing performance compared to early pandemic teaching. Although students appreciated the flexibility and reduced anxiety of online writing practice, they also noted the absence of face-to-face rapport and collaborative writing opportunities.

Study 2: What ESL teachers should know about online writing tasks (Al-Jarf, 2014c)

This study outlines the types of online writing tasks that can be integrated into online courses, discussion forums, blogs, wikis, and other digital platforms as supplements to in-class writing instruction. These tasks include: (i) targeted writing skills such as writing topic sentences, supporting details, inter-sentence and intra-sentence connectors, cohesion and coherence, word choice, and mechanics; (ii) free-writing tasks; (iii) error-correction tasks; (iv) remedial tasks; (v) extension activities; (vi) tasks requiring students' comments; (vii) pre- and post-instruction assessment tasks; (viii) self-improvement and study-skills tasks; (ix) electronic searching tasks, among others. The study emphasizes that online writing tasks should match students' proficiency levels, needs, and interests. Effective tasks should raise learners' awareness, promote noticing, encourage focus on metalanguage, contextualize instruction, accommodate different learning styles, integrate peer interaction, and provide continuous training and technical support.

Study 3: Enhancing freshman students' writing skills with mind-mapping software (Al-Jarf, 2009c)

The study investigated the effect of a mind-mapping software (FreeMind 0.8.1) on EFL freshman students' writing skill development. A total of 86 female freshman students participated in the study, divided into a control group receiving traditional textbook-based instruction and an experimental group receiving traditional instruction supplemented with mind-mapping activities. Before instruction, both groups took a writing pretest. T-test results showed no significant difference between the groups' in their writing ability. The experimental group was trained to use FreeMind as a prewriting tool to brainstorm, generate ideas, and organize supporting details. Students created weekly mind maps in class with instructors' guidance and continued using the software at home. The mapping process involved placing a central topic, generating branches and sub-branches, using colors, symbols, and keywords, and visually representing associations among ideas. The focus was on idea generation first, with organization occurring later. At the end of the course, both groups took the same posttest, which included a new essay topic and assessed key writing components such as topic sentences, supporting ideas, cohesion, punctuation, and spelling. Students also completed an open-ended questionnaire about their experience with the software. Results showed significant improvement in both groups from pretest to posttest. However, the experimental group achieved significantly higher gains than the control group ($T = 22.56, p < .01$). Posttest paragraphs from the experimental group contained more relevant details and better organization. Many students continued to draw mind maps by hand during the exam to support their writing.

The attitudes questionnaire-survey results revealed positive perceptions of mind mapping. Students found the mind-mapping software enjoyable, helpful for generating and organizing ideas, and supportive of creative thinking. Despite initial difficulty with the English interface and unfamiliarity with mind mapping, students reported that the activity became easier with practice. By the end of the semester, they used the software 1–4 times per week and spent 30–60 minutes creating maps. Most indicated they would continue using mind mapping in future writing courses. Overall, the study concluded that integrating mind-mapping software into writing instruction significantly enhances EFL students' writing performance and fosters positive attitudes toward the writing process.

Study 4: Task-based instruction for EFL struggling college writers (Al-Jarf, 2005b)

The study investigated the impact of task-based language teaching (TBLT) on the writing development of 65 EFL freshman students enrolled in a writing course at King Saud University. Pretest results showed extremely poor writing skills, with frequent errors in mechanics and difficulty generating and organizing ideas. Throughout the semester, students engaged in structured weekly task cycles that included modelling, timed individual practice, meaning-focused feedback, self- and peer-editing, and bi-weekly quizzes that alternated between paragraph writing and task-based exercises. At the end of the course, posttest results revealed a significant improvement in writing performance ($T = 12.14, p < .01$), supported by qualitative evidence of greater fluency, longer and more

coherent paragraphs, improved sentence complexity, and fewer mechanical errors. Questionnaire responses showed positive attitudes toward TBLT, with students reporting increased motivation, confidence, and enjoyment of writing. The study concluded that TBLT effectively enhanced struggling EFL writers' skills due to both strong student engagement and efficient task management.

Study 5: The effect of web-based learning on struggling ESL college writers (Al-Jarf, 2004b)

The study compared traditional writing instruction that depended on the textbook with a blended model that integrated web-based learning through Blackboard for EFL freshman students. In addition to in-class instruction, the experimental group received online support that included tutorials, discussion-board participation, posting paragraphs and creative writing, accessing grammar and writing links, locating information from external websites, and word-processing their paragraphs using MS Word. Students interacted with peers and the instructor through e-mail, threads, and shared resources, while the instructor provided technical support and encouraged participation without correcting online submissions. Before instruction, both groups completed the same essay pretest, and at the end of the 12-week treatment they took the same posttest, which included letter writing and objective grammar tasks. Essays were holistically graded using content, organization, cohesion, language use, and mechanics. Statistical analyses showed significant pre- to post-test improvement in both groups, with much larger gains for the experimental group ($T = 12.14$, $df = 61$) than the control group ($T = 4.6$, $df = 50$). Posttest medians favored the experimental group (85% vs. 77%), and ANCOVA confirmed a significant advantage for web-based instruction ($F = 29.84$, $p < .0001$) with a moderate effect size of .55. The findings demonstrated that supplementing traditional instruction with structured online activities substantially enhanced students' writing achievement.

Cluster 2 — Writing about untraditional themes (global themes)

Studies 6, 7, 8: Blogging about sustainable development, current global events and the Covid-19 pandemic in EFL writing courses (Al-Jarf, 2025b; Al-Jarf, 2022a; Al-Jarf, 2022b)

These three studies employed a class blog as a writing activity in freshman EFL writing courses, using themes such as Sustainable Development Goals, current global events, and COVID-19. In all three, students searched for multimodal materials, wrote summaries and reactions, and interacted through comments and peer feedback, while the instructor acted as a facilitator. Across the three studies, blogging consistently led to significantly higher writing-skill gains than paper-and-pencil assignments and fostered positive attitudes, collaboration, and reflective engagement with writing.

Study 9: Combating the Covid-19 hate and racism speech on social media (Al-Jarf, 2021b)

The spread of Covid-19 worldwide was associated with hate and racism speech on social media which sometimes encourages violence and bullying in the different communities. This study proposed a model for creating an anti-hate Twitter page to teach students tolerance rather than negative sentiment associated with Covid-19, to encourage dialogue, and teach students to accept others. Students and instructors from different backgrounds enter into dialogue with each other to gain knowledge of the reality of Covid-19, and to critically reflect on the pandemic. Students may use art and culture for creating counter narratives to counterbalance one-sided narratives and simplified overgeneralizations by hate speakers. Bringing the outside world to the students' realm through publishing and watching videos about Covid-19 around the world. Students can search for and tweet examples of pandemics that took place throughout history such as the Spanish flu, the plague in the Middle Ages and others. Students can search for and tweet examples of pandemics that took place throughout history such as the Spanish flu, the plague in the Middle Ages and others. Although the study focuses on combating Covid-19 hate speech, it is included in this review because it employs Twitter-based writing tasks that promote critical thinking, creativity, and online written interaction among EFL learners.

Study 10: Integrating ethnic culture Facebook pages in EFL instruction (Al-Jarf, 2014a)

This study proposes using Facebook as an interactive platform where instructors and students collaboratively create pages dedicated to exploring the cultural practices of specific ethnic groups. Working in English, students investigate themes such as language, religion, music, dance, cuisine, customs, art, children's literature, festivals, sports, and traditional dress. The instructor sets clear goals, provides guiding questions, and assigns one cultural theme at a time, allowing students to search for articles, images, podcasts, and videos, then post summaries, reflections, comparisons, and opinions in their own words. Students are required to comment, discuss, and orally retell content in class, turning the Facebook page into a space for continuous engagement. Motivation is supported through keeping contribution logs, extra credit, and the inclusion of Facebook content on assessments. Throughout the process, the instructor acts as a facilitator—guiding inquiry, ensuring relevance, modelling skills, and maintaining a supportive environment that strengthens students' English proficiency, cultural knowledge, and active participation.

Study 11: Integrating participation goals in writing activities for EFL college students (Al-Jarf, 2021d)

Many EFL students have difficulty generating ideas for writing topics. Writing instructors tend to select topics that are too abstract, repetitive, uninteresting, vague, too broad or unfamiliar. At the same time, the students lack prior knowledge to draw on. To help the students generate ideas for writing topics, this study suggests the integration of participation goals in writing instruction. Participation goals are those that require the students' involvement in social and civic issues. Writing instructors can select topics

related to local and global social, educational, health, political and/or technological issues with which the students are familiar and to which they can relate. The students can write to describe a problem, its causes and suggest solutions to it. The integration of participation goals proved to be effective in developing college students' writing skills.

Cluster 3 — Practicing writing for creativity

Studies 12, 13, 14: Exploring discourse and creativity in Facebook creative writing by non-native speakers (Al-Jarf, 2018); Discourse and creativity issues in EFL creative writing on Facebook (Al-Jarf, 2015); & Social networks and creative writing in EFL (Al-Jarf, 2014b)

Across these three related studies, the author examined creative writing produced by EFL learners on Facebook to explore discourse features, creativity, and the motivations behind students' voluntary online writing. Using a consistent qualitative methodology, the studies collected poems, short narratives, reflections, and thematic posts shared in public Facebook spaces, and supplemented the textual analysis with students' explanations of why they engaged in creative writing on social media. Findings across all datasets showed that Facebook provides a low-pressure, socially supportive environment that encourages experimentation with language, imagery, and narrative voice, leading to richer creativity than typically observed in classroom writing. Despite linguistic inaccuracies, students demonstrated strong expressive ability, meaningful audience engagement, and a willingness to take risks. Their self-reports revealed that they wrote creatively to express emotions, connect with peers, build identity, and enjoy the freedom of an authentic, interactive space. Together, the studies concluded that social networks function as powerful platforms for fostering creativity, motivation, and discourse development among EFL writers outside formal instruction.

Study 15: Online instruction and creative writing by Saudi EFL freshman students (Al-Jarf, 2007b)

The study examined creative writing by 38 Saudi EFL freshman students enrolled in an online course, analyzing 54 poems, stories, plays, and essays together with students' pre/posttest test scores and interview data. Findings showed that creative writing ability was not connected to English proficiency, as students across all achievement levels produced meaningful and original texts. Higher-proficiency writers demonstrated greater verbal originality and fewer errors, while less proficient writers relied more on spoken English and phonetic spelling. Interviews revealed that these freshman creative writers were intrinsically motivated, enthusiastic, socially engaged, and avid readers who enjoyed English media. Factors such as travel or studying abroad did not influence creativity. The online learning environment was found to be the strongest catalyst for creativity: it provided a supportive, low-anxiety space for experimentation, fostered peer interaction and encouragement, and enabled students to express themselves freely. The students felt that these conditions were absent in a traditional classroom. The study concluded that creativity in EFL writing can flourish when students receive positive feedback, write for communication rather than correctness, and participate in interactive, technology-mediated writing activities that nurture confidence, enjoyment, and self-expression.

Cluster 4 — Combining Writing with reading & grammar:

Study 16: Role of instructor qualifications, assessment and pedagogical practices in EFL students' grammar and writing proficiency (Al-Jarf, 2022h)

Three groups of EFL freshman students were concurrently enrolled in a grammar and a writing course. One group was taught the grammar and writing courses by the same instructor; the other two groups were taught grammar and writing by two different instructors using the same textbook but different instructional and assessment techniques. The study aims to find out which group made higher gains in grammatical knowledge and writing skill development. It also aimed to find out the effects of instructor qualifications, assessment, and pedagogical variables on students' grammatical competence and writing skill development. Comparisons of the grammar and writing post-tests showed significant differences between the three groups in the writing and grammar post-test mean scores. There were strong correlations between the grammar and writing post-test scores. Performance of the Group that received a combination of writing and grammar instruction by the same instructor (Instructor A) was the highest. The relationship between grammar and writing instruction seems to be reciprocal: writing instruction affects grammatical competence and grammatical knowledge affects writing skill development. Better achievements were made when both courses were taught by the same instructor as she can make the right connections between what is taught in both courses, which specific structures and skills should be emphasized. The instructors' qualifications, pedagogical system, educational and professional experience, the integration of online instruction, the type of error correction and instant feedback given to the students and the formative assessment technique used were significantly more effective than writing/grammar instruction that depended on the textbook alone. These variables proved to be important for enhancing the grammatical knowledge and writing quality of unskilled, low ability EFL students and resulted in a significant improvement in their grammar and writing post-test scores.

Studies 17 & 18: Enhancing freshman students' performance with online reading and writing activities (Al-Jarf, 2013a); & Integrating RCampus in college reading and writing for translation students (Al-Jarf, 2010a)

These two studies investigated the effectiveness of integrating RCampus, an open-source online course management system, into EFL freshman classrooms to enhance students' reading and writing skills. In both studies, freshman translation majors received traditional instruction based on the textbook, while the experimental groups also engaged in online extension activities through RCampus, which provided a discussion forum, e-portfolios, iRubrics, course documents, and messaging tools. Weekly discussion threads required students to search for information, read supplementary materials, and respond to questions in writing. The students also posted book summaries, initiated discussion topics, and commented on peers' posts. The instructor served as a facilitator who provided feedback and individual support.

Across both studies, pre- and post-test comparisons showed significant gains in students' reading and writing performance at the .01 level. Active participants, who regularly posted and interacted online, outperformed inactive students, demonstrating higher skill development and greater engagement. Qualitative analysis of students' written responses revealed improvements in identifying main ideas and supporting details, inferring word meanings from context, connecting pronouns with antecedents, and producing clearer summaries and outlines with fewer grammatical and spelling errors. Responses to the questionnaire indicated highly positive attitudes toward online instruction. The students reported increased vocabulary, faster reading, improved summarization and analytical skills, enhanced typing fluency, and greater confidence in expressing ideas. They appreciated the opportunity to learn collaboratively, exchange ideas, and engage with topics beyond the textbook. By contrast, inactive students reported barriers to participation as lack of time, limited computer access, low digital literacy, and difficulty navigating RCampus. Together, the two studies demonstrate that integrating RCampus with traditional instruction can significantly enhance EFL students' reading and writing skills while fostering motivation, collaboration, and meaningful online engagement.

Cluster 5 — Writing Assessment and Feedback

Study 19: Creating and sharing writing rubrics (Al-Jarf, 2011b)

The study focuses on the use of digital iRubrics as an assessment tool for evaluating EFL writing performance, demonstrating how instructors can create analytic rubrics to ensure consistent scoring, clear expectations, and transparent feedback. It shows how EFL writing instructors and students can design, customize, and apply digital writing rubrics using the iRubric tool in the RCampus platform to support transparent, consistent, and outcomes-aligned assessment. After reviewing research on the pedagogical value of rubrics, including their role in clarifying expectations, improving scoring reliability, guiding instruction, and enhancing student self-assessment, the article outlines the steps for building analytic rubrics, applying them to assignments, scoring student work, sharing rubrics with colleagues, and reporting results through the online gradebook. Sample paragraph-writing rubrics illustrate how criteria such as topic sentence quality, supporting details, cohesion, grammar, mechanics, and formatting can be operationalized into performance levels. The article argues that digital rubrics help standardize assessment across multiple instructors, save grading time, provide students with secure and detailed feedback, and strengthen the overall quality and fairness of writing evaluation in EFL programs.

Study 20: A model for communicative error correction in Saudi EFL freshman students' writing (Al-Jarf, 2021)

The study proposes a communicative model for error correction in EFL freshman writing classes that shifts the focus from meticulous, form-focused marking to meaning-focused, in-class feedback. Instead of correcting every spelling, grammar, punctuation, and capitalization error in the students' written assignments, the instructor monitors students as they write in class, provides individual help, and gives communicative feedback that targets meaning and highlights only errors related to the specific rules or skill taught in the current chapter. Correct forms are not given; feedback identifies the presence and location of errors to promote self-editing and peer-editing through guided prompts. Out-of-class writing is encouraged for fluency and expression without penalty for errors. The model aims to reduce writing anxiety, build confidence, and develop autonomy by gradually training students to self-monitor content, organization, and form. Extra credit is awarded for well-written paragraphs produced within class time. The article argues that selective, meaning-focused feedback delivered during the writing process is more effective and less burdensome than traditional comprehensive correction, and better supports the development of writing skills among EFL freshman students.

4. Discussion

4.1 Meta-Conclusion

Across the studies included in this SR, there is a clear pattern: EFL writing development improves most consistently when instructional practices reduce cognitive overload, increase meaningful engagement, and provide learners with structured yet supportive scaffolding. Whether through blended web-based instruction, communicative error-correction models, digital iRubrics, or creative writing on social networks, the evidence shows that students write more effectively when the learning environment emphasizes clarity, autonomy, and authentic communication rather than exhaustive correction or rigid form-focused tasks. Interventions that foreground meaning—such as communicative feedback, online interaction, and creative expression—tend to

lower anxiety, increase motivation, and promote self-monitoring, while tools that make expectations explicit—such as analytic rubrics—enhance consistency and transparency in assessment. Although the studies vary in context, sample characteristics, and technological tools, they converge on a shared conclusion: EFL writers benefit from pedagogical approaches that balance structure with freedom, guidance with independence, and accuracy with communicative purpose. Collectively, these findings underscore the need for writing instruction that is process-oriented, learner-centered, and supported by clear assessment frameworks.

4.2 Meta-Interpretation.

Taken together, studies in this SR reveal a deeper pedagogical shift in how EFL writing is learned, supported, and assessed. Although the interventions differ (web-based instruction, communicative feedback, digital iRubrics, and creative writing on social networks) they converge on a shared principle: EFL writers develop more effectively when instruction reduces cognitive burden and increases meaningful engagement with language. The consistent improvement observed across studies suggests that writing accuracy and fluency do not emerge from exhaustive correction or rigid form-focused tasks, but from environments that allow learners to experiment, express meaning, and receive targeted, manageable support.

The findings also indicate that writing development is mainly social and process-oriented. Whether through Blackboard discussions, Facebook creative posts, or in-class conferencing, students write more confidently when they have an audience, a purpose, and opportunities to negotiate meaning. Communicative feedback and selective error correction appear to work not because they ignore form, but because they prioritize comprehension and intention, allowing learners to internalize structures gradually rather than defensively.

Assessment practices across the studies further reinforce this interpretation. Formative assessment every two weeks or so help capture areas that students have difficulty with. Digital iRubrics do more than standardize grading; they make expectations visible, reduce ambiguity, and help students monitor their own progress. This transparency aligns with the communicative and process-based approaches observed in the instructional studies, suggesting that assessment clarity is itself a form of support for writing development.

Overall, the collective evidence points to a model of EFL writing instruction that is learner-centered, cognitively manageable, socially interactive, and strategically supportive. The studies imply that when students are given space to write for meaning, supported by clear criteria and focused feedback, they develop not only greater accuracy but also stronger confidence, autonomy, and motivation as writers.

4.3 Cross-Cutting Insights

The current cross-study analysis reveals several unifying insights that cut across the diverse instructional approaches examined in the current SR. First, the studies consistently show that EFL writing improves when instructional practices lower anxiety and cognitive load, whether through communicative feedback, selective error correction, or creative online writing spaces. Students write more fluently and confidently when they are not overwhelmed by exhaustive correction or rigid form-focused demands. The highlight also the importance of authentic, socially meaningful writing contexts. Web-based instruction, Facebook creative writing, and in-class conferencing all demonstrate that learners engage more deeply when writing has a real audience, a communicative purpose, and opportunities for interaction. Writing development appears to be accelerated when students negotiate meaning, respond to peers, and see writing as a tool for expression rather than a test of accuracy. Moreover, students' support is central to improvement. Whether through step-by-step writing tasks in the textbook, guided prompts for self-editing, or analytic iRubrics that clarify expectations, students benefit from structured support that gradually leads to independence. Scaffolding reduces the cognitive burden of writing, helps learners internalize strategies, and enables them to monitor their own progress. Transparency in assessment through digital rubrics, and meaning-focused feedback, and selective correction all make the writing process more predictable and manageable for learners. When students understand what is expected and receive focused, actionable feedback, they are better able to revise, self-correct, and build confidence.

Finally, the cross-cutting evidence suggests that effective EFL writing instruction balances form and meaning, structure and freedom, instructor guidance and learner autonomy. Approaches that privilege communication, clarity, and gradual skill development—rather than exhaustive correction—tend to produce more sustainable gains in writing ability. Together, these insights point toward a pedagogical model that is process-oriented, learner-centered, and grounded in authentic communication.

4.4 Causes of Writing Problems

Across the reviewed studies, several interconnected factors contribute to persistent writing difficulties among EFL learners, particularly freshman students in Saudi and similar contexts. First, low proficiency level, including weaknesses in vocabulary,

grammar, spelling, and punctuation, creates a heavy cognitive load that interferes with idea generation and organization. Students often struggle to express meaning because they are worried about form, leading to fragmented sentences, unclear ideas, and avoidance of complex structures.

Second, insufficient exposure to authentic writing practices contributes to mechanical, formulaic writing. Many students arrive at university with a history of writing instruction that emphasizes memorization, controlled exercises, and instructor-centered correction rather than meaningful communication. As a result, they lack experience with drafting, revising, and writing for real audiences, which limits their ability to develop fluency and coherence.

Third, negative attitudes and writing anxiety play a significant role. Several studies report that students view writing as a chore, often associated with fear of making mistakes or receiving extensive red marks and corrections. This anxiety leads to avoidance behaviors such as copying from the Internet, relying on tutors, or submitting incomplete work. When writing becomes a source of stress rather than expression, students' willingness to take risks and develop their voice diminishes.

Fourth, ineffective feedback practices contribute to recurring errors. Traditional extensive corrections, where instructors mark every mistake, overwhelm students and fail to promote long-term improvement. Students often do not understand the corrections, cannot prioritize which errors matter, and lack strategies for self-editing. This results in repeated errors across assignments and a dependence on the instructor for accuracy.

Fifth, large class sizes and limited instructional time restrict opportunities for individualized support. Instructors often cannot provide timely, meaningful feedback during the writing process, which forces them to correct errors after the fact rather than guide students while they write. This reactive approach limits students' ability to internalize writing strategies.

Finally, lack of transparency in assessment criteria, such as unclear expectations, inconsistent grading, or absence of rubrics—creates confusion about what constitutes good writing. When students do not know what is expected, they struggle to plan, organize, and evaluate their own work, resulting in weak content development and poor structure.

Together, these causes indicate that writing problems stem not only from a single deficit but also from a combination of linguistic, pedagogical, affective, and contextual factors. Addressing them requires instructional approaches that reduce cognitive load, provide meaningful scaffolding, promote autonomy, and create supportive environments where writing is treated as a communicative, iterative process rather than a test of accuracy.

4.5 Implications

Findings of the current SR reveal several important implications for EFL writing instruction, writing curriculum design, and writing assessment practices. (i) writing pedagogy must move from product-oriented, error-focused approaches toward process-based, communicative models that reduce cognitive load and allow students to generate ideas before attending to form. When learners are encouraged to write for meaning, receive selective feedback, and revise through guided prompts, they develop greater confidence, fluency, and autonomy. (ii) There is a need for topic selection that aligns with students' background knowledge and lived experiences. Writing tasks that are abstract, overly broad, or culturally distant hinder idea generation even in L1. In contrast, familiar, concrete topics, such as sustainable development issues, current global events, or COVID-19, activate prior knowledge and make writing easier. Integrating participation goals that invite students' suggestions, opinions, and personal input further enhances engagement and supports idea development. (iii) assessment practices must become more transparent and supportive. The use of analytic digital rubrics helps clarify expectations, standardize scoring across instructors, and provide students with actionable feedback. Rubrics also guide learners in monitoring their own progress, which result in strengthening both accuracy and self-regulation. (iv) Current findings also highlight the importance of in-class writing time and immediate feedback. When instructors monitor students as they write, offer meaning-focused guidance, and avoid overwhelming them with comprehensive correction, learners will be able to internalize writing strategies and be independent in self-editing. (v) English departments should recognize that writing difficulties stem from a combination of linguistic, cognitive, affective, and contextual factors. Effective writing instruction therefore requires coordinated support: smaller class sizes when possible, professional development in feedback strategies, integration of digital tools, and curricula that balance structure with communicative purpose. Collectively, these implications call for a writing pedagogy that is learner-centered, cognitively manageable, and grounded in authentic communication.

4.6 Positioning This Review Within the Global Writing Research

The current SR contributes to global writing research by foregrounding perspectives and instructional practices from a context that remains underrepresented in the global writing literature. Much of the global research on L2 writing has been shaped by studies conducted in Western, English-dominant settings, with a strong emphasis on academic genres, process writing, and

feedback typologies. In contrast, the studies synthesized in this review highlight the realities of EFL writing instruction in Saudi Arabia: large classes, limited exposure to authentic writing, heavy reliance on instructor, centered correction, and students' struggles with idea generation and writing anxiety. By documenting how Saudi EFL students respond to communicative feedback, digital rubrics, blended learning, and creative writing spaces on social media and online discussion forums, this review expands the geographical and pedagogical scope of global writing research.

Findings of the current study also align with several international trends. Globally, writing researchers have emphasized the importance of process-oriented instruction, learner autonomy, meaning-focused feedback, and technology-enhanced writing environments. Studies in this SR align with these priorities, demonstrating that EFL college learners benefit from supervised writing tasks, selective feedback, and opportunities to write for real audiences. At the same time, the review challenges assumptions embedded in Western models by showing that students in some EFL contexts often struggle not with grammar alone but with idea generation, topic familiarity, and writing confidence. Such issues are less visible in settings where students have richer literacy backgrounds.

Furthermore, this SR contributes to global conversations about assessment transparency and equity in writing evaluation. The integration of digital iRubrics illustrates how clear criteria and consistent scoring can support learners in contexts where assessment practices have traditionally been opaque or inconsistent. This positions the review within a growing international movement toward fair, criterion-referenced writing assessment.

Finally, by synthesizing studies that incorporate local pedagogical innovations, such as participation goals, communicative error-correction models, and writing tasks grounded in current events, this SR demonstrates how context-sensitive approaches can enrich global theory. It shows that effective writing instruction is not imported as it is from dominant research traditions but emerges through the interplay of global principles and local realities. In doing so, this work positions itself as a bridge between international writing research and the real experiences of EFL learners in Saudi Arabia.

4.7 Comparison With Previous Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses in the Literature

Prior SRs and meta-analyses reveal that the existing literature on EFL/ESL writing is increasingly dominated by studies focusing on technology-enhanced writing, particularly AI-driven tools, automated writing evaluation (AWE), and digital platforms. Recent reviews on ChatGPT (Alsaedi, 2024; Feng Teng, 2024; Mali, 2025), Grammarly (Llausas et al., 2024), ProWritingAid (Damayanti & Santosa, 2024), and broader AWE systems (Aldosemani et al., 2023; Huawei & Aryadoust, 2023; Ding & Zou, 2024) mainly examine how emerging technologies support accuracy, feedback, and revision processes. These reviews emphasize tool effectiveness, user perceptions, and pedagogical challenges, but they focus almost exclusively on technology as the central intervention. On the contrary, the current SR did not investigate any of these technologies utilized by previous studies in the literature.

Similarly, the authors' studies in the current SR did not investigate technologies that some prior SR studies included such as technology-enhanced collaborative writing as WhatsApp (Khurram et al., 2024), e-portfolios (Aygün & Aydın, 2016), online collaborative learning (Al Yafaei & Mudhsh, 2023), immersive technologies (Chen et al., 2023), and CMS-assisted instruction (Tsai, 2015). These studies highlight the social and interactive dimensions of writing but remain anchored in digital environments rather than classroom-based pedagogy.

Additionally, studies in the current corpus are partially consistent with studies in prior SRs which focused on specific pedagogical constructs, such as peer feedback (Iswandari & Jiang, 2020; Liang et al., 2025; Zhang, 2022), genre-based instruction (Zhai & Razali, 2023; Aulia, 2024), critical thinking in writing (Yin et al., 2023; Hamamah & Junining, 2022), dictation (Kamal & Basith, 2023), project-based learning (Cahyono et al., 2024), and reading-writing connections (Anaktototy, 2023). These prior SRs examined targeted instructional strategies but do not address the broader ecosystem of writing challenges faced by EFL learners.

Although several prior SRs in the literature synthesize writing difficulties and error patterns (Mohammadi & Mustafa, 2020; Akhtar et al., 2019; Nurkamto et al., 2024), focus on assessment practices (Taufiqulloh et al., 2025) or module development (Sun et al., 2022), provide valuable insights into learner challenges and assessment frameworks, they do not integrate classroom-based interventions with broader pedagogical models as is the case in the current SR.

Contrary to these technology-centered or narrowly focused reviews in prior SRs, the present SR offers a holistic, pedagogy-driven synthesis of EFL writing interventions that span communicative feedback, blended learning, creative writing, digital rubrics, participation goals, and classroom-based scaffolding. Unlike previous reviews that concentrate on a single tool, platform, or instructional technique, this review brings together diverse, context-sensitive approaches implemented in Saudi and comparable

EFL settings. It highlights issues that are largely absent from global reviews—particularly idea-generation difficulties, topic familiarity, writing anxiety, and the cognitive burden of exhaustive error correction.

Moreover, compared to earlier SRs in the literature which emphasized technological affordances, this review foregrounds the human dimensions of writing instruction: instructor–student interaction, in-class monitoring, selective feedback, and the role of meaningful, familiar topics in reducing cognitive load. By integrating communicative models, participation goals, and scaffolded writing processes, the current SR positions itself as a complementary and necessary counterbalance to the technology-heavy direction of recent scholarship.

To summarize, this work fills a critical gap by offering a contextually grounded, pedagogically comprehensive synthesis that reconnects EFL writing research with the realities of classroom practice, learner psychology, and culturally relevant instruction, dimensions that remain underrepresented in the existing SRs and MAs.

4.8 Limitations of This Systematic Review

Although this review offers a comprehensive synthesis of EFL writing interventions across multiple pedagogical and technological contexts, several limitations should be acknowledged. (i) The review is based primarily on studies conducted in Saudi Arabia. While this contextual focus provides depth and cultural relevance, it may limit the generalizability of findings to other regions with different educational systems, literacy backgrounds, or instructional traditions. (ii) Some of the studies included in this SR relied on small size samples and used descriptive rather than experimental methodologies. This makes it difficult to compare effect sizes or draw causal conclusions across interventions. The absence of meta-analytic statistical synthesis further reflects the variability and limited quantitative reporting in some of the studies. (iii) Several pedagogical practices used in EFL writing classrooms, such as instructor conferencing, genre-based instruction, use of e-portfolios, and multimodal composition, are underrepresented in this corpus. Similarly, the rapid emergence of AI-assisted writing tools is not utilized in studies in the current corpus. (iv) Although the review integrates insights from different writing practices in the corpus, it does not include classroom observations nor other writing instructor interviews that could provide further qualitative depth. The findings therefore, reflect what the researcher reported, not necessarily the full complexity of writing instruction as experienced by all groups of learners and other writing instructors at the same institution.

Despite these limitations, the review offers a valuable, contextually grounded synthesis that highlights pedagogical patterns, identifies persistent challenges, and proposes directions for more effective EFL writing instruction.

4.9 Future Writing Research Directions

The current SR highlights several directions for future EFL writing research. (i) There is a need for longitudinal studies that trace the development of writing skills in EFL over multiple semesters rather than short instructional cycles. Most existing studies examine immediate or short-term improvements, leaving unanswered questions about the sustainability of improvements in accuracy, fluency, and idea generation. (ii) There is a need for mixed-methods and classroom-embedded research designs that capture the lived experiences of instructors and students. Observations, interviews, and learner diaries can provide richer insights into writing challenges, affective factors, and the dynamics of feedback and revision—dimensions that are often overlooked in quantitative studies. (iii) Although technology-enhanced writing has dominated recent studies, future studies should move beyond tool effectiveness to investigate how digital platforms shape writing behaviors, motivation, and identity. More research on student's utilization of AI tools in EFL writing, assignments and term papers and on authors' use of AI in generating specialized research articles is still open for further investigation in the future. Together, these directions call for research that is longitudinal, cognitively informed, contextually grounded, and methodologically diverse, that captures the complexity of EFL writing as both a linguistic skill and a communicative, social, and cognitive process.

5. Recommendations

Based on the results of the current SR, below are some recommendations for guiding EFL writing instructors, EFL curriculum designers, and departments in improving EFL writing instruction. For classroom practice, EFL instructors should provide brainstorming activities, visual organizers, and background knowledge activation to help the students generate ideas, especially when topics are abstract or unfamiliar. Use familiar, concrete, and relevant writing topics. Link assignments to sustainable development issues, current global events, or widely discussed social topics to reduce cognitive load and increase engagement. Adopt communicative and meaning-focused feedback. Highlight key errors without overwhelming students with extensive error marking, to promote self-editing, confidence, and autonomy. Integrate participation goals and tasks that ask for students' suggestions, opinions, and personal experiences to encourage meaningful communication and make writing more accessible. Increase in-class writing time under the instructor's supervision to allow for immediate guidance, reduce reliance on copying, and support the development of process-based writing habits.

For assessment and feedback, use analytic rubrics to enhance transparency as digital or paper rubrics clarify expectations, standardize scoring, and help students monitor their own progress. Train the students in writing rubric interpretation. Teach them how to use rubrics for self-assessment and to strengthen metacognitive awareness and revision skills. Balance accuracy with communication. Assessment should encourage not only grammatical correctness, but also idea development organization, and clarity. Instructors need support in shifting from extensive correction to selective, communicative feedback. Workshops on rubric design, calibration, and fair scoring can improve consistency across instructors. Practical strategies as peer editing, group writing tasks, and participation goals, can reduce instructors' workload and maintain instructional quality.

For EFL curriculum and materials development, step-by-step writing activities in EFL, as idea generation, drafting, revising, and editing, should be systematically integrated into the curriculum. Integrate reading-writing activities. Exposure to models, short texts, and thematic readings supports idea generation and enriches instructors' content knowledge. Technology should be used to enhance collaboration, feedback, and authentic communication.

For EFL department policy, smaller writing classes allow for more individualized feedback and meaningful interaction. Writing should be reinforced across reading, speaking, and grammar courses to build cumulative skill development. EFL departments can support writing centers, peer-tutoring workshops, and extracurricular writing activities to strengthen students' confidence and practice.

6. Conclusion

This SR demonstrates that effective EFL writing instruction emerges from approaches that balance instructor's guidance with learner autonomy, structure with communicative purpose, and accuracy with meaning. Across the diverse writing interventions examined in this SR that range from communicative feedback and participation goals to blended learning, digital rubrics, and mindmaps and creative online writing, there is one consistent pattern that stands out: students write more confidently and competently when cognitive load is reduced and idea generation is supported through familiar, meaningful, and contextually relevant tasks. Writing difficulties among EFL learners stem not only from linguistic limitations but also from challenges in generating ideas, limited exposure to authentic writing, and anxiety produced by exhaustive error correction. Instructional models that foreground meaning, scaffold the writing process, and provide selective, actionable feedback help students develop fluency, accuracy, and self-monitoring skills.

The review also highlights the importance of transparency in assessment and the pedagogical value of tools such as analytic rubrics, which clarify expectations and promote consistency across instructors. While recent global research has focused heavily on AI-assisted writing and automated evaluation systems, this review underscores the continued relevance of human-centered, classroom-embedded pedagogies that respond to learners' cognitive, affective, and cultural needs. By synthesizing studies from Saudi and comparable EFL contexts, the review expands the geographical and pedagogical scope of global writing research and offers insights that complement technology-driven approaches.

Finally, the findings call for writing instruction that is process-oriented, learner-centered, and grounded in authentic communication. When students are given time, support, and meaningful topics, they develop not only stronger writing skills but also greater confidence and motivation as writers. This review provides a foundation for future research and practice aimed at creating writing classrooms where learners can think, express, and grow with clarity and purpose.

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