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## Palestine University English Majors' Writing Performance Compared to their Secondary School Academic Achievement amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract:

This study aims at investigating the relation between Palestine University English majors' writing performance and their secondary school academic achievement amid the coronavirus pandemic in the second semester of the academic year 2020/2021. The participants were twenty-three Palestine University English majors, two males and twenty-one females. And their writing production on a practical writing test was quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed. In addition, the researcher compared the participants' total score on writing one course and their total mark in secondary school certificate. Moreover, a semi-structured interview with the participants of the study was conducted via WhatsApp application to reveal the reasons behind their recent writing level. Findings indicated that Palestine University English majors' writing performance has a significant positive relationship with their academic performance at secondary school during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants of the study were not satisfied with their writing performance level, and they attributed this decline to the following reasons: (1) online learning at Palestine University during the COVID-19 Pandemic does not suit their needs, (2) Palestinian Public School English language teaching needs to be developed in light of university requirements, and (3) students' family economic situation and the last Israeli attack (May 2021) badly affected their writing performance.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Pandemic, secondary school certificate, writing performance

## مقارنة الأداء الكتابي بالتحصيل الدراسي في الثانوية العامة لطلبة اللغة الانجليزية في جامعة فلسطين خلال جائحة كورونا

### المخلص:

هدفت الدراسة لتقصي العلاقة بين الاداء الكتابي والتحصيل الدراسي في الثانوية العامة لطلبة اللغة الانجليزية في جامعة فلسطين اثناء جائحة كورونا خلال الفصل الثاني للعام الاكاديمي 2021/2020, تكونت عينة الدراسة من 23 طالبا وطالبة ( طالبين وواحد وعشرين طالبة), حيث تم تطبيق تحليل نوعي وكمي لأداء عينة الدراسة الكتابي في اختبار الكتابة العملي, وكذلك قام الباحث بمقارنة درجات عينة الدراسة في مساق الكتابة (1) مع نتائجهم في الثانوية العامة, وكذلك تم تنفيذ مقابلة مع عينة الدراسة عبر تطبيق الواتس اب لمعرفة اسباب مستوياتهم الحالية في الكتابة, اظهرت النتائج بان هناك علاقة طردية موجبة بين أداء الثانوية العامة الأكاديمي والأداء الكتابي لطلبة اللغة الانجليزية في جامعة فلسطين, ومع ذلك اظهرت عينة الدراسة عدم رضى عن مستوى كتاباتهم في اللغة الانجليزية وارجعوا ذلك لعدة اسباب كان أهمها: (1) التعليم عن بعد المستخدم في جامعة فلسطين خلال وباء كورونا لا يتناسب مع احتياجاتهم وتفضيلاتهم, (2) التدريس المستخدم في مدارس الثانوية العامة الحكومية يحتاج الي تطوير في ضوء متطلبات الجامعات, (3) مستوى العائلات الفلسطينية الاقتصادي والاعتداء الاسرائيلي الغاشم الاخير أثر سلبا على الأداء الكتابي للطلبة.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** وباء كورونا, شهادة الثانوية العامة, الاداء الكتابي.

## I. Introduction:

In most countries around the world, the academic performance of secondary school students is considered as an indicator of their abilities to perform well in various university programs. In Palestine, for example, students join different university specializations according to their scores in secondary school certificate (Ministry of Higher Education, 2016). However, Sadeq (2021) recorded that Palestinian secondary school students should do a placement test before approaching higher education institutions. The results of such a test could be taken for granted as a best predictor of students' future performance at tertiary level. Sadeg's point of view may be a reaction to the academic performance level of his university students, or to previous research results which found that high school students are ill-prepared for advanced courses at college, and assessing higher-order learning which is required at tertiary level is not tackled in secondary school examinations (Ferenstein & Hershbein, 2016; Sultana & Rahman, 2018).

Learning English and mastering its skills is among the important aims that the Palestinian Ministry of Education assigns for Palestinian students as one of the requirements of compulsory school subject at every school level. And those students are expected to gain awesome English skills before approaching higher education institutions. Writing, which is one of the English language productive skills, is the last skill that students possess, and a body of research papers have indicated a weak writing level of English foreign language learners (EFLs). Mourtaga (2004) stated that neither teachers nor students at the Islamic University-Gaza are aware of the frequency of their English composition errors, while Mosaidis (2016) noticed that EFLs face different types of challenges while constructing a piece of English writing. Those students struggle to remember necessary words that help them construct correctly-formed sentences. In addition, Anh (2019) indicated that EFLs consider writing as the most difficult skill, and the writing skills of the participants of his study were very limited. The participants in Anh's study encountered major writing problems which were affected by three main reasons: the teaching materials, teaching methods and students themselves. And AL-Hussain & Younis (2021) recorded various types of mistakes in the written discourse of AL-Quds Open University English majors.

Previous academic research papers have tackled public school versus college EFL students' performance from different angles. Butler (2012) tracked how teachers assess EFLs' performance in English classes via inviting forty-nine teachers from elementary and secondary South Korean schools to assess the recorded performance of sixth graders who were doing English activities. Findings indicated that teachers' assessment varied according to their school level. In another investigation track, Amasuomo (2014) compared the academic performance of two groups admitted with different entry certificates to the Federal College of Education in Nigeria. Results showed that the academic performance level of the secondary school certificate group was moderate and surpassed the other group's academic performance which was at a low level. Likewise, Eckstein & Ferris (2017) compared the writing composition of the first language and second language freshmen students. A sample of the writing production of fifty-six first language and seventy-four second language freshmen enrolled in a writing course was analyzed. Results revealed that the needs of L1 students; grammar accuracy, morphological awareness and language anxiety, were significantly different from those of L2 students. In addition, Teng & Huang (2018) described the strategies that can help secondary school learners to effectively enhance their writing proficiency. The researchers found that self-regulated students have a sense of self-efficacy and are aware of their strengths and weaknesses. The autonomy level of such students is high, and they always seek opportunities to enhance their language proficiency. Moreover, Cerdeira, et al. (2018) analyzed the relation between

the performance of students in secondary school and the scores obtained in national exams versus their academic performance in higher education. Results revealed that students' scores in secondary school are better predictors of subsequent performance than the access exam scores.

Educators around the world have different views regarding the best criteria used to enroll secondary school students at higher education institutions. Some believe that students' score level at secondary school is an effective indicator of students' future performance (Amasuomo, 2014; Cerdeira, Nunes & Seaabara, 2018; Ministry of Higher education, 2016). Others record that a placement test result is effective in describing secondary school students' future ability, and its result is genuine in placing the student at the right university major (Jefferson College, 2021; Phoenix College, 2021; Sadeq, 2021). The recent study aims at investigating the relation between Palestine University English majors' writing performance and their secondary school academic performance amid the COVID-19 pandemic and revealing the reasons behind the recent writing level of the participants from students' perspectives.

## **II. Literature Review**

### **Palestinian Secondary School Graders**

In Palestine, students start to learn English as a foreign language from grade one. And Palestinian secondary school graders are students in 11-12 grades. They are 17-18 year old. At grade ten, those students are given free chance to join any of the four main teaching tracks available to them at secondary school education in Palestinian Southern Governorates. These tracks are scientific stream, literary stream, religious stream and technical stream. Students enrolled at the four streams learn related subjects that aim at enhancing their main branch skills. Regarding English language, all Palestinian secondary school students nearly learn the same English textbooks and are "Exposed to learning experiences and opportunities which are expected to enable them to comprehend and appreciate written texts of different genres on a variety of topics" (Najjar et al., 2015, p. 56). Najjar added that the goal of teaching writing at secondary school is to enable students to present information and ideas in an organized English written text of various types (p.19). This goal is similar to the goal set in countries which teach English as a foreign language. However, Suvin (2020) indicated that Bangladeshi EFLs at secondary school encounter serious writing problems particularly in using correct English vocabulary, grammar and punctuation.

Palestinian students learn English as a foreign language for 12 years. These students experience various opportunities which are expected to enhance their language proficiency and enable them to communicate fluently using the target language. After finishing secondary school education, Palestinian students' writing skill, which is the last skill that students master, is expected to be in its best level. It is worth mentioning that due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, secondary school students during the scholastic year 2019/2020; freshman college students at 2020/2021 academic year did not have the opportunities to benefit from the whole teaching activities included in their syllabus, as some of 12<sup>th</sup> graders' textbooks' units were cancelled. Most of the second semester few units remaining to enhance students' skills were tackled via online teaching techniques, used for the first time in Palestinian Public Schools. Neither teachers nor students were trained on using such new learning techniques, and several difficulties have encountered their application in Palestine which may negatively affect students' learning outcomes (Bashitiashaaer et al., 2021).

The academic performance of Palestinian secondary school students is assessed through their performance in the final examinations, which are administered and rated by the Ministry of Education at the end of grade twelve. Students do the examinations and receive a secondary school certificate which indicates their academic performance level accordingly (Ministry of Higher Education, 2016).

### **Writing Skills**

Writing gives people a chance to identify their thoughts and feeling using correct orthographic forms which are correctly organized within English texts. Harmer (2007) recorded that writing involves a combination of various language skills; vocabulary knowledge, syntactic rules, oral proficiency, and reading skills, and gives students opportunities to think about language and reinforce the language learned (p.112). Harmer (2001) added, "When students write in lessons, they have a chance to rehearse language production in safety, experimenting with different language in different genres that they will use on some future occasion away from the classroom" (p.249). This clarifies the importance of writing activities and indicates that students' writing skills' level can be used to reveal their overall English proficiency. In this context, Anh (2019) indicated that writing is the students' least preferable skill, and it is the last skill that students master. According to Lee et al.'s (2017) findings, the participants of their study, who were chosen from Hong Kong secondary schools, were not motivated to write in English, and the reasons behind this phenomenon are the students' previous experience and writing environment they were engaged in; teachers' method of teaching, uninteresting writing materials and insufficient time for writing. Also, AL-Hussain & Younis (2021) found that AL-Quds Open University English majors' written production is weak and full of different types of mistakes.

Good English writing is conducted under various necessary conditions. These conditions include knowledge of English: paragraph format, writing styles, syntactic and morphological rules, coherence and cohesion techniques and punctuation marks usage (Harmer, 2001, p. 255). Moreover, Matlabi & Shedifat (2018) mentioned that correct English spelling, which causes serious problems for most writers, is necessary (p.20), and Hajjaj (2017) emphasized that the use of correct words, phrases and expressions affects students' writing quality. Knowledge of the aforementioned writing conditions enables writers to compose good English writing pieces and allows them to convey their written message easily.

### **Palestine University Freshmen Writing (1) Course**

The Faculty of Education at Palestine University has a major which trains students to be future English language teachers. Students enrolled in such a major study 128 credit hour divided into 18-hour university courses, 33-hour faculty courses and 77-hour English major courses (Palestine University, 2021). Writing (1) is among the three writing courses that English majors should pass. It is a three-credit hour course, and its activities train students to compose well-organized English paragraphs of different genres. Students revise: related grammar topics, the different types of sentences, punctuation marks and the three main elements of a paragraph; the topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentence. In addition, students are given opportunities to use relevant connecting words that help them join sentences within the body of the English paragraph. Moreover, this course manipulates practical English writing activities and sheds lights on EFLs' common writing mistakes such as fragments, run-on sentences, faulty pronoun references and subject-verb agreement in a hope to improve the quality of the written products of English majors (Shaat, 2021).

During the second semester of the academic year 2020/2021, Writing (1) course, the same as the other courses at Palestine University, was conducted online due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Instructors used Fast Stone Capture Program and similar programs to record the meetings and download them to students via the UPINAR/Moodle; the university website, and students download these recorded materials, memorize them and do various quizzes and exams accordingly. They did not have face to face meetings nor live chat videos with their instructors. Such a method of teaching drags us back to the classical humanism philosophy of language teaching, which considers teachers as givers of information and students as receivers and memorizers of that information (Cheng & Fox, 2017, p.18). This may indicate that Palestine University professors at the Faculty of Educations

do not have the skills required for adopting electronic teaching as Bashitialshaaer et al. (2021), who investigated the obstacles that met achieving quality distance learning amidst the COVID-19, indicated that Palestinian professors and students confronted twenty-seven barriers in conducting electronic meetings and exams, and they need training in using such a method of teaching and learning.

### **The Questions of the Study**

The researcher tackled the following questions:

- (i) What is the relation between Palestine University freshman English majors' writing performance and their general point average (GPA) at general secondary school certificate?
- (ii) What is the secondary school academic performance's level of Palestine University freshman English majors amid the COVID-19 Pandemic?
- (iii) What is the writing skills' level of Palestine University freshman English majors amid the COVID-19 Pandemic?
- (iv) What are the reasons behind the recent writing performance of Palestine University freshman English majors from students' perspectives?
- (v) What is the relation between Palestine University freshman English majors' writing skills and their secondary school academic performance?

## **III. Methodology**

### **Design of the Study**

The researcher used a mixed approach design that comprises a quantitative analytical description of the participants' secondary school academic performance versus a qualitative and quantitative description of their writing skill performance at the university level. In addition, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the 23 freshman English majors at Palestine University to reveal the reasons behind their recent writing skills' level.

### **The Participants of the Study**

The age of the twenty-three students; two males and twenty-one females, included in the recent study ranges from 19-20 year. All of these students learned at Palestinian public schools and they all studied English language from grade one to grade twelve. The twenty-three students who participated in the recent study are freshman English majors at the Faculty of Education-Palestine University. These students enrolled in writing one course during the second semester of the academic year 2020/2021. They all gave the researcher a copy of their secondary school certificate and their writing one total score. The participants of the study did the practical writing test, and their writing productions were rated by two raters to gain reliable data.

### **Instruments of the Study**

The researcher collected required data through secondary and primary instruments. The secondary instrument was the achievement record analysis of the participants' secondary school certificate and their writing one course. On the other hand, the primary instruments included a semi-structured interview and a practical writing test. The former allows the interviewer to derive sequential questions from the interviewees' answers and was conducted with the participants of the study to reveal the reasons behind their writing production level at university during the COVID-19 Pandemic, and the latter includes four questions which the participants took to provide extra reliable data about their writing performance. The first question of the practical writing test invites students to write topic sentences for three topics, while the second question asks students to write supporting sentences for two different topic sentences. In addition, the third question invites students to write a relevant concluding sentence for a given paragraph, and the last question, question number four,



invites students to write a good paragraph about one of three different topics; a good teacher, living room or smoking at public places. For more information about the practical writing test of the study see appendix (1).

### **The Participants' Writing Product Analysis**

The writing test was distributed to five university professors who assured its validity, and after distributing it to the participants of the study and giving them an hour to write their answers, the answer sheets were collected and rated by two raters who considered four main facets: the elements and format of a paragraph, correctly-formed sentences, coherence and cohesion, and English syntactic and morphological rules. The means of the two raters were registered as reliable scores. In addition, the participants' writing production was qualitatively analyzed by the researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher utilized the (SPSS V.26) and used graphs and frequency tables, percentages and Person Correlation Coefficient to analyze the collected data and to answer the questions of the study.

## **IV. Findings & Discussions**

### **The Participant's' Writing Performance Compared to their GPA**

The correlation coefficient between the participants' scores in writing one course and their GPA at general secondary school certificate was compared. Results of this comparison is stated in Table (1).

TABLE (1)  
**Correlation Coefficient Between the Participants' Writing Scores and their GPA**

	<b>Correlation Coefficient</b>	<b>P-Value (Sig.)</b>
<b>Relation Between the Participants' Scores in Writing One Course and their GPA</b>	0.741*	0.000

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table (1) shows that the correlation coefficient between the participants' scores in writing one course and their GPA equals 0.741, and the p-value (sig.) is 0.000. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the correlation coefficient is statistically significant at ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ). We conclude that there is a significant positive relationship between the participants' scores in writing (1) course and their GPA at secondary school certificate. So the researcher can rely heavily on the participants' writing skill level to reveal their academic performance.

### **The Participants' Scores in Secondary School Certificate**

The researcher analyzed the participants' secondary school certificates and recorded their total scores in these certificates in Table (2) below.

TABLE 2  
**The Participants' Scores in Secondary School Certificate**

<b>Score</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>60% to 79.9%</b>	4	17.4%
<b>80% to 89.9%</b>	4	17.4%
<b>90% to 100%</b>	15	65.2%
<b>Total</b>	23	100.0%

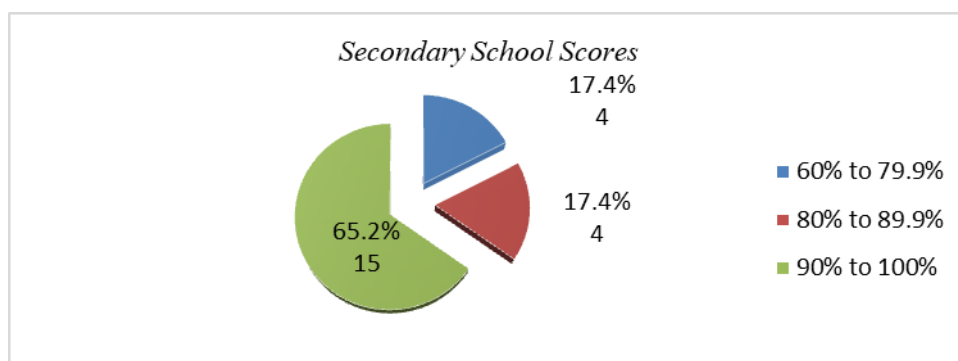


Table (2) and its graph show that about fifteen students (65.2%) of the twenty-three students who participated in the recent study and who represent the whole freshman English majors group at Palestine University during the second semester of the academic year 2020/2021 gained 90-100 GPA score in their secondary school certificate, while other four students (17.4%) gained 80-89 GPA score. The rest of the freshman English majors group at Palestine University includes other four students, who represent (17.4%) of the whole group, obtained 60-79 GPA score in their secondary school certificate.

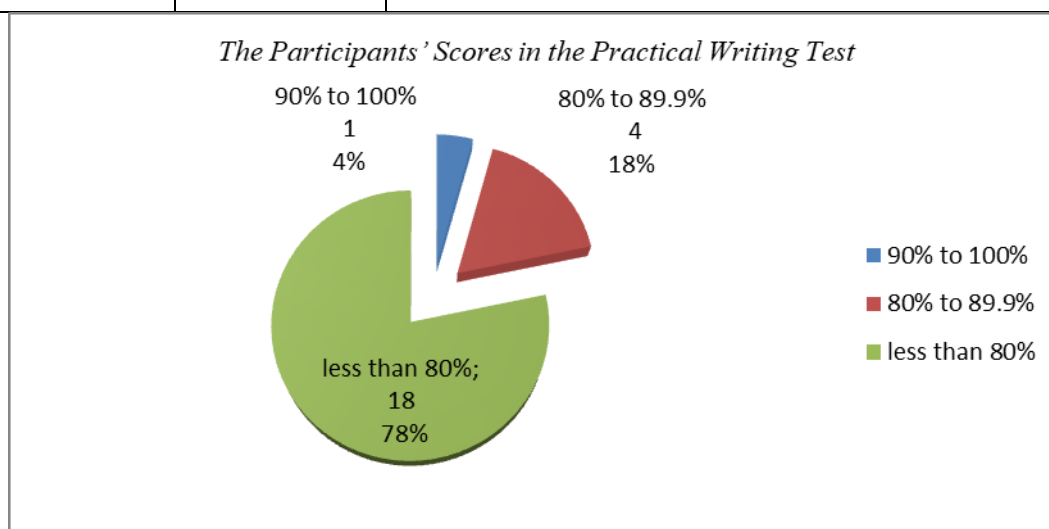
According to the recent criteria used at the Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education, students who gain more than 85% in their secondary school certificate are talented students who have brilliant skills, and they are allowed to be enrolled in any university program. If we adopt the previous idea, we can conclude that the majority of English majors at Palestine University are highly talented students as most of them gained a score which exceeds 85% in their secondary school certificate, so they are expected to perform well in any English language major.

### The Participants' English Writing Performance

The researcher analyzed the participants' scores on the practical writing test, which were rated by two raters, and summarized the raters' mean scores in Table (3) below.

TABLE 3  
The Participants' Scores in the Practical Writing Test

Score	Frequency	Percent
60% to 79.9%	18	78%
80% to 89.9%	4	18%
90% to 100%	1	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>100.0%</b>



The above table and its graph reveal that one student in the participants of the study obtained excellent score; above (90%), and just four students' scores were between (80%-89.9%). Eighteen students' scores were lower than (80%). In addition, the qualitative analysis of the participants'



writing performance in the practical writing test revealed that students encountered common mistakes summarized and quantified in table (4) below.

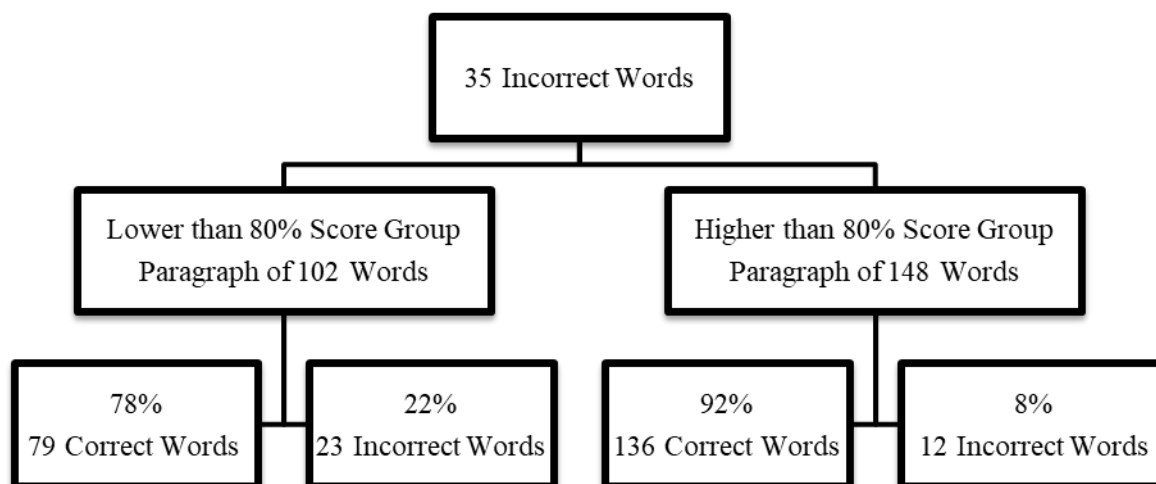
TABLE 4  
*The Participants' Common Writing Mistakes*

The Mistake Title	Frequencies
1- fragments	42
2- run-on sentence	33
3- faulty subject-verb agreement	36
4- faulty pronoun reference	39
5- punctuation errors	53
6- paragraph format	13
7- sentence structure (syntax)	38
8-inappropriate organization & flow of thoughts	21
9- vocabulary error	35

Information stated in the above table explains that the most frequented mistake encountered by the participants of the study was using correct punctuation marks as students committed (53) punctuation mistakes, while paragraph format, repeated (13) times, was the smallest mistake encountered by the participants of the study. The participants of the study could not differentiate between the comma and semicolon use. They, also, forgot to end a sentence with a period, and about (33) run-on sentences were constructed by the participants of the study. The qualitative analysis of students' writing production revealed that students are still weak in analyzing the obligatory components of English sentence as they tend to write fragments such as: Smoking bad habit./ While being in a taxi or a bus./ Governments necessary rules a must./. In addition, the participants' writing productions lack smooth organization of thought. The participants of the study faced difficulties in connecting English sentences. Examples like: However being in the same taxi, some smoke cigarettes./ I like to stop smoking because others like to smoke./ are found in students' writing. Moreover, the limitation in vocabulary knowledge still stands as a serious problem that the participants of the study encounter as word form errors were repeated for (35) times in the participants' writing production. Sentences like: A good teacher has a tree important qualified./ To be a teacher, you have important character./ Life in Gaza is enjoyed, but it is some disadvantages./student smoke citrate in school and teacher deal with it kind/ and its nature-friendly./ were obvious in the participants' writing production. Also, words like: phenomenons, lifes, and persons, which occur due to the overgeneralization of the English plural "s" rule, were found in students writing.

The qualitative analysis of the participants' writing product indicated that the sentences used in the students' paragraphs were not varied and the correctly-formed ones were simple sentences, and a few compound and complex sentences were observed. Students who gain less than 80% score tend to use simple sentences in their paragraphs, and they committed mistakes in forming compound and complex sentences and avoided writing complex-compound sentences which they may not know. On the other hand, students who gained more than 80% scores constructed varied types of error-free English sentences, and they were courageous tried to construct compound-complex sentences which made a special difficulty for them.

The researcher, also, analyzed the participants' writing product using word count as a basic. The following chart illustrates the results of this analysis.



The above chart shows that the words' mean of the paragraphs written by students whose score is lower than 80% was 102 words, and these words are divided into 78% correct words and 22% incorrect ones. The mistakes these students committed were simple words' errors which include: (1) the misuse of the third person singular "s", (2) the use of an incorrect form of irregular plural nouns, (3) the use of faulty word form, and (4) the use of an incorrect simple words' spelling. On the other hand, the words' errors committed by students whose score is higher than 80% were more complicated as they tended to use multisyllabic complex words which requires a mastery of high morphology and spelling skills which they may lack. Those students constructed more mature paragraphs which include 148 word mean. These words are divided into 92% correct words and 8% incorrect ones.

The results of the aforementioned quantitative and qualitative explanation of Palestine University freshman English majors' writing product, which are in agreement with (AL-Hussain & Younis 2021; Anh, 2019; Mosaidis, 2016; Suvin 2020), indicate that these students lack necessary writing skills. The low level of students' writing skills could be a result of unmotivated students who encountered uninteresting writing materials and traditional writing teaching methods which do not motivate them to be engaged in writing tasks (Hidayati, 2018; Lee et al, 2017). It also could be a result of uncaring tertiary level students, ineffective writing course at the university level, or unsatisfying instruction methods as Harper (2014) recorded that situational need and individual motivation empower education in creative writing.

### **The Participants' Writing Skills Compared to their Secondary School Academic Performance**

The researcher compared the participants' total score on the practical writing test and their total scores in writing one course versus their secondary school certificate scores using Pearson Correlation Coefficient. In addition, the researcher compared the students' scores in Writing (1) course and the practical writing test. Results of this comparison are stated in Table (5) below.

**TABLE 5**  
***The Participants' Score in Secondary School Certificate and their Writing Performance***

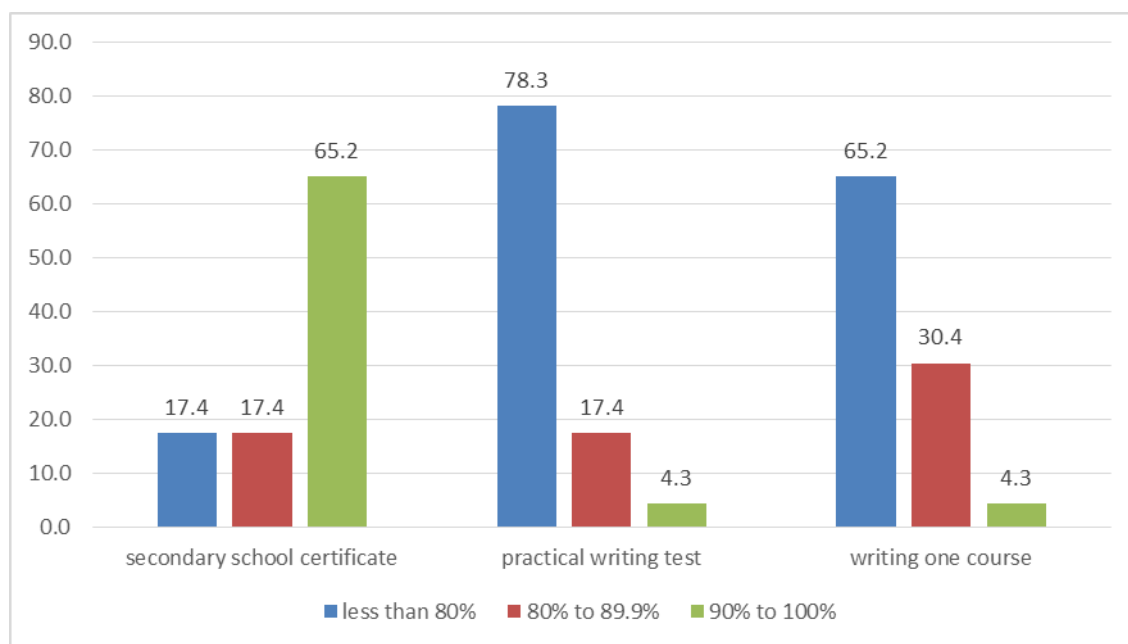
		<b>Correlation Coefficient</b>	<b>P-Value (Sig.)</b>
<b>Secondary School Certificate VS. Practical Writing Test Scores</b>	Relationship between secondary school certificate and practical writing test	0.478*	<b>0.011</b>
<b>Secondary School Certificate VS. Writing One Course Scores</b>	Relationship between secondary school certificate and writing one course	0.495*	<b>0.008</b>
<b>Practical Test VS. Writing One Course Scores</b>	<b>Relation between practical writing test and writing one course score</b>	<b>0.819*</b>	<b>0.000</b>

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

The above table shows that the correlation coefficient between secondary school certificate and writing one course performance of Palestine University freshman English majors equals (0.495) and the p-value (Sig.) equals (0.008). The p-value (Sig.) is less than (0.05), and the correlation coefficient is statistically significant at  $\alpha = 0.05$ . We conclude that there is a significant positive relationship between secondary school academic performance and Writing (1) course performance of Palestine University freshman English majors. Moreover, table (4) shows that the correlation coefficient between Palestine University English majors' performance in the practical writing test and secondary school certificate equals 0.478 and the p-value (Sig.) equals (0.011). The p-value (Sig.) is less than (0.05), and the correlation coefficient is statistically significant at  $\alpha = 0.05$ . We conclude that there is a significant positive relationship between secondary school academic performance and practical writing test performance of Palestine University freshman English majors. For more information about the participants' scores at secondary school and writing course see appendix (2). In addition, the above table reveals that the correlation coefficient between the practical writing test and writing one course scores is (0.819), and the p-value (Sig.) equals (0.000). The p-value (Sig.) is less than (0.05), and the correlation coefficient is statistically significant at  $\alpha = 0.05$ . We conclude that there is a significant positive relation between students' scores in the practical writing test and writing one course.

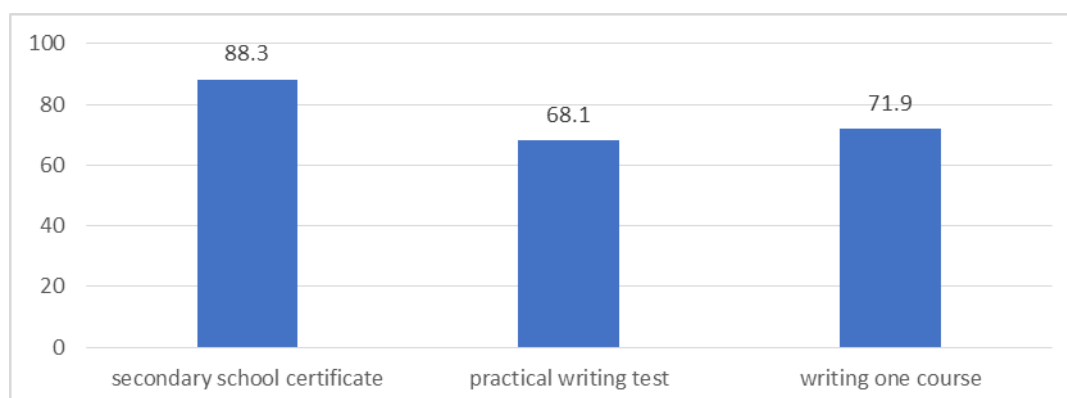
The above results which show positive relationship between secondary school students' academic performance and their tertiary writing one indicates that students' scores on Palestinian secondary school certificate can be used as a good predictor of students' writing performance at tertiary level. This is in agreement with Cerdeira et al. (2018) who are in favor of students' scores on secondary school as the best predictor of students' future performance. It is worth mentioning that although the relationship between secondary school grades and writing performance of Palestine University freshmen English majors' was positive, the participants were not satisfied with their writing performance level. The following graphic design shows the participants' score frequency percentage at secondary school compared to their writing performance at tertiary level.

### The Participants' Score Frequency Percentage at Secondary School VS Tertiary Writing Skill



The above graphic design shows that the majority of the participants (15 out of 23 students, 65.2%) gain excellent grade at secondary school, while their writing performance at tertiary level decline as (1 out of 23 students, 4.3%) gain excellent score. The moderate (80-89%) and low (less than 80%) levels in the practical writing test and Writing (1) course is bigger than that at secondary school grade. In addition, the researcher computed the mean scores of the participants of the study at secondary school and their writing level. The following graphic design illustrates this comparison.

### Comparison of the Participants' Secondary School Performance Means VS their Tertiary Writing Level



The former graphic design illustrates the mean scores of the participants of the study in writing; 68.1 in the practical writing test and 71.9 in Writing (1) course are lower than their performance mean score at secondary school (88.3).

### Palestine University English Majors' Perspectives

The analysis of the participants' answers on the semi-structured interview questions conducted by the researcher revealed the reasons behind the recent decline of the participants' writing skills level. Table (6) below presents these reasons (Reasons which gain less than 50% were neglected).

TABLE 6  
Reasons behind the recent Writing Level of the Participants of the Study

N.	The Reason	Frequency	Percentage
1	Online learning does not suit my preferences, and it deprives me of real contact with my instructor.	20	86.9%
2	I attend some online lectures and copy the answer of the assignments from my colleagues.	18	78.2%
3	School learning lacks important activities that could enhance my writing skills and my overall English proficiency.	17	73.9%
4	The economic situation of my family is in bad condition, and the latest Israeli attack badly affects my writing production.	13	56.5%
5	I think Writing (1) course is an important course which enhances my writing skills. However, I still need more writing activities as the recent level of my writing skill does not satisfy me.	21	91.3%

The above table includes reasons suggested by the participants of the study to explain their writing skill level decline. Twenty students (86.9%) out of the twenty-three students who participated in the recent study mentioned that online learning at Palestine University does not suit their preferences, and they were in bad need of face to face contact with their teachers, which gives them opportunities to receive satisfying direct feedback for their various writing enquiries. The participants mentioned that the type of online teaching used at the Faculty of Education, Palestine University is sterile as it is a one-way method of instruction where the instructors are senders of information, and we as students are receivers of that information. The participants added that the online method adopted by their instructors do not allow them to analyze or comprehend the tackled topics thoroughly. This is in line with (Bashitalshaaer, et al. 2021; Katibi et al., 2020) who indicated that Palestinian teachers need to be trained on online teaching methods. However, Paul & Jefferson (2019) did not find a difference in student performance between face-to-face and online learners. This may be due to the effective type of online learning program used in Paul & Jefferson study which allows students to have alive meetings. It, also, may be due to participants' who are used to the online teaching and learning environment. In addition, eighteen students (78%) out of the twenty-three students indicated that they did not give online learning adequate attention. They added that they attended some meetings, and they used to copy the answers of the assignments from their colleagues. This badly affects their writing experience and logically justifies their writing

skills' level decline. Also, seventeen students (73%) out of the twenty-three students remembered that school teaching was ineffective and teachers at schools do not give writing and oral skills due attention, and they just presented writing models that help students pass the exam not to gain required writing skills. Moreover, thirteen students (56.5%) out of the twenty-three students attributed their writing skill decline to their family economic situation and to the latest Israeli attack. It is worth mentioning that twenty-two students (95.6%) of the twenty-three students showed positive attitudes towards writing one course, and they added that they still require more courses that help bridge their secondary school English language gap and enhance their writing skills and their overall English proficiency.

The aforementioned reasons, mentioned by the participants of the study, indicate that students are not in favor of online learning, and they are still prefer face-to-face instruction at tertiary level. This may be due to the absence of effective programs required for implementing such a method of teaching at Palestine University. The recorded meetings which don't give students opportunities to have a live discussion with their teachers deprive them from real opportunities to enquire about puzzling English writing issues. In addition, the traditional methods of teaching used at Palestinian Public School badly affect students' learning outcomes. This is in line with (Harmar, 2001 & Richards & Renandyya, 2002) who indicated that most English foreign language teachers focus on teaching grammar rules, and they tend to urge students to memorize useless information and deprive them of real exposure to the target language.

Despite the aforementioned situations which badly affect students learning outcomes, the participants' of the study still have positive attitudes towards learning English language in general and writing skills in particular. This evokes an important idea which indicates that freshmen English majors at Palestine University have a positive sense of self-efficacy, and they are aware of their strengths and weaknesses which invite people in charge of education at school and tertiary level to evaluate adopted teaching strategies in light of students' preferences.

## V. Conclusions

Twenty-three students participated in the recent study, and those students represented the whole freshman English majors, who enrolled in Writing 1 Course during the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester of the academic year 2020/2021, at the faculty of Education, Palestine University. The researcher compared the participants' academic performance at secondary school to their writing performance at tertiary level. The limited number of the participants of the study and the comparison of their secondary school academic level to just writing performance might have affected the credibility of the study results. Including bigger number of students and comparing their secondary school academic performance level to other language skills might provide more reliable data. However, the mixed approach research design of the recent study, which includes the analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, satisfies readers and convinces them of the findings revealed. In addition, knowing that writing is the last skill mastered by students invites the researcher to take it as an indicator of students' overall language proficiency. Based on the limitations of the present study and its results, the following conclusions have been reached:



- There is a positive relationship between secondary school academic performance and the writing skills of Palestine University freshmen English majors amid the COVID-19 Pandemic. So Palestinian students' scores on secondary school certificate can be used as a reliable indicator of their future academic performance at college.
- Palestine University freshmen English majors' writing skill level is lower than their academic performance at secondary school. And Palestine University freshmen English majors are not satisfied with their English writing performance level and their secondary school English teaching methods.
- Online learning amid the COVID-19 Pandemic does not suit Palestine University freshmen English majors' needs and preferences.
- The recent situation in Gaza Strip; blockage, poor economic situations and Israeli reprisal aggressive attack, badly affects the academic performance of Palestine University freshmen English majors.

## VI. Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- Palestine University should develop the techniques and devices used in online learning to give students chances to have live contacts with their instructors.
- Writing courses at Palestine University should be given more attention and their instructors' performance should be regularly evaluated.
- English teachers at secondary schools should be trained on using methods and techniques that aim at enhancing students' effective use of the target language.
- Blended learning should be used from school learning level. This helps students to gain online learning skills needed at tertiary level.
- Psychological training programs which aim at alleviating crises effects on Palestinian students should be conducted in Gaza.
- More academic studies should be conducted to investigate the relationship between secondary school students' performance and their tertiary level one.

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