

# Using Alternative Assessment to Improve First-Year Students' Writing at Al-Quds University

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**Abstract:** *This study investigates the effectiveness of alternative assessment techniques in enhancing the paragraph writing skills of first-year students at Al-Quds University's Languages Center. Conducted within the framework of a compulsory English writing course, the research explores how peer feedback, self-assessment, and one-on-one conferencing can contribute to the development of students' writing abilities. The study is grounded in the context of English being taught as a foreign language in Palestine, where proficient writing skills are essential for academic success and professional communication. Through addressing the main research question—how alternative assessment techniques improve first-year students' writing—this study also answers sub-questions related to the role of peer feedback, self-assessment, and conferencing in enhancing writing outcomes. Findings highlight that these strategies foster self-reflection, collaboration, and targeted feedback, ultimately aiding students in constructing well-developed paragraphs. The research underscores the importance of integrating alternative assessment techniques into writing curricula to equip students with critical writing skills necessary for academic and life success.*

**Keywords:** alternative assessment, ESL Writing, Self-Assessment, Peer Fe

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## INTRODUCTION

Based on my own personal experience, I have noticed that almost all students find writing as a whole to be challenging. They feel paralyzed; writing is the monster that has been chasing them. At the university level, they get to take three courses to prepare them to write full paragraphs, however, when they reach the actual writing course, their knowledge most of the time is

nonexistent, I believe this is because the feedback on their writing that they had been given for the past three courses didn't help them improve. They are stuck in the place where they began. The kind of feedback we give was not sufficient enough to help them improve their writing level. They knew they made mistakes, but they did not know how to fix them.

The challenges that students face is multi. The most obvious one is that they understand the grammar rules individually, but once they have to implement them all together, they mess it all up. They would do excellent in the grammar test, but they would do horribly in writing. And just underlining their mistakes is not a solution, they don't know what they did wrong. Another issue is that students face is the limited resources to take ideas from, they lack the imagination that makes them able to describe details interestingly. Asking them to write freely is even a greater issue. Their questions would be all over the place; what tense should we use? What topic should we write about? where should we start? In addition, their writing would be all over the place.

### **The Context of My Research**

The study was carried out on students at Al-Quds University's Languages Center through using their English compulsory writing course which focuses on paragraph writing. At this level, students are supposed to have sufficient grammar and vocabulary that can aid them in writing a well-developed paragraph to be able to use this skill in other courses since the language of instruction in most universities in Palestine is English. Also, it is essential to mention that the English language in Palestine is taught as a foreign language. Thus, improving college students' writing skills originates from the need that students have to develop this skill because these students need this skill as a life skill alongside academic skills. As students or even graduates, need to write emails to their instructors, and reports and essays for their courses, meetings, and in some cases hospital rounds, court sessions, etc. Even more importantly, they need to be able to tell their own stories in a job interview, to be able to talk about their experiences, strengths, weaknesses, achievements, as well as interests to make them compelling, vivid, and alive in their audience's minds.

### **Description of The Learning Challenge**

As mentioned above, students' strife with writing. Their writing displays many weaknesses including their inability to implement the thing they learned in writing and their inability to write condensed ideas, topping that with the fact that the feedback they get is not sufficient to help them improve and learn from their mistakes. Therefore, in this research, I aim to help students improve their writing through trying different feedback methods on their first drafts writing and checking the effectiveness of each method in their final drafts.

I am certain that it is essential for teachers to take notice of the type of students they teach to be able to design the teaching process to fit their needs and interests and be able to address them. Teachers are in need to consider their students' age, culture, majors they are in, and the

circumstances they go through. Most students are teenagers which I believe is a sensitive period of age. The way I view them is inspired by the way I felt when I was a student at their age; they are in a transformation period, they are about to become adults and they are confused about how to act. If I want to treat my student the correct way, I must understand their identities, because according to Erickson (1968), "one's sense of ego identity is shaped by three interacting elements; one's biological characteristics; one's own unique psychological needs, interests and defenses; and the cultural milieu in which one resides." (Kroger, 2007). Thus, I need to know their identities and their cultural background to build a stable relationship with them, I believe this will develop the learning process and will ensure better performance and planning.

To begin with gender differences, classes contain both males and females. Male students either shave their facial hair or choose to grow a beard and a mustache. Male students are typical teenagers, most of them following the fashion trend of growing beards. They obviously care about their looks. This could indicate that these students' do this to get the other sex's attention. They seek to gain females' admiration. However, sometimes these male students have financial issues that make them focus on studying and working that they don't have time to care about their looks or what the opposite sex thinks of them.

On the other side, female students who have gained most of the freedom they have recently when they graduated high school, so one piece of evidence on this newly gained freedom is the amount of makeup they wear, whether full or simple. This shows that these want to highlight their female beauty. We could say, that they as well do this in some cases to get the other sex's attention. However, we can find that some female students avoid makeup for cultural or religious reasons. Another sign of females' maturity is the way they dress (their style). Most of the female students give a lot of attention to the way they dress, as they aim to impress both their male and female peers.

At this age, usually, students have made their decisions about their future professions which could tell us a lot about each person. Unless, like in many students' cases, they were forced into studying their majors by their parents or societies. Since I started teaching, I've heard so many stories from students about how they were forced to study medicine for example, because their families see these professions to be prestigious. Or how they have to study law because their families have famous lawyers that can help them in the future. Thus, many get stuck in majors they do not like or do not have an interest in because they are forced to. Moreover, getting to know students' personalities by their majors can be a very ambiguous matter. Nevertheless, there is more than one way is possible to understand students' personalities. I believe writing is one of them; asking them to write opinion essays for example can show us a lot about their interest. Other good methods could be games and speaking tasks as well. These can be successful in helping teachers understand students' cultural background and where these students come from, to understand how to deal with

them, and to establish a better learning environment because as I mentioned before understanding the students' identity, in general, offers the teacher a better stage to teach.

Another aspect that shapes my students is their cultural backgrounds. Students are either Muslim or Christian Palestinians with small differences in their sub-cultures due to their different social class and their tribal or community traditions. Religion, customs, and traditions can determine the values that students adopt. Furthermore, students have respect for me and use titles when addressing me because I am their educator, although our ages are close. And this is because it is a part of their religion and culture as Arabs and Muslims. Also, what I mentioned before about students being forced into their majors by their families shows how culture has an effect on decision making for these students because, in our Arabic society, teens have to respect and approve of their family decisions without asking or complaining.

Another aspect I feel influences the culture of students is their socio-economic status. For some students, the socio-economic status can give them an opportunity to follow their interests, educational-wise, even if their Tawjehi results were not good enough through paying more for the parallel education experience that our universities offer. The socio-economic status also can decide the kind of clothes they wear, the transportation they use, the phone they carry, the food they eat, and even the way they spend their free time at the campus. You can see this difference in classes, as some students might be interested in a lesson that has the theme of brands, they would participate more because they know more about this topic than other students who are from a different class. Students belong to the same culture. However, their identities are various. This variety of identities might add a spark to my classes; but on the other hand, it might also be a challenge for me as a teacher who is trying to connect and address the variety of interests, needs, and levels of these students. To conclude, it is an educational must for the teacher to be aware of their students' different identities. He/she should promote the use of collaboration and helping one another. I will use student-centric strategies to promote learning. I will push the students to follow their passions and attempt to provoke their curiosity with classroom materials. Students will both understand and be treated fairly.

The paper aims to improve students' writing and help them create ideas that are organized, precise and sophisticated in their writing because today the world needs students whose ideas are focused and who are capable of explaining their ideas distinctly and passing them on efficiently. Therefore, developing students' abilities to express their ideas will help them to become proficient individuals. Another aim is implementing three feedback strategies; self-assessment, peer feedback, and one on one conferencing, alongside various scaffolds: modeling, and multi-editing cycling, to help my students develop their imagination and their writing efficiency.

This research provides English language teachers and educators with a theoretical background that proves the effectiveness of the three strategies in teaching writing. Also, I expect it to provide a practical experience of performing such strategies so that curricula designers, English supervisors,

English teachers, and decision-makers can take it into account. In addition, the results and findings of this study are anticipated to motivate English teachers and specialists and give them a perception of the importance of improving their students' writing skills.

This article examines the effectiveness of using different feedback strategies to develop writing skills of English language learning at the university level. In the process, I have main and sub-research questions in mind.

### **Research Question:**

How can the usage of alternative assessment techniques improve first-year students at Al-Quds University in writing paragraphs?

### **Research Sub Questions:**

- How would **peer feedback** enhance paragraph writing of university students ?
- How would **self-assessment** develop paragraph writing of university students ?
- How would **one-on-one conferencing** enhance paragraph writing of university students?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Foundation of My Action**

Reading, listening, speaking and writing are the four basic skills for learning any new language. However, writing is considered to be the most difficult skill for students and the most needing one for hard-working, as it goes through various stages and incorporates many components such as grammar, mechanics, syntax, organization, (Abu Shawish & Abdel Rahman, 2010). Educators of English as a second language must consider the fact that teaching English writing should start from the primary stages of teaching the language. This means that teachers have to put much effort into teaching the basics of writing mechanics. Most importantly, they need to focus on what comes after the writing process. The major role a teacher has which is giving feedback. Because giving feedback plays a major part in improving students' skills and putting them on the right path.

Regarding the same issue, teaching writing these days follows the paradigm of the process approach. In contrast to the old approach which is the product one; that means teaching writing that focuses on the final production (one final draft). However, the process approach focuses on reproducing the model text, which gives the students the opportunity to take advantage of the teacher and their classmates' feedback. The process approach should go through stages; setting the goals for the students, collecting ideas on the chosen topic, organizing information (outlining). Drafting, reviewing, revising, and editing, (AbuHumos,2019).

English in Palestine is taught as a second language. It is taught in public, private, and UNRWAS schools. In Private schools, administrations use international curriculums hoping that their students

will become better and more competent in English. On the other side, public and UNRWA schools use a curriculum that was imposed by the Palestinian Ministry of Education. As reported by Dajani and McLaughlin (2009), 70% of Palestinian students go to governmental schools, 24% go to UNRWA (UN) schools, and only 6% go to private schools. Add to that, Dajani and McLaughlin (2009) claim that “In acknowledgment of its importance in global communications, English is now a core subject in the first Palestinian National Curriculum from the first grade (age 6 years)” (p.28) to grade 12. This means, that acquiring and learning English can open wide many doors for Palestinians, as they would have greater opportunities in almost all fields such as education, business, health, technology, politics, etc

Writing is the most challenging area in learning a second language. It is based on the appropriate and strategic use of language with structural accuracy and communicative potential (Dar & Khan, 2015). According to (Fareed, Ashraf. & Bilal, 2016), grammar and syntax were the major problematic language concerns found in writing. Some of the problems that were found are incorrect use of prepositions, articles, tenses, singular/plural, verbs, sentence structure, and the use of informal and spoken expressions. While Haider (2012) found that vocabulary also poses a problem for learners as they are oblivious of the collocational and connotational meanings of the words. In addition, experimental research conducted by Adas and Bakir (2013) at Al-Najah University in Nablus, revealed that Palestinian students have many deficiencies in writing which results in relatively poor written final products. These deficiencies include limited vocabulary, ill-structured sentences, their dependence on the Arabic-English composing-translating method where they first compose in Arabic and then translate what they write into English, and their inability to transform their grammatical knowledge into writing.

Feedback is a broad phrase that covers a wide range of strategies. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, feedback is information about a product that indicates whether it is successful or needs to be modified. Gallimore and Tharp (1990) define feedback in the field of English instruction as a technique of directing “students to substantial improvement in performance on the next try” (p.180) and say that feedback is most successful when the information offered to students is compared to some standard. As a result, it is critical to offer students rubrics that clarify the criteria for grading, particularly when dealing with writing activities.

For more than a decade, there has been controversy about whether providing corrective feedback to L2 writers may enhance their written correctness. Truscott (1996, 1999, 2004, 2007) disregarded error correction as not just ineffective but also damaging to pupils’ writing accuracy. An earlier study revealed that correction had little or no influence on student writing, lending credence to Truscott’s argument (Kepner, 1991; Sheppard, 1992). Students in Kepner’s (1991) experiment received two forms of written feedback: message-related comments and surface error corrections. The consistent use of L2 written error-corrections as the main medium of written feedback was found to be unproductive in L2 writing.



Furthermore, Jongekrijg and Russell (1999) state that the most common method of giving feedback is via written comments; however, they concede that students' reactions to these written comments are varied. Some students might react positively and effectively and fix their writing while others might be unable to understand these comments. Therefore, there needs to be a way to ensure that students get the gist of these comments and make use of them as much as possible. From here comes the need to use more authentic ways to give feedback.

One feedback strategy that has been showing a high effectiveness rate is peer feedback. There are other titles for peer feedback that are used interchangeably, such as peer review and peer response, but they all refer to the same concept in which students provide constructive criticism after reading and analyzing one other's work. Peer feedback, for example, refers to the recommendations or comments, questions, or queries that students make to one another after reading any piece of writing to produce 'reader-based prose' (Flower, 1979).

Given the significance of peer feedback theory, it is worth mentioning Vygotsky's Social Development Theory. This theory highlights the basic significance of social interaction in the development of cognition, with the community playing a key part in the process of meaning formation (Vygotsky, 1978). According to previous studies on the effect of peer feedback, using both quantitative and qualitative data, Tsui and Ng (2000), investigated the effects of teacher and peer comments on secondary L2 learners in Hong Kong. They found that "some learners incorporated high percentages of both teacher and peer comments, some incorporated higher percentages of teacher comments than peer comments, and others incorporated very low percentages of peer comments." Those who favored teacher comments found peer comments not useful. Those who favored peer comments reported that they "enhance a sense of audience, raise learners' awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses, encourage collaborative learning, and foster the ownership of text." According to them, learners were able to "develop a sense of autonomy over their own writings", and, the writing classroom is no longer one that gives absolute control to the teacher. The teacher role changed into "negotiating meaning and collaborating with learners to clarify and voice their thinking, emotions, and argumentation as well as in helping them to develop strategies for generating ideas, revising, and editing" (p.168).

Al-Jamal (2009) examined the impact of peer feedback on improving writing skills and building positive attitudes among English language learners. She found that the participants have benefited from the training on peer response. Moreover, she noticed some differences in the revision behavior between males and females in the quality and quantity of responses between the two groups. She concluded that this technique affected the participants' attitudes positively in a way that enhanced the development of their writing skills. She recommended that English teachers utilize the guiding principles offered by her study in their own planning, and student training for more effective writing lessons.

Another feedback strategy is one on one conferencing. According to Anderson (2000), the best way to ensure that students make use of teachers' assistance is to have teachers sit with them individually. According to Bayraktar (2012), one-on-one conferences are "teacher-student writing conferences that are individual, one-on-one teacher-student conversations about the students' writing or writing process" (p. 709).

One-on-one conferences can be viewed through Dewey's constructivist approach, in which Dewey (1940) emphasizes the importance of socially-contextualized knowledge construction and the fact that education must begin with a psychological understanding of the learner's capacities, interests, and habits, which must then be interpreted and translated into their social equivalents. As a result, one-on-one conferences are social situations in which instructors may reach out to their students' capacities, interests, and habits and assist them in the construction of knowledge through social contact with the teacher. Moreover, Luban et al. (1978) further elaborate on the effectiveness of one-on-one conferences in improving students' writing by saying that teachers, in such conferences, play the role of an editor, audience, and writer; they ask their student writers for clarification and more elaboration on some ideas.

The third feedback strategy this literature review goes discusses is self-assessment. "Assessment tends to shape every part of the student learning experience" (Orsmond, Merry, & Reiling, 2000, p. 24) The term self-assessment as a term is defined as the ability to identify strengths and weaknesses and points for improvement in one's performance, has attracted considerable attention from researchers (Falchikov & Boud, 1989; Graham and Harris, 1993; Boud, 2000; Zimmerman, 2002). According to (Oscarson 2009)" Teachers need support in making assessment analyses, and having access to students' self-assessments gives a more comprehensive base from which to make these judgments. The students' assessments are a real and valid complementary source of information. "and here comes the role of self-assessment. It can be used to aid the teacher in the process of giving feedback.

Self-evaluation is central to cognitive and constructivist theories of learning and motivation. Shepard (2001) emphasizes the importance of student self-monitoring of learning and thinking in the knowledge building that is at the heart of such theory. While learning, students generate meaning in part by self-assessing. Students organize, analyze, and internalize during learning and this process is exactly what self-assessment is about. They must link new knowledge, understandings, and abilities to what they have already stored and used. According to Mcmillan&Hearn(2008), "Self-assessment fosters students' ability to make these connections themselves; provides a mechanism to enhance learning in a meaningful, rather than rote, manner; and results in greater student motivation and confidence." Positive self-evaluations help learners to devote more resources to continued study and achieve greater goals in the future (Schunk 1995), thus students must self-assess to understand when they are learning, how much effort they must



spend for success when they have been successful when they have been incorrect, and which learning strategies work well for them.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

### Main Research Question:

#### **How can the usage of alternative assessment techniques improve first-year students at Al-Quds University in writing paragraphs?**

In my teaching journey came to find that the greatest majority of my students, whether they were high or low achievers have a problem with writing. This struggle is due to many inadequacies including their writing anxiety, inability to use their grammar knowledge, lack of vocabulary, lack of background knowledge, and inability to elaborate on details. According to Adas and Bakir (2013), Palestinian pupils have relatively poor written final products. Their errors include limited vocabulary, ill-structured sentences, their dependence on the Arabic-English composing-translating method, and their inability to transform their grammatical knowledge into writing.

### Research Sub-questions:

- How would **peer feedback** enhance paragraph writing of university students?
- How would **self-assessment** develop paragraph writing of university students?
- How would **one-on-one conferencing** enhance paragraph writing of university students?

### -Site and Participants:

The study will be conducted at Al Quds University Languages Center in Abu-Dis and the participants are ten sophomores from different majors who are taking the course “English Language Skills Level 1B”, which is a course that train and teach students on all the English language skills.

### -Data collection and analysis:

The researcher aims to use different data collection tools, each will be what best suits the question being studied.

1. Observation; which through it information on a phenomenon is gathered.
2. Post and Pre-Implementation Interviews; which are face-to-face conversations between the students and the researcher with the sole purpose of collecting relevant information to satisfy a research purpose.
3. Students’ Writing Samples; which the researcher will ask students to write as in-class tasks, then will be collected to get information out of them.

### - What data/evidence/observations did you collect to answer the sub-questions? Why?

This study will be conducted using the qualitative approach. The researcher will analyze the results qualitatively through finding codes in the students' writing to conduct a thematic analysis.

The researcher will be collecting students' artifacts, class observation, and reflection. The procedures in applying the assessment strategies will be implemented in three cycles. Each cycle will be 2 weeks and each week will contain two lectures. In each cycle, one assessment technique will be implemented and students will write two drafts one before being given the feedback and one after it.

At the beginning of each cycle, students will be asked to write a paragraph about a topic from the course's book as their first draft. They will have to write it following the correct rules of writing a paragraph as their prior knowledge. Following that the feedback process starts.

### **Data Collection tools**

#### **Pre- and Post-Implementing Writing:**

In each feedback strategy, students will write two drafts, one before implementing the feedback method and one after it. Those writing drafts will be used to collect data and analyze results

#### **Classroom Observations:**

I will be using this method in collecting my data to see to what extent the students are involved in the classroom. Participation and involvement in the discussions will be very important inside the classroom as well as the written work. I will take notes about the whole class in general and each student.

#### **Post Students' Reflections:**

There will be an interview to ask students, in general, some certain questions about writing skills. Then at the end of the lesson, the teacher will give students a piece of paper to reflect on the peer feedback strategy and how it helped them in improving their writing skills so that the reflection would be more accurate for each student.

### **What I have learned As Related to My Intervention: My Story in the Field**

#### **How can I use peer editing to improve students' paragraph writing skills?**

To investigate the effectiveness of peer feedback in improving students' writing, I used three data collection tools: pre and post-implementing writing, teacher's observation, pre-interview, and post students reflections.

#### **Pre and Post-Writing Interviews:**

Based on the pre-interview, 7 out of 10 students claimed that whenever they are asked to write, they just write whatever ideas come to their minds in whatever order. They also added that they usually mention their ideas without bothering to provide any further elaboration since they do not

anticipate an audience to read their writing other than their teachers who read their papers to give them a grade and not to listen to their ideas. One of the students said he knows well how to organize his ideas and elaborate on them. Another student claimed that “with a little bit of thinking and planning, the organization task becomes easier”; however, he added: “I still need the teacher’s guide to help me with the final organization.”.

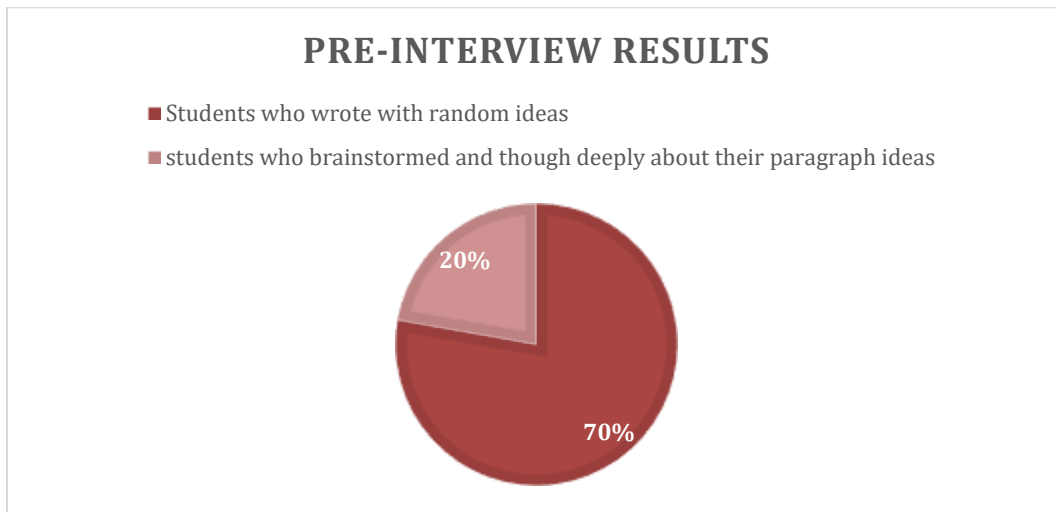


Figure 1

However, after the implementation of the strategy of peer feedback and through answering the post-implementation questions, 9 out of 10 students expressed their approval of and their satisfaction with the improvement they have witnessed as a result of the peer feedback in terms of collecting and arranging their ideas, the development of these ideas, and the overall structure of the paragraph. One student claimed that he found no difference and that if he went and revised his work alone, he would have made the same results.

#### **The pre-implementation and post-implementation drafts:**

In the pre-implementing writing, six out of ten students were not focused on their writings and they had few errors and mistakes in their paragraphs. They had some clear mistakes in the topic, supporting, and concluding sentences. They also faced some problems in punctuation and they faced some run-on sentences. Students had some grammatical mistakes and structural mistakes in their writing. Some of them were not organized in their paragraphs and they had trouble writing a cohesive paragraph.

Add to that, eight students showed disorganization of ideas and a lack of elaboration on them in their first drafts (pre-drafts). On the other hand, two students did not have a serious problem with organization or elaboration on ideas in their first drafts. Overall, almost all of the students’ writings

were weak in ideas and they lacked good ideas that can be explained in detail. However, eight students came to improve their organization and arranging of ideas after using peer feedback except for two students who still need to work more on the development and clarity of their ideas. For example, one student showed awful organization in her first draft and she needed further elaboration and development of ideas. Her organization, grammar, and structure improved after she read her pair notes and corrections.

After this, I let each pair set and discuss their work to help each other elaborate more, here is the same student third draft which was submitted on the course's e-class.

We notice how amazing is the difference between the first and last drafts is. In the last draft, the students elaborated way much more on her ideas and arranged the paragraph more accordingly, and got closer to perfection. While in the first draft, it was very short, unstructured, and summarized.

Moreover, almost every student who participated in this activity had a remarkable improvement in their organization and elaboration on ideas in their second drafts, a thing that can be interpreted as an influence of peer feedback.

### **Class Observation:**

While observing the process of peer feedback between students, I couldn't help but notice how students gave feedback to their classmates in a way that made their own writing better. They started noticing their own mistakes while taking a look at other students' mistakes and even how they wrote. These students got inspired by each other.

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