Decoding Proficiency: A Deep Dive into Writing Samples Analysis to Unveil Students' Real Competence

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Abstract

This study, conducted as a quantitative analysis, aims to investigate how high school teaching methods impact the writing abilities of incoming freshmen at Tishreen University's English Department in Latakia, Syria, and whether these students meet the Department's standards. To achieve this, 60 writing samples from the Composition and Comprehension 1 exam in the first semester of the 2022-2023 academic year were gathered and analyzed for linguistic and meta-discourse markers. The analysis revealed that many students struggled with constructing coherent sentences, using appropriate vocabulary, and employing academic discourse markers. These findings emphasize the importance of improving the transition between educational stages by aligning teaching practices. To facilitate a smoother transition, it is crucial to implement effective writing exercises at the high school level. Such exercises provide students with opportunities to refine their composition skills, including grammar and vocabulary usage, which are essential for success in the English Department, particularly when tasked with producing longer English texts. In conclusion, this study highlights the significance of bridging the gap between high school and university writing, emphasizing the need for enhanced teaching practices at both levels to better prepare students for academic success in higher education. Accuracy.

Keywords: Accuracy, Fluency, Lexical Richness, Meta-Discourse Markers, Syntactic Complexity, Writing Skills.

الكشف عن الكفاءة: التحري الدقيق من خلال تحليل عينات الكتابة للكشف عن الكفاءة الحقيقية للطلاب

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المستخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة الكمية إلى دراسة كيفية تأثير أساليب التدريس في المدرسة الثانوية على قدرات الكتابة للطلاب الجدد في قسم اللغة الإنكليزية بجامعة تشرين في اللاذقية، سورية، وما إذا كان هؤلاء الطلاب يستوفون معايير القسم. لتحقيق ذلك، تم أخذ ٦٠ عينة كتابية من امتحان التعبير والاستيعاب ١ في الفصل الدراسي الأول من العام الدراسي ٢٠٢٢-٢٠٢٣ وتحليلها؛ لفحص ميزات النص اللغوية ومؤشرات ما وراء الخطاب. كشف التحليل أن العديد من الطلاب واجهوا صعوبةً بالغةً في تشكيل جمل سليمة التركيب، وارتكبوا أخطاء في استخدام أشكال المفردات المناسبة، وافتقروا إلى استخدام مؤشرات الخطاب الأكاديمي. تؤكد هذه النتائج على ضرورة تعزيز الانتقال بين المستويات التعليمية؛ من خلال ربط أساليب التدريس المتبعة فيها. لتسهيل هذا الانتقال بشكل أفضل يجب أن تُمارس الكتابة في المدارس بشكل فعال؛ لأن ذلك سيوفر للطلاب فرصاً كبيرة لشحذ مهاراتهم في الكتابة الأكاديمية الضرورية في قسم اللغة الانكليزية، بما في ذلك تطبيق قواعد اللغة وتشكيل المفردات خاصةً عند كتابة نصوص طويلة باللغة الإنكليزية. وفي الختام، تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على أهمية سد الفجوة بين الكتابة في المدارس الثانوية، والجامعات مع التأكيد على الحاجة إلى ممارسات تعليمية معززة على كلا المستويين لإعداد الطلاب بشكل أفضل للنجاح الأكاديمي في مرحلة التعليم العالي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الدقة، الطلاقة، غنى المفردات، السمات البلاغية، التعقيد النحوي، مهارات الكتابة

1. Introduction

Written discourse produced by students has a crucial role during their academic life because it is the window through which they can convey their ideas (Fang, 2021; Reeder, 2024). This makes acquiring academic writing skills a prerequisite for success in higher education levels.

The results of this investigation will be used to validate whether or not the methods of teaching English adopted by Syrian high school teachers are negatively affecting the writing competence of students, especially those who choose to complete their higher education in the English Department. The framework of this study is based on the methods and findings of research conducted on the development of writing skills, such as (Hinkel, 2002 ;Knouzi, 2016).

Research Problem

The current study aims to assess the writing skills of students entering the English Department at Tishreen University, Latakia, Syria, by analyzing samples from the first-year Composition and Comprehension 1 examination held in the first semester of 2023. The study seeks to understand whether the teaching methods employed by Syrian high school teachers negatively impact students' writing competence, particularly those pursuing higher education in English.

Research Questions

1. How do high school teaching practices influence the writing skills of freshmen entering the English Department at Tishreen University؟
2. To what extent do incoming freshmen meet the writing expectations of the English Department؟
3. What specific difficulties do students face in their writing, such as sentence formation, vocabulary usage, and academic discourse markers?

To answer these questions, the study examines selected samples from the first-year Composition and Comprehension 1 examination held in the first semester of 2023 in the English Department at Tishreen University, Latakia, Syria. The researcher collected 60 writing samples, and they were divided into three groups. The first one is Group 1 whose score ranged between good and excellent (70% to 90%). Next is Group 2 whose students passed the test with fair scores (55% to 69%). Finally is Group 3. Students performance in this group was poor and did not qualify them to pass the examination.

Significance of the Study

1. This study addresses a critical issue in the education system, focusing on the effectiveness of high school teaching methods in preparing students

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for university-level writing.

2. By identifying the challenges faced by freshmen in meeting the English Department's writing expectations, the study aims to inform educational decision makers about areas that need improvement.

3. The findings of this study can guide curriculum development efforts aimed at enhancing the transition between high school and university, ultimately improving students' academic success.

4. Understanding the specific writing difficulties encountered by students can inform targeted interventions and support programs to better prepare incoming freshmen for the demands of university-level writing courses.

2. Theoretical Framework
2.1 Markers of Writing Competence

This section represents the first sub-section of the main section number 2, and it is assigned 2.1. The first section of the theoretical framework should be study-related key words. The labeling of this section should be italicized and in bold 12 font size. Each word should be given a sub-subsection number and explained in detail. The labeling of the sub-subsection should Various scholar, including Carroll (2002) and Sullivan (2006) argued that academic writing at the higher education is far more complicated than writing at the school level. Carroll (2002) suggested that the complexity arises from the students' need to apply appropriate writing conventions, such as unity, coherence, and cohesion. Sullivan (2006) defined academic writing at the university level as a form of response to "an article, essay, or reading selection that contains at least some abstract content and might be chosen based on its appropriateness for a college-level course" (pp. 16-17). When they write, students have to showcase their critical thinking skills, ability to arrange and present their writing efficiently, incorporate information they learned skillfully in addition to applying grammar, spelling, and punctuation rules. However, Maharani, Hakiki, and Safitiri (2023) suggested that most students are under-prepared and struggle to produce academic articles, and teachers play a major role in that struggle.

Moreover, not all learners build their writing skills in the same manner. For instance, Lesmana and Ariffin (2020) suggested that many factors play pivotal roles in language learning, such as motivation, the range of cognitive capacities, confidence, and the bpurpose of learning the language. Also, Nhung (2023) suggested that variations in strategies adopted by students influence their writing outcome, that is, students who do not use strategies or adopt unsuitable ones before, while, and after the writing process will likely not achieve well in academic writing tasks at university. Other very important factors that determine writing competence are features like fluency, accuracy, and complexity (Barrot & Agdeppa, 2021), and lexical richness and meta-discourse features (Erarslan, 2021).

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2.1.1 Fluency

Written fluency is defined by Foster (2020) and Johansson and Rijlaarsdam (2023) as the active, fluid, and versatile use of words. Learners' fluency is considered a crucial indicator of their competence, especially in the contexts of foreign or second language acquisition. Abdel Latif (2014) argued that examining writing fluency is essential because it will "inform us about the difficulties students have in written text production." (p. 196)

Written fluency can be measured through a variety of methods, such as the product-based analysis which only focuses on the finished text and does not consider the process of writing itself (Rahayu, 2022). In contrast, process-based analysis in concerned with the number of words written per minute. It is measured by dividing the overall word count by the total time required to finish the writing assignment (Ong & Zhang, 2010). Findings of studies that examined written fluency varied. For example, Silva (1993) reported that better fluency does not always signify higher quality. In contrast, others like Sasaki (2002) concluded that skilled students wrote considerably longer texts than their less killed peers.

2.1.2 Accuracy and Syntactic Complexity

Wang, Duan, and Liu (2022) stated that accuracy in writing refers to the correctness, precision, and precision of the content, language, and information conveyed in a written text. It can be measured by counting the error-free T-units and dividing their number by the total number of T-units in the text. To get more accurate results, errors are classified by their type (Mertosono & Erniwati, 2023). Another method of measuring accuracy is by dividing the total number of errors by the word count in the text. Syntactic complexity on the other hand is defined as the degree of complexity in sentence formation and grammar structures in learners' writing. Knouzi (2016) suggested that competent learners are able to use subordination to present complex meanings, i.e. using more concise sentence structures, than less proficient learners. Therefore, one of the best ways to measure syntactic complexity is by counting the dependent clauses and dividing their number by the total number of T-units in the text (Knouzi, 2016).

2.1.3 Lexical Richness

Zhang (2020) defined lexical richness or diversity as scope of lexical items used in the text where a wider scope demonstrates a greater diversity. Various researchers, such as Ha (2019) suggested that lexical diversity can be measured by adopting a type-token ratio, where the number of different words written in a text is divided by the number of types in the same text. However, longer texts tend to have more vocabulary types, so using this method with texts of different lengths is fairly demanding.

For this reason, various programs were developed to accurately examine the degree of lexical richness in written texts. One of these programs in VacabProfile (VP) developed by Tom Cobb. He classified lexical items into four levels of frequency: the first most common 1000 words, the second most common 1000 words, academic words list, and off-list words.

2.1.4 Meta-Discourse Markers

Alsaawi (2022) defined rhetorical features as the linguistic resources that structure the writers' attitudes towards the topic they are writing about or their audience. Knouzi (2016) suggested that effective use of these features, which include words like, first, second, next, actually, may, etc., demonstrates competent writing skills. Using rhetorical features also achieves coherence, cohesion, and a smooth relationship between ideas in the text. Sun (2020) believed that proficient writers use rhetorical features a lot more than less competent ones.

3. Context of the Study
3.1 Higher Education in Syria

For contextualizing the study, the following section presents a brief description of the higher education context of Syria, and the writing syllabus used to teach freshmen in the English Department at Tishreen University. The Ministry of Higher Education is responsible for higher education and postgraduate studies across all universities and higher institutes in Syria. As for students, the score achieved at the Grade 12 final test, which is the final examination at the school level determines what and where students will continue their post-school education. For most higher education studies, there are no entrance tests before the admission process. The study was conducted in Tishreen University, which is the only public university in the Latakia Governorate.

3.2 First-year Writing Course at the Department of English

The focus of Composition and Comprehension 1, the very first academic writing course at the Department of English, is paragraph writing. Ann Hogue's (2007) First Steps in Academic Writing is currently used to achieve that. The objective of the textbook is to help students successfully acquire academic writing skills. Its content teaches students rules of punctuation, sentence structures, grammar, ways of organizing paragraphs, unity, coherence, and cohesion. Students at this level are required to compose well-structured summaries and explanatory paragraphs about different topics. To succeed in this course, students have to showcase acceptable grammar, use a wide range of vocabulary, display critical thinking, and develop coherent and well-constructed arguments related to the writing tasks.

4. Methodology

Data were collected from 60 samples of writing produced by first-year students in 2023 during their first-semester examination in the English Department. The researcher selected freshmen because they have already had experienced academic writing for an entire semester. Also, they can still refer to whatever they have learned throughout their school education.

There were 629 first-year students in the academic year 2022-2023, and 121 (19.24%) have succeeded in the composition test. 60 writing samples were selected and divided into three groups. First is Group 1, and their performance ranged between good to excellent. Next is Group 2 whose performance was acceptable. Finally is Group 3 who performed very badly in the test and consequently failed.

4.1 The Writing Test

The composition test had three main tasks. The first one was a reading and comprehension task where students had to read a passage and answer some questions. Next, students had to combine sentences to create different types of sentences, such as simple, compound, and complex. Finally was the writing task. Students were required to compose a paragraph of maximum 15 lines either about Four Steps to Stay Safe in a Foreign City or Four Characteristics of Your Dream Job.

4.2 Data Analysis

The study follows the quantitative approach to data analysis. All markers of writing competence discussed earlier in section 2 above were examined via objective measures. Statistical analysis was performed using GenStat-12 Program, and the significant difference between the means was calculated using the Student T-test. Every occurrence of each feature was counted instead of using comprehensive measures that generally judge the quality of the text. Adopting such measures may be inaccurate, biased, and may lack validity (Cumming, 1998).

Students' samples were divided into T-units. Hunt (1966) and Mylläri (2020) defined a T-unit as one main clause and all the subordinate clauses that come with it. For instance, *There were two women in the bar and they were arguing.* This is a sentence with two T-units. Table 1 below summarizes the measures that rely on T-unit analysis.

Table (1)

Methods of Examining the Competence Features in Writing Samples

Feature	Analysis Method
Fluency	Total number of words/ total number of T-units (W/T)
Accuracy	Total number of error-free T-units/ total number of T-units (EFT/T)

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Syntactic complexity	Total number of clauses/ total number of T-units (C/T)
Lexical richness	Cobb's VP program
Rhetorical features	Total number of features/ total number of T-units

4.3 Data Analysis
4.3.1 Fluency

Fluency was measured by dividing the total number of words by the total number of T-units in each text. According to Muller (2014), this is the most common way of assessing fluency especially among researchers who are not able to collect data electronically or have time constraints. As for the degree of fluency, Hunt (1966) defined T-units made up of 1 to 8 words as being short. T-units made up of 9 to 20 words are medium-length, and any T-unit with more than 20 words as long. The length of T-units written by students in this sample was 12.3 words in Group 1, 11.97 words in Group 2, and 11.15 in Group 3. This indicates that students across the three groups tended to compose medium-length T-units.

To get a precise comparison of the fluency variation among the three groups, the coefficient of variation measure was used, and the results are presented in Table (2) below.

Table (2)
Variation in Fluency in the sample

Groups	Mean	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of Variation %
Group 1	12.425 a	2.4024	19.34
Group 2	12.280 a	2.701	21.995
Group 3	11.276 a	2.455	21.771
Probability	NS		

NS: No significant difference.
Similar letters next to the means mean no significant difference between them

As seen in Table (2), analysis reveals that there is no significant variation between the groups. Knouzi (2016) suggested that "The length of T-unit measure does not discriminate between the causes of the length." (p. 138). This was found to be true in the current sample. For example, Student 2 in the sample wrote a 31-word long T-unit because of unnecessary redundancy. On the other hand, student 23 wrote too many sequential noun phrases in one of the T-units.

Examples:
Student 2: Fourthly, after you get on the city you should be friendly to make friends that can take you on trips and stay nearby you so that you do not get lost.

Student 23: First, if a girl travels with you, you should buy female personal safety protection items.

4.3.2 Grammatical and Lexical Accuracy

Accuracy, both grammatical and lexical, was measured by dividing the total number of error-free T-units by the total number of T-units. However, Soncini, Matteucci, and Butera (2023) stated that different teachers would evaluate errors differently. As a solution to this problem, Kroll's (1990) Error Category Model was employed to classify syntactic errors into four divisions: sentence structure errors, verb-related errors, reference errors, and article errors. See Table 3 for further details.

As for lexical accuracy Engber's (1995) Lexical Error Taxonomy was used to sort lexical errors in this study. Errors are divided into word-choice errors or their formation. Table 3 below demonstrates the ratios of grammatical and lexical accuracy.

Table (3)

Ratios of Grammatical and Lexical Accuracy

	No.	Percentage %	Mean	Standard Deviation	Coefficient of Variation %
Group 1 (total of 230 T-units)					
Grammatically Error-free T-units	207	90	90.76 a	8.206	9.04
Lexically Error-free T-units	205	89.13	88.91 a	11.949	13.44
Group 2 (total of 232 T-units)					
Grammatically Error-free T-units	108	46.55	46.86 b	18	38.415
Lexically Error-free T-units	134	57.75	58.24 b	18.15	31.16
Group 3 (total of 171 T-units)					
Grammatically Error-free T-units	43	25.15	21.71c	25.51	96.77
Lexically Error-free T-units	77	45.03	42.39 c	21.01	60.18
Probability of grammatical accuracy test			***		
Probability of lexical accuracy test			***		

***: significant difference at 1‰ level.

Similar letters next to the means mean no significant difference between them.

Students in this sample wrote 633 T-units in total. 358 (56.56%) of these T-units were grammatically correct, and 416 (65.72%) were

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lexically correct. Analysis also revealed that students in groups 1 and 2 produced more T-units that students in Group 3. Although Group 1 and 2 produced almost the same number of T-units, as seen in Table 3 above, Group 1's accuracy rate was significantly greater than Group 2's accuracy. In addition to that, the coefficient of variation indicated that students of Group 1 were more competent in grammar than students of Group 2, and students of Group 2 were more competent than those of Group 3. Table (4) summarizes the types of grammatical and lexical errors committed by students in the three groups.

Table (4)

Types of Grammatical and Lexical Errors

Error type	Number	Percentage
Group 1		
Grammatical	24	50
Sentence structure	12	50
Verb-centered	5	20.83
Reference	4	16.67
Article	3	12.5
Lexical	24	50
Choice	10	41.67
Form	14	58.33
	Total = 48	
Group 2		
Grammatical	123	59.13
Sentence structure	49	39.84
Verb-centered	37	30.08
Reference	20	16.26
Article	17	13.82
Lexical	85	40.85
Choice	39	45.88
Form	46	54.12
	Total = 208	
Group 3		
Grammatical	124	60.19
Sentence structure	47	37.90
Verb-centered	41	33.06
Reference	21	16.94
Article	15	12.09
Lexical	82	39.81
Choice	34	41.46
Form	48	58.54

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	Total = 206	

As seen in Table 4, a total of 462 errors were committed. 271 (58.66%) were grammatical whereas 191 (41.34%) were lexical. Moreover, sentence structure errors were the most frequent among the grammatical category (39.85).

Example:
Student 21: My dream job should be close to my house where I live in I don't like to spend my money in transportation. (A run-on sentence and error in the relative clause).
Other grammatical errors:
Student 44: Secondly, deal with travel agency. (Missing article).
Students 59: Take map to know the city and their nice locations. (Missing article and noun-pronoun agreement error).

Both Knouzi (2016) and Kroll (1990) reported similar findings. They both found that the number of sentence structure errors was significantly higher than any other type of grammatical errors.

As for lexical errors, Table 4 above also presents the types of lexical errors committed by students in the current study. Lexical form errors were the most common at 56.54%. Hemchuaand Schmitt (2006) explained such errors as being the result of the incomplete acquisition of other members of the lexical family when students learn the meanings and spellings of words. Examples of lexical errors from the sample:
Student 45: Manage you nervouse is very hard, but it is characteristics of the good teacher. (Derivation errors and a missing article).
Students 46: Beware when you set with a new people because they could be a deviler. (Errors in formation, derivation errors and a misused article).

4.3.3 Syntactic Complexity and Lexical Richness

To measure syntactic complexity, the total number of clauses was divided by the total number of T-units in each text. Analysis revealed that students in all three groups preferred simple T-units, as 63.98% of all T-units consisted of one clause. On the other hand, 33.18% of T-units contained two clauses, and only 2.84% of T-units consisted of three clauses.

As for measuring lexical richness, Cobb's VP program was used, which is available on the following link www.lextutor.ca/vp. The program examines the frequencies of words in relation to the entire language and not based on the text produced by students. As mentioned in section 2,

Cobb divided words into for levels:

the first most common 1000 words, such as be, some, would, people;

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the second most common 1000 words, such as excitement, calm; academic words list, such as authoritative, benefit, finally; and off-list words, such as proper nouns, misspelled words, abbreviations, acronyms, etc. Table (5) below shows that students across all three groups in the sample mostly used words that are classified among the first 1000 words list.

Table (5)
Frequency Level of Each Token in All Writing Samples

	1st 1000 words %	2nd 1000 words %	Academic words list %	Off-list words %
Group 1	90.23 a	4.97 a	6.55 a	2.24 a
Group 2	90.14 a	3.79 b	3.19 b	1.55 b
Group 3	88.90 a	3.20 b	2.9 b	1.21 c
Probability	NS	***	***	*

NS: Not significant difference. *: significant difference at 10 % level.
***: significant difference at 1‰ level.
Similar letters next to the means; mean no significant difference between them.

4.3.4 Correlation between Fluency, Accuracy, and Complexity

Knouzi (2016) stated that there could be a give-and-take relationship between fluency, accuracy, and complexity. For example, some writers might compensate accuracy for the sake of fluency, especially in long or complex tasks. Moreover, Knouzi (2016) asserted that using over-simplified structures that contain errors reveal that writers do not have good command over syntax yet. Table 6 below shows the significance of the correlation between fluency, accuracy, and complexity in all 60 samples measured using the Pearson Correlation Coefficient index.

Table (6)
Correlations between Fluency, Accuracy, and Complexity

	Syntactic complexity	Fluency	Lexical accuracy	Grammatical accuracy
Syntactic complexity	-	-	-	-
Fluency	0.2368[NS]	-	-	-
Lexical accuracy	-0.0583[NS]	0.0793[NS]	-	-
Grammatical accuracy	-0.2737*	0.0505[NS]	0.7498**	-

NS: not significant; *: significant at 0.05 p; **: significant at 0.01 p

As seen in Table 6 above, there was no significant correlation

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between the fluency and accuracy. That is the fluency did not increase or decrease at the expense of accuracy. However, this was not the case for syntactic complexity and accuracy. It was found that there was a negative but non-significant correlation between syntactic complexity and lexical accuracy. That is, the increase in the number of clauses per T-units increased the chances of committing lexical errors.

The negative correlation between syntactic complexity and grammatical accuracy was even bigger and more significant (-0.2737, significant at 0.05 p). This means that when the number of clauses per T-unit increased, the chance of committing grammatical errors increased as well. For example, while 49.67% of one-clause T-units were error-free, only 22.23% of two-clause T-units were error-free, and none of the three-clause T-units were error free. However, as mentioned earlier, the majority of T-units produced by all students consisted of single clauses. This could be an indication that grammatical accuracy achieved by competent students was a result of using oversimplified sentences.

Finally, the correlation between syntactic complexity and fluency turned out to be positive (0.2368) but not significant. This result was expected since writing more syntactically complex T-units would automatically lead to increasing the numbers of words or clauses per T-units.

4.3.5 Meta Discourse Markers

According to Intaraprawat and Steffensen (1995), meta-discourse markers are elements within a text that clarify its organization, convey the writer's stance toward the content, and involve the reader in the discourse. These features are categorized into seven groups, with Hinkel (2002) further subdividing the Connectors category into eight subcategories. The classifications by Intaraprawat and Steffensen (1995) and Hinkel (2002) were amalgamated and employed for this study. Table (7) below explains each of these features.

Table (7)

Meta-Discourse Markers

1.	Connectives are linguistic elements used to establish connections between different parts of a text.	
	Connectors: These include adverbs, adverbial phrases, and coordinators.	
	Enumeratives	E.g., first, first of all, second.
	Additives	E.g., as well, too, also, moreover.
	Summatives	E.g., to conclude, to summarize, to sum up.
	Resultatives	E.g., therefore, consequently, as a result, hence.
	Concessives	E.g., despite, while, even though, although.
	Logical/semantic	They establish logical relationships between

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		different parts of a text. They indicate sequence, contrast, comparison, clarification, etc.
	Other connectors	E.g.,in fact, in truth, honestly, by the way.
	Reminders: They remind the reader of an idea mentioned earlier in the text, e.g., as mentioned above.	
	Topicalizers: They signal that a new topic will be discussed, e.g., There is/ are, speaking of.	
2.	Code glosses facilitate the readers' understanding of the intended meanings in a text.	
	Exemplification	E.g., such as, for instance.
	Other code glosses	E.g., in other words, to illustrate.
3.	Illocutionary markers clarify the type of illocutionary act the writer is performing.	
	E.g., I regret, I believe, I now pronounce.	
4.	Validity markers communicate the writer's dedication to the accuracy or truthfulness of the information conveyed.	
	Emphatics: They convey the writer's confidence, e.g., utterly, entirely, for sure, absolutely.	
	Hedges: They soften the force of a statement, making it less absolute or assertive., e.g., may, could, I think, in my opinion, etc.	
5.	Narrators indicate to the reader the source of information or the authorities referred to.	
	E.g., as declared by the King, according to the Prime Minister.	
6.	Attitude markers enable writers to express their emotions or reactions to the content of the text.	
	E.g., I think it is clear that, it is crucial to, it surprises me that.	
7.	Commentaries engage the reader directly in the discourse.	
	E.g., Why don't we consider, dear participants, let's think about.	

Meta-discourse features were measured by dividing the total number of markers in by the total number of T-units in each text. Intaraprawat and Steffensen (1995) stated that what distinguishes good pieces of writing from poor ones is the density of meta-discourse markers. The more they have, the better they are. Table 8 below shows the types and density of meta-discourse markers produced by the students in the sample.

Table (8)
Meta-Discourse Markers in Students' Writing Samples

Markers		Students' groups						Density of markers		
		Group 1		Group 2		Group 3		Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%			
1.	Connectives	228	76.77	205	75.37	88	73.95	0.99	0.88	0.51
	Connectors	218	95.61	196	95.61	88	100			
	Enumeratives	91	41.74	82	40.84	44	50			
	Additives	85	38.99	63	32.14	21	23.86			
	Summatives	10	4.57	14	7.14	7	7.95			
	Resultatives	15	6.88	20	10.20	8	9.09			
	Concessives	4	1.83	8	4.08	4	4.55			
	Logical/semantic	5	2.29	6	3.06	3	3.41			
	Other connectors	8	3.67	3	1.53	1	1.14			
	Reminders	0	0.00	0	0.00	0.00	0.00			
	Topicalizers	10	4.39	9	4.39	0	0.00			
2.	Code glosses	6	2.02	7	2.57	2	1.68	0.03	0.03	0.01
	Exemplification	6	100	7	100	2	100			
	Other code glosses	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00			
3.	Illocutionary markers	13	4.38	18	6.61	6	5.04	0.05	0.08	0.03
4.	Validity markers	20	6.73	20	7.35	12	10.08	0.09	0.09	0.07
	Emphatics	12	60	11	61.11	7	58.33			
	Hedges	8	40	7	38.89	5	41.67			
5.	Narrator	0	0	0	0.00	0	0	0.00	0.00	0.00
6.	Attitude markers	16	5.39	12	4.41	4	3.36	0.07	0.05	0.02
7.	Commentaries	14	4.71	10	3.68	7	5.88	0.06	0.04	0.04

Analysis showed that connectives were the most frequently used markers. They made up 76.77% of the meta-discourse markers in Group 1, 75.37% of the markers in Group 2, and 73.95 % of the markers in Group 3. Hinkel, (2002) explained students' reliance on connectives as a result of them being the most widespread and likely the most straightforward method of establishing cohesion within a text.

However, Intaraprawat and Steffensen (1995) believed that both

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competent and incompetent students use connectives, for they are quite simple and do not need the writer's exceptionally deep understanding regarding the needs of the reader. Instead, they assist writers in gaining a clearer comprehension of the structure of their evolving texts. In addition to that, connectives help strengthen the structure of the texts when their syntactic structure and organization are weak (Knouzi, 2016). For this reason, the quality of connectives rather than their quantity should be the decisive factor in terms of what distinguishes good writing from weak one.

According to this argument, the meta-discourse markers employed by students in this study are impacted by their heavy dependence on connectives, such as "and," "so," and "but", with minimal utilization of topicalizers (4.39%), and a complete absence of reminders in all texts. Knouzi (2016) suggested that relying heavily on basic connectors restricts the scope of text advancement and diminishes the variety and depth of semantic relationships that students may convey.

5. Conclusions

Overall, this study contributes to the broader conversation on writing instruction and highlights the importance of addressing the challenges students face in developing writing skills. It emphasizes the need for collaborative efforts between educators and institutions to improve writing education and support student success.

The following section provides answers the research questions.

1- How do high school teaching practices influence the writing skills of freshmen entering the English Department at Tishreen University?

   a. The primary focus on grammar and vocabulary through a deductive approach taught in Arabic negatively impacted students' writing proficiency.

   b. Emphasis on memorization for grammar tests left students unprepared for extensive writing tasks requiring attention to both form and meaning.

2- To what extent do incoming freshmen meet the writing expectations of the English Department?

   a. Incoming freshmen struggle to meet the writing expectations of the English Department at Tishreen University.

   b. Despite possessing knowledge of grammar rules, students faced challenges in implementing them effectively in writing longer texts.

   c. The limitations of high school teaching practices contributed to students falling short of the department's expectations.

3- What specific difficulties do students face in their writing, such as sentence formation, vocabulary usage, and academic discourse markers?

   a. Students faced various difficulties in their writing, including issues with sentence formation, vocabulary usage, and academic discourse markers.

   b. The deductive teaching approach in high school made students struggle to apply grammar rules and vocabulary effectively in composing coherent and meaningful texts.

   c. Limited practice in writing and lack of exposure to academic writing conventions further hindered students' writing proficiency.

6. Recommendations

1. It is important to incorporate instruction on the writing process, including prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing, to help students develop a deeper understanding of how to compose coherent and well-structured texts.

2. Students should be provided with opportunities for meaningful writing practice that goes beyond grammar tests. They also should be encouraged to engage in authentic writing tasks that require attention to both form and meaning.

3. Students should be explicitly taught academic writing conventions, including sentence formation, vocabulary usage, and academic discourse markers.

4. Another recommendation is to implement feedback techniques that support students with constructive feedback on their writing and opportunities for revision. Peer review and self-assessment to promote reflection and improvement in writing skills is also recommended.

5. Decision makers should provide professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their knowledge and skills in teaching writing effectively. Teachers should be offered training on instructional strategies, assessment practices, and incorporating writing process instruction into the curriculum.

6. It is strongly recommended to foster collaboration between high school and university educators to ensure alignment in writing

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instruction practices and expectations. Establishing such communication channels enables sharing best practices and resources to support students' smooth transition to higher education.

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