

## The Influence of Writing Constraints on the Accuracy of Written Production among EFL learners

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تأثير قيود الكتابة على دقة الإنتاج الكتابي بين  
متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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### Abstract

This study examines the influence of writing constraints—such as limited time, word count, and task-specific instructions—on the accuracy of written production among sophomore students at the University of Tobruk. Writing constraints are widely used in language classrooms to simulate real-world writing scenarios, but their impact on learners' ability to produce accurate written language remains underexplored. Despite the importance of this topic, few studies have investigated how such constraints affect the grammatical, lexical, and mechanical accuracy of EFL learners' writing. This research aims to fill that gap by examining the effects of different constraints on the quality of student writing.

The study involved 40 intermediate-level sophomore students majoring in English. They were divided into a control group (writing without constraints) and an experimental group (writing under time limits, word count, and task-specific instructions). A quantitative approach was employed using error analysis and an independent samples t-test to assess writing accuracy. Data were collected through timed and untimed writing tasks. The findings showed that students writing under unconstrained conditions produced more accurate writing, particularly in terms of lexical and overall accuracy. Grammatical and mechanical accuracy appeared more stable and less affected by constraints.

These results underscore the importance of task design in writing instruction. Constraints such as time pressure and word count can negatively affect writing quality, especially for less proficient learners who may lack the cognitive resources to maintain accuracy. Educators are advised to balance structured writing tasks with opportunities for free expression to support learner development.

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**Keywords:** writing constraints, EFL writing, accuracy, lexical errors, grammatical accuracy, mechanical accuracy.

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### الملخص:

تدرس هذه الدراسة تأثير قيود الكتابة - مثل الوقت المحدود، وعدد الكلمات، وتعليمات محددة للمهمة - على دقة الإنتاج الكتابي بين طلاب السنة الثانية في جامعة طبرق. تُستخدم قيود الكتابة على نطاق واسع في فصول اللغة لمحاكاة سيناريوهات الكتابة في العالم الحقيقي، ولكن تأثيرها على قدرة المتعلمين على إنتاج لغة مكتوبة دقيقة لا يزال غير مستكشف بشكل كافٍ. على الرغم من أهمية هذا الموضوع، فإن القليل من الدراسات قد تحقق في كيفية تأثير هذه القيود على الدقة النحوية والمعجمية والميكانيكية للكتابة لدى المتعلمين في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. يهدف هذا البحث إلى سد هذه الفجوة من خلال دراسة آثار قيود مختلفة على جودة كتابة الطلاب. شملت الدراسة 40 طالبًا من المستوى المتوسط في السنة الثانية تخصصهم اللغة الإنجليزية. تم تقسيمهم إلى مجموعة ضابطة (تكتب بدون قيود) ومجموعة تجريبية (تكتب تحت حدود زمنية، وعدد كلمات، وتعليمات محددة للمهمة). تم استخدام نهج كمي باستخدام تحليل الأخطاء واختبار t لعينة مستقلة لتقييم دقة الكتابة. تم جمع البيانات من خلال مهام كتابة محددة زمنياً وغير محددة زمنياً. أظهرت النتائج أن الطلاب الذين يكتبون في ظروف غير مقيدة أنتجوا كتابات أكثر دقة، لا سيما من حيث الدقة المعجمية والدقة الإجمالية. بدت الدقة النحوية والميكانيكية أكثر استقراراً وأقل تأثراً بالقيود. تؤكد هذه النتائج على أهمية تصميم المهام في تعليم الكتابة. يمكن أن تؤثر القيود مثل ضغط الوقت وعدد الكلمات سلباً على جودة الكتابة، خاصة للمتعلمين الأقل كفاءة الذين قد يفتقرون إلى الموارد المعرفية للحفاظ على الدقة. يُنصح المعلمون بموازنة مهام الكتابة المنظمة مع فرص للتعبير الحر لدعم تطوير المتعلمين.

**الكلمات الدالة:** قيود الكتابة، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، الدقة، الأخطاء المعجمية، الدقة النحوية، الدقة الميكانيكية.

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## 1.1 Introduction

Writing is a fundamental skill in both first and second language acquisition and plays a pivotal role in academic and professional communication. Among the four language skills, writing is often regarded as the most challenging for learners and instructors alike due to its demands on grammar, vocabulary, organization, and mechanical accuracy. EFL learners, in particular, face considerable difficulty producing accurate written texts, especially under conditions that impose writing constraints such as time limits, word count requirements, and task-specific instructions.

Writing constraints refer to external limitations that restrict the way learners plan, organize, and express their ideas during the writing process. These constraints, while reflective of real-world writing scenarios, can significantly impact learners' ability to maintain grammatical, lexical, and mechanical accuracy. Despite their frequent application in classroom assessments and standardized tests, limited research has explored their direct effect on the accuracy of written production in EFL contexts. Most studies have focused on fluency or complexity, while the dimension of accuracy remains under-investigated.

This study aims to address this gap by examining the effects of common writing constraints—namely time pressure, word limits, and structural guidance—on the accuracy of written output among intermediate EFL university learners. It also seeks to identify the types of linguistic errors most influenced by these constraints and to contribute insights that may inform more effective writing instruction practices.

## 1.2 Research Questions

1. To what extent do writing constraints affect the accuracy of written production among EFL learners?

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2. How do different types of writing constraints (e.g., time limits, word count, task-specific instructions) influence grammatical, lexical, and mechanical accuracy in EFL students' writing?
3. Is there a significant difference in writing accuracy between constrained and unconstrained writing tasks?
4. Which categories of linguistic errors (grammatical, lexical, mechanical) are most affected by writing constraints?

### **1. 1.3 Objectives of the Study**

1. To examine the extent to which different types of writing constraints influence the accuracy of written production among EFL learners.
2. To investigate the specific impact of each type of writing constraint on grammatical, lexical, and mechanical accuracy in EFL students' written texts.
3. To identify and compare the most frequent types of linguistic errors produced by EFL learners under constrained versus unconstrained writing conditions.

### **1.4 Research Hypotheses**

1. Writing constraints have a statistically significant impact on the overall writing accuracy of EFL learners.
2. Time constraints exert the most negative influence on writing accuracy compared to other types of constraints.
3. There is a statistically significant difference in grammatical, lexical, and mechanical accuracy between students writing under constrained conditions and those writing without constraints.

### **2.1 Literature Review**

This chapter reviews previous empirical studies that have addressed the effect of the types of writing constraints on the accuracy of written production, with a particular focus on learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Writing whether in a first or second languages, is widely recognized as one of the most complex language skill due to the intricate interplay of many aspects as grammatical knowledge, vocabulary, organization, and mechanics. Skehan and Foster ,(1997) define writing complexity as "learners' capacity to use more elaborate and complex target like language and it's the stage and elaboration of the underlying inter language system." Moreover, because of its complexity, academic writing is frequently considered as the most difficult skill to be mastered. In agreement, Hapsari ,(2011) argued that writing remains the most difficult of the four skills of any language, particularly for learners who struggle to generate ideas and organize them with applying appropriate grammar, spelling, and word choice. Learners can see the difficulty in producing and organizing ideas and also the mastery of the different aspects of writing as grammar, spelling, word choice and so on.

For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, writing becomes even more cognitively demanding when certain constraints- such as limited time, word count, or specific instructions, are imposed. These constraints are significant barriers for English language learners that affect their ability to write accurately. In other word, they may hinder learners' ability to focus on linguistic precision and shift attention from language form to task completion. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is essential for enhancing the quality of written communication.

### **2.2 Writing Accuracy in EFL Contexts**

Writing accuracy as Polio, (1997) defined the degree to which learners produce correct grammar, mechanical dimensions, and appropriate lexical. Similarly, Skehan & Foster, (1996) define it as "the extent to which the language produced conforms to the target language norms and it's a characteristic concerning a learner's capacity to handle whatever level of inter-language complexity s/he has currently attained." Additionally, another definition by Bitchener & Ferris, (2012) the use of correct and appropriate grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics in written

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discourses. Linguistic accuracy in writing significantly affect a learner's ability to communicate effectively and impact their academic performance.

In EFL context, accuracy is regarded as a core measure of proficiency, students with good accuracy of written production often face no struggles with linguistic accuracy producing errors in grammar, syntax, and lexicon that can impede communication and affect assessment outcome. In the EFL setting, accuracy in writing is considered the main indicator of language proficiency of English language, particularly in academic writing assignments. Bitchener & Ferris, (2012) stated that the development of writing accuracy calls for both the exposure to correct forms and opportunities for meaningful language use. That is. Enhancing writing accuracy requires the exposure to correct language forms along with ample opportunities for purposeful and contextual meaningful language practice.

As Ellis & Yuan, (2004) argued that L2 learners often struggle to maintain writing and grammatical accuracy when they focus on other aspects as fluency and content development. Therefore, instructional approaches and effective pedagogical typically aim to foster accuracy often emphasize error correction, corrective feedback, guided practice, and focused feedback to support learners' development of accurate written language.

### **2.3The Influence of Writing Constraints**

Writing constraints are common in educational settings in both first and second language classrooms from timed limits to structured assignments with specific formatting rules. Those constraints affect cognitive processes through limiting planning time, limiting linguistic choices. Based on cognitive Load theory Sweller,(1988) these limitations and constraints in writing lead learners to make exacerbating errors in the accuracy of writing. Similarly, Ellis & Yuan, (2004) suggests that learners might sacrifice writing accuracy for fluency under specific pressure as time limits.

Writing constraints define as limitations or conditions imposed on writing tasks as time pressure, word count, and genre-specific formats. Such constraints are common in standardized assessments and classroom settings and their impact on learners' written performance remains a topic of debate.

Limited study investigated how constraints affect writing output for instance, Ong & Zhang, (2010), stated that time limits and pressure negatively influenced the accuracy of student writing. Also, Rahimi & Zhang, (2018) confirmed that constrained planning time led to higher error rates among low-intermediate EFL learners. In contrast, according to Kormos ,(2012), not all writing constraints have negative effects on learners' written productions for learners in advance level, moderate constraints may improve writing performance by encouraging focus and excessive revision.

A study conducted by Rahimpour and Hazar, (2007) investigated the relationship between writing constraints and the accuracy of grammatical rules found that writing under strict time limitations and task-specific instructions lead to decreased linguistic precision among EFL learners, that is cognitive resources redirect from language form to content generation. While, Ong and Zhang ,(2010) examined the impact of time pressure on task performance in low intermediate –level of L2 writing. Their findings shown that time limits tasks reduced grammatical accuracy as learners' prioritized content and fluency. However, their study restricts only on one type of writing constraints which is time limit and doesn't consider the role of other aspects such as task-specific instructions and word count.

Despite several studies on writing accuracy and some studies on constraints in writing, little is known about how all types of writing constraints influence the accuracy of written production. Also, less study have focused specifically on the accuracy dimension in constrained vs. unconstrained writing among EFL learners and their relative impact on grammatical, lexical, and

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mechanical accuracy. This gap explains the need for further research to clarify how different types of constraints affect various dimensions of writing accuracy.

## **2.4 Writing Constraints and Accuracy**

The relationship between task complexity and writing accuracy is unclear and multifaceted. According to Skehan, (2009) "some cognitive processing theories argued that learners have limited attentional resources". That is, learners possess limited attention capacity; thus, when learners write under specific constraints and pressure, they may prioritize meaning or fluency over form which is resulting in reduced grammatical and lexical accuracy. Studies by Tavakoli & Skehan (2005) and Manchón et al. (2009) provide evidence that EFL learners under time restriction showed reduced grammatical accuracy compared to those given planning time in the process of writing. Learners given sufficient time tend to produce more accurate texts, likely because they can allocate cognitive resources more effectively across planning and revision phases.

## **3-Methodology**

### **3.1 Procedure of the Study**

This study aimed to examine the influence of writing constraints on the accuracy of written production and to explore how different types of constraints influence grammatical, lexical, and mechanical accuracy in student's writing among sophomore students at university of Tobruk, in Libya. The procedure involved several key phases as participant selection, task implementation, preparation, data collection, and analysis.

#### **3.1.1-Participant Selection**

The participants of this study were a total 40 undergraduate EFL students. All participants were at the same intermediate proficiency level, as confirmed by their performance on a standardized placement test and shared similar educational backgrounds and English proficiency levels.

#### **3.1.2-Group Assignment**

Participants were randomly assigned into two equal groups:

- Experimental Group 20Ss: exposed to specific writing constraints (e.g., time limitations, required use of specific tenses) That is, performed writing tasks under specific constraints.
- Control Group 20Ss: completed the same writing task without any constraints. (wrote freely without imposed constraints)

#### **3.1.4-Task Design and Implementation**

Two writing tasks were developed for the purpose of the study. Both tasks required students to write a short essay on familiar academic topics.

- The experimental group required to perform the task under time constraints (30 minutes), with instructions to use past tense, at least two complex sentences, and approximately 100–150 words.
- The control group wrote freely without imposed constraints with unlimited-time, no task-specific instructions, no grammatical, or syntactic restrictions.

#### **3.1.5. Writing Session Procedures**

All writing sessions were conducted in a controlled classroom environment and under the supervision of the lecturer. Each participant wrote individually without assistance and no feedback was provided during the writing process.

#### **3.1.6. Data Collection**

The written texts were collected immediately after completion without participants' names for evaluation. All compositions were assessed by two independent instructors using an analytic scoring standardized rubric focusing specifically on grammatical accuracy, including subject-verb agreement, word order, verb tense consistency, punctuation, the proper use of sentence structures.

The written samples were collected from both groups and assessed using an analytic rubric comprising four components:

1-Grammatical Accuracy (e.g., correct verb tenses, subject-verb agreement)

2-Lexical Accuracy (e.g., appropriate word choice)

3-Mechanical Accuracy (e.g., punctuation, spelling, capitalization)

4-Overall of writing Accuracy(holistic integration of all the above)

Each component was scored on a 3-point scale (total = 12 points). The researcher used peer-reviewed rubrics to ensure inter-rater reliability.

### 3.1.7-Data Analysis

Grammatical accuracy scores were statistically analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics in order to summarize the accuracy scores in each group. An independent samples t-test was employed to compare the mean accuracy scores between the experimental and control groups using SPSS software. That is, to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in accuracy between the experimental and control groups at the 0.05 level of significance.

Descriptive statistical methods and independent samples (t-tests) performed to compare the performance of the two groups.

Table (1) shows the differences between the two groups according to error type (lexical Error);

Error Type	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
lexical Error	constraint	25.3	482.1	203.2	38	.0340
	unconstraint	40.2				
			883.0			

Table (1) shows the differences between the two groups according to error type. The lexical Error value was 203.2 at a degree of freedom of 38 and a significance level of 0.034, which is less than 0.05. Therefore, there are statistically significant differences in favor of the group restricted to the writing conditions, with an arithmetic mean of 3.25. Mean scores were different between both groups.

Observation: There was significant difference in words usage between students who completed constrained and unconstrained tasks. Interpretation: Lexical use may depend more on students' existing vocabulary knowledge than on task limitations or time constraints.

Table No. (2) shows the differences between the two groups according to the error type (grammatical)

Error Type	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Grammatical Error	constraint	40.1	231.1	0.000	38	000.1
	unconstraint	41.1				
			465.1			

The differences between the two groups according to the error type (grammatical), the t value was 0.000, the degree of freedom was 38, and the significance level was 1.00, making it statistically insignificant. There were no huge differences between the two groups on the amount of grammatical errors.

Observation: Students in both groups- with and without time or word-count restrictions demonstrated better in the use of grammatical structures.

Interpretation: It is likely that the limited time and word count in the constrained tasks unhindered students' ability to carefully monitor and revise grammatical accuracy (the use past tense and two complex sentences)

Table No. (3) shows the differences between the two groups according to the error type (Mechanical).

Error Type	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Mechanical Error	constraint	80.2	281.1	834.1	38	075.0
	unconstraint	15.2				
			933.0			

The differences between the two groups according to the error type (Mechanical), the T value is 834.1, the degree of freedom is 38, and the significance level is 0.075, which is therefore not statistically significant. There are no differences between the two groups on producing mechanical errors with and without constraints.

Mean scores were close, with a slight advantage for the constrained group.

Observation: Mechanical features such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization were not heavily influenced by task constraints

Interpretation: These errors tend to occur spontaneously and they related to writing habits.

#### 4.1 Grammatical Accuracy

Unconstrained Group: Mean = 40.1

Constrained Group: Mean = 41.1.

$T(38) = 2.10, p < 0.05 \rightarrow$  Significant

#### 3.22 Lexical Accuracy

Unconstrained Group: Mean = 40.2

Constrained Group: Mean 25.3

significant difference between groups

$T(38) = 3.22, p > 0.05$

#### 3.4 Mechanical Accuracy

Slight difference, not statistically significant

Unconstrained Group: Mean = 15.2

Constrained Group: Mean= 80.2

$T(38) = 1.45, p > 0.05$

#### 4.4 Overall Writing Accuracy

Unconstrained Group: Mean = 20.9

Constrained Group: Mean = 13.9

$T(38) = 1.34, p < 0.05 \rightarrow$  Significant

Overall performance was slightly the same among students who completed the task with and without constraints. Grammatical and mechanical accuracy appear to be less affected by task constraints.

## Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the influence of writing constraints such as time limits, word count, and task-specific instructions—on the grammatical, lexical, and mechanical accuracy

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of written production among EFL learners. The findings stated that writing constraints affect students' performance differently depend on the type of constraint and the linguistic aspect:

#### 1-Lexical Accuracy

The results proved a statistically significant difference in lexical accuracy between the constrained and unconstrained groups. Students under constraints produced more lexical errors. This result equal with findings by Ong and Zhang (2010), who stated that time-limited tasks reduced lexical and accuracy among low-intermediate learners. The paper supports the argue that when learners are stressed to meet word count or time requirements, their attention shift from lexical precision to accomplish the task criteria.

#### Grammatical Accuracy2-

Based on the results of the study, there was no statistically significant difference in grammatical accuracy between the two groups. This result corresponds with findings by Kormos (2012), who claimed that some constraints may not significantly affect grammatical production in learners with appropriate language exposure. EFL learners at the intermediate level rely on internalized grammatical rules which is less affected by task pressure when working with familiar task like past tense.

#### 3-Mechanical Accuracy

Mechanical accuracy are less sensitive to such constraints. Mechanical features such as punctuation and capitalization are unconscious habits developed through repeated practice. Rahimi and Zhang (2018), argued that such components are less sensitive to task constraints and they influenced by learners' previous writing habits than by writing conditions.

#### 4-Overall Writing Accuracy

The unconstrained group slightly outperformed the constrained group in overall writing accuracy. This suggests that although task constraints introduce challenges, learners still maintain a similar level of accuracy through task familiarity or basic planning strategies. However, this balance may not be sustainable more complex writing assignments.

These results reinforce the need for teachers and curriculum designers to balance task authenticity with learner capacity. While writing constraints can promote efficiency, they may unintentionally delay language development if applied excessively.

### **Recommendations for teachers:**

1. Using differentiate task design by avoid applying the same type of constraint across all student levels.
- 2- Giving feedback on lexical errors by providing learners with vocabulary-building activities and focused feedback to support them during constrained writing tasks.
- 3- Allow students planning time before constrained tasks to help them organize ideas and gather appropriate vocabulary.

### **Conclusion**

This paper highlights the importance of understanding how writing constraints influence EFL learners' writing, particularly in terms of accuracy. Such constraints are inevitable and essential in academic writing situations and assignments their cognitive and linguistic implications must be carefully considered. Writing constraints as time limits , word count restrictions, and structural requirements are common in real-world tasks, yet their specific impact on grammatical accuracy of written production remains an underexplored area in second language acquisition research. The results indicate that constraints negatively affect lexical and overall accuracy, suggesting that time pressure-word count may hinder language accuracy. Students who wrote under unconstrained conditions produce more accurate writing, particularly in term of lexical and



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overall accuracy. Grammatical and mechanical accuracy appear to be relatively stable and less influenced by task constraints.

Further studies are recommended to explore how writing constraints affect EFL learners at varying proficiency levels and across longer writing tasks.

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