

A Comparative Study of American and Moroccan University Students' Perception of Academic Writing

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Abstract

The study attempts to investigate native speakers' and non-native speakers' perceptions of writing quality. Thirty-seven American freshmen students and forty Moroccan semester two students participated in the study. An email interview was used to explore the similarities and differences between the students' views on what makes good academic writing. Both American and Moroccan Students were asked about the different features of academic writing that can contribute to its quality. The research findings revealed that most of the American students focused on the content of the paper. They stated that it should be exciting and engaging. It should also have depth and grab the reader's attention. Many of them mentioned the reader in their responses. They noted that writing should be easy to read and respond to the readers' expectations. On the other hand, Moroccan students focused on the form of paper, including language and conventions. They put correct grammar and vocabulary on top of their list. Good writing style, good sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, simple language, and coordination are necessary elements. The study has pedagogical implications that can benefit writing teachers.

Keywords: *academic writing, English native speakers, non-native speakers, perceptions*

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is a complex skill that encompasses several sub-skills that writers should possess to write effectively. These sub-skills go beyond grammar and vocabulary. They include “thinking process, stylistic choice, grammatical correctness, rhetorical arrangement, and creativity.” (McKay, 1979). Familiarity with the native speakers’ writing conventions and meeting the native speakers’ expectations are also essential. For some researchers, learning to write academic writing may be compared to acquiring a second language. Silber (1979) discusses the differences between oral and written language and logically valid arguments for dealing with written language as a second language. So, writing is challenging even for the native speakers of a language. For the non-native speakers, it is more complex because of their unfamiliarity with the target language’s rhetorical style.

Although many researchers have assumed that L1 and L2 writing are identical, their differences are essential, according to the results of a large body of comparative empirical research (Silva, 1993; Benda, 1999). Understanding these differences helps writing practitioners adopt or adapt L1 practices and enables teachers to care for ESL/EFL writers’ particular needs (Silva, 1993). In this respect, a coherent and comprehensive theory of the first language and second language writing that considers the written product and the student writers themselves is needed to account for these differences.

University students need to acquire this skill to perform different tasks to achieve academic success. They have to write assignments, reports, papers, notes, etc. Even the exams are written. So writing is the most critical skill since it guarantees students’ success at the academic and professional levels. Considering this fact, it is essential to explore how students perceive writing and how they deal with it.

Comparative studies on writing compare the first language and ESL/EFL writing to find similarities and differences. Yet, comparing NS’ native speakers’ and non-native speakers’ and NS’ perceptions of writing is overlooked. The choice of this topic is motivated by the fact that teaching composition is not only about teaching students how to write sentences, paragraphs, and essays; it is also a process of discovering “...what writing is, what it involves and what differentiates the good from the bad writer.” (Zamel, 1976:74). So, teachers should be aware of how their students perceive writing and writing quality to identify their difficulties and help them change their misconceptions about writing. Regarding those statements, the researchers formulate the research question as follow:

- a) How do Moroccan university students and American freshmen perceive writing?
- b) How do the two groups perceive writing difficulties?
- c) How do they deal with these difficulties?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 First Language and Second Language Writing

Many comparative studies on native English speakers’ writing and ESL writing were carried out and revealed that there is no coherent and comprehensive theory of L2 writing. In this regard, more research needs to be done in this area. According to Silva (1993), L2 writing is strategically, rhetorically, and linguistically different in fundamental ways from L1

writing. Therefore, L2 writing specialists need to look beyond L1 writing theories to better describe the unique nature of L2 writing.

Contrastive rhetoric researchers dealt with the differences in second language writing as being attributed not only to the influence of the first language or the national culture. They accounted for these differences as being attributed to different reasons, namely, —, first language educational background, disciplinary culture, genre characteristics, and mismatched expectations between readers and writers (Connor, 2002, p. 504). Hence, writing difficulties may be attributed to factors other than the harmful interference of the mother tongue, namely, developmental effects, educational background, and students' personal experience and writing strategies (Liebman, 1992). Kaplan believes that ESL students' problems in writing result from their use of the L1 rhetorical conventions in their L2 writing, which results in *—doodle* texts (Kaplan, 1987). Yet, Matsuda (1997) believes that with the absence of evidence that any of these factors is the most prominent, a multifaceted explanation would be more beneficial and enlightening. Matsuda (1997) points out that contrastive rhetoric researchers should not merely investigate linguistic, cultural, and educational influences to account for second language writing. Other factors like past writing experience should not be overlooked.

2.2 Students' Perception of Writing

Beliefs about second language writing have changed over time due to the different approaches and theories that emerged to find out an optimal approach to teaching writing. Traditionally, writing was perceived as text-oriented, mainly as a product whose function is to teach and reinforce language structures (Hyland, 2002). This attitude to writing was inspired by the audio-lingual method, which considers language as primarily spoken, and writing is taught in a language class mainly to reinforce speaking. This approach to writing influenced writing teachers, who dealt with writing as imitative. The writing task consisted of copying sentences that students have already practiced to minimize the possibilities of making mistakes (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

With the advent of the communicative approach, writing was dealt with as a skill that needs to be learned to communicate one's thoughts. A large body of research was conducted to investigate this skill from different perspectives because writing was found to have many other functions beyond language. It is used to improve students' thinking and learning. Hence, the report gained importance from its different parts and the contribution it makes to understanding. This invited many researchers to investigate how much students are aware of the importance of this skill and whether they can recognize the difficulties they have to acquire it. The following section presents a summary of the different studies done on students' perception of writing.

Jordan (1997) conducted a study on non-native post-graduates taking writing courses at a university in the UK to identify their writing difficulties. He asked the students to comment on their writing problems using a six-point scale, ranging from no problems to many challenges. Following are the areas of difficulty students identified: vocabulary 62% style 53%, 19% spelling 42% grammar 38% punctuation 18% handwriting 12% The students' instructors were given the same questionnaire. Their responses were as follows: style 92% grammar 77% vocabulary 70% handwriting 31% punctuation 23% spelling 23%

As revealed by the above results, the students and their instructors had different perceptions of the difficulties they had in writing. For the students, vocabulary was the most challenging aspect of writing. For the instructors, on the other hand, the style was of more significant concern. The student's perception in Jordan's study cannot be neglected because vocabulary is one of the most problematic areas in writing for non-native speakers, as the anecdotal evidence demonstrates.

Ismail (2010) conducted a study to explore how ESP students perceive writing. The study results revealed that the students perceived writing positively, and they were aware of the importance of academic writing in their studies and career. Derakhshan & Shirejini (2020) used a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview to investigate EFL Iranian students' perceptions of writing difficulties. One hundred twenty students participated in the study. The survey results revealed that grammar, spelling, punctuation, choice of words, organization, and familiarity with genres and rhetorical structures, negative transfer from Persian to English, and idiomatic expressions and collocations make writing challenging for the students.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Research Design

The present study adopts a qualitative research design to delineate university students' perceptions of academic writing. The rationale behind using this method is that it is optimal for exploring what students think about writing through using open-ended questions to allow the participants to talk about their experience with writing.

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study are Moroccan and American university students. A total of 40 semesters two students are included in the Moroccan sample. They come from Chouaib Doukkali University in El Jadida.

Table: The participants' characteristics

	Moroccan students	American students
Number	40	37
Age range	18-21	17-19
Gender	13 males /27 females	9 males/ 28 females
Linguistic background	Moroccan Arabic/ Amazigh (first language) Standard Arabic and French (second language) English (foreign language)	English (first language) Spanish (foreign language)

Their age ranges from 18 to 21. They share the same linguistic background. They all speak Moroccan Arabic or Amazigh as their mother tongue(MT) (some grew up speaking both). They studied Standard Arabic and French at primary school middle school, and high school, and started studying English in their final year of middle school.

Thirty seven American college students also participated in this study, thirteen males and twenty-four females. Their age ranges from 17 to 19. They study writing and rhetoric at the College of Education at James Madison University, a mid-sized public university in the U.S. state of Virginia.

3.3 Research Instrument

Since the objective of this study is to explore students' perceptions of writing quality, a qualitative research method is regarded as convenient to answer the research questions. An email interview was used to elicit data from the participants. It was, in fact, a useful instrument in this study to get the story behind the participants' experiences with writing and writing classes. In other words, it served the researcher's objective of investigating the similarities and differences between the American group and their Moroccan counterparts' perception of academic writing.

The American and Moroccan students received the email questions in their email boxes. They were reminded that they did not need to do their research to find answers for them. They just had to answer them according to their perceptions.

3.4 Data Analysis

The students answered the interview questions in a word document and sent them to the researcher. A deductive approach to data analysis was used since the researcher employed a predetermined structure which was based on the following categories:

- a. Students' attitude to academic writing
- b. Students' awareness of the importance of vocabulary in writing
- c. Students' conception of writing difficulties
- d. The students' approach to writing assignments
- e. Students' perception of what they need to learn to make writing less challenging

It is important to note that the participants were given pseudonyms to assure anonymity and confidentiality.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 The Moroccan and American students' Perception of Writing Quality

When they were asked about the qualities of a good piece of writing, most American students focused on the content of their paper more than the form. The content, according to them, must be exciting and engaging. It should have depth and grab the reader. A good piece of writing should be easy to read and should respond to the readers' expectations. The students demonstrated that they had a sense of audience and that they were aware that they should know to whom they write. Many of them mentioned the reader in their responses: *"I would say that the most important qualities of an essay are clarity, the ability to capture the readers' attention, and avoid redundancy."* Said Liza The responses confirm Ouaouicha's (1986) claim about U.S. students who are thought to use more audience awareness strategies and emotional appeals in their arguments. The students also talked about the importance of coherence and its contribution to writing quality. For them, a piece of writing should be clear to the reader. It should also have a logical structure and smooth transitions between the paragraphs. Some students stated that a good piece of writing should vigorously represent

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the writer's voice "...Without a voice, writing is boring. I prefer reading essays, papers, and other writing assignments that exhibit the writer's persona." Said Aline

Examples of the American students' responses

- *Ann: Style, creativity, and an arguable thesis. An essay is far more interesting to read if there is some character and tone in the writing and if the writer looks at a unique or even just does an unusual take on a well-known subject. An arguable thesis is important to make the reader want to keep reading – people always want to know why.*
- *Alex: The most important quality is a strong, clear, and evident thesis. The essay must then have at least two or three strong arguments supporting this thesis and backed up by evidence. It is also important to sometimes include a con-argument and to be able to refute it.*
- *Katiya: To have good writing, I think that the beginning has to have an intense hook. I don't like papers or books that take chapters to get interesting. The hook is what makes me determine whether or not I'm going to really focus on the writing. I also think that the body paragraphs have to keep an energetic and enthusiastic tone. If the paper gets too boring or the author seems to have lost interest in details then that paper suffers. Lastly, I think there needs to be a flow to the paper. I don't like reading one paragraph and then it abruptly stops and a whole new topic begins. I like transitions when I am reading.*

On the other hand, the Moroccan students focused on the language of the written text and writing conventions as qualities of a good piece of writing. They considered correct grammar, vocabulary, good writing style, good sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, simple language, and coordination as necessary elements in writing:

- *Salma: "I consider sentence structure, paragraph organization, and vocabulary."*
- *Ranya: "Clarity, organization, and grammar."*
- *Taha: "I believe that a piece of good writing should contain a good writing style, correct grammar, and good sentence structure"*

Some of them also emphasized content. They talked about the clarity of the writer's stand and the quality of the arguments. However, nobody mentioned the sense of audience as a quality that contributes to the paper's clarity. This may be attributed to the fact that Moroccan students have only one reader; the teacher. The students demonstrated an awareness of the importance of coherence (clarity, good organization, coherence, connectedness). Some of them talked about using vocabulary as a good quality: "*vocabulary, simplicity, the quality of the arguments*" said Anas. Only one student mentioned critical thinking as the most important quality that can make writing interesting:

Zakaria: I think the most important qualities that an essay has to have: first of all, THE CRITICAL THINKING, actually without a critical mind the writer won't be able to develop his essay, this criterion is the one which makes the essay interesting enough and

worthy to be read, then the capacity to make a correct sentence, I mean without spelling mistakes.

4.2 Students' Awareness of the Importance of Vocabulary in Writing

As a response to the question: Do you think that knowledge of vocabulary is vital to writing? Why? Or why not? The Moroccan and American students' responses pinpoint the importance of vocabulary in writing since most of them recognize how necessary vocabulary may be to make one's writing exciting and convincing. Many of the responses of the American students relate vocabulary to the clarity and precision of ideas. Others explain how the effective use of vocabulary can affect the readers of a written text since it motivates them to keep reading. Others see it as a way to avoid repetition. Only a few of them believe that vocabulary is not important for one to communicate one's ideas. Writers, for them, do not need to use "fancy words" or "big words," if they are not well chosen and effectively used. This will make their writing look artificial, and may not serve the purpose of communication which is the most important thing.

Examples of the student's answers

- *Emily: Yes, I believe knowledge of vocabulary is important to writing because if you don't know the vocabulary, you will have to repeat the same word over and over again instead of using a different word for it, such as a synonym. It also simply makes writing easier. For example, if you know the words to use, it's much easier for you to write instead of sitting and thinking about the words you need to use.*
- *Kathy: Vocabulary is always important. It makes it possible to describe things more accurately, and with fewer words in most cases. It also can make reading more interesting in itself (at least to me). It's kind of fun to find words that I don't know, and that in itself makes me more interested in learning them and learning more about the topic.*
- *Bruno: Yes. You do need to be able to say what you mean and mean what you say. While you do not need to have a fabulous vocabulary, it definitely needs to be good. You need to be able to use words and phrases that specifically explain what you are trying to say.*

The Moroccan students share the same ideas. It is clear that the students are aware of the importance of vocabulary in writing: Sanaa Said: "*Knowledge of vocabulary is very important because the language is the key to communication. We all have ideas but what makes the difference is vocabulary.*" Most of the respondents talked about the role of a good vocabulary repertoire in avoiding repetition, as Bouchra stated: "*We need a vocabulary to avoid repetition.*" They also related vocabulary to the ability to express one's ideas and to be focused; "*With vocabulary, we can better express our ideas.*" Said Karim. However, none of the respondents mentioned its effect on the reader.

4.3 Students' Conception of Writing Difficulties

Most American students consider writing a difficult task that requires a lot of thinking and skills to be able to deal with it. "*I wouldn't say that writing is easy—it takes much careful thought to narrow the entire breadth of the English language and the subject matter*

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into a simple piece of writing,” said Ann. They believe that familiarity with the subject they want to write about makes writing accessible for them. For some of them, they have to be interested in the topic at hand to write efficiently. For others, love for language and words determines how much they can enjoy writing:

Diana: “I find writing easy because I have always loved language. I enjoy learning new words and finding different ways to express my opinions and ideas. To enjoy writing, I believe one must have a passion for expressing ideas and researching to develop his or her personal thoughts further.”

Many students relate the level of difficulty to the type of writing they have to do. They believe that freewriting is much easier than academic writing because the latter requires a lot of effort to reflect on the topic and organize the ideas.

Katia: In my opinion, it depends on the kind of writing I’m doing. If it’s creative writing, I find it easy because there are no wrong answers. It can be challenging if it’s more technical writing, but the more I can understand my topic, the easier it becomes. Only a few of them talked about practicing to make writing easier.

Likewise, the Moroccan students do not find writing easy: “Personally, I think that it is not an easy skill.” But the majority talked about reading and practicing writing as the only solution to facilitate writing: “For me, I found writing difficult, but I started to find it easy because of practice. As we know, practice makes perfect.” Some of them mentioned the simplicity and the accuracy of the language they use to express their ideas, and the familiarity with the topic makes their job less challenging.

- *Seddiq: In fact, I don’t find writing that easy. However, there is something that makes it easier than speaking. For instance, the writer has enough time to think about the appropriate ideas as s/he has also enough time to choose the suitable vocabulary, tenses, and punctuation. In addition, the writer has the chance to edit and make his paragraph well-organized.*
- *Souhaila: Having good grammar makes writing easier because you will not make mistakes in your writing.*
- *Yasmine: I think having a plan makes writing easy, also having a good vocabulary knowledge could make it easy too, good grammar also.*

The students were also asked about what makes writing challenging for them. For the American students, having to abide by some rules and conventions is what makes writing challenging for them; “Writing is only challenging when the writing is a requirement, and when a topic is assigned for the writing for which I have absolutely no personal interest.” Said They prefer free writing because they can express their ideas freely without any restrictions. Some of them consider problems with the language, unfamiliarity with the topic, and the assignment as difficulties they need to handle.

Diana: “The topic makes or breaks the simplicity of a writing topic. The more familiar I am with the assignment or the topic, the easier it’ll be for me to write.”

The majority of the students talked about their problem with formulating a thesis:

Bruno: Probably one of the most challenging parts of writing is formulating a thesis. That's one thing I've struggled with this past semester: writing an argumentative, clear thesis that takes a stance and is worth writing 12-15 pages on.

- The following are examples of the students' responses. *Tim: All the rules that you have to follow when writing.*
- *July: The hardest part of writing for me is using proper grammar. Dian: It is challenging because it requires a myriad of skills. You need to be knowledgeable about your subject, see well, construct an argument, and put it into words. Anna: What makes writing challenging sometimes for me is that I don't know how to start the paper. Putting the first words on a page is the hardest step for me; everything just comes to me once I get rolling.*

The Moroccan students also were asked about what makes writing challenging. Most of them pointed out that they had problems with the organization of the essay: *"I think that what makes writing challenging is how to organize the ideas."* Said Taha They find it challenging to organize their thoughts and abide by the rules of academic writing. Some students talked about writing as a difficult skill because it requires a combination of skills, language, and thinking skills: *"I suppose that what makes writing challenging is the combination of skills because writing comprises a lot of skills; for example, Grammar and thinking skills."* Said Rania. They also mentioned the unfamiliarity with the topic as a factor that affects their writing. Only a few students talked about the difficulties they have with vocabulary even though it is an issue in second language writing, according to many research studies (Silva, 1993; Hinkel, 2009) and anecdotal evidence.

Salma: I think that writing is a little bit difficult and challenging for many reasons. First, writing has some rules that we have to respect, and sometimes when I'm restricted by time, I may not respect all those rules, and I can make mistakes. Second, I think that writing requires a wide vocabulary. Sometimes I cannot find the appropriate vocabulary, so I think that vocabulary is one of the greatest difficulties I encounter in writing. Indeed, I can say that I am facing many difficulties in writing.

4.4 How the Students Approach their Writing Assignments

The students in the two groups were asked how they think they approach a writing assignment and what they do to make it less challenging. Most of the students in the two groups talked about understanding the prompt first then writing the main topic they wanted to discuss in the essay. Some students talked about brainstorming their ideas and organizing their thoughts. However, only a few mentioned editing their work to add content and correct mistakes to bring it to a final product.

- *Lara: It depends on what I write about. I like to learn about the topic. It makes it a lot easier to get the first draft out on paper when I know more about the topic. I write the first draft and try to get my ideas out on paper as fast as I can. Then I edit it (usually really heavily) for the first time. Then I give it a day or so and edit it a second time so that I have a more objective view of it.*

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- *Michael: I make an outline. I begin with who, what, where, and why. After determining those four components, I then move on to the structure of the writing assignment.*
- *Sarah: I approach a writing assignment by having a complete understanding of what the topic is first, and making sure I can explain the topic to someone else in my own words. Afterward, I make sure I can at least convey a general idea of what I'm trying to say to someone else. Then, with structure completely on the back burner, I just write anything and everything that can be used in my paper. Lastly, and most importantly, I organize my thoughts on the page.*

4.5 Students' Perception of What They Need to Learn to Make Writing less Challenging

The American students were asked about what they think they need to learn to make writing less challenging. The majority of the respondents think that practicing writing and receiving immediate feedback can make the task easier *"I believe there is nothing specific I need to learn; the best way for me to improve is to practice."*Said Achanty. Some students talked about the role of the teacher in encouraging creativity and reducing the pressure on the student since they believe that their problem with writing resides in the different rules that restrict their freedom in writing. Sandra stated: *"I have to ignore everything they taught me in high school. Five paragraph essays are horrible and limit my writing capabilities as a college student."* Another response from Lara that reinforces the same idea is: *"I cannot answer from the perspective of someone who does not enjoy writing. But I believe personally that learning any discipline is easier when pressure is minimized and when creativity and individuality are engaged and honored."* Two students talked about the difficulty to develop a style in writing, and that students need to learn a variety of techniques *"...that can be used to help set tone, illustrate an idea, paint scenery, and so on."*Said Aline Seven students stated that they all that they needed is that the assignment should be clear for them; *"Sometimes I just need the assignment to be thoroughly explained to me. Once I have a solid understanding on the assignment itself, I don't find writing it to be much of a challenge."*Said Alex

The Moroccan students also were asked about what they needed to learn to make writing easier. Most of the students talked about two primary practices that could enhance their writing skills; reading and practicing writing. The following are examples of the students' responses:

- *Ali: If I find writing challenging, I will read a lot in order to enrich my vocabulary and broaden my imagination, and I will try to write every day (paragraphs, essays...).*
- *Sanae: We need to read articles and do a lot of practice*
- *Imane: I think the best thing that we can do to learn how to write is to read and to practice.*

- *Walid: In my opinion, I think reading is the best key to fix this issue. By reading we can find much vocabulary. Besides, we learn how to write correctly and avoid mistakes. Therefore, reading is crucial in order to become good writers.*
- *Rania: I think I should obtain a wide knowledge about various topics besides words, expressions and vocabulary related to those topics.*
- *Kawtar: Practice is the best way to learn writing .Firstly , practice enables us to learn new words .Also ,learn writing by practicing helps us to know our mistakes and learn from them*

5. DISCUSSION

The comparison between American and Moroccan students' perception of academic writing revealed that the differences outnumber the similarities. These results were expected since the writing course programs they take at university have different objectives, and the content and methods used to teach this content are also different. If we look at the Moroccan writing course content, we find that the purpose of composition 1 is to enhance students' basic English writing skills. The focus is on developing paragraph-writing skills with emphasis on topic sentences, order of arrangement, and basic styles of paragraphs. Students have to study and practice basic grammar and fundamentals of composition. Emphasis is laid on punctuation, sentence combining, sentence construction, correct language use, and other basic writing skills. So, the course puts emphasis mainly on sentence structure and paragraph structure. In the second semester, students start to learn the essay structure. This explains the Moroccan students focus on the form of the writing text more than the content.

On the other hand, the American students focus more on the content than the form of writing. This is also attributed to the way they are taught writing. As newcomers, most American university students take a writing class. The objective of the writing class is to equip them not only with the tools they will need throughout their college career, including their majors but also throughout their life. The aim is to help them achieve success as college students and as citizens. Students must make a significant commitment to become critical readers, listeners, thinkers, and writers. At the end of their first year, they should use reading and writing to inquire, learn, think, and communicate in their personal, academic, and civic lives. They should be able to develop and support a relevant, informed thesis or point of view appropriate for its audience, purpose, and occasion (rhetorical knowledge). They should also analyze and evaluate information to identify its argumentative, credible, and ethical elements. In addition, they should be able to reflect on civic responsibility related to written discourse (critical thinking, reading, and writing).

The focus of the writing class is also on the writing process. Students must demonstrate an understanding of writing as a series of tasks involving invention, research, critical analysis and evaluation, and revision for audience, purpose, and occasion. They need to effectively incorporate and document appropriate sources to support an argumentative thesis or point of view. Control over surface conventions, such as syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling, is also necessary. It should be employed to serve the writer's audience, purpose, and occasion. So, writing is used to teach students other skills, mainly thinking skills that can help them cope with the changing demands of society.

We can say that both Moroccan students and American students were concerned with the rhetorical organization. When they were asked about their writing difficulties, most of them said that they find organization and writing conventions the most challenging part. So, this issue does not only characterize second language writers, as Silva (1993) claimed in a survey she conducted. She pointed out that second language writers devote less time to preparation, used limited vocabulary, made more mistakes, have issues with the organization of material around objectives, and have problems with grammar and linguistic variety. Native speakers of English also face these problems in their writing.

6. CONCLUSION

The students' perceptions were built on their previous experiences with writing. What the American and Moroccan students think about writing reflects the type of instruction they have received. The American students' answers show that they see writing as a tool to communicate their thoughts. So, most of the students mentioned the reader in their answers and said that their writing should be engaging and easy to read, while only a few Moroccan students showed a sense of audience. The students in the two groups found writing challenging and were aware of vocabulary in writing. Yet, only a few of them talked about vocabulary as a difficulty they have. Also, when they were asked about how they approach writing, they spoke about brainstorming their ideas and organizing them. Yet, only a few of them mentioned editing their work despite the importance of this step to improve it. These results invite teachers to reconsider the way writing is taught in the Moroccan context.

6.1 Pedagogical Implications:

Obviously, many teachers' and students' perceptions of writing need to be reconsidered. Teaching the writing conventions is indeed essential to help students learn the academic writing style. However, this should not be the end of the story. Writing should be regarded as a form of communication that students need to learn to cope with the requirements of modern life. It is an educational tool that can be used to teach not only language but also skills and values. This can be done by setting objectives that include enabling students to communicate through writing by focusing on the writer, the message, and the audience. In the prewriting activities, the teacher can teach critical thinking by inviting students to express their opinion and give logical arguments to support their stand. He/she can ask them to evaluate their peers' arguments to learn about the reasoning fallacies, which can make their arguments invalid. Writing can also be used to teach values such as tolerance, citizenship, social responsibility, and the list is long.

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Appendix

Interview questions

PERCEPTIONS OF WRITING

You are being asked to participate in a research study being conducted by Nadia Hellalet, who was a fellow in the International Leaders in Education Program here at James Madison University in the spring of 2013. The purpose of this study is to investigate how non-native speakers and American native speakers of English differ in their perceptions of writing. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of her Ph.D.

___ Male

___ Female

___ Freshman

___ Sophomore

___ Junior

___ Senior

1. Were you asked to do much writing in middle school and/or high school? What type of writing? Please provide an example of a writing assignment you remember and briefly explain why you remember it.
2. What type of writing were you asked to do in your first-year university-level writing class? Please provide an example or two of typical assignments.
3. In your opinion, what important qualities does a good piece of writing, such as an essay, have? Please identify three qualities you consider most important.
4. Do you think that knowledge of vocabulary is important to writing? Why? Or why not?
5. How do you approach a writing assignment? That is, what do you do first, second, and so on?
6. If you find writing easy, what, in your opinion, makes it easy?
7. If you find writing challenging, what, in your opinion, makes it challenging?
8. If you find writing challenging, what do you think you need to learn to make it easier?