

## The Importance of Differentiated Instruction in Developing EFL Students' Writing Performance: The Case of First-Year Students of English at Batna2 University

أهمية التدريس المتميز في تطوير المهارات الكتابية لدى طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية  
- السنة الأولى- بجامعة باتنة 2

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### Abstract:

Due to the difficulties facing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students when they write in English, they end up producing pieces of writing that are neither consistent nor comprehensive. To account for the reasons behind these problems, we hypothesized that teaching writing skills based on EFL students' varied skills might develop their writing performance. This study aims to investigate the importance of differentiated instruction in developing EFL students' writing performance. To achieve this aim, a descriptive method was adopted using a questionnaire administered to forty (40) first-year EFL students of English at Batna-2 University. As far as the students are aware of the reasons behind writing problems, the results indicate positive views to some adaptive instructional thoughts: providing different learning materials, grouping students depending on their preferences, and giving them different activities to choose what best suits them. Thus, the findings assert that these students call for an alternative teaching strategy through the strategies and techniques suggested hoping to find them in the writing course.

**Key words:** Differentiated instruction; writing performance; EFL students

### المخلص:

يواجه طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية العديد من الصعوبات إذا ما تعلق الأمر بالكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية، تؤدي في الأغلب إلى إنتاج نصوص كتابية تفتقر إلى الاتساق والإفهام. وبهدف توضيح الأسباب الكامنة وراء هذه الصعوبات افترضنا أن تدريس المهارات الكتابية المبنية على المهارات المتنوعة لطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية باعتبارها لغة أجنبية قد يطور من أدائهم الكتابي. وتهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إثبات أهمية التدريس المتميز في تطوير المهارات الكتابية لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وفي سبيل ذلك اعتمدنا منهجا وصفيًا باستخدام استبيان وُزِع على

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أربعين (40) طالبًا في السنة الأولى -لغة إنجليزية- بجامعة باتنة 2. وبقدر ما كان الطلاب مدركين للأسباب الكامنة وراء مشاكل الكتابة، فإن النتائج تشير إلى وجهات نظر إيجابية لبعض الأفكار التعليمية التكيفية المتمثلة في: توفير مواد تعليمية مختلفة، وتجميع الطلاب حسب ميولاتهم، ومنحهم أنشطة مختلفة لاختيار ما يناسبهم. وبالتالي، تؤكد النتائج أن هؤلاء الطلاب يدعون إلى استراتيجية تدريس بديلة من خلال الاستراتيجيات والتقنيات المقترحة على أمل العثور عليها في دورة الكتابة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التعليم المتميز؛ مهارة الكتابة؛ طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية.

### **Introduction:**

Teaching foreign languages is not only based on the way of applying different methods in the classroom, but also on the skillfulness in tailoring any teaching plan regarding the current level of learners. In this respect, based on the researchers' experience, a teacher generally used to prepare one lesson along with some activities for all students. Additionally, what is generally observed in EFL classrooms is that there is a kind of learning variations among students. This means that some students can perceive an idea quickly, others need more time and extra examples to understand the information, while few ones do not even concentrate while the teacher is explaining. Accordingly, classroom variation becomes a challenging issue in education.

Writing is one of the crucial productive skills that have to be mastered by EFL learners. Once again, according to the same researchers, students frequently are unable to produce a clear and meaningful piece of writing. In this vein, tremendous studies have shown the difficulties encountered by EFL students when they write in English. As stated by Nunan (1999), producing a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing seems to be the most difficult task to do in language learning. The factors behind students' problems in writing lie in psychological, linguistic, and cognitive features. In this regard, Raimes (1983) asserted that students frequently find difficulties in expressing an idea in a foreign language.

Therefore, previous research studies have proved that foreign language learners face many problems when they write in English. In this respect, new paradigm in educational research has given importance to differentiated instruction. It is an adaptive teaching approach that takes into account students' varied learning needs and skills.

The present study attempts to investigate how differentiating instruction is important in the writing course. Differentiating writing instruction is a foremost approach that meets students' interests, needs, and skills. This study can reveal the significance of matching student diversity to responsive instructional strategies in a high educational context. More frequently, students need to learn the material within their skills and abilities. Throughout this work, a descriptive method was adopted to gather data on the topic under study using a questionnaire. The findings of this teaching model will provide

a piece of evidence on how EFL university students will perceive some instructional strategies of differentiating writing instruction.

### **I- Theoretical Framework:**

**I.1- An alternative approach to teaching and learning:** Students do not learn in the same way; they indicate varying learning abilities, learning styles, academic levels, and learning preferences. Hence, teachers require adapted instruction to meet learners' varied needs (Bender, 2012). In this respect, teachers have to realize an adaptive learning atmosphere that supports student learning. Accordingly, through the use of differentiated instruction, the teacher can respond to the variations among learners (Levy, 2008).

Broadly speaking, differentiated instruction is an adaptive teaching approach to teaching and learning that caters for students' varied needs using the most convenient strategies. At its core, differentiated instruction supports and enhances student learning through identifying readiness levels, which is much more significant than relying on the curriculum design only (Tomlinson, 1999). Unsurprisingly, students vary in the way they learn. As stated by Theisen (2002), "each learner is unique, rigorous, relevant, complex and flexible" (p. 2). More importantly, Tomlinson (1999) outlines that differentiating instruction refers to neither a teaching model nor instructional strategy. However, it is a way of thinking by which an instruction tailors to students' learning characteristics. In sum, this type of teaching is seen as "shaking up" classroom where students can absorb the input, make sense of it, and use what they have mastered in varied practices (Tomlinson, 2001).

A differentiated teacher tries to adopt day-to-day challenging teaching practices that respond to student skills and learning styles. Therefore, the successful applicability of differentiated instruction is based on teachers' responsibility, willingness, and training, which seems to be the key to meeting the variations among learners.

Furthermore, the philosophy of change (differentiation) in teaching practice entails various challenges: allocated time of preparation, lack of materials, and teachers' lack of training and support, which seems to be the shortcomings of differentiating an instruction (Chan et al., 2002, as cited in Nicolae, 2014). The differentiated teacher needs to control those factors to increase the chance of applying a differentiated teaching approach in a single classroom.

**I.2- The features of differentiating writing instruction:** As formerly argued, students do not receive information at the same rate. When taking writing as an example, one may observe that some learners are novice writers and require more direct instruction, while some have skills above the requisite level. Thus, writing, as stated by Turbill (1984) is an expressive activity that "... involves thinking, feeling, talking,

reading — and writing [composing]” (p. 9). To attain a contextual and meaningful piece of writing, much attention should be given to the way ideas are transformed into texts. In this regard, the teacher has to differentiate the instructional strategies used during each phase (content, process, and product) to facilitate the understanding and practice of the essential writing skills. Therefore, it would be easier for diverse students to write as much as they can in an effective way because each one learns depending on his/her abilities and skills.

Due to such learning variations, there seems a need to teach one lesson using multiple ways so that all students can learn the key ideas and skills of the lesson. Accordingly, differentiating writing instruction is an indispensable teaching strategy that matches student characteristics to the target instruction. Besides, Dodge (2005) claimed that “differentiation embodies the philosophy that all students can learn — in their own way and in their own time” (p. 6). It can be achieved through three elemental areas: Content refers to what to teach from skills and ideas through varied materials, process is a sense-making process where students are provided with varied activities to select what best suits them, and product defines the different ways students use to show their understanding of the content.

**I.3- Implementing differentiated instruction in EFL writing classroom:** Writing teachers used to apply the process approach, which is based on providing required time and positive feedback for learners to do well in their writing assignments. Many studies have reported the efficacy of the process approach to writing in different teaching contexts. Bukhari (2016) investigated the effect of mind mapping on EFL learners’ writing ability. The findings revealed that the mind mapping technique was effective as it improved the quality of EFL learners’ writing in terms of structure, content, length. Likewise, another study conducted by Listyani (2018) contented that the process approach to teaching academic writing had a positive effect on students’ writing competence.

After reviewing the literature, it can be seen that writers vary in their learning styles and proficiency level. However, those learning attributes were not tackled in the investigated studies. According to Murray (1985), diversity is a crucial aspect that the process approach has to address. Thus, Research literature confirms that implementing differentiated instruction, especially to teach writing skills in a higher educational context, was not the main interest of many researchers, that is why this teaching approach lacks research reports (Chien, 2012; Shea, 2015).

In sum, a glimpse of research literature has disclosed the placement, features, and purpose of differentiated instruction. The teacher who wants to implement this teaching strategy, s/he must have enough knowledge and training on its application and

significance. To put it another way, differentiating instruction can be achieved by making prerequisite decisions on students so that it would be easier for teachers to tailor the instruction according to learners' varied skills and interests. Although differentiated instruction is considered as a foremost teaching strategy that meets the diverse skills of learners, it still lacks empirical support (Subban, 2006). In our context, differentiating writing instruction goes through the same theoretical procedures of adapting any instruction. It can be seen as a responsive teaching strategy used to teach writing skills. This study will reveal a research report that covers some conclusions on how differentiating writing instruction is important to EFL university students.

## **II- Fieldwork:**

**II.1-The problem statement:** Teaching writing skills for EFL learners requires an effective teaching model that helps in organizing the lesson plan in a form of systematic procedures. In this regard, students can perceive the information at ease, and they can make sense of it by producing a coherent and consistent piece of writing. At this level, teachers can check the effectiveness of the instructional design by assessing the teaching strategies adopted. Therefore, the more students acquire writing competencies, the more they can develop their writing potentials without relying on their teachers, which is not the case for all students.

However, based on the researchers' experience in teaching writing, EFL students find difficulties when they write in English. As argued by Al-Sawalha & Chow (2012), EFL university students still find problems when attempting to produce a piece of writing nonetheless they have spent several years training on the basic writing courses. It can be seen that students are not satisfied with the actual teaching method, and they are incapable to master the skills of writing and achieve their writing potentials. Al-Khsawneh (2010), in his study, contended that the teaching method and the learning environment are the major reasons for their weaknesses in English. Therefore, EFL teachers need to use an alternative teaching method that best works with the learning requirements.

Moreover, Davis (1998) believes that students will be encouraged to write if they receive supportive activities that motivate and interest them. This means some factors affect student learning the teacher should be aware of. Accordingly, every student is unique in the way of learning. In this respect, Tomlinson (1999), as an educational researcher, comes up with a responsive theory (differentiation) that explains how diverse students learn. She argued that differentiated instruction is a teaching approach that gives a chance to all students to engage in the learning process, regardless of their skills, abilities, and strengths.

Throughout this study, the issue of writing problems will evidently be identified and described in terms of what kind of writing instruction may fit EFL university students. The findings will disclose the importance of using differentiated instruction in writing courses, through which EFL students will be able to write with the least mistakes that require self-evaluation. In fact, it is all about what EFL teachers decide to plan from instructional strategies.

**II.2- Research questions:** On the basis of investigating the importance of differentiated instruction in EFL writing classroom, the following questions were raised:

- What are the reasons for first-year EFL students' frequent problems in writing?
- To what extent is differentiated instruction important in developing first-year EFL learners' writing performance?

**II.3- Research hypotheses:** The current study is built on the following hypotheses:

- First-year EFL students' writing problems is likely to be due to the absence of an effective teaching plan.
- If the teacher adopts an adaptive teaching strategy that meets first-year EFL students' varied skills, this would develop their writing performance.

**II.4- Population and sampling:** The population of the current study is first-year EFL students of English at Batna-2 University. This level was selected because the students did not have enough idea about university study, and most of them did not master writing skills yet. In this respect, they could describe the learning environment (writing courses) as appropriately as possible. Since it was not possible to work on the entire population, this study is mainly applied to a group of participants, namely a sample. They are selected through a simple random sampling technique. Therefore, this sample involves forty (40) First-year EFL students, representing 16.66% of the whole population (240 individuals).

**II.5- Research instrument:** To answer the research questions, a descriptive design was employed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. A questionnaire was considered as the most convenient data gathering tool for this research paper, as "it affords a good deal of precision and clarity because the knowledge needed is controlled by the questions" as asserted by McDonough and McDonough" (1997, p. 171)

**II.6- Description of the questionnaire:** The questionnaire consists of five items; three are open-ended questions, and two are closed-ended. It was intended to achieve the following objectives:

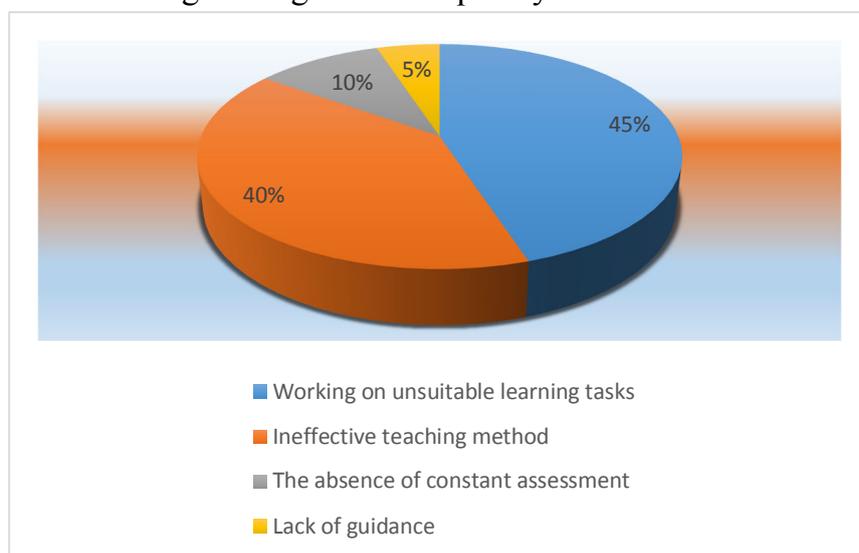
- To identify the reasons behind EFL students' frequent problems in writing.
- To identify EFL students' attitudes regarding using different learning materials during writing courses.
- To demonstrate the importance of learning preferences in the classroom.

- To show the significance of using different activities in writing class.
- To reveal the strategies and techniques that might improve the current learning environment.

Each item aims to achieve one of the objectives mentioned above. In this sense, it would be a clear image of the importance of differentiating writing courses to facilitate the content for all students.

### **II.7- Data analysis**

**Item One:** In the first question, the participants were asked to identify the reasons that led to frequent writing problems. In this regard, qualitative data were collected and organized into categories. This question discloses the obstacles that prevent students from learning writing skills adequately.

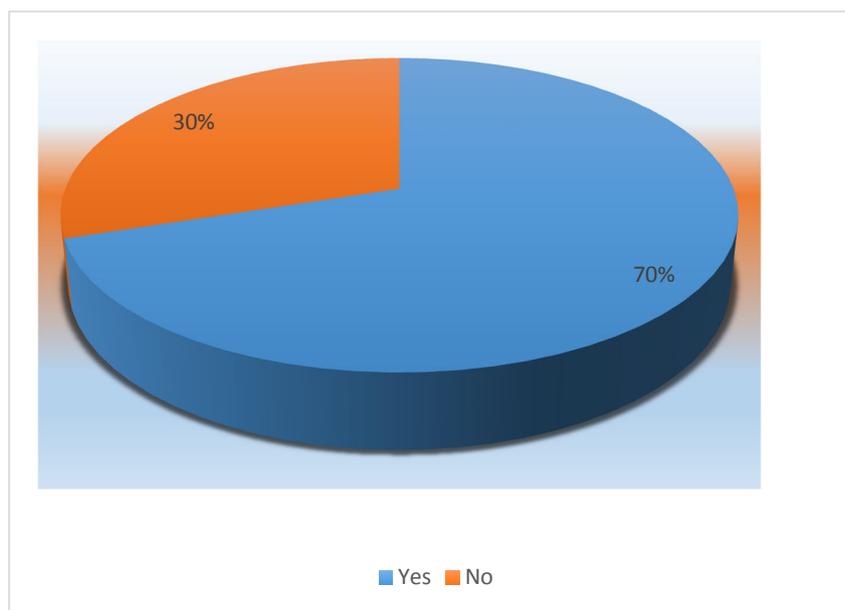


**Figure N°01. Some of writing problems reasons**

As indicated in Figure 1, almost half of the participants (45%) stated that they were provided with tasks that did not address their levels; this indicates that students have varied learning skills that need to be taken into consideration by teachers. (40%) of the respondents asserted that the teacher's way of teaching did not respond to the attributes of their learning (skills, interest, readiness, etc.). In this sense, most of the students do not concentrate while the teacher is explaining the lesson. At this level, it can be seen that how to teach plays a crucial role in the teaching process. Only (10%) of the participants stated that there was no frequent assessment of their learning, indicating that constant assessment is an indispensable strategy in the writing course that permits students to know what they master and what they did not. However, a minority of respondents (5%) thought that their teachers did not guide and monitor them during classroom routines. In brief, these results suggest that students are acquainted with the learning environment they belong to, which is a piece of evidence that shows the fact

that those students call for the change to ameliorate the atmosphere of the current teaching-learning process.

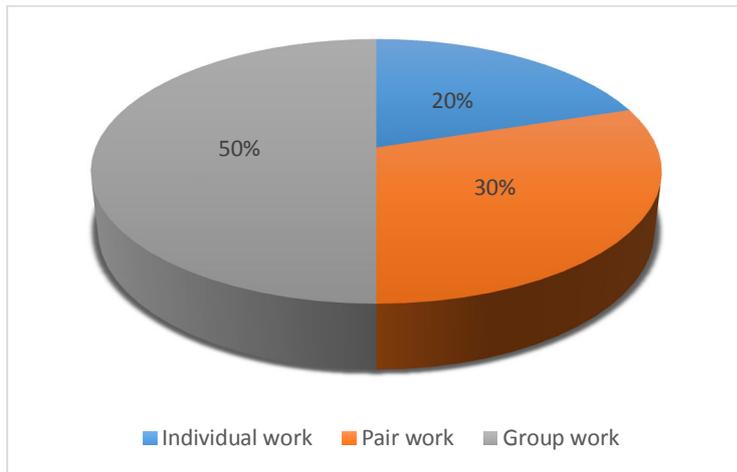
**Item two:** The second question tends to indicate students' viewpoints regarding the use of different learning materials to guarantee the understanding of the key ideas of a lesson.



**Figure N°02. The importance of providing different materials to facilitate information delivery**

Figure 2 shows a surprisingly high proportion (70%) of respondents accepted the idea of varying the levels of explaining the information, whereas (30%) of them did not accept this instructional thought. The results reveal that a significant number of students support the use of varied learning materials, which seems to be reliable evidence that unveils student desire to learn when effective learning requirements are provided during the classroom. At this point, the teacher should have an idea of how students learn due to which s/he can prepare the lesson using effective materials.

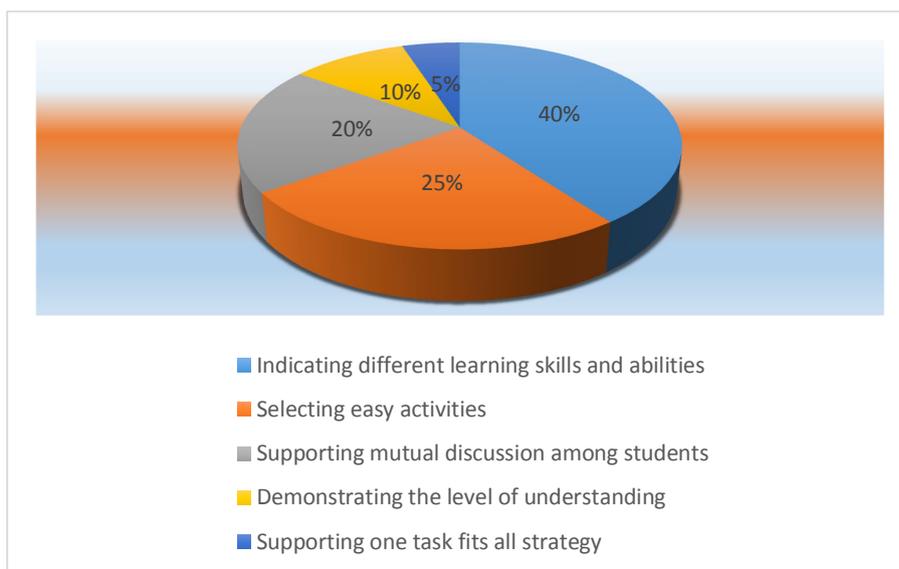
**Item three:** The third question demonstrates how students' learning preferences are significant in classroom practices. This would be a significant aspect that facilitates student learning.



**Figure N°03. Identifying students' learning preferences**

As displayed in Figure 03, half of the participants (50%) preferred group work, (30%) of them considered pair work as a convenient way of learning. However, (20%) of the respondents stated that working individually was suitable for them. Thus, students do not belong to the same grouping class. This illustrates that every student is unique in his/her way of learning. On the other hand, when teachers give attention to learning preferences, this would stimulate all the learners to work best on the classroom practices. In brief, students need to be grouped according to their individual preferences, which may give them a chance to engage thoroughly in the process of learning.

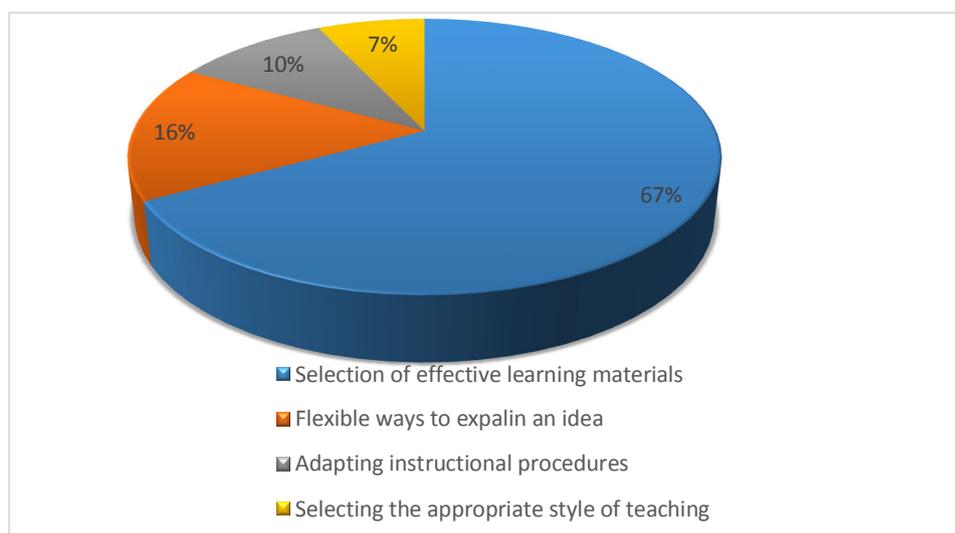
**Item four:** The fourth item aims to reveal the importance of using different activities in writing class. It is an open-ended question, and data were categorized into themes.



**Figure N°04. Students' viewpoints concerning the use of different activities in writing courses**

The results show that (40%) of the participants supported the idea of selecting tasks regarding their cognitive abilities and skills. (25%) of the respondents claimed that this strategy can be seen as a good way to choose easy tasks to finish them quickly. This data indicates that these students do not want to develop their mental capacities even they can do so, and (20%) stated that through task choice, they could share different ideas related to challenging activities using group works. Additionally, task choice, for some others (10%), is apparent as a cognitive process that identifies the varying levels of understanding key ideas. Only (5%) of the respondents asserted that working on the same activity enables the teacher to give feedback on the mastery of content. This suggests that ‘one task fits all’ is a convenient strategy for those students. In sum, it can be seen that a considerable number of students accept the idea of choosing the most appropriate activities; which would improve their preferences and competencies in particular. In other words, some students prefer the tasks that are designed according to their interests, skills, and abilities. In contrast, for other few ones, the choice opportunity may distract what is already understood and become demotivated.

**Item five:** The fifth question uncovers some strategies and techniques suggested by the participants to ameliorate the learning environment of writing courses. This would be a piece of evidence on students’ awareness of the actual teaching strategy used.



**Figure N°05. Strategies and techniques suggested for ameliorating the current learning environment**

It is apparent from Figure 05 that (67%) of the respondents illustrated the importance of using effective learning materials (smartphones, laptops, data show, and games) to facilitate the understanding of the lesson. At this level, they may become more decisive towards individual learning tasks and projects. Another point asserted by (16%) of the

same participants, which is the way of explaining an idea or skill; they considered it as a crucial issue because they constantly encounter difficulties in demonstrating what is being learned. Accordingly, students need a teacher who is flexible and professional enough towards the use of effective teaching methods and techniques, in this case, s/he can make sure that all the learners perceive the content. However, only (10%) of the respondents argued that providing more examples and giving sufficient time to absorb an idea are two requisite strategies that could help them to understand the lesson. These results suggest that adapting the instructional procedures (matching lesson plans to students' varied skills) may decrease teaching-learning problems because they are tailored to students' learning attributes (interests, needs, and learning styles, ...). Eventually, a teacher's mastery of the content may affect student learning (7%). Students believed that their teachers did not explain well the lesson. At this point, the problem lies in the absence of adapting teacher's his/her level to that of their students. In brief, almost all the students are aware of the present learning atmosphere, and they have suggested some of the main strategies that would help them to learn writing skills in a convenient learning atmosphere.

**11.8- Discussion:** As formerly mentioned, it was observed that students face difficulties when they write in English. Many researchers have explored students' problems in writing. Ibnian (2017), in his study, identified the following writing problems: lack of ideas, grammar difficulties, time construction, and lack of clear assessment. Accordingly, to overcome those problems, the present study investigates how differentiating writing instruction is important to develop EFL learners' writing competence. The findings can be classified into two main categories:

The first question in the study sought to determine the reasons behind EFL students' difficulties in writing. The results revealed the following problems:

The students believe that the provided activities do not address the skills of all students. This is due to students' competency level (beginner, intermediate, or advanced). A student can work better in the activities that respond to his/ her cognitive abilities. Therefore, the selection of the most appropriate learning tasks is a significant instructional strategy that would reinforce student learning.

According to them, the present teaching method does not handle their different writing skills, and the teacher does not create an atmosphere that motivates them during each writing course. In this respect, since every student varies in understanding and responding to questions (Chang, 2002), adjusting teachers' teaching methods to meet students' learning styles would improve their performances (Zeeb, 2004). Likewise, Bharadwaj & Pal (2011) argued that teaching methods could be effective unless they

meet learners' needs. In short, the teaching process is based not only on preparing the lesson and activities but also related to facilitating the information for all students.

The same students contend that they do not know their performance progress. They are just learning without being aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their writing. It is, yes, each learner can depend on his/her capacities when they study. However, this is not sufficient; there seems to be a continuous assessment of their learning. Thus, a teacher can be a flexible monitor and facilitator unless s/he manage the variations among learners during the classroom routines. Besides, differentiated teachers use constant formative assessments that respect a broader range of writing products (Shea, 2015). In this case, learning tasks can be varied to provide different opportunities for students to choose what best fits their cognitive levels. Therefore, the teachers can be aware of students' writing performances at any point in time.

To reveal the significance of differentiated instruction in the writing course, some principles of this teaching strategy were mentioned in the questionnaire. The first section of the results assert that there are different reasons behind students' writing problems, so it is clear that EFL students are aware of the learning environment they belong to. Thus, these students call for an effective teaching method that would help them to improve their writing skills. In this vein, the findings suggest that EFL students accept the idea of varying learning materials and tasks. Since we all know that students do not receive the information at the same rate, the teacher has to provide them with different learning opportunities to understand and process the key ideas of the lesson. They also agree on grouping them regarding their preferences (individual work, pair or group work). Besides, they illustrate reasonable features that indicate their willingness to find the learning environment that motivates and supports them, especially when they mentioned their suggestions on learning.

According to Zamel (1997), EFL writing teachers should take into account students' learning purposes. At this level, the second question is successfully answered by clarifying how differentiating instruction is important in teaching writing skills hoping to improve EFL students' writing performance. Therefore, the findings reveal the most relevant features of differentiating writing instruction. As ascertained by Shea (2015), "principles of differentiation undergird all aspects of any effective writing classroom — a community where members have ample time to write, share, and receive targeted feedback" (pp. 80-81).

### **Conclusion:**

Teaching writing as a process is a complex activity that requires a systematic and effective teaching pattern. Reviewing literature has argued that students encounter many difficulties in writing. This means that different factors lie behind students' inability to produce a coherent and consistent piece of writing. The study at hand aims at

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## **The Importance of Differentiated Instruction in Developing EFL**

investigating the importance of differentiating writing instruction in EFL classrooms. The analysis and interpretation of students' questionnaire reveal significant findings on EFL students' standpoints regarding the present learning environment (writing class). In particular, the results show the factors that obstruct them from using and improving their skills. On the other hand, as the students are not satisfied with the current teaching model, this seems to be a hint to an alternative teaching method. Accordingly, a significant number of the students accept some instructional strategies that can be used in a writing session, namely providing different learning materials (printed SlideShares, PowerPoint presentation, books, or handouts); organizing tiered activities that cater for high, mid, or low levels; giving them a chance to choose their grouping preferences, one may prefer to work individually, in a pair or group work. More importantly, they can suggest some strategies, namely using more than one way to explain an idea, explaining the lesson through an effective teaching style, and providing distinctive materials that might elaborate the key elements of the content.

The teaching process requires an effective teaching model that best fits both students and teachers. At this line, it can be concluded that writing teachers can apply differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms since students have varied skills and abilities. From this study, the following recommendations can be drawn:

A teacher should know how to differentiate writing instruction. Differentiation is not only based on background information, but also on how successful one could tailor the instruction to students' varied needs and academic levels.

1. Students' learning characteristics have to be determined during the first writing session. It is an adaptive instructional thought that would facilitate the process of differentiating writing lessons. This could be a crucial aspect of teaching as it identifies student's learning card, namely how each student prefers to learn
2. It is important for students to actively engage in the process of learning, at this level, they can know their strengths and weakness concerning writing skills.
3. Providing different learning opportunities for students would activate their personal preferences and choose what best suits them from learning materials and tasks.

The present study attempts to identify the reasons behind writing problems and investigate the significance of differentiating writing instruction. These limitations in the research area pave a way for further research. As future researchers, one may examine the attitudes of teachers towards using differentiated instruction. Besides, investigating the effect of differentiated instruction on EFL students' writing performance is another worth investigating topic.

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**Appendix:**

**Students' Questionnaire**

Dear student,

This questionnaire is used to gather data on the importance of differentiated instruction in EFL writing classrooms. It aims at investigating how differentiating writing instruction would improve students' writing performance. It would be our pleasure to fill in the appropriate box.

1. what are the reasons behind your writing problems?

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2. Do you think that providing different learning materials are important for understanding the information?

Yes   
No

3. What do you prefer?

An individual work   
A pair work   
A group work

4. What are the benefits of using different activities in a writing class?

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.....  
.....  
.....

5. What do you suggest from strategies to be used in the classroom?

**Thank you for your cooperation**