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Exploring EFL Learners' Writing Difficulties and their Attitudes towards Reading

استكشاف صعوبات الكتابة لدى طلاب اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية ومعتقداتهم تجاه القراءة

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Abstract

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English has become the most prominent means of global communication, and the most important means of acquiring access to the world's intellectual, cultural and technical resources. The teaching of EFL aims to enable the learners to master its four skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Writing is one of the main language skills. It plays an essential role in expressing one's ideas, opinions and attitudes. Nevertheless, many EFL learners cannot develop their writing skill, and they encounter several difficulties when they write. The current study aimed at exploring English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' writing difficulties, and their attitudes towards reading. The data were collected through a structured questionnaire oriented to a sample of fourth year middle school (4th YMS) learners at Hadri Miloud Middle School, Ouled M'hala, Setif, Algeria. The obtained results revealed that learners' major difficulties lie mainly in vocabulary, grammar and spelling. Moreover, the results show that the learners have a positive attitude towards reading and consider it as important in improving their writing skill. These results can be used by EFL teachers to design remedial activities in order to strengthen EFL learners weaknesses in writing.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ملخص

طلبة اللغة

الانجليزية

صعوبات الكتابة

الكتابة

القراءة.

لقد أصبحت اللغة الانجليزية وسيلة رائدة للتواصل العالمي و للاطلاع على ثقافات العالم و تكنولوجياياته. تدريس هذه اللغة كلغة أجنبية يصبو إلى تمكين الطلبة من إتقان مهاراتها الأربعة : السمع الكلام القراءة و الكتابة. و تعد الكتابة إحدى أهم هذه المهارات, إذ تلعب دورا مهما في التعبير عن الآراء و الأفكار. إلا أن الطلبة يواجهون عدة صعوبات عندما يكتبون. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى الكشف عن صعوبات الكتابة لدى تلاميذ اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية و موقفهم تجاه مهارة القراءة. عملية جمع البيانات تمت بواسطة استبيان موجه لعينة من تلاميذ السنة الرابعة متوسط بمتوسطة حذري ميلود, اولاد محلة, سطيف, الجزائر. النتائج المحصل عليها بينت أن الصعوبات الرئيسية التي يواجهها التلاميذ عند ممارسة مهارة الكتابة تكمن على مستوى المفردات, القواعد, و الإملاء. إضافة إلى ذلك, بينت النتائج الموقف الايجابي لدى التلاميذ تجاه مهارة القراءة كأداة مهمة لتحسين مهاراتهم الكتابية. هذه النتائج يمكن استعمالها من طرف أساتذة اللغة الانجليزية كمنطلق لتصميم تمارين علاجية لتقوية نقاط ضعف التلاميذ في الكتابة.

1. Introduction

English has become the most prominent means of global communication, and the most important means of acquiring access to the world's intellectual, cultural and technical resources. The teaching of EFL aims to enable the learners to master its four skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Writing is one of the main language skills. It plays an essential role in expressing one's ideas, opinions and attitudes. Nevertheless, many EFL learners cannot develop their writing skill, and they encounter several difficulties when they write. These difficulties might be related to various aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, coherence, or cohesion. Exploring and highlighting these problems can help in improving learners' writing skill through specific remedial tasks and activities.

This study inquires about the writing difficulties of EFL learners and their attitudes towards reading.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Writing Skill and Writing Difficulties

Nunan (2003) explains that writing is both a physical and mental act. On the one hand, it is the physical act of committing words or ideas to some medium. On the other hand, it is the mental work of inventing ideas, thinking about how to express them and organizing them into statements, and paragraphs that will be clear to the reader.

Byrne (1988) and Heaton (1990) point out that writing is a complex process as it necessitates the mastery of grammatical devices, conceptual thinking and judgmental elements.

Grabe and Kaplan (1996) indicate that since writing is not natural but rather gained through continuous efforts and much practice, it becomes a complex skill.

Hence, the previously mentioned researchers agree that writing is complex and needs both mental and physical efforts

Nunan (1999) states that producing a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing is the most difficult task to do in a foreign language learning. As a matter of fact, researchers in the field of teaching English as a Foreign

language stress that both the content and the form are important aspects of writing a composition. Writing needs appropriate language use, text construction, layout, style and effectiveness (Harmer, 2007).

Students' problems in writing may occur because of many factors, including psychological, linguistic and cognitive aspects. Raimes (1983) think that when students complain about how difficult it is to write in a second language, they are not only about the difficulty of finding the right words and using the correct grammar but also about the difficulty of finding and expressing ideas in a new language.

Hadifield (1992) notes three areas of difficulty for the learner in relation to the productive skill of writing. He pointed out that the first difficulty is that the writer cannot consult the reader, for the audience is not immediately present as in the case with speaking. Second, learners suffer from a linguistic difficulty in that language used in speech is not the same as writing. In some cases, it is simpler like a shopping list, in others it is more elaborate and formal like in academic report. The difficulty is more evident for EFL learners who are unaware of the discourse patterns inherent in particular types of writing. The last difficulty is cognitive, this relates to the ability to organize ideas on the paper.

In brief, writing is difficult because of the absence of the audience, the linguistic difference between speech and writing, and the ability to organize ideas on paper.

Graham (2007) claims that knowledge is the most important ingredient in writing improvement. Hence, the lack of schematic knowledge can be considered as a real handicap, as the schematic knowledge of the EFL writer has a clear impact on his writing achievement. That is to say, his memory storage related to language form and content influences the writing ability.

First, spelling is one form aspect of English language to dictate a certain level of challenge to accurate and fluent writing. Nakon (2009: 18) argues that "if learners have poor spelling skills, they will typically avoid writing tasks, and when writing will avoid words that they find difficult to spell".

The lack of consistency between the sound and

letter systems of the English language compared to other languages generates the spelling difficulties. Many English sounds are pronounced in one way but spelled differently. This creates confusions and irregularities for EFL learners while spelling words in compositions. (Labiod, 2016).

Moreover, grammatical competence and lexical knowledge are other factors participating in writing difficulties. On the one hand, grammatical competence may include knowledge about how language is organized differently from the oral language. In a point of fact, the learner faces challenges while writing, as writing with the absence of the reader needs the use of an explicit informing language with an accurate grammar. On the other hand, lexical reservoir is a key component in the writing process. One of the main causes of the writing deficiencies among language learners is the absence of a rich vocabulary (Kyoko, 2009).

In addition, the cultural content is another writing difficulty among language learners, as learners have to respect particularities of the target culture. Xing et al, (2008) state that:

An added complexity is that different cultural conventions are involved in academic argument. These conventions are important from the point of view of the teacher in that overseas students may have a logical orientation, but it may be perceived to be illogical to a reader anticipating a different culturally constrained demonstration of logic.(75)

In sum, spelling, grammar, lexical and cultural features of the target language stand here as undeniable examples of form and content schematic knowledge which may hinder writing.

2.2 Reading as a Solution to Writing Difficulties

Reading is a very important skill that helps people to learn and acquire knowledge and experiences. As a result, learners need to raise the attitude of reading and become active readers.

According to Ferris and Hedgcock (2005), reading becomes the basis of writing because the information acquired through reading contains print-encoded messages as well as clues about how the messages:

grammatical, lexical, semantic, pragmatic, and rhetorical constitute and combine to make the message meaningful.

According to Holmstron and Glengening (2004: 32), reading is important because:

- It develops students' writing by making them better writers, since they may face different rules of grammar which help them later in developing a sense of structures of the language , grammar, and increase their vocabulary.
- It enables students to have a kind of interaction and form their own thoughts.

Johnson (2008:07) believes that the relationship between reading and writing is that reading helps learners become better writers, by making them in contact with the rules of grammar, consequently; they develop the language structure, grammar, and increase their vocabulary; hence, reading in the writing classroom is understood as the appropriate input for the acquisition of writing skill since it is believed that reading some productions will in a way function as primary model for which writing skill can be acquired, or at least inferred (Eisterhold; 1990).

Krashen (1984:20) theorizes that a person's "writing competence comes only from large amounts of self-motivational reading for interest and/ or pleasure", and adds that "it is reading that gives the writer the feel for the look and texture of reader-based prose".

Reading is essentially a great source for building one's schemata in general and that of learners' in particular. Ming-Yueh (2009:89) states that "reading can play a role in the writing process by providing schemata (ideas) to write about. Without reading, the writer cannot have content to write about or the arguments or information to use". Thus, reading can function as an ideas resource in composing.

In this sense, Hylland (2003:17) adds that " extensive reading can furnish great deal of tacit knowledge of conventional features of written texts, including grammar, vocabulary, organizational patterns, interactional devices and so on". So, reading introduces models to be followed when writing.

Johnson (2008:07) clarifies that “through reading students have incidental contact with the rules of grammar” i.e., as much as learners are exposed to the language through reading they develop this grammatical competence, knowing about parts of the sentence, tenses, determiners, and prepositions, and will finish by using this competence in their writings.

a matter of fact, reading can be assumed as the basic content and form resort for writing compositions.

Learning to write is at the heart of learning English as a foreign language. So, efforts from teachers’ and learners’ parts should be unified and directed towards finding effective means to boost this language skill. Reading may be a basic ingredient in the development of this language skill among EFL learners.

3. Methodology

3.1 Context

The current study followed an exploratory design in order to investigate EFL learners’ writing difficulties and their attitudes towards reading as a solution to improve writing. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administrated to 4th YMS learners. The obtained data were transformed into numbers and percentages and compared through tables and figures.

3.2 Research Questions

Two main research questions were raised:

- 1- what are EFL learners’ writing difficulties?
- 2- What are EFL learners’ attitudes towards reading to improve their writing?

3.3 Participants

The sample of this research comprised seventy six (76) fourth (4th) YMS learners at Hadri Miloud Middle School in Ouled M’hala, Setif, Algeria, during the academic year 2019/2020.

3.4 Instruments

A structured questionnaire was oriented to the learners in order to explore their writing difficulties and their attitudes towards reading as a solution to improve writing. (Appendix A).

4. Results and Discussion

A/ Biodata Information

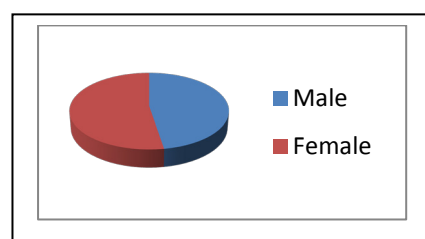
1/ You are male or female ?

Table 01:

Participants’ Gender.

	Male	Female
Frequency	36	40
Percentage	47.3 %	52.6 %

Figure 01:



Participants’ Gender

The number of the participant males and females is close; though females are more than males. The rate of the participating females is (52.6 %), whereas the rate of the participating males is (47.3 %).

B/ Writing Skill and Writing Difficulties

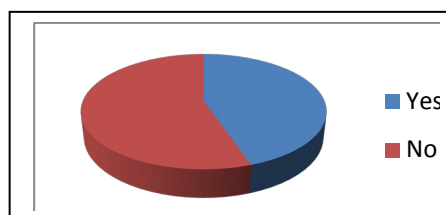
1/ Are you motivated to write in English?

Table 02:

Motivation to Write in English.

	Yes	No
Frequency	34	42
Percentage	44.7 %	55.2 %

Figure 02:



Motivation to Write in English.

Results obtained from the questionnaire reveal that (55.2 %) of the participants are not motivated to

write in English, whereas (44.7 %) of the participants responded that they are motivated to write in English.

Motivation plays a significant role in learning the writing skill, however the majority of the participants do not like writing and have a negative attitude towards it.

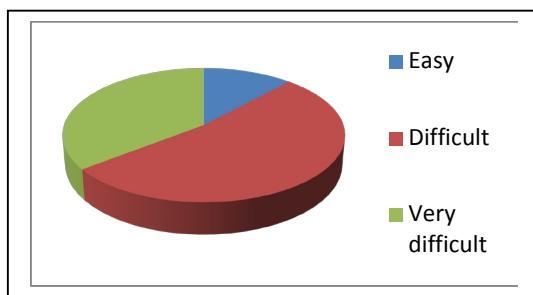
2/ In general, you find writing assignments in English: easy, difficult, very difficult?

Table 03 :

Level of Difficulty.

	Easy	Difficult	Very difficult
Frequency	09	40	27
Number	11.8%	52.6%	35.5%

Figure 03:



Level of Difficulty.

The majority of participants (52.6%) find English assignments difficult, and (35.5%) reported that they find it very difficult, and only (11.8%) of the participants stated that writing is an easy task.

The reality that most participants see writing assignments as difficult or very difficult might be a result of their lack of motivation or their lack of knowledge of how to write effectively.

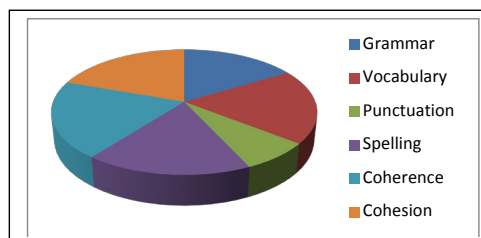
3/ What are the aspects you are likely to find difficulties in?

Table 04:

Aspects of difficulty.

	Gram mar	Vocab ulary	Punct uation	Spe lling	Coh erence	Coh esion
Frequency	46	54	21	49	56	55
Percentage	72.3%	73.6%	27.6%	71.05%	64.4%	60.5%

Figure 04



Aspects of difficulty.

The results concerning the aspects of writing difficulty are as follows: vocabulary (73.6%), grammar (72.3%), spelling (71.05 %), coherence (64.4%), cohesion (60 %), and punctuation (27.6%).

The obtained results reflect that learners find difficulty in most of the writing aspects with close percentages. First, they find major difficulty with vocabulary as they do not find the accurate words to describe their thoughts and ideas due to the lack of experience of word choice tasks like repetition of words, the misuse of vocabulary items. Second, grammar difficulties might be due to the lack of practice of grammar rules in context. Third, spelling constitutes another difficulty as the learners spell many words wrongly, even though these words are commonly used. Moreover, learners find difficulty at the levels of coherence and cohesion. Their ideas are not related, maybe due to the low understanding of topics or the lack of practice of how to use connectors and discourse makers. Finally, learners find some difficulty in punctuation, which might be the result of little focus on this aspect.

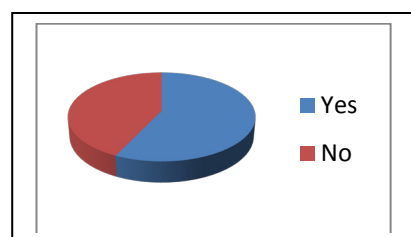
4/ Are you given enough time in the classroom to write or answer writing tasks?

Table 05:

The sufficiency of writing time.

	Yes	No
Frequency	44	33
Percentage	57.8%	43.4%

Figure 05:



The sufficiency of writing time.

(57.8%) of the participants claimed that they are given enough time to write or answer writing tasks, whereas (43.4%) believe that the given time is insufficient.

Providing sufficient time to write or answer is an important factor for learners to think well and focus on all the aspects of writing.

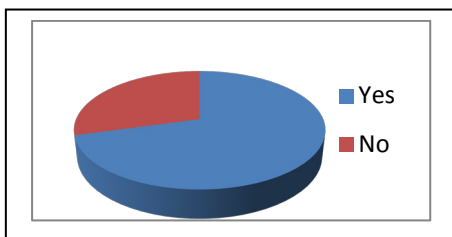
5/ Does the teacher allow you to use dictionaries in your writing?

Table 06:

The use of dictionaries

	Yes	No
Frequency	53	22
Percentage	69.7%	28.9%

Figure 06:



The use of dictionaries.

(69.7%) of the participants reported that the teacher allows them to use dictionaries in their writing, unlike (28.9%) who claimed that the teacher does not allow them to use the dictionaries.

Dictionary use might be a way to improve learners' writing and a motivating tool to compose.

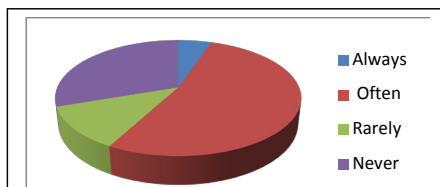
6/ How often do you use dictionaries in your writing?

Table 07:

Frequency of Dictionary Use.

	Always	Often	Rarely	Never
Frequency	04	40	09	23
Percentage	05.2%	52.6%	11.8%	30.2%

Figure 07:



Frequency of Dictionary Use.

(52.6%) of the participants appear to use dictionaries often, (32.2%) of them never use them, (11.8 %) use them rarely, and (05.2%) use them always.

Learners use the dictionaries to find the meaning of the difficult and new words, and also to find the equivalents in the target language. So, dictionary use can improve learners' writing level.

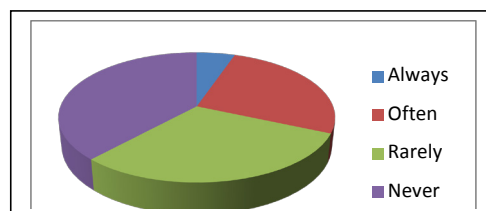
7/ How often do you write in English outside the classroom?

Table 08:

Frequency of Writing in English outside the classroom.

	Always	Often	Rarely	Never
Frequency	04	20	23	29
Percentage	05.2%	26.3%	30.2%	38.1%

Figure 08:



Frequency of Writing in English outside the classroom.

Results show that (38.1%) of the participants never write in English outside the classroom, (30.2%) of the participants rarely do, (26.3%) of them often do, and (05.2%) of them always do.

Improving the writing skill needs continuous practice. In this sense, learners need to write more often in order to develop their writing skill.

C/ Reading Skill:

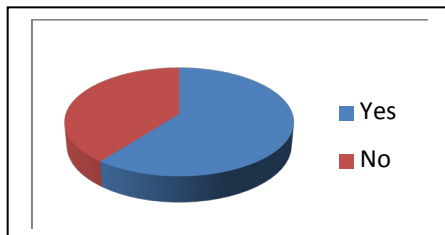
1/ Are you motivated to read ?

Table 09:

Motivation to read

	Yes	No
Frequency	46	30
Percentage	60.5%	39.4%

Figure 08:



Motivation to read .

(60.5%) of the participants claimed that they are motivated to read in general, whereas (39.4%) stated that they are not motivated.

Reading is a receptive skill that plays a significant role in feeding mind to generate ideas and refine perceptions and thoughts.

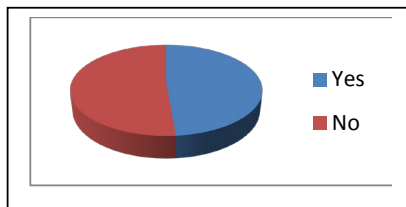
2/ Do you read in English?

Table 10:

Reading in English.

	Yes	No
Frequency	37	39
Percentage	48.6%	51.3%

Figure 10:



Reading in English.

(51.3%) of the participants stated that they do not read in English, and (48.6%) reported that they read in English.

The lack of reading might be a leading factor to the low level of writing proficiency.

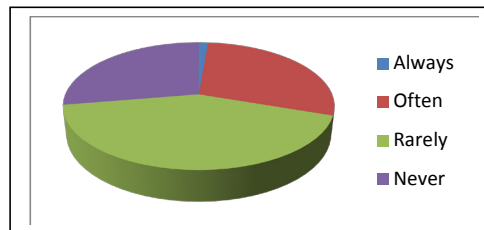
3/ How often do you read books, magazines or texts in English?

Table 11:

Frequency of reading in English .

	Always	Often	Rarely	Never
Frequency	01	22	32	21
Percentage	01.3%	28.9%	42.1%	27.6%

Figure 11:



Frequency of reading in English .

(42.1%) of the participants rarely read, (28.9%) of them often do, (27.6%) of them never do, and only (01.3%) of them always do.

Learners in this case do not read in English may be due to the lack of materials and opportunities.

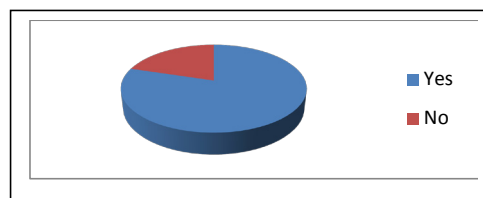
4/ Is reading skill includes in your writing session?

Table 12:

The inclusion of reading in writing Session.

	Yes	No
Frequency	59	15
Percentage	77.6%	19.7%

Figure 12:



The inclusion of reading in writing Session.

(77.6%) of the participants claimed that reading is included in their writing session, however (34.6%) stated the opposite.

Reading and writing are intertwined skills. Therefore, including reading in the writing session may help the learners to improve their knowledge about writing.

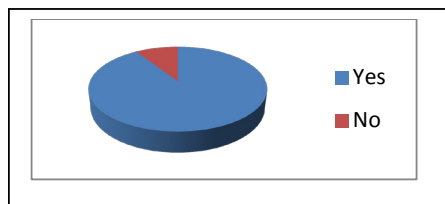
5/ Is reading important in improving your writing skill?

Table 13:

The importance of reading.

	Yes	No
Frequency	69	07
Percentage	90.7%	09.2%

Figure 13:



The importance of reading.

(90.7%) emphasized the importance of reading in improving the writing skill. So, the learners are aware of the role played by reading to enhance writing.

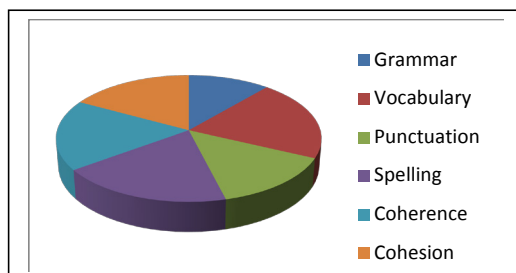
6/ What are the aspects that can be improved through reading?

Table 14:

Aspects that can be improved through reading.

	Gram mar	Vocab ulary	Punct uation	Spel ling	Cohe rence	Cohe sion
Frequency	37	68	46	62	59	56
Percentage	60.5%	89.4%	48.6%	81.5%	77.6%	73.6%

Figure 14:



Aspects that can be improved through reading.

(89.4%) of the participants claimed that reading improves vocabulary, (81.5%) emphasized that it can improve spelling. (77.6%) stated that it improves cohesion, (73.6%) reported that it can improve coherence. (60.5%) responded that it improves grammar, and (48.6%) showed that it improves punctuation.

Learners are aware that reading can improve all the aspects of writing with different degrees.

5. Conclusion

First, the results obtained from the questionnaire indicate that the majority of learners are not motivated to write and see writing as a difficult task. In this sense, Grabe and Kaplan (1996) claim that since writing

is not natural but rather gained through continuous efforts and much practice, it becomes a complex skill.

Second, the results concerning the aspects of writing difficulties showed that vocabulary, grammar and spelling are the most stressed difficulty aspects. These results agree with the findings of Kyoko (2009) who asserts that grammatical competence and lexical knowledge are other factors participating in writing difficulties. On the one hand, grammatical competence may include knowledge about how language is organized differently from the oral language. In a point of fact, the learner faces challenges while writing, as writing with the absence of the reader needs the use of an explicit informing language with an accurate grammar. On the other hand, lexical reservoir is a key component in the writing process. And one of the main causes of the writing deficiencies among language learners is the absence of a rich vocabulary. Also, the results were in line with Nakon (2009:18) who argues that “if learners have poor spelling skills, they will typically avoid writing tasks, and when writing will avoid words that they find difficult to spell”.

Third, the obtained results concerning learners’ attitudes toward reading reveal that the learners believe that reading is important and can improve many aspects in their writing. These results are in line with the claims of Johnson (2008) who believes that the relationship between reading and writing is that reading helps learners become better writers, by making them in contact with the rules of grammar, consequently they develop the language structure, grammar, and increase their vocabulary.

As a matter of fact, the previously raised research questions can be answered. Firstly, EFL learners’ main writing difficulties lie at the levels of grammar, vocabulary and spelling. Secondly, EFL learners have positive attitudes towards reading and consider it as a means to improve their writing skill.

In this case, EFL teachers are recommended to enhance the role of reading in their classrooms, and encourage their learners to read in the classroom and outside it, in order to improve their writing skill via encountering new lexis and structures, which will reduce their difficulties at the levels of grammar, vocabulary and spelling as mentioned previously.

Conflict of Interest

We hereby (the authors) declare that we do not have conflict of interest

- List of annexes

Appendix A

Learners' Questionnaire

Dear learner,

This questionnaire is constructed to explore EFL learners' writing difficulties and their attitudes towards reading at middle school.

We would be grateful if you could fill this questionnaire, and we inform you that your answers will be completely anonymous and used for scientific research only.

Please, put a (✓) in the appropriate column.

A/ Biodata information

You are: male female

B/ Writing skill and writing difficulties

1/ Are you motivated to write in English?

Yes No

2/ In general, you find writing assignments in English:

Easy

Difficult Very difficult

3/ what are the aspects you are likely to find difficulties in?

Grammar

Spelling

Vocabulary

Cohesion

Punctuation

Coherence

4/ Are you given enough time in the classroom to write or answer writing tasks?

Yes No

5/ does the teacher allow you to use dictionaries in your writing:

Yes No

6/ How often do you use dictionaries in your writing?

Always

Rarely

Often

Never

7/ How often do you write in English outside the classroom?

Always

Rarely

Often

Never

C/ Reading skill

1/ Are you motivated to read?

Yes No

2/ Do you read in English?

Yes No

3/ How often do you read books, magazines or any texts in English?

Always

Rarely

Often

Never

4/ Is reading skill included in your writing session?

Yes No

5/ Is reading important in improving your writing?

6/ what are the aspects that can be improved trough reading?

Grammar

Spelling

Vocabulary

Cohesion

Punctuation

Coherence



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