

Assessing the Academic Key Performance Indicators of Junior College Students in Writing at Albaha University

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Abstract

The current paper has focused on evaluating Saudi junior students' writing performance at Albaha University. In this direction, the study aims to assess the academic key performance indicators of Saudi male students who study Writing (1) course in the first term of (2019) in the College of Science and Arts in Almandaq. About 24 students participated in this study. They were divided into two groups: a control group (n=12) and an experimental group (n=12). A pretest and posttest were carried out to collect the necessary data for both groups. To analyze the data, the study used percentages and the comparison of key performance indicators based on the Thorndike Approach for evaluating students' results and the natural distribution for their grades. Results revealed that while 24% of the control group participants failed to pass the posttest, all the experimental group respondents passed in the posttest after implementing the course through Blackboard. These results showed a statistically significant difference between the control group and the experimental group in favor of the experimental group. In light of these findings, the academic key performance indicated that the students' writing skills improved after implementing the treatment through the Blackboard Portal which helps in enhancing students' writing skills and achieving the students' learning outcomes in the College of Science and Arts in Almandaq and other Colleges at Albaha University.

Keywords: Blackboard, indicators, performance, Thorndike Approach, writing.

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is a very complicated cognitive activity in which the writer wants to establish communication through conventionally observable marks, Nunan (1989:36). It is one of the main four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Brown, 2000). Writing in English poses major difficulties for many Second Language Learners (SLL) when it comes to writing well-structured sentences or paragraphs. It is a productive skill in which the learners are not only to produce sentences but further to connect them in a particular order. Harris and Cunningham (1994) argued that writing texts in English is a complicated process as the writer has to move repeatedly backward and forward between his/her opinions and the written manuscript. Also, the relationship between the student and the text is considered a two-way interaction

between improving their knowledge and their written text (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987). These complications are caused by the need for activating a high level of language control, generating ideas, and evaluating the written work (Murcia and Olshtain, 2000).

Most English language staff members in the English Language Department in the College of Science and Arts at Albaha University suffer from the weak English language performance of the students, especially in writing skills. Some of them have poor performance in the English language. This weakness subsequently affects their academic progress greatly. The poor performance of students in English is obvious in the writing courses, such courses pose great difficulties for most of the students, and sometimes writing is the reason behind college dropouts. Even though the students learn English for eight years in public education, they still have enormous and severe problems in writing. This research paper tries to assess Saudi University Students' Academic Key Performance Indicators in writing (1) Course through the use of the Blackboard portal in the first term of 2019. Also, it aims at developing the students' writing skills as EFL learners, and to enhance their writing performance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Quality Improvement

The importance of Quality in the educational context has increased recently in the 21st century. The mechanism of quality is created by administrations to sustain and increase the quality of education. Biggs (2014:19) stated that quality improvement is greater than assurance because quality improvement aims at investigating problems as they arise and tries to avoid them. Besides, quality improvement is a cyclical process that aims at refining educational practices in a way that supports achieving its learning objectives. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education Scotland (2017:3) argued that Quality enhancement is to try to enhance the impact of the students' learning experiences through quality programs. For this purpose, the QAA Scotland (2017) has designed the Quality Enhancement Framework that includes five elements: "enhancement themes, institution-led review, student engagement in quality, public information, and Enhancement-led Institutional Review".

Ajiba and Zerhouni, (2019) argued that student engagement is a key factor in responding to higher education students' requirements and in improving the quality of the learning/teaching settings at the Moroccan tertiary level. The fewer students engage in their studies, the less quality there will be in the higher education programs, and the fewer the students will be satisfied with their studies. This premise will be examined through the fieldwork that will be discussed in the following sections.

2.2 Writing (1) Course Learning Outcomes

2.2.1. Knowledge

Writing (1) course offers productive skills essential for communicative purpose in the language written texts. It focuses on grammar, vocabulary, the enhancement of linguistic sub-skills, and motivates students to improve these skills such as planning,

taking notes, and writing keywords. By the end of the course, the students writing abilities should be improved (English language Course Specification, Albaha University, 1438).

The strategies of teaching students writing must focus on English sentences, using coherence, and cohesive devices. Furthermore, the language instructor gives students homework and then, they give feedback. He also asks them to write a topic sentence, thesis statements for several topics and correct them. For example, the instructor gives students quizzes to improve their writing skills.

2.2.2 Cognitive Skills

The students should have the ability to think of new ideas and to elaborate on them. They, also, use several conjunction words as much as possible. To develop their skills, the course instructor explains the writing strategies, and the students apply those strategies while writing under the teacher's supervision and guidance. On the other hand, the students should practice several activities as part of the semester's assessment. These contain homework, assignment, and papers which check if they developed the required skills (English language Course Specification, Albaha University, 1438 H).

2.2.3. Students' personal skills

The course instructors present tasks to enhance the students' writing skills to enable them to write accurate paragraphs and essays. They suggest new concepts to activate students in the classroom and raise points for discussion aiming at finding out a thesis statement to begin paragraph writing. The students practice writing phrases, clauses, and sentences correctly. The instructors distribute students into groups and request them to produce an essay about a certain topic, then, the teacher collects the essays and corrects them, and consequently give them feedback (English language Course Specification, Albaha University, 1438 H).

2.3 Previous Studies

Some studies conducted on the problems encountered by international and Arab university students in L₂ writing revealed that they experienced a wide range of problems. Rasouli, (2020) investigated the impact of task type on the writing accuracy of Iranian female and male EFL students. 50 intermediate Iranian EFL students (aged from 19 to 26) were the participants of the study. The participants were divided into two groups according to their age (n=25 for each). They were asked to write a composition of at least 100 words for both of them. The findings of the study did not reveal any significant differences concerning the writing accuracy of both groups (male and female) in three task types. The study results have practical implications in different fields such as implementing and designing tasks in a second language classroom environment, English as a foreign language testing, and Second language acquisition research.

Mugaddam and Zakaria (2013) conducted a study to assess Sudanese university students' written performance at the tertiary level. The participants of the study were 65 instructors and 240 students enrolled in writing courses in level four in different

Sudanese universities. An achievement test and two questionnaires were used to collect the data. The study findings revealed that the participants were unable to use the writing strategies such as pre-writing and organization of the written texts. They also showed the students lack the awareness of cohesive devices.

Hughes (2013) argued that an effective writing test should examine only writing skills. A test that covers a variety of writing tasks provides a more representative image of a student's writing skills than one that includes only one writing task. However, improving the scoring procedures that will be implemented with the test is the most difficult part of producing a written test. Several tests apply an analytic scoring procedure in which different aspects of a piece of writing take scores, such as organization, content, and grammar. Other tests apply a holistic scoring approach, whereas a single score is assigned to writing examples, based on an overall impressionistic assessment of the students' performance on the test. Technical support for scoring is also available with automated assignment scoring.

Many instructors who teach writing courses make use of portfolios for assessing the students writing. A portfolio is a group of students' writing, collected over time. It usually includes samples of the students' best work and offers a collection of written samples, rather than a single piece of writing. Besides, it may also contain a written image by the student on his or her development in writing, as well as a self-evaluation of his weaknesses and strengths in writing. The portfolio is a base for the final grade.

2.4.1 Views of Research in Writing in the Arab Setting

The studies cited below showed that Arab students encountered grammatical, lexical, and L₁ style transfer, coherence, cohesion, and organizational difficulties in EFL writing. Ajiba and Zerhouni, (2019) examined the learners' engagement for quality enhancement and respond to student needs at the Moroccan tertiary level. They collected the necessary data from three Moroccan universities. The study ran a questionnaire to examine the students' engagement adapted from (Kember, Leung & McNaught, 2005 in Kember & Leung, 2009) to 883 participants. The data was analyzed through the statistical analysis of frequencies using the SPSS program. The study findings revealed that the participants have a low level of engagement with their studies and that the university program lacks some aspects of "good practice" in higher education.

Ahmed (2010) investigated the organizational problems of Egyptian students using a mixed-method research design. Two tools were utilized to collect the data, a questionnaire, and a semi-structured interview. The study findings showed that the students had some problems with their English writing. They had some problems with incoherence, thesis statements, topic sentences, concluding sentences, and conclusions. Cohesion was also problematic for Egyptian students. They have also difficulties in using reference, substitution, ellipsis, and cohesive devices.

Al-Khasawneh (2014) investigated the errors of English written paragraphs of twenty-six Jordanian students (16 female and 10 male students). The mistakes committed by the participants were checked and classified into different categories. The results showed that the study participants committed many grammatical and spelling

mistakes. These findings also revealed that the study respondents were commonly misused English articles.

Another study by Rass (2015) examined the difficulties faced by Palestinian students who enrolled in EFL teaching courses to enhance well-written paragraphs. The researcher analyzed the accumulated data. The study samples were 205 students selected randomly from the population. The findings showed that participants face similar repeated types of mistakes. Also, these findings revealed that they face some difficulties in writing the topic and concluding sentences, as well as using transitions correctly. It was also reported that the students inappropriately transfer Arabic style in their writing.

2.4.2 Problems of Writing in Saudi Contexts

Al-Zahrani (2018) studied the most common problems of writing paragraphs made by Saudi female students with a special emphasis on the main structural elements of the paragraph unit. Also, the research investigated the most challenging paragraph element. Twenty female English major students at Albaha University participated in this study. Each student wrote a paragraph describing her hometown as the main tool for this study. To analyze the data, the researcher used content analysis and frequency percentages to evaluate the written documents using an evaluation checklist developed for this study. The results explored that writing supporting sentences was the most problematic element as it was the most common failed structural component. The most common failed criterion was using appropriate transitions to connect the supporting sentences which reached 90% among the study participants.

Altamimi and Rashid (2019) ran a study aiming at investigating the causes of Saudi university students' spelling mistakes in their written texts. The study samples were 15 learners enrolled in the English Language courses in the Faculty of Arts at Tabuk University as well as 15 English language instructors from the same college. The results showed that there were various causes of students' spelling mistakes such as the students' attitude, syllabus, the interference of L₁ into L₂, and finally the system of education in general.

Elhussien (2019) conducted a study that examined the efficiency of applying creative writing to develop Saudi female students' creative writing competence (level-4) at Almajma'a University. The study participants were 64 female students who were distributed into two groups: an experimental group (n=32) and a control group (n=32). A pretest and a posttest were used for the study. The results revealed that the experimental group's creative writing competence was much better than the control group. Also, they showed that the application of creative writing multi-tasks has a positive impact on improving Saudi learners' creative writing competence in all types of essays.

In their research, Alqahtani and Elumalai (2020) examined the use of lexical cohesion in the writing of undergraduate students who enrolled in an advanced ESL reading course at King Saud University. The participants in their study were 35 students. The study findings revealed that the students' skills in vocabulary, grammar,

and discourse markers usage improved significantly. Also, these findings proved that the students are motivated and engaged in group work and pair work.

Chatta & Haque (2020) carried out a study that examined the influence of Flipped Classroom Instruction on enhancing Saudi junior students' writing skills, who enrolled in writing (1) course in the Business College, at Prince Sattam University in AlKharj. The study participants were distributed into a control group and an experimental group. The research ran a pretest and a posttest for both groups. The results revealed a statistically significant difference between the control group and the experimental group in favor of the experimental group. These findings showed a considerable improvement in the experimental group paragraph writing. The participants reflected positive attitudes toward the Flipped Classroom instruction. Therefore, this paper recommended that applying flipped classroom instruction in the English classes improved the students' paragraph writing at Prince Sultan University and other Saudi Universities.

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Setting

This study ran in the English Department in the College of Science and Arts in Almandaq at Albaha University in the Albaha region, Saudi Arabia in the first term of 2019. There are two programs in the English Department: the first one is for applied linguistics and the other one for literature studies.

3.2 Participants

A sample of this study includes 24 junior students who enrolled in the writing (1) course, in the College of Science and Arts in Almandaq, at Albaha University, Saudi Arabia, in the first term of 2019. The participants of this study were randomly distributed into a control group (n=12) and an experimental group (n=12).

3.3 Instrument

Before the treatment, the researcher ran the pretest-posttest designs to collect the necessary data for both groups. An achievement test was designed to assess the students; writing skills. It covered writing topic, supportive, and concluding sentences, thesis statements, cohesion and coherence, and other writing skills. .

3.4 Procedures

A pilot study was implemented on 10 students to ensure the validity of the instrument. This results in minor modifications of the test. Then, all students had given a pretest. After the treatment, the participants were divided into a control group and an experimental group. A posttest was presented to both groups to assess their writing performance. The researchers acted as the main examiner because he is the only instructor of the course.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To analyze the data, this study uses percentages and the comparison of the key performance indicators based on the Thorndike Approach for evaluating students' results and the natural distribution for their grades as follows:

Table 1. Normal distribution of grades according to Thorndike Approach:

Grade	Normal Distribution
A	10%
B	20%
C	40%
D	20%
F	10%

Table 1 above, shows the normal distribution of grades according to the Thorndike Approach for evaluating the students' grades and percentages.

4.1 Results of the Students in the Pretest

Before the treatment, a pretest was administered to the participants to guarantee their homogeneity and determine their ability and knowledge in writing. After taking the pretest in writing (1), the results were tabulated and analyzed according to Thorndike Approach for grades distribution and percentage as follows:

Table 2. Percentage of the students' grades in the pretest:

Grade	Normal Distribution	Actual Grades
A	10%	0%
B	20%	4.5%
C	40%	8.5%
D	20%	33%
F	10%	54%

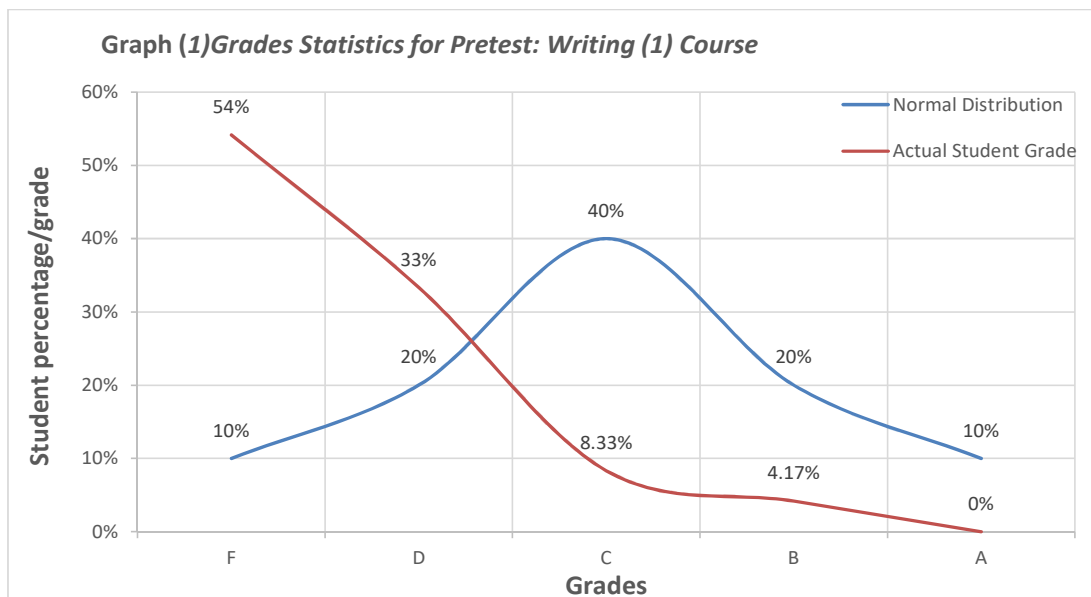


Fig. 1. Pretest writing results

Table 2 and Figure 1 above show the actual grades distribution and percentage of the participants of the study (24 students) in the Writing (1) course in the pretest. Findings revealed that 4.5% of the participants get a grade (B) which is below the natural distribution which is 20%, and 8.5% of the respondents achieved grade (c) below the natural distribution for a grade (c) which is 40%. However, 33% of the participants get a grade (D) which exceeds the natural distribution for the same grade which is 20%; while 54% of the respondents get (F) which highly exceeded the normal distribution of a grade (F) which is 10%. These findings of the pretest revealed a very weak writing performance of Saudi junior students, who enrolled in English Writing (1) courses in the College of Science and Arts in Almandaq Branch at Albaha University.

4.2. Results of the Control Group in the Posttest

The control group consists of 12 students, who take the posttest in writing (1) course in the first term of 2019. Their results are formulated and analyzed according to Thorndike Approach for grade distribution and percentages in Table 3 and Figure 2.

Table 3. Grade Distribution and Percentages for the control group in posttest:

Grade	Normal Distribution	Actual Grades
A	10%	7%
B	20%	7%
C	40%	17%
D	20%	45%
F	10%	24%

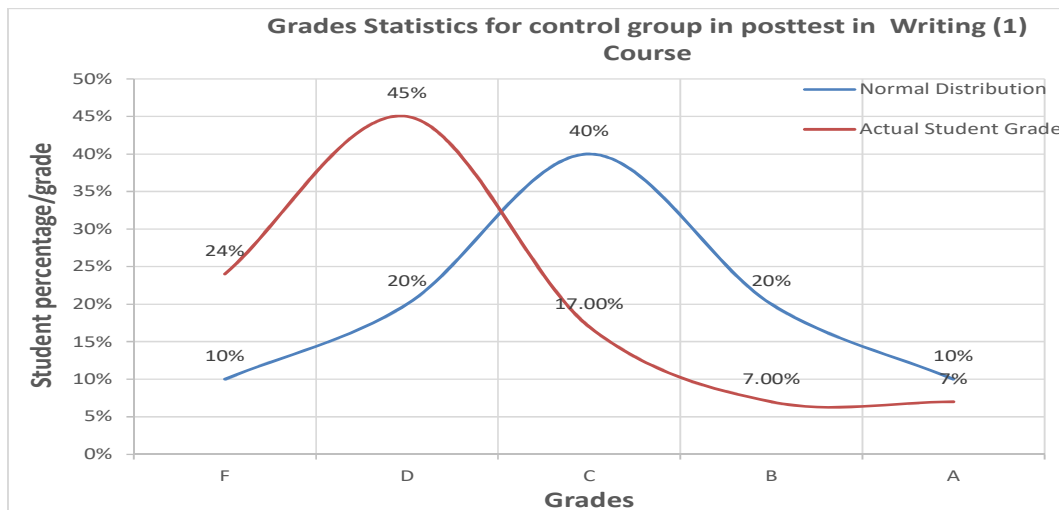


Fig.2. Control group posttest

For the scores gained from the posttest for the control group, about 7% of the participants got a grade (A) which is reasonable. Also, 7% of them get (B) which is below the normal distribution for the same grade which is (20%) according to Thorndike Approach (see Table 1). About 17% got (C), which is far below the normal distribution which is (40%). While 45% got a grade (D) which is more than the normal distribution for the same grade (20%), and about 24% of the participants failed the posttest.

4.3. Results of the Experimental Group in the Posttest

As compared with the control group, the experimental group also contains 12 students. After running the posttest for the experimental group, the results are analyzed and the students' marks are distributed according to the Thorndike Approach for grades distribution and percentages in Table 4 and Figure 4.

Table 4. Distribution and Percentage of the experimental group in the posttest:

Grade	Normal Distribution	Actual Grades
A	10%	8%
B	20%	46%
C	40%	23%
D	20%	23%
F	10%	0%

Table 4 shows the students' actual grades and percentages in the posttest. 24 students took the posttest. The posttest results show that 8% of the participants get a grade (A) which is slightly below the normal distribution which is (10%). Whereas 46%

of the respondents got (B) which exceeds the normal distribution for the same grade which is (20%). Also, 23% of the participants had (C), and 23% of them got (D) which is the most reasonable grade. No students got (F).

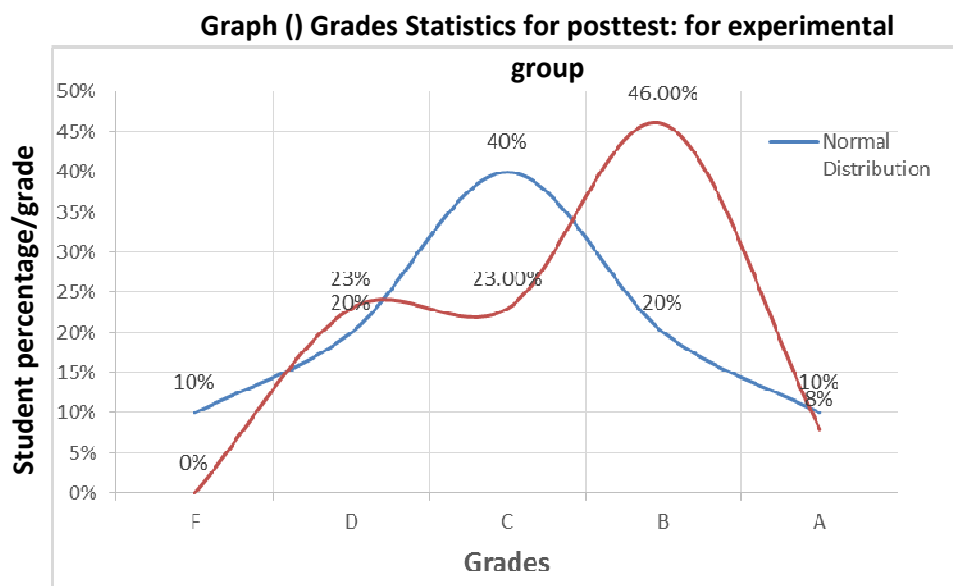


Fig.3. Post-test results

Figure 3 above revealed the grade statistics and percentage for the experimental group in the posttest in writing. It is clear that 23% of the students got a grade (D), and 23% of the participants got (C); While 46% got (B), and only 8% of the respondents got (A). No one got (F).

4.3 Overall Results for the Posttest for both Groups:

Table 5. Overall results of pretest and posttest for both groups

Grade	Normal Distribution	Actual grades and percentage in pretest for all Students.	Actual grades and percentage for the control group in posttest	Actual grades and percentage for the experimental group in posttest
A	10%	0%	7%	8%
B	20%	4.5%	7%	46%
C	40%	8.5%	17%	23%
D	20%	33%	45%	23%
F	10%	54%	24%	0%

Table 5 shows the overall results of the pretest and the post-test. Whereas no participant gets a grade (A) in the pretest, about 7% of the participants in the control group get (A), and 8% of the students get a grade (A) in the posttest which is reasonable

for both groups. The findings also revealed that 4.5% of the respondents got (B) in the pretest. While 7% of the control group participants got (B), around 46% of the participants in the experimental group achieved grade (B) in the post-test which exceeds the normal grade distribution. Also, the results showed that only 8.5% of the control group participants got a grade (C), about 23% of the experimental group got a grade (c) in the post-test which is below the normal distribution. Besides, 33% of the control group students got a grade (D) in the post-test, only 23% of the experimental group students got the same grade (D) which is reasonable. Finally, while 54% of the participants failed the pretest, 24% of the control group got (F), however, all of the experimental group students passed the posttest. These findings show a significant improvement in the posttest for both groups, especially the experimental group.

These results show a statistically significant difference that the students' writing skills were significantly developed in the posttest for the experimental group much better than the control group. The results are in line with the studies conducted by McLaughlin et al. (2014) for Pharmaceutics classes, Ayçiçek and Yelken (2018) for English course in a school, and Marcey and Brint (2012) for biology classes, these studies demonstrated that scores of the posttests were higher than the pretests.

The results of this study go in line with the study of Yu and Wang (2016), who use a new strategy for flipping the English writing course for undergraduate students. The experimental group performed better than the control group participants. The scores of the experimental group are higher, and the students are positive towards the use of the blackboard portal. In the same way, they agree with the results of Qadar and Arslan (2019), who investigated the impact of FCI on Iraqi EFL students. In this research, the participants of the experimental group have written better paragraphs than the control group. They also aligned with the results of Alzahrani (2018) who studied problems of writing paragraph structure of female students at Albaha University.

These research findings indicate that the academic key performance of the students in writing skills considerably developed for the experimental group in the posttest much better than for the control group.

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to assess the academic key performance indicators of Saudi male students, who study writing (1) course (level-1) in the College of Science and Arts in Almandaq at Albaha University. The results of this study revealed a significant improvement in students writing skills in the posttest than in the pretest. About 54% of the students failed to pass the pretest. These findings indicated that the participants had a weak writing performance in the pretest. After the treatment, while 76% of the control group passed in the posttest, all the experimental group participants passed in the posttest. These findings revealed a statistically significant difference between the control group and the experimental group in favor of the experimental group. They showed that the experimental group's writing skills improved much better than the control group. The experimental group participants used correct sentences grammatically in their writing and committed fewer grammatical errors in the posttest.

Meanwhile, their writing was systematic in the case of punctuation, cohesive, and coherent, and they wrote paragraphs properly. These results had a statistical significance that teaching writing skills, using ‘Keep Writing 1’ through the Blackboard Portal can enhance the students’ performance and improve their learning outcomes. In light of these findings, the study concluded that the academic key performance indicators, based on the Thorndike approach of evaluating students' results and the natural distribution for their grades which showed that the students' academic writing skills were developed after treatment and their learning outcomes were improved. Also, this research is considered as a good step in achieving the quality of the programs in teaching the English language and increasing the quality of teaching writing and other skills in other colleges of Albaha University.

The study findings illustrated that EFL in the College of Science and Arts experienced a weak performance in writing skills and that the language program lacked some features of “worthy practice” in Albaha Universities. The present research findings can help in improving the quality of English language programs as it revealed weaknesses in students’ writing performance that need to be considered in the learning process that Albaha University is going through. The study provided suggestions for improvement such as giving students more practice of writing skills such as using transitions, topic sentences, supporting sentences, concluding sentences, editing and reviewing their written paragraphs, etc. Another implication of this paper is that students can provide useful feedback that can be applied to develop the learning and teaching of EFL as well as the environment in all colleges of Albaha University.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings, the study recommended the following:

- *Instructors should present activities to improve the students’ writing skills.
- * Students should practice writing topic sentence, supporting and concluding sentences.
- * Learners should practice, revise, and edit sentences and paragraphs.
- *Individual writing and pair writing activities should be run along with group discussions and error correction techniques.
- * Implementing the use of the Blackboard to teach students English courses.

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