



Teaching writing courses in a virtual environment: Exploring the perspectives of EFL university students

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ABSTRACT

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The principal aim of the present investigation is to delve into the perspectives of university students majoring in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), with a specific focus on the delivery of first year composition courses in a virtual instructional environment. This research assesses the effectiveness of online instruction in essay writing courses and delineates the obstacles encountered by students during the teaching and learning processes. To fulfill this objective, a total of 90 undergraduate students specializing in English Language and Literature within the academic program in Jordan actively participated in the study by completing an online survey. Data collection from these students was executed through a purposefully designed questionnaire comprising 20 items. The questionnaire leveraged a 5-point Likert scale, from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with a selected group of 20 students enrolled in an essay writing course. Established methodologies were employed to analyze the responses to the questionnaire items. The results highlighted the positive impact of the online first year composition course on students' academic achievements. The study also revealed specific impediments and constraints inherent in the virtual learning environment. The study concludes by offering a set of implications aimed at enhancing the efficiency of online course delivery, with a primary emphasis on augmenting the overall learning experience for students.

Contribution/Originality: The research illuminates both the challenges and benefits that come with virtual learning platforms. It significantly enhances the understanding of how to leverage digital environments to support the development of writing skills among EFL students. The research reveals the students' experiences, their preferences for instructional methods, the use of technological tools, and their overall satisfaction with online learning. These insights are vital for educators and those who develop courses, as they offer guidance on creating more engaging and effective online writing programs tailored to EFL students' needs, aiming to boost their language skills and academic achievements.

1. INTRODUCTION

Proficient writing skills are paramount in academic achievement, manifesting significant issues for students whose English proficiency is categorized under English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Singh, 2019). English composition necessitates not only a command of linguistic aptitude but also an awareness of the cultural and

scholastic expectations of the target readership (Mo, 2012). EFL scholars often have to contend with the challenging requirements of academic writing, particularly in higher education (Singh, 2019).

Conventionally, EFL pupils have undergone writing instruction in brick-and-mortar educational settings. Nonetheless, the rapid increase of digitalized learning environments has led to novel prospects for the instruction of EFL composition. Online composition courses have many advantages, including the immediate receipt of feedback, the strategic utilization of multimedia resources, and the cultivation of opportunities for cross-cultural interaction among students (Kwak, 2017; Warschauer & Grimes, 2007).

In spite of the potential merits of online writing courses, the empirical data on their efficacy is limited, particularly in EFL pedagogy. While certain studies (e.g., Khatter, 2019; Sulistyo, Mukminatien, Cahyono, & Saukah, 2019) have revealed the operational efficiency of digitalized courses in writing proficiency among EFL learners, the results are inconsistent. Consequently, this has left a gap for supplementary investigations of the effectiveness of online writing courses within EFL education.

Online introductory EFL composition courses have garnered significant attention, particularly within the social environments of EFL learning (Borgman & Dockter, 2018). There is a discernable gap in the existing literature concerning the robustness of these courses. EFL scholars have expressed varying opinions of these courses; some have a preference for the online environment compared with conventional in-person pedagogy, while others report a sense of detachment and a lack of instructional assistance (Laato, Lipponen, Salmento, Vilppu, & Murtonen, 2019; Owston, York, & Malhotra, 2019).

The main aim of this inquiry is to thoroughly examine the pedagogy in the deployment of online first year composition courses for Jordanian EFL students. The substantial investments made by Jordan in technology and e-learning infrastructure renders it a compelling topic for examination, in agreement with Alkubaisi, Al-Saifi, and Al-Shidi (2022). The main objective is to augment the growing repository of academic acumen on online courses in EFL pedagogy while determining the variables that affect students' perceptions of face-to-face and online courses, all within the broader context of evaluating the efficacy of online first year composition courses.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The investigation can be situated within the overarching framework of the Community of Inquiry paradigm, harnessing the multi-dimensional aspects encompassing content and organization, feedback and instruction, discussions and collaboration, online platform and virtual environment, and beliefs pertinent to the virtual academic writing course (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999). Given its focus on analyzing the three entities of social, cognitive, and pedagogical presence within the digital domain of online learning environments, the Community of Inquiry framework is relevant to the scope of this research (Arbaugh, Bangert, & Cleveland-Innes, 2010). The synthesis of these facets with the Community of Inquiry framework augments the depth and breadth of our understanding concerning the perceptions and enhancement of EFL university students partaking in online first year composition courses (Choo, Bakir, Scagnoli, Ju, & Tong, 2020).

The cognitive presence component within the Community of Inquiry framework is closely aligned with the content and organization dimension. This dimension involves a detailed examination of the structural arrangement, categorization, and presentation of information within online courses designed for first year composition, as outlined by Waters, Kovanović, Kitto, and Gašević (2015). The cognitive presence component primarily underscores the intellectual and educational aspects of the online learning environment, with a particular focus on cultivating critical thinking skills and knowledge acquisition.

Simultaneously, the teaching presence component within the Community of Inquiry framework demonstrates a strong correlation with the feedback and instruction dimension. This dimension delves into the impact of feedback and instructional methods employed in online courses, especially within the context of first year composition. It explores the pivotal role of instructors in facilitating and supporting student learning, encompassing their ability to

effectively convey information, provide timely feedback, and foster meaningful interactions, as stated by Turk, Müftüoğlu, and Toraman (2021).

The social presence component within the Community of Inquiry framework is intricately connected with the discussions and collaboration dimension. This dimension comprehensively explores the level of student engagement, interaction, and participation in online discussions and collaborative activities within first year composition classes. It emphasizes the importance of cultivating a sense of community and promoting meaningful interactions among learners in the online learning environment, an idea highlighted by Lin and Gao (2020).

Furthermore, the combination of cognitive presence and social presence within the Community of Inquiry paradigm gives rise to the online platform and virtual environment dimension. This dimension entails a thorough evaluation of the features, usability, and overall learning experience provided by the online system and virtual environment implemented in introductory writing courses. It's crucial to acknowledge that the technological attributes and the overall user experience within the online learning environment exert a significant influence on both cognitive presence and social presence, as detailed in a study by Yang (2016).

The beliefs about the virtual academic writing course dimension reflect the profound influence of students' attitudes, beliefs, and expectations regarding online academic writing courses. This component pertains to the individual mindset of EFL university students and delves into their perceptions. It's worth noting that while the Community of Inquiry framework may not explicitly explore individual beliefs, it provides a contextual framework for comprehending how these beliefs interact with the social and cognitive dimensions of the learning environment, as articulated by Jimoyiannis, Schiza, and Tsiotakis (2018).

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Higher education has undergone a transformative shift with the implementation of online learning, offering a plethora of pedagogical alternatives characterized by flexibility and ubiquitous accessibility (Yusnilita, 2020). The development of students' writing and communication proficiencies is a fundamental pedagogical objective of the online courses (Pilkington, 2018). In assuring the efficacy and substantive worth of these online academic endeavors, it is imperative to understand the thoughts and perceptions of EFL students (Mahyoob, 2020). This study delves into the body of existing literature to examine the extant research on the perceptions of EFL students concerning online first year composition courses. It seeks to underscore prevalent thematic strands while gaining insight into the challenges and attributes characterizing these pedagogical endeavors.

Empirical scrutiny of students' perspectives regarding online learning has led to the identification of several variables. Of notable significance are the intrinsic language-related impediments, cultural dissonance, and the novelties applicable to digital learning environments. Scholarly investigations confirm EFL students' tendency to construe online learning as efficient, flexible, and advantageous conducive to autonomous inquiry (Sakkir, Dollah, & Ahmad, 2021). However, along with the advantages come concerns regarding technological competence, the lack of face-to-face interactions, and the limited opportunities for linguistic practice (Karkar-Esperat, 2018). These aspects influence the EFL students' perceptions of online first year composition courses and are pivotal in shaping their intellectual engagement and satisfaction.

EFL students have demonstrated a preference for feedback customized to their language proficiency and writing skills, as indicated by Gan (2020). Additionally, Zheng and Warschauer (2015) underscored the positive impact of collaborative activities and discussions that create opportunities for language practice and cultural exchange on the perceptions of EFL students regarding online composition courses.

Nandi, Hamilton, and Harland (2015) emphasized the pivotal role of technological components and course design in shaping how EFL students view online first year composition courses. User-friendly online platforms and well-structured courses contribute to enriched learning experiences. Academic literature highlights the significance of intuitive and accessible interfaces, integration of multimedia materials, and inclusion of interactive learning

activities. Moreover, Dahmash (2020) suggested that integrating culturally relevant content and authentic writing tasks can enhance EFL students' motivation and engagement, positively influencing their perceptions of online composition courses.

Cultural and social factors have a substantial influence on the perspectives of EFL students regarding online learning and composition courses. Tarhini (2016) noted that cultural values, including distinctions between collectivism and individualism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance, influence students' preferences for collaborative learning, interaction with instructors, and perceptions of the effectiveness of online courses. Research by Meihami and Salīte (2019) on the influence of cultural elements on EFL students' viewpoints indicates that expectations for social presence and collaborative learning in online settings may be shaped by collectivistic cultural norms.

The quality of pedagogy underpinning the terrain of online freshman composition courses notably contours students' epistemic proclivities and their resultant scholastic accomplishments. EFL students have demonstrated a proclivity for lucid directives, punctual and insightful feedback, and substantive pedagogic interactions with educators (Litterio, 2018). In tandem with these predilections is the paramount facet of pedagogical presence, which encapsulates the function of instructors as catalysts for cognizant learning.

This research makes a comprehensive assessment of various pivotal facets encompassing students' perspectives of online learning. These critical dimensions include the organization and structure of content, the quality and effectiveness of feedback and instructional processes, the dynamics of discussions and collaborative endeavors, the functionality and user experience of the online platform and virtual environment, and students' overall perceptions of virtual academic writing courses. These facets are widely recognized as influential determinants of students' overall satisfaction, engagement, and academic outcomes of online learning. Through an analysis of these parameters, this study aims to identify specific areas that need further attention and refinement. These areas include pedagogical methodologies, online collaborative modalities, platform usability, and students' opinions of virtual learning.

In light of these objectives, the fundamental aim of this research is to gauge the effectiveness of online first year composition courses designed for Jordanian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The distinctive context of Jordan, characterized by substantial investments in technology and e-learning infrastructure (Alkubaisi et al., 2022) presents an intriguing and noteworthy case study. The overarching purpose of this study is to contribute to the ever-expanding body of knowledge pertaining to online education within the realm of EFL. It also seeks to determine the variables that influence students' perceptions of online courses and assess the efficiency of online first year composition courses within this distinctive setting.

4. METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a comprehensive mixed methods approach, amalgamating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to conduct an in-depth exploration of students' perceptions concerning online writing courses and their subsequent influence on academic performance. The quantitative phase entails the creation of a structured survey to encompass the core variables unearthed during the data analysis process. This survey was administered to a diverse sample of students in online writing courses, with a focus on equitable representation. Statistical techniques, encompassing descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression modeling, are used to uncover trends, associations, and predictive links between diverse factors and students' perceptions and their academic achievements.

The qualitative phase comprises focus group discussions with a carefully selected subset of survey respondents. This qualitative arm of the research aims to delve deeper into participants' experiences, challenges, and recommendations pertaining to online writing courses. The selection of interview and discussion participants was purposeful, taking into account variables such as age, gender, academic background, and varying levels of

satisfaction. A thematic analysis was employed to uncover recurring themes, patterns, and subtleties embedded within the qualitative data, ultimately enriching the overall comprehension of students' perspectives. Moreover, the research design acknowledges the significance of triangulation, wherein the amalgamation of insights garnered from the quantitative and qualitative phases strengthens the credibility and comprehensiveness of the research findings. Ethical considerations remain paramount, ensuring adherence to ethical guidelines such as informed consent, safeguarding participant anonymity, and data confidentiality. The research design also places a strong emphasis on bolstering the validity and reliability of the findings through rigorous data collection and analysis techniques. Ultimately, the research culminates in a comprehensive discussion that outlines the implications arising from the findings and suggests practical recommendations for educators, educational institutions, and policymakers, thereby enhancing the quality of online writing courses and, consequently, academic performance.

4.1. Participants of the Study

The participants of the study comprised 90 EFL students at Yarmouk University College enrolled in a course on essay writing and first year composition in the first semester of the 2020/2021 academic year. This course is taken by second and third year students in the English Language and Literature department. It is compulsory in their course plan and has a pre-requisite course. It was their first time taking an online writing course using the college platforms. For the interviews, twenty students were randomly selected to illicit their perceptions in more detail to support the results of the questionnaire. Table 1 presents the course data.

Table 1. Participants' course data.

University	Number of students	Major	Level
Yarmouk	60	English language and literature	3 rd year
Yarmouk	30	Translation program	2 nd year

Sixty students in their third year enrolled in the English Language and Literature program and 30 students in their second year enrolled in the Translation program at the Department of English Language and Literature in Jordan.

4.2. The Questionnaire

The research tool, developed within the Community of Inquiry framework, functions as a comprehensive instrument specifically tailored to appraise the fundamental elements of social presence, cognitive presence, teaching presence, and satisfaction in the context of online writing courses.

To assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire, a robust statistical measure, Cronbach's alpha, was employed. This measure gauges the extent to which the items within each section of the questionnaire are interrelated and measure the same underlying construct. High Cronbach's alpha values signify strong internal consistency. Alongside this, inter-item correlations were scrutinized to identify items that demonstrated weaker correlations with others in their respective sections. Items displaying low inter-item correlations underwent a thorough evaluation, leading to their deletion or modification when they notably undermined the questionnaire's internal consistency. To obtain the reliability of the questionnaire, it was piloted to 30 students. The Cronbach's alpha value was 0.822, indicating reliability.

4.3. The Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 20 randomly selected students. The interview questions were prepared by the researcher and encompassed questions related to the impact of online learning on the students' performance and difficulties in the online writing course, and their academic performance in the course.

4.4 Validity and Reliability of the Interviews

Two experts in the field examined the interview questions with the students and ensured the validity of questions and their compliance with the aim of the study.

To ensure reliability of the interviews, the researcher read the transcription twice using a content analysis sheet and classified the content based on the interview questions and then transcribed the students' answers. Table 2 shows that the inter-rater correlation value of the students' interviews is 86.85, while the intra-rater coefficient value is 87.85.

Table 2. Inter-rater and intra-rater Pearson correlation of the students' interviews.

Categories of analysis	Agreement percentages	
	Inter-rater	Intra-rater
Virtual learning environment	85.4	89.2
Academic performance	88.3	86.5
Overall	86.85	87.85

4.5. Analyzing the Results of the Interviews

The study's methodology commenced with the audio recording of the interview sessions, followed by the transcription of the students' responses. Subsequently, a systematic thematic categorization of the transcribed content was conducted, employing a content analysis sheet as a tool. Guided by the interview questions and the corresponding student feedback, two overarching categories emerged as the focal points for the content analysis, each encompassing discrete subcategories.

The primary categories for analysis are "virtual learning environment" and "academic performance." The virtual learning environment category manifests a set of subcategories arising from the analysis of the students' responses. These subcategories include "difficulties in the virtual learning environment" and "the efficacy of technological tools in the learning process." Within these subcategories, nuanced challenges and issues surfaced, encompassing the students' proficiency in essay composition through computer technology, impediments linked to collaborations with peers, constraints associated with the availability of technological devices and internet connectivity, the presence or absence of intrinsic motivation, the effectiveness of the virtual learning environment for writing courses, the quality of online interactions with instructors, and the influence of the internet on the realm of academic writing.

The second primary category of "academic performance" embraces multifarious dimensions, including "the effectiveness of online feedback for academic essays," "advancements in academic writing through computer programs," "online assignment submission," "the role of virtual classrooms in teaching writing," "awareness of plagiarism," and "editing and drafting through the use of computerized tools." These subcategories delve deeply into the students' experiences and perceptions, specifically with regard to their academic advancement within the online writing course. The meticulous thematic categorization process carried out a methodical and structured analysis of the interview content, facilitating the extraction of pertinent insights into the challenges confronted by the students and the trajectory of their academic development through online learning.

5. FINDINGS

5.1. Findings of the Questionnaire

Table 3 presents an insightful exploration of student evaluations of the online writing course segmented into four critical dimensions: Social presence, cognitive presence, teaching presence, and satisfaction. Each dimension is comprised of various items, with students' responses recorded across a spectrum from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, including a midpoint of neutrality. The table enumerates both the count and percentage of these responses, leading to an average score for each item, indicative of the overall trend in student opinion.

Social presence: This segment probes into the students' sense of community and interconnectedness within the virtual course setting. Key aspects under this umbrella included the degree of belongingness, ease of forming connections with fellow students, and the role of online discussions in building relationships. The mean scores, with the lowest at 2.1, point to moderate agreement on these aspects, suggesting a need for improvement in cultivating a more robust sense of community. The highest score within this domain was 3.73, reflecting a stronger agreement in certain areas such as the efficacy of online discussions.

Cognitive presence: This domain assesses the depth of students' intellectual engagement with the course material and activities. It encompasses critical analysis, practical application of concepts, and goal setting for writing proficiency. The variation in mean scores, from 2.73 to 3.76, indicates differing levels of cognitive engagement among students. While some aspects received moderate scores, suggesting room for enhanced intellectual stimulation, others scored higher, indicating successful pedagogical approaches in certain areas.

Teaching presence: Addressing the instructional aspect, this category evaluates the instructor's effectiveness in course delivery, including aspects such as clarity of instructions, responsiveness, and overall course management. The mean scores in this category ranged from a moderate 2.51 to a high 4.04, the latter reflecting a strong foundation in course organization. The variance in the scores highlights the differing perceptions of the instructor's role and their effectiveness in the learning process.

Satisfaction: This dimension measures the students' overall satisfaction with their learning experience on the course. It covers general contentment, the likelihood of recommending the course, and the perceived impact on writing skills enhancement. With mean scores spanning from 2.4 to 3.64, the data reveals a broad spectrum of satisfaction levels, indicating areas, such as course engagement, where further improvements could enhance the student experience. The results in [Table 3](#) provide a multifaceted view of the online writing course, identifying both strengths and areas for potential growth.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the students' perception regarding teaching an online first year composition course.

Category	#	Items	Responses										Mean
			SA		A		D		SD		NAND		
			N	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Social presence	1	I felt a sense of belonging in the online writing course.	9	10	18	20	9	10	45	50	9	10	2.1
	2	I found it easy to connect with my peers in the course.	5	5.30		26	29.60	5	52	57.9	2	2	2.1
	3	Online discussions in this course helped me get to know my classmates.	27	30.20	45	50	5	4.80	9	10	4	5	3.73
	4	I felt comfortable expressing my opinions and ideas in the course.	38	42.1	28	31.00	6	6.90	16	18	2	2	3.6
	5	I actively engaged in collaborative writing activities with my peers.	13	14	40	45	1	1	33	37	3	3	2.97
Cognitive presence	6	I often critically analyzed and evaluated the course readings and materials.	10	10	40	45	4	5	36	39	0	00	2.73
	7	The course challenged me to think deeply about writing concepts.	22	25	50	55	9	10	7	8	2	2	3.59
	8	I was able to apply writing concepts learned in the course to real-life situations.	9	10	58	65	2	2	18	20	3	3	3.38
	9	I contributed innovative ideas and perspectives to course discussions.	22	25	49	55	9	10	8	8	2	2	3.67
	10	I set clear goals for improving my writing throughout the course.	22	25	49	55	5	5	13	14	1	1	3.76
Teaching presence	11	The instructor provided clear explanations of the course assignments.	11	11.8	31	35.30	11	11.70	37	41.20	0	00	2.51
	12	The instructor was responsive to my questions and concerns.	18	25	45	50	9	10	17	14	1	1	3.2
	13	The instructor facilitated engaging and thought-provoking writing discussions.	23	25.9	37	41.20	14	15.6	14	15.3	2	2	3.14
	14	I received constructive feedback that helped me improve my writing.	18	25	45	50	9	10	17	14	1	1	3.22
	15	The course was well organized and structured by the instructor.	19	21	66	73.70	0	00	5	5.30	0	00	4.04
Satisfaction	16	Overall, I am satisfied with my learning experience in this online writing course.	14	15	50	55	0	0	24	27	2	3	3.64
	17	I would recommend this online writing course to other students.	23	25.90	37	41.20	14	15.60	14	15.30	2	2	3.14
	18	The course met my expectations in terms of improving my writing skills.	14	15	50	41.20	14	15.6	14	15.03	2	2	3.14
	19	I believe the course provided valuable insights into effective writing techniques.	18	25	45	50	9	10	17	14	1	1	3.22
	20	I felt motivated and engaged throughout the duration of the course.	8	10	27	30	5	5	50	55	00	00	2.4

Note: SA = Strongly agree, A = Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly disagree, NAND = Neither agree nor disagree.

While some elements of cognitive and teaching presence were positively received, aspects of social presence and overall satisfaction suggested the need for targeted enhancements. The varied responses from the students highlight the complexity and challenges inherent in creating an engaging and effective online learning environment.

5.2. Discussion of the Findings of the Questionnaire

Social presence: In the domain of social presence, several noteworthy observations emerged from the questionnaire responses. The first item indicates a moderate level of agreement (mean = 2.1) among the respondents regarding their sense of belonging within the online writing course. In the second item, students generally found it difficult to connect with their peers, reflected by a mean score of 2.1. The third item highlights a positive perception of online discussions, with a mean score of 3.7, suggesting that students felt these discussions facilitated acquaintance with their peers. Item four, with a mean score of 3.6, indicates that the respondents were comfortable expressing their opinions and ideas in the course. Lastly, the fifth item with a mean score of 2.97 implies that while some students actively engaged in collaborative writing activities, there was variability in their levels of engagement.

Cognitive presence: In the cognitive presence domain, the questionnaire data yields insightful findings. For the sixth item, with a mean score of 2.73, the respondents reported varying levels of critical analysis and evaluation of course readings and materials. The seventh item, with a mean score of 3.59, indicates that students found the course challenging in terms of encouraging deep thinking about writing concepts. Item eight, with a mean score of 3.38, suggests that students felt capable of applying writing concepts learned in the course to real-life situations. Item nine, with a mean score of 3.67, reflects that student believed that they contributed innovative ideas and perspectives to discussions. Finally, the tenth item, with a mean score of 3.76, implies that students set clear goals for improving their writing.

Teaching presence: Within the teaching presence domain, the questionnaire responses provide valuable insights. The eleventh item, with a mean score of 2.51, indicates that the instructor provided clear explanations for course assignments. The twelfth item, with a mean score of 3.2, suggests that students perceived the instructor as responsive to their questions and concerns. Item thirteen, with a mean score of 3.14, implies that the instructor facilitated engaging and thought-provoking writing discussions. The fourteenth item, with a mean score of 3.22, suggests that students received constructive feedback that contributed to their writing improvement. Lastly, the fifteenth item, with a mean score of 4.04, indicates that students found the course to be well organized and structured by the instructor.

Satisfaction: Finally, in the domain of satisfaction, the questionnaire data provides valuable insights into students' overall perceptions. The sixteenth item, with a mean score of 3.64, reflects that student expressed overall satisfaction with their learning experience in the course. Item seventeen, with a mean score of 3.14, suggests that students would recommend the course to their peers. The eighteenth item, with a mean score of 3.14, indicates that the course met students' expectations in terms of enhancing their writing skills. Moreover, item nineteen, with a mean score of 3.22, suggests that students believed the course offered valuable insights into effective writing techniques. The final item, with a mean score of 2.4, reflects variability in students' motivation and engagement throughout the course.

These findings offer a comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions within the online writing course, encompassing social presence, cognitive engagement, teaching quality, and overall satisfaction. They revealed positive evaluations of the various dimensions while also highlighting areas that may warrant further attention or enhancement, demonstrating valuable feedback from the students.

5.3. Findings of the Interview

Table 4 methodically organizes the students' responses into two principal categories: 'Learning Environment' and 'Academic Performance', each further dissected into specific subcategories. These categories encapsulate distinct elements of the online learning experience, quantified by the number of responses and their corresponding percentages, thus providing a nuanced understanding of the prevailing student perceptions.

5.3.1. Learning Environment

This principal category is divided into two key subcategories—'challenges in the learning environment' and 'technology's role in learning'. Challenges in the learning environment reveal a spectrum of obstacles faced by students. A significant proportion of the respondents, ranging from 65% to 85%, reported issues such as trouble in essay organization using computers, a deficit in peer collaboration, limited access to technology, and internet connectivity issues. Notably, a mere 10% indicated a lack of self-motivation. 'Technology's role in learning' reflects a moderately positive outlook, with approximately 60% to 65% of students acknowledging the benefits of the virtual learning environment, communication with instructors online, and the role of the internet in learning academic writing.

5.3.2. Academic Performance

This category assesses the aspects linked to students' academic outcomes from the course. The majority of the students, with percentages ranging from 60% to 80%, positively evaluated several facets of their online learning experience. These include the utility of online feedback for essays, improvements in writing skills through computer programs, the ease of submitting assignments online, and the efficacy of instruction in virtual classrooms. A noteworthy 80% of the cohort exhibited awareness of academic integrity principles and 70% appreciated the advantages of using computers for editing and drafting.

Table 4 offers a comprehensive view of student experiences in the online writing course, delineating both the challenges and the successful elements as perceived by the participants. The data highlights issues primarily related to the learning environment, especially technological access and collaborative learning, while concurrently affirming the positive impact of the course on students' academic performance. This dichotomy in responses emphasizes the complex dynamics of online education and suggests avenues for refining the learning environment and maximizing the benefits of technology in educational settings.

Table 4. Frequencies and percentages of the students' interview responses.

Category	Subcategory	Idea	#	%
Learning environment	Problems in the learning environment	Ability to organize essays using a computer	15	75.0%
		Lack of collaboration with colleagues	17	85.0%
		Lack of technological devices	13	65.0%
		Lack of internet access	15	75.0%
	Effectiveness of technology in learning	Absence of intrinsic motivation	2	10.0%
		Effectiveness of the virtual environment in the writing course	8	60.0%
		Online communication with the instructor	13	65.0%
Academic performance		Effectiveness of internet usage in learning academic writing	8	60.0%
		Effectiveness of online feedback on academic essays	15	75.0%
		Improvement in academic writing using the computer program	13	65.0%
		Online submission of the assignment	12	60.0%
		Effectiveness of virtual classrooms in teaching writing	12	60.0%
		Awareness of academic integrity	16	80.0%
		Editing and drafting using the computer	14	70.0%

5.4. Discussion of the Results of the Interview

Learning environment: Within the sphere of the learning environment, this study has meticulously explored various subcategories, offering an understanding of the participants' educational surroundings. Regarding the efficacy of technology in the realm of learning, a substantial 75% of the respondents endorsed technology's pivotal role in organizing their essays. This resounding affirmation confirms the benefits of technology in facilitating the structural organization of written compositions. Nevertheless, a notable concern emerged, as 85% of the interviewees reported a lack of collaborative engagement with their fellow learners, underscoring the need to cultivate collaborative dynamics in online pedagogical contexts.

Student 1: *"I had problems engaging in the video conferences every week, and I missed collaborating with colleagues. Collaborating with colleagues face-to-face facilitates the process of learning. I can get feedback from them and ask them to review my work."*

Furthermore, our investigation unveiled a concern, with 65% of respondents expressing dissatisfaction with their access to essential technological devices. This underscores the need to ensure equitable access to these fundamental educational tools. Similarly, 75% of the interviewees admitted to facing challenges regarding the inadequacy of internet access. This reinforces the undeniable importance of reliable and uninterrupted internet connectivity in the domain of online learning.

Student 2: *"The problem is that I live in a remote village with no internet access. I used to use my own mobile data to access classes."*

A particularly intriguing revelation is the assertion by 10% of the participants regarding the absence of intrinsic motivation. This underscores the necessity for a comprehensive exploration of strategies aimed at invigorating and nurturing students' intrinsic inclinations in the context of online pedagogy. Additionally, 60% of the participants acknowledged the effectiveness of the virtual learning environment for their writing courses, which augments the prospects of online platforms as conducive spaces for the pedagogical transmission of writing skills.

Of particular note is the emphasis placed by 65% of the respondents on the significance of online interaction with their instructors. This underscores the pivotal role of vibrant instructor–student interactions within the educational landscape. Additionally, 70% of the interviewees affirmed the efficacy of internet usage in acquiring academic writing competencies, signifying the potential of online resources in enriching the pedagogical experience.

Academic performance: The overarching category focusing on academic performance traverses a spectrum of pivotal facets relating to academic achievement and evaluative feedback.

A substantial 75% of the interviewees attested to the efficacy of online feedback in driving improvements in their academic essays. This underscores the significance of timely and constructive feedback mechanisms in enhancing scholarly performance. Similarly, a significant 65% of participants reported tangible enhancements in their academic writing endeavors through the use of computer-based programs, accentuating the pivotal role of technology in refining writing competencies.

Moreover, approximately 60% of the interviewees found digitalized assignment submission methods to be convenient. This operational convenience may have profound implications for the overall student experience. Likewise, 60% of interviewees reported the effectiveness of virtual classrooms in the pedagogical delivery of writing instruction, thereby confirming the potential of online classrooms for the dissemination of writing pedagogy.

Student 7: *"Writing feedback on my task on Moodle facilitates the process for me in revising and reediting my essay. The comments included detailed feedback on my writing and the teacher's recommendations to improve my writing."*

The interview results revealed a remarkable awareness of academic integrity, with 80% of the interviewees displaying a heightened awareness of ethical conduct in the academic sphere. This revelation underscores the importance of ethical standards in the domain of scholarly pursuits.

Student 5: *"I avoid cheating, and I make sure that my writing doesn't have similarity since the teacher uses the Turnitin program to match similarity in writing. This issue raised my awareness of what is meant by plagiarism and how can we avoid it."*

Lastly, a significant 70% of the interviewees recognized the utility of computer-assisted processes for editing and drafting written compositions. This underscores the instrumental role of technology in textual refinement.

Student 4: *"When I write an essay using the word processor, my grammar and spelling mistakes reduce; I used to check my mistakes by taking advantage of the word processing program before submitting the final draft."*

In conclusion, the results from the interviews offer a comprehensive overview of the experiences and perspectives of students regarding online learning. They reveal both the advantages and the challenges within the technological paradigms of learning, the significance of instructor–student interactions, and the possibilities for enhancing academic performance through feedback and tool deployment. These empirical insights have the potential to inform strategic interventions aimed at elevating the online learning experience and students' scholarly trajectories. It is clear from the results, that essay writing students face challenges represented by the lack of collaboration and lack of internet access, which affects their engagement and collaboration with their colleagues in the virtual environment. This is in line with previous studies by Alkubaisi et al. (2022) and Karkar-Esperat (2018), who highlighted the importance of enhancing e-learning infrastructure and the equity of access to technological devices.

The social presence component within the Community of Inquiry framework is intricately connected with the discussions and collaboration dimension. This dimension involves a comprehensive exploration of the level of student engagement, interaction, and participation in online discussions and collaborative activities within first year composition classes. It emphasizes the importance of cultivating a sense of community and promoting meaningful interactions among learners in the online learning environment, an idea highlighted by Lin and Gao (2020). Since students lack interaction in a virtual environment, this should be an area of focus to enhance students' collaboration and interaction with colleagues in order to raise the quality of the online writing course to meet the students' learning demands.

6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

It is important to recognize the limitations of this research. Firstly, the findings of the study pertain specifically to the perceptions of EFL undergraduate students at Yarmouk University in Jordan. Notably, several factors, such as motivation, social influence, experience, and instructor support, were intentionally left out due to limitations in terms of time and financial resources. Extrapolating these results to encompass EFL students in pre-university settings or university students across various academic disciplines would be unjustified given the intentionally focused nature of the study. As the participants in the study were exclusively sourced from a singular institution, caution is warranted if attempting to extend the conclusions of the study to encompass all universities throughout Jordan or other nations.

7. IMPLICATIONS AND PRACTICE

In light of the comprehensive analysis and the insights extracted from the study, a series of recommendations are made with the aim of improving online writing courses and optimizing academic performance within the digital learning landscape. These recommendations are intended for educators, academic institutions, and policymakers seeking to enhance the effectiveness of online writing courses. They encompass the promotion of digital proficiency through tailored digital literacy initiatives, the cultivation of collaborative learning experiences, equitable access to technological resources, the stimulation of intrinsic motivation through an engaging course design, and the leverage of virtual learning environments. Moreover, they emphasize the importance of effective online communication, maximal utilization of internet resources, and the optimization of online feedback. Furthermore,

these recommendations extend to the expansion of computer-based tools, the elevation of academic integrity awareness, and support for editing and drafting software. They underscore the need for a culture of continuous evaluation and improvement within online learning environments, with an emphasis on professional development for instructors. These collective recommendations aim to create a dynamic, inclusive, and effective digital learning ecosystem, thus mitigating challenges, maximizing opportunities, and enhancing the quality of online writing courses and academic performance.

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