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Developing Writing Skills: A Practical Remedy of Common Writing Problems among Students of Writing Skills Courses at Preparatory Year, Najran University KSA

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Abstract

Teaching and/or developing writing skills has always been a pain for both teachers and learners in an EFL classroom situation. In this project an in-depth effort will be made to investigate the challenges (faced by the teachers as well as learners) in teaching and developing writing skills based on live classroom teaching experience. An analysis and review of sample writing attempts of the students will also be done to examine and offer the remedies and suggestions in order to minimize the problems of conventions, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and some of the basics of language use (grammar).

Keywords: Developing writing skill, EFL classroom situation, Review of sample writing attempts.

Introduction

Writing has always been considered as a pain for both learners and the ELT practitioners as well. There are assumptions that the writing is one of the most difficult or challenging language skills to be developed. The researchers themselves, in the four year EFL teaching experience in Saudi

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Arabia, have experienced that the learners always struggle in their writing and face problems especially in conventions, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and some of the basics of language use (grammar). The fact of the matter is that Saudi learners have these writing problems because they have least exposure in this very skill and mostly escape writing tasks even, at times, in their own mother language. There are reasons cited by EFL practitioners and scholars who conducted study in this field, most of them consider this is just because of the learners' poor background and mother tongue interference. Many studies have been conducted to investigate the problems of acquiring English in general and problems in writing in particular. This is based on the very fact that the students have many problems when writing in English, like not knowing how to organize their ideas, because it is almost a new experience for them. The very fact, that for the students to succeed in a foreign language generally, and writing skills specifically, they need to surround themselves in a language learning environment, remains – without argument. The current study not only examines the very grave situation i.e. some of the common writing problems among students of writing skills courses at Preparatory Year, Najran University, it also provides possible remedies and suggestion which will help, in turn, develop writing skill among EFL learners.

Literature Review

Many studies (Zughoul and Taminian, 1984; Kambal 1980; Zughoul and Husain 1985; Hisham, 2008; Abdul Haque, 1982; Ababneh, Sana M. Omar 1996; Chen, Y-M. 2002 and others) have been conducted in the Arab world to investigate the problems of learning English as a second/ foreign language among Arab learners.

Zughoul and Taminian (1984) found that “Jordanian EFL students commit serious lexical errors while communicating in English.”

Kambal (1980) analyzed errors in three types of free composition written by first year Sudanese university students. His research focused on the major syntactic errors made by these students in the verb phrase and the noun phrase. Kambal also found that the three main types of errors made in the verb phrase are verb formation, tense, and subject-verb agreement. He discussed errors in tense within five categories: tense sequence, tense substitution, tense marker, deletion, and confusion of perfect tenses. The findings of this study reveal that the third-person singular marker was used redundantly, and they also revealed the use of the incorrect form of verb to be.

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In their study, Zughoul and Husain (1985), found three problems that the students experienced in writing skills and these are the lack of lexical variety, subordination, and their heavy reliance on redundancy that does not add any new information to the text.

Hisham (2008) studied the problems of Arab students who were studying at Business College at University Utara Malaysia. After the study he found that those students experienced difficulties in vocabulary register, grammar, and referencing.

Abdul Haque (1982), conducted a research on syntactic analysis in composition on Jordanian Secondary students and states that “one of the linguistic areas in which students in the secondary cycle commit errors is in the writing skills. As a result, ESL/EFL teachers are still in search of a coherent, comprehensive theory of the teaching of writing.

This study specifically focuses on the problems of conventions, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and some of the basics of language use (grammar) in writing among the students of writing skills courses at Preparatory Year, Najran University. This study offers some remedies and suggestion for the above mentioned problems.

Research Objectives

This project aims at investigating writing problems among the students of writing skills courses at Preparatory Year, Najran University. It also offers some relevant remedies and suggestion which will, in turn, contribute to improve practice and performance in the writing classroom. We hope that these measures will help to bring along better results in the future teaching and learning attempts.

Methodology

Fifteen teachers and sixty students were involved in this study. Teachers were given the questionnaire to reflect their opinion regarding the students writing problems such as conventions, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and some of the basics of language use (grammar) based on their classroom teaching practice. The students were randomly selected from different writing sections and were given some tasks on writing (e.g. phrases, sentences, and paragraph etc.) in order to get writing samples from them. While analyzing their writings, the researchers found that the

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selected samples had writing problems of conventions, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and some of the basics of language use. Five of them are presented for this study to examine and to offer the suggestions and relevant remedies to improve the teaching writing instructions and/or to develop the writing skills among learners.

Tools

Questionnaire was used as a means to collect the teachers' opinion on the common writing problems viz. problems of conventions, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and some of the basics of language use. Writing samples from the students were used in this study to collect and examine the actual data.

Analysis of Teachers' Questionnaire

The following figures have been analyzed carefully to present the teachers' opinion on every single writing problem which carries, according to this study, nine sub-categories in every single area of writing problems i.e. conventions, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and the language use:

1. Conventions:

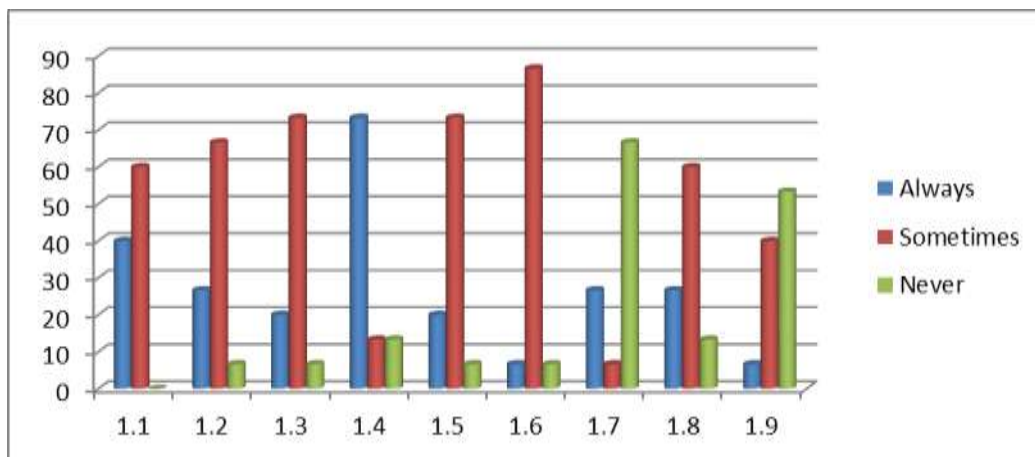


Fig 1: analysis of the problems in conventions

The researchers asked questions regarding the conventional problems in writing. Though the respondents differ, as Fig 1 shows, on the sub-categories of conventions, most of them agree that they do have problems in handwriting, incomplete sentences, and consistency in spatial use while they write. This area needs to be focussed in order to minimise the problem.

2. Punctuation:

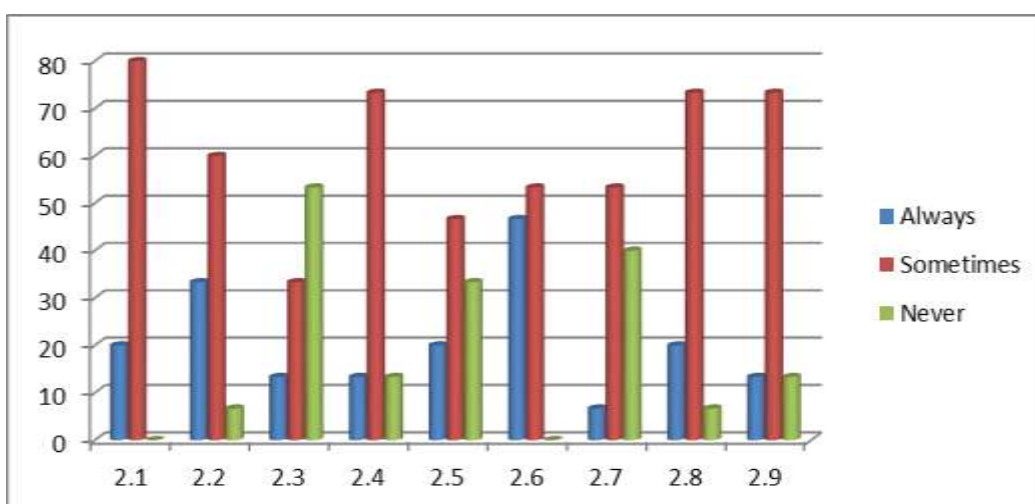


Fig 2: analysis of the problems in punctuation

The researchers asked questions regarding the punctuation problems in writing. As Fig 2 illustrates that the learners do face punctuation problems in their writing and always struggle in the proper use of period, question mark, colon/semi colon and commas while they write. This area should be taken into consideration by the teachers especially when they are correcting the students write ups.

3. Capitalization:

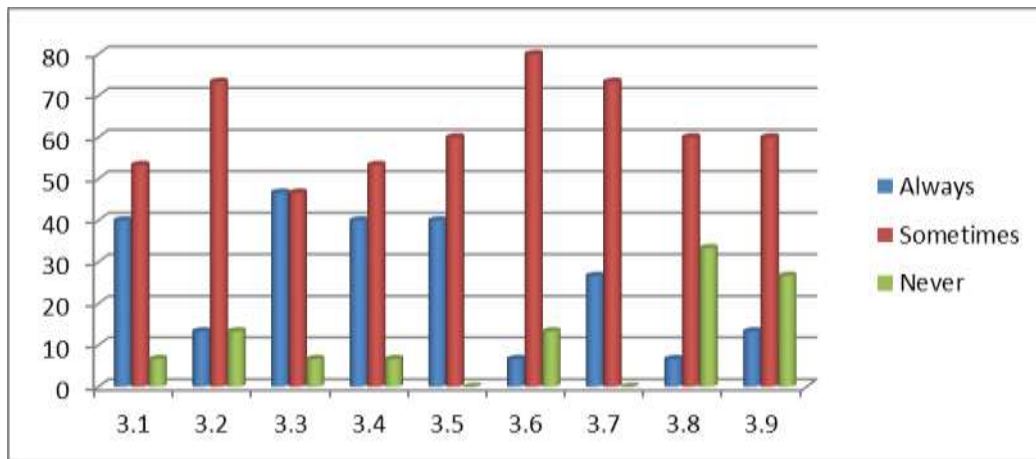


Fig 3: analysis of the problems in capitalization

The researchers asked questions regarding the capitalization problems in writing. Here the respondents reflected their views, as Fig 3 shows, that many of the learners frequently miss or replace the capital/lower case letter at the start of the word/sentence. It seems that the students don't have enough input to differentiate the proper use of capitalization whether or not to use the capital or lower case letter of all proper nouns, title words/phrases and the first word of a sentence while they write.

4. Spelling:

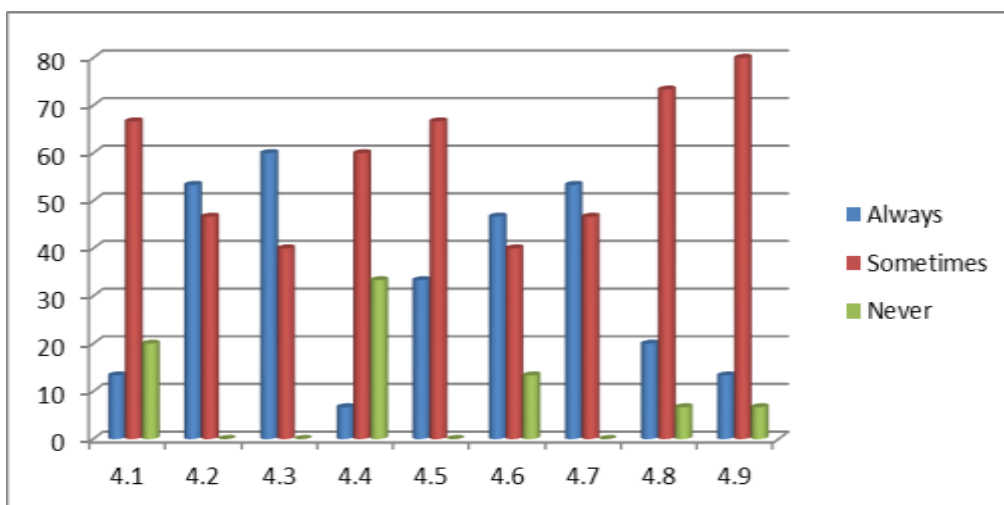


Fig 4: analysis of the problems in spelling

On the questions regarding the spelling problems in writing, most of the teachers, as Fig 4 shows, agree that their students have spelling problems like confusion with word of similar spelling, confusion of /p/ and /b/ and /w/ and /v/, confusion in the words similar in spelling but different in meaning and confusion in spelling and pronunciation while they write. The results, as per the figure, show that the learners face the said problem in their writing may be due to the mother tongue interference since they do not have the similar or so letters/sounds in their native language.

5. Language Use

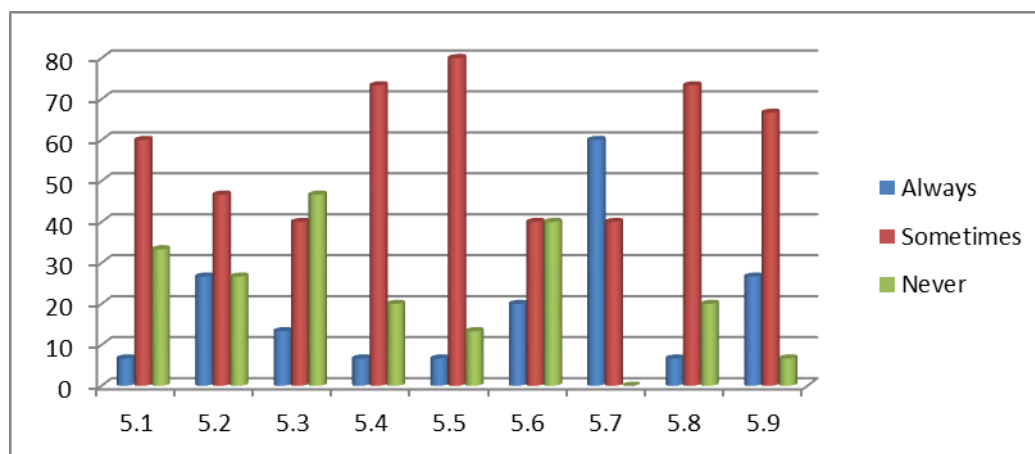


Fig 5: analysis of the problems in language use

The researchers also asked questions regarding the problems of language use in writing. Here the respondents differ, as Fig 5 shows, on the sub-categories of the writing problems in language use. They agree that their students always struggle while they use foreign language chunks and face problems like inappropriateness, synonyms and antonyms, sentence structure pattern, SVA pattern and awkward phrasing and unconventional grammar while they write. The general assumption is that the learners carry the said problems from their secondary classes where, as the past studies experienced, the proper and intensive practice of grammar items are excessively taught but not in the linguistic frame.

Students Writing Samples

The following writing sample were examined and analyzed in terms of writing problems, according to the present study, among the Preparatory Year students. The samples demonstrate that the learners do have, also revealed by the teachers opinion, problems of conventions, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and language use. Keeping the nature of the said problems in mind, the researchers offer relevant remedies and suggestions to improve the teaching writing instructions and to develop the writing skills among learners.

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Wahid is a new student in my English class of the English language center. He generally likes life in Saudi Arabia. He likes the summer, but he doesn't like his homework. He is still feeling all year from a small town in the north. He is studying business administration, English and accounting. In his free time, he reads books and goes to the gym. He plans to visit the United States next summer so he needs to learn English.

Sample 1. Convention

Different languages and all the people of his language which he understands and speaks, for example, the state of Britain and English-speaking countries Britain and Spain speak Spanish and every people has its own language and speak it fluently. It is my view that the best language is Arabic is the language of the Koran. Quran

Sample 2. Punctuation

1- I will travel to Alha town after
 2- I hope to go to the cafe
 3- My best hobby is swimming
 4- I will attend for United States
 5- I am looking for a job
 Question
 1- Did you sleep early?
 2- What did you do last night?
 3- What is your favorite hobby?
 4- What are your plans?
 5- What is your job?
 Comments
 1- My hobbies are play football, swim, shopping and watch TV.
 2- I will travel to Alha but I don't
 3- I will buy milk, juice and bread
 4- My preferences are IPad, iPad and a black belt.
 5- I will take few books to reading, writing, paper and a yellow and list 1-49

picture
 park
 lake
 four men
 people
 shore
 scene
 sunny
 water
 grass
 trampet
 sandals
 hand
 mentay
 umbrella
 clothes
 dancing

Sample 4. Spelling

C. Write a paragraph (75 Words) on any ONE of the following:
 a. Holiday Food b. My Classmate

Language Use
 Holiday Food
 Food my god. I like Saudi. I like kabsa and barge. I like kabsa of all the foods. My family like mangi and kabsa and sambothe and water and juice and milk and vegetable. Food it is the god in life. My family like kabsa and kabsa of all the foods. I like eat kabsa and barge and drink coffee with tahini.

Suggestions and Remedies

The following suggestions and remedies may be useful to minimize the problems of conventions, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and language use:

Suggestions

- Writing classes must witness more practice than delivering lectures
- Teacher must explain the use of all the punctuation marks
- Teacher must explain the rules of capitalization
- Teacher must engage the learners in memory/vocabulary games
- Teacher must motivate and encourage the learners before actual writing
- Teacher must provide the language support on every single topic
- Teacher must act as a prompter to assist the student at times
- Students should be encouraged to do home assignment as much as possible

Remedial Exercises

1. Conventions

- copy and dictation,
- jumbled words exercises, and
- peer editing

2. Punctuation

- story telling (melody of speech),
- editing, and
- loud reading with proper punctuation awareness

3. Capitalization

- titles exercises,
- vocabulary and compound words exercises, and
- identification of capital and lower case exercises

4. Spelling

- memorization exercises,
- word completion exercises, and
- word formation exercises

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5. Language Use

- form and functions exercises,
- sequence of tenses exercises, and
- gap filling/story writing exercises.

Conclusion

After the analysis of the teachers' questionnaire and the examination of the students writing samples, the researchers found that the learners frequently repeat the errors regarding conventions, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and language use, which, in our opinion, is a hindrance in developing writing skill at this level and need to be looked very seriously. Therefore, the EFL teachers are advised to pay more attention in their pedagogical applications while teaching writing. The researchers also recommend a further study in order to measure the effectiveness of the remedial exercises offered in this study.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire/Checklist

The following questionnaire/checklist is prepared by the researchers to get the teachers' opinion on the common writing problems among students at the Preparatory Year, Najran University.

Please check [√] where applicable.

Scale: 1: Always, 2: Sometimes, 3: Never

	Conventions	Punctuation	Capitalization	Spelling	Language Use
1	Your students handwriting is legible. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students use a period at the end of each sentence. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students use both capital and lower case letters. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students spell all words correctly. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students use appropriate language. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3
2	Your students do proper use of lines on the paper. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students use a question mark at the end of each question. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students capitalize all proper nouns. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students confuse with words of similar spelling. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students use synonyms/antonym for words they write a lot. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3
3	Your students leave white spaces between words. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students use an exclamation. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students capitalize the pronoun 'I'. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students confuse with words of similar in spelling but different in meaning. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students use L1 words in their sentences/writings. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3
4	Your students' sentences go from left to right. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students know the proper use of comma. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students capitalize important words in a title. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students spell /p/ and /b/ appropriately. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students use SVO/SP/SVA patterns correctly. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3
5	Your students' sentences begin in different ways. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students always confuse between full stop and comma. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students capitalize the first word of a sentence. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students always misspell words in their writings. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students use correct form(s) of the verb/words. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3
6	Your students write complete sentences. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students confuse with colon and semi colon. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students capitalize the first word in a direct quotation. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students confuse with American v/s British spelling. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students use Arabic basic sentence patterns. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3
7	Your students' words/sentences go from right to left. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students use quotation marks in dialogue. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students capitalize 'W' in a WH question. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students confuse words starting with /p/ and /b/. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students need language support/struggle with basic vocabulary. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3
8	Your students write too small or too large. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students use commas between words in a list. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students capitalize all noun words. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students confuse words starting with /w/ and /v/. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students use accurate grammatical structures. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3
9	Your students use cursive writing. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students use apostrophes in contractions and possessives. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students capitalize salutation and complementary close. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students write words according to the pronunciation. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Your students use awkward phrasing. <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3

Instructor Name: _____ Nationality _____ Course _____

Educational Qualification _____ Teaching Experience ESL _____ EFL _____

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Colophon:

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