

Technological Affordances and Teaching in EFL Mixed-ability Classes during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract—With the widespread of COVID-19 in Saudi Arabia, the educational authorities issued firm directions to convert to virtual classes exploiting the available Learning Management System (LMS). However, during the academic year 2020-2021, the researchers observed that writing EFL instructors at Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University (PSAU), Saudi Arabia, faced diverse challenges due to having online mixed-ability classes, i.e. those classes where students have varying levels of readiness, motivation, and academic caliber. Though many previous studies explored the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning practices, very few studies addressed the way technological affordances pose challenges for instructors teaching mixed-ability classes. Therefore, the present study, using mixed quantitative and qualitative research methods, sought to explore challenges that evolved due to the technological affordances of LMS to spot the persistent problems and to offer relevant solutions for upgrading, writing teaching and learning practices. The basic research design relied on an online questionnaire followed by semi-structured interviews. Findings showed that differentiated instruction proved to be the most successful strategy for teaching writing in mixed-ability online classes as it allowed the adaptation of materials, teaching and learning practices, and assessment tools to motivate low-achievers. In addition, the collaborative tools offered by the Blackboard such as the White Board, Discussion Board, Blogs, and Breakout Groups helped to meet the preferences of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners. Finally, further studies are recommended to explore the affordances of educational technologies regularly to identify potential benefits and limitations for offering the best teaching and learning practices.

Keywords—Technological affordances; blackboard; writing teaching; EFL mixed-ability classes; differentiation instruction; COVID-19

I. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed great advances in the use of technology in the area of distance teaching and learning. These technological advancements acquired more significance

during the time of worldwide crises such as COVID-19. Indeed, the outbreak of COVID-19 at the end of 2019 caused all aspects of life to go dramatically as it forced the largest lockdown and precautionary measures ever known. As the whole world became under the COVID-19 siege, there was a great demand for educational technologies such as Virtual Laboratories, Augmented Reality, Wearable Technology, Cloud Computing, LMS where virtual classrooms have turned out to be the only available avenue of communication through which teaching is channeled. That is, online teaching/learning became the representative of the new pandemic pedagogy [9]. It turned out to be the only legitimate heir to the throne of the long-lasting traditional teacher-centered pedagogy. Though its advent has been unplanned, it seems that the new pedagogy is here to stay and higher education institutions should be ready to deal with the new scenario for a longer time [10]. In the Saudi context, the Saudi government saved no efforts to make all the necessary technical support available to the students and teachers alike for the new change to take effect. LMS, represented mainly by the Blackboard, which was already in use before the coronavirus outbreak, was assigned as the official portal for education. In a short time, teachers had to adjust themselves to the new situation and shape their professional practice in a way that fits the new paradigm [12].

Though educational technologies were principally devised to simulate physical teaching/learning environments, many issues and challenges still render their usage questionable. Indeed, before the breakout of the pandemic, online learning was at its best a trendy practice, but it has never been inclusively adopted as the main system of education [11]. Yet recently, online teaching/learning became the norm. Taking into consideration that the online teaching is learner-centered [7], one major challenge is having students with different abilities and diverse competencies due to their diverse backgrounds, learning styles, personal traits, goals, and motivations, all grouped in one class [1, 2]. Such kind of

classes is referred to as 'mixed-ability class'. Having students with different learning styles and speed means that they are expected to respond differently to the teaching methods across diverse classroom situations [3]. Accordingly, teachers are requested to adapt their materials as well as their teaching styles and strategies to cope with such varied levels, especially in electronic platforms where many privileges of face-to-face communication are markedly missing. This issue becomes more complicated while teaching productive skills, writing and speaking.

The present study is mainly concerned with highlighting the challenges that face instructors in teaching writing courses at Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University (PSAU) with special reference to the strategies they individually develop to overcome the challenges caused by students' mixed abilities in online classes. Indeed, writing is a very crucial skill that all students need in their academic study to fulfill most of the academic duties, especially doing assignments and exams. The English Department at PSAU offers four writing courses targeting the instruction of writing short paragraphs to writing researched essays. In all writing courses, instructors are conventionally required to help students to improve their skills and to become good writers [5], and they usually depend on student's writing proficiency in order to test their knowledge and abilities [6] as it provides tangible evidence for learners' progress in language learning [8]. Still, teaching writing for students in mixed-ability classes forms a great challenge for many instructors since they are required to meet students' needs, design multi-level tasks, implement different teaching strategies, and build on students' previous experiences.

Taking into consideration the four writing courses taught at PSAU, the present study seeks to answer one major research question: What is the impact of technological affordances on teaching writing in mixed-ability online EFL classes during the COVID-19 pandemic? Under this overarching question, three sub-questions are subsumed: (a) What are the major challenges that face instructors during online teaching of writing for mixed-ability classes? (b) What are the strategies that can be employed online to help instructors to teach writing effectively in online mixed-ability classes? and (c) To what extent are the online mediated strategies effective in teaching writing in mixed-ability classes? By answering these questions, the present study aims at (a) exploring how COVID-19 imposed a new pedagogy making full use of educational technology, (b) identifying the major challenges that face writing instructors in online mixed-ability classes, (c) outlining the online mediated strategies that would help instructors in teaching writing in online mixed-ability classes, and (d) helping instructors of writing courses at PSAU to evaluate the advantages of virtual mixed-ability classes that they could build on to promote their students' writing skill. Towards fulfilling these objectives, we use qualitative and quantitative research methods in the form of an online questionnaire combining closed and open. It moves from a description or an assessment of the current situation of teaching writing at PSAU to the analysis of the demanding challenges. Complementarily, all instructors representing the research community are engaged in semi-structured online

interviews via zoom to discuss such challenges as well as instructors' views and assessments of the teaching strategies used in physical and virtual mixed-ability classes.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 is a brief survey of the previous studies that mapped the terrains of teaching writing to mixed-ability classes via technologically-led platforms. Section 3 outlines the theoretical underpinnings underlying the present study as it identifies mixed-ability classes, discusses the major differences between physical and virtual classes, delineates the rationale behind using educational technologies to facilitate teaching/learning at the time of emergency, and highlights how the tools offered by LMS could be efficiently used for teaching writing for mixed-ability classes. Section 4 offers the study methodology in terms of data collection instruments and the procedure of analysis. Section 5 reports on the findings of the study. Section 6 summarizes the main findings, discusses relevant pedagogical implications for teaching writing in mixed-ability virtual classes, and offers recommendations for future research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Teaching language skills in mixed-ability classes have received notable scholarly attention due to the diversity of challenges that affects instructors' and learners' performance. However, to the authors' best knowledge, the current study is the first to explore the best EFL teaching and learning practices despite the challenges offered by technological affordances, especially those marking LMS. Iloanya [38] explained teacher's role in mixed-ability classes as they integrate students with learning disabilities and outstanding students in the same class to achieve the desired learning results. Ten people were interviewed, namely four primary school teachers, four secondary school teachers, and two members of the Education Department. The objective of the interview was to learn how teachers manage their teaching in mixed-capacity classes. Findings showed that some teachers faced many challenges while teaching students in mixed-ability classes, whereas some other teachers were much concerned with innovating new strategies to ensure that students help each other. That is, they were quite persuaded that teachers have to provide new techniques to ensure that students have an access to quality education.

Other studies focused on the teaching strategies for meeting students' diverse needs in mixed-ability classes. Aftab [19] highlighted the importance of teachers' beliefs about differentiated instruction in teaching mixed-ability classrooms. An online open-ended questionnaire was distributed to 120 teachers at private middle schools in order to understand their perspectives and beliefs around the use of differentiated instruction in teaching mixed-ability classes. Findings showed that 95 % of the teachers wished to use differentiated instruction, while 40.8% of the teachers already used differentiated instruction in their classes. Teachers recognized that using differentiated instruction would develop and improve students' academic progress, increase their participation in the class, and cover their different needs; however, there is still dereliction in implementation.

Based on a semi-structured interview, Reyes and Rodríguez [39] explored EFL teachers' views regarding how to fulfill students' needs in mixed-ability classes. Findings showed that fulfilling students' needs in mixed-level classes requires having diverse instruction methods that adopt more materials that suit both low and high-level students. In addition, teachers have to pay more attention to individualized and continuous assessment because they have played an important role in fulfilling students' needs in mixed-ability classes. The study affirmed that there was not "a magic strategy" that fulfills every student's needs in mixed-ability classes. Similarly, Svård [2] aimed at exploring the perceptions of the EFL teachers in Botswana about teaching mixed-level classes focusing on the way teachers intervene to satisfy learners' needs in light of persistent difficulties. Findings revealed that teachers have mixed feelings as some envisaged having mixed-ability classes as natural and therefore they tried to work out solutions for common challenges. Other teachers thought it is the government's responsibility to classify learners based on their abilities to create homogenous learning groups.

Al-Shammakhi and Al-Humaidi [40] compared the perceptions of 180 male and female EFL teachers in Oman teaching mixed-ability classes with a special focus on the challenges involved. Findings showed that both male and female teachers faced the same challenges and they worked out the same solutions to overcome these challenges. Yet, female teachers have been proved as more efficient in motivating their students. Similarly, Alsubaiei [4] explored the challenges encountered and the strategies adopted in mixed-ability classes and by thirty female EFL teachers in English Language Institute (ELI). The basic research instrument was an online questionnaire. Findings revealed that the major challenges encountered by most teachers were mainly related to three basic areas: students' motivation, teaching and learning practices, and the courses materials. Furthermore, the level of teachers' training proved to have no relationship with the effectiveness of their teaching strategies.

Due to the strict precautionary measures imposed on the educational settings worldwide because of the outbreak of COVID-19, online classes became a much safer channel. Such emerging practices drew the attention of researchers for exploring teaching and learning practices as well as readiness for converting to online learning. Coman, *et al.* [41] analyzed data collected from 762 students representing two major Romanian universities. Data reflected students' perceptions concerning online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results showed that the Romanian universities were not yet completely ready for the exclusive application of the online learning. A similar study was conducted by Farrah and al-Bakry [26] who investigated the potential challenges and benefits of online learning practices applied during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Palestinian universities as perceived by six university students. Findings affirmed that the experience is not up to the expectations and needed further improvements in terms of the technological infrastructure and training of teachers.

Given the focus of the present study, another array of research examined how to cope with the mixed-ability classes'

challenges while teaching writing. Aljahdali and Alshakhi [42] explored the benefits and challenges resulting from teaching writing to Saudi university students using the integrated skills approach. Results indicated that students' performance in writing improved albeit considerations of the multi-level students and the highly crowded classrooms. Similarly, Bantis [43] used task-based learning (TBL) as a communicative portal to teach writing to mixed-level students. Results showed that TBL has been proved to be an effective tool in differentiated learning for meeting students' different individual needs.

Likewise, a pool of research investigated the potential horizons and applications of online learning. In her study, Hakim [44] aimed to probe the different perspectives of the currently imposed state of teaching caused by the COVID-19 pandemic that imposed a completely technology-mediated mode of learning. Results accrued from 50 instructors working for the King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia, pointed out that some technical issues related to the quality of the internet, demotivated students, and attention deficit rendered the process of online learning quite immature. Conversely, findings also highlighted many advantages for integrating technology in the classroom. In the same vein, Alpala and Peña [45] examined the effectiveness of using virtual resources in secondary school for upgrading students' performance in writing. Results showed that virtual resources positively affected the learning process and enhanced communication among students.

Teaching writing in virtual classrooms for mixed-ability students received equal scholarly attention. For example, Yusof, *et al.* [46] examined the effect of using Facebook Note to afford students to provide feedback on their peers' writing within the framework of the process-oriented approach to writing. The aim was to cope with the diversity of levels through providing timely feedback. Results highlighted the effectiveness of the peer review in dealing with mixed-ability class challenges. Equally important, Pennington [48] suggested a four-step approach based on the use of assistive technology to teach writing at the sentence level to students with moderate to severe disabilities. The selection of the digital tool among the many available ones was based on the individual needs of the students. Similarly, Fonseca [49] investigated the effect of using Google Classroom as an assistive tool to teach writing to university students at Universidad Nacional. Findings illuminated many benefits of the application of the virtual classroom as it facilitates the acquisition of the skill in an enjoyable and attractive atmosphere.

More specifically, online collaborative platforms proved to be highly effective in mediating writing instruction. Jeong and Hmelo-Silver [25] affirmed the positive impact of using online collaboratively-employed Google Docs on university students' performance in academic writing. Likewise, Yunus, *et al.* [50] investigated the advantages and disadvantages of using social networking tools in teaching writing to TESL Malaysian university students. Results showed that such integration enriched students' knowledge, enhanced their motivation, and promoted confidence in learning writing. Furthermore, Wu, *et al.* [51] examined the effect of using online flipped writing

instruction on the EFL writing performance of English majors in Taiwan. Findings indicated that the suggested method was effective in improving the writing skill and mitigating demotivating factors.

Based on this literature review, it could be stated that despite the diversity of the educational technologies and tools manipulated for teaching in general and for teaching writing in particular, they were used sided with physical classes. The quick turn to online teaching/learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Saudi context imposed new teaching and learning pedagogy. However, scarce studies have been conducted to investigate the issue of writing teaching in mixed-ability classes exclusively via electronic platforms. Therefore, we feel a need to explore the challenges that face EFL writing instructors in mixed-ability classes, and the strategies worked out to overcome them.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Writing, especially for EFL students, is an instrumental skill that they require for both academic and personal purposes such as expressing ideas and identities, convincing their audience, offering inputs and knowledge [13] in addition to other daily activities such as emailing and networking. To be fully accomplished, the process of writing is commonly planned to go through a set of stages: being excited and motivated to write, prewriting, making an outline, writing notes, drafting, and finally revising and editing [14]. Among the several problems that might occur during the process of writing are spelling mistakes, wrong use of punctuation marks, run-on and fragmentary sentences, and dangling modifiers. Since these mistakes are common, writing teachers are usually required to devote enough time and to offer a healthy environment in classrooms for developing better writing skills [15]. This could be done through adopting the teaching strategies that best suit learners' interests and needs. Also, students ought to be granted enough chances to practice their writing skills since the ultimate goal of learners is to learn to produce well-written documents.

Relevant literature asserts that writing difficulties are related to some psychological, linguistic and cognitive problems on the part of learners. Psychologically speaking, writing requires students to write independently without getting immediate feedback and without interacting with peers; therefore, it is largely claimed to be the most complex language skill [8]. Equally important, beginners often face many problems regarding the application of grammatical rules to writing well-formed sentences. Such problems are related to spelling, grammatical patterns, well-formedness, word choice, coherence, etc. [16]. Relatedly, Alfaki [17] argues that some of the cognitive problems that students face during writing process include problems of punctuation, organization, capitalization, content and spelling. All of these problems get much complicated in mixed-ability classes as students learn at different rates and require different types of feedback.

By definition, a mixed-ability class is the one where learners clear great difference in achievement, understanding, linguistic repertoire, and learning. It covers a broad set of variations among students in different language learning competencies in addition to classroom practices [18]. Indeed,

teaching students with different personalities, desires, intelligences, backgrounds, and learning styles is a very big challenge for many EFL teachers because they have to design their lesson plans and even materials to meet students' needs [19, 20]. Another term that is quite similar to mixed-ability classes is 'heterogeneous classes' in which students have different abilities, learning styles, language knowledge, and cultural background [21]. They also include differences in gender and age.

Indeed, teaching mixed-ability classes is challenging and demanding for both learners and teachers who always plan to ensure efficient learning for students. Yet, teachers sometimes fail to realize the benefits of mixed-ability classes [23]. One benefit is that the interaction between the high achievers and the low achievers, under the teacher's guidance, is likely to get students to feel responsible for their learning [2]. Furthermore, such interaction often brings about a sense of belonging and achievement [3], and supports mutual scaffolding, feedback, and sharing of experiences thereby enhancing understanding [24]. Despite these advantages, teaching mixed-ability classes remains a hard job that needs a resourceful teacher. With the existence of varying levels of skills, interests and linguistic repertoire in the same class, teachers stand uncertain as to how to teach the whole class without doing injustice to gifted, struggling, and average students [4].

The gamut of the in-class practices and the efforts that teachers exert to meet the learning needs of each learner came to be known as 'differentiated instruction' or 'responsive teaching'. Principally, differentiated instruction aims at achieving equity in educational opportunities between high and low achievers by pushing low achievers to move from their comfort zones [31]. For Orr [34], differentiation is "all about making the learning engaging, empowering, investigative, explorative and open ended" (vii). To do so, teachers are required to design their teaching in response to what their students competence by altering the content, the instructional method, learning activities and assessment tools [47]. In this regard, Tomlinson [52] and Valiande [31] argue that differentiation covers three important features of the instructional situation: (a) input/content, the content is what student is meant to learn, (b) process, how students critically make sense of the presented knowledge, and (c) output/product, the manifestation of what students already learned.

Teachers worldwide have been trained to use similar instruction approaches in physical classrooms. Yet, virtual classes represent another story. As mentioned earlier, the high mortality rates and the widespread of COVID-19 forced academic officials to convert to the online teaching/learning mode [27]. It started at a slow rate and gradually blended learning paved the way to the complete shift to the online learning [28, 29]. However, countries responded varyingly to the COVID-19 pandemic with regard to its aftermaths for education due to differences in the technical infrastructure that accommodate online teaching and learning practices [30]. Indeed, the accelerating advances in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have smoothed the way for the successful application of Technology-Enhanced Learning and Teaching (TELL) [25]. In this regard, the UNESCO [22]

reported that online education is expected to catch up with face-to-face education and soon technology will characterize the universities and become the mainstream medium of delivering education. Still, the whole experience of using educational technologies should be evaluated in light of the affordances of ICT. Affordances refer to the actual properties of a thing, primarily those functional properties that determine just how the thing could be used [36]. The major affordances of ICT included the accessibility of rapid-changing information, the diversity of experiences, the communication and collaborative abilities of technology, reflection and critiquing potentials, immediacy, multimodality.

Now with the newly imposed pandemic pedagogy in which online learning has become the mainstream system of education, the instructional practices that deal with mixed-ability writing classes should adjust to the new situation. Although writing is commonly perceived of as an individual work, students can gain substantial benefits out of their collaboration with their peers through the different tools offered by diverse educational technologies. Many of these technologies are integrated in the Blackboard system that is used widely in Saudi universities (see Fig. 1). For instance, online collaborative technologies like wiki, blogs, Google Doc and online word processors provide common space enabling students to work simultaneously on the same writing project and trade mutual feedback on their work [25]. Facebook might be also used as a collaborative tool in teaching the writing skill [38].

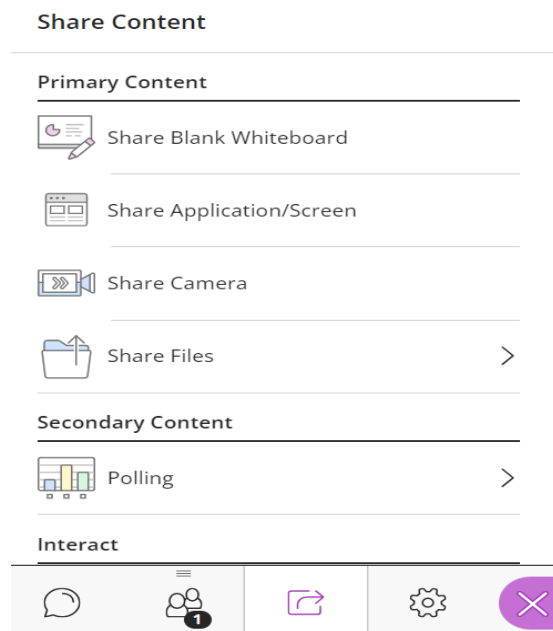


Fig. 1. The basic Tools for Sharing Content via the Blackboard.

Such collaboration can be actualized by different means including sharing written texts for peer review in addition to sharing the writing experience itself [32]. Hyland [32] argues that online learning affords a communicative atmosphere that makes for the unattainable interaction achieved in the physical classroom. The main disadvantages that were always ascribed to the computer-assisted language learning were the isolation the learners experience while they interact only with the

technological device. However, this drawback is mitigated through the collaborative activities that the online learning has considerably facilitated. In the context of teaching and learning writing online, collaborative learning has been proved as a positive approach in which students learn through small groups supporting each other to develop and improve their education [33]. Zurita, *et al.* [35] claim that collaborative learning in mixed-ability classes helps low achievers to accomplish writing tasks better and faster. Simultaneously, high achievers in mixed-ability classes perform writing tasks more strongly, whether in a homogeneous or a heterogeneous group. Despite the many studies that applauded the horizons of collaboration, Bower *et al.* argue that collaborative activities flow more seamlessly in the traditional classroom than is the case in the virtual classroom [37].

IV. METHODOLOGY

The research design adopted in the present study integrates both quantitative and qualitative methods with the aim of (a) identifying their attitudes towards writing online teaching with a particular reference to the technological affordances that mark LMS represented by the Blackboard system at PSAU, (b) exploring the challenges that face EFL instructors teaching writing courses online for mixed-ability classes compared to physical classes, and (3) discussing the best teaching strategies that have been proved as efficient in overcoming these challenges. For more effective use of the questionnaire, two types of validity have been fulfilled: content validity and face validity. Regarding content validity, a jury of English language teaching professors as well as professors of educational technology has verified the questionnaire for clarity, readability and comprehensibility. Furthermore, regarding face validity, since we targeted a stratified sample to ensure that all strata of EFL writing instructors at PSAU are represented, an online questionnaire is administered to 15 instructors teaching the four writing courses in Department of English (male and female sections), College of Science and Humanities, PSAU. Those instructors have been teaching writing both offline and online over three years. This rubric has been made in order to ensure that they experienced both the benefits and challenges of online and offline writing teaching for mixed-ability students. The researchers made sure that each class included students with different levels in writing. Their grades in the different writing courses formed the major standard for such classification.

The questionnaire includes four areas of investigation: (a) manageability of diversity in online writing mixed-ability classes (4 statements), (b) the major challenges encountered in such classes (7 statements), (c) online writing teaching and learning practices (6 statements), and (d) perceptions regarding the integration or exclusion of online teaching technologies (4 statements). Participants' responses would be distributed over Likert's five-point scale: (5) Strongly Agree [SA], (4) Agree [A], (3) Neutral [N], (2) Disagree [D], and (1) Strongly Disagree [SD]. The questionnaire has been initially administered to a group of five instructors to make sure that all statements are readable and understandable. Some modifications are made accordingly. Complementary to the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews with all writing instructors are carried out via the Blackboard. Such interviews

are intended for participants to provide more detailed and in-depth information about the specific challenges they faced and the particular strategies and activities they employed to respond to these challenges taking into consideration the quick transition to the use of the Blackboard system.

V. DATA ANALYSIS

A. The Questionnaire

The questionnaire administered to the target research community at PSAU was intended to record writing instructors' responses and perceptions regarding four major areas: (1) manageability of diversity in online writing mixed-ability classes, (2) the major challenges encountered in such classes, (3) online writing teaching and learning practices, and (4) perceptions regarding the integration or exclusion of online teaching technologies. Regarding the first issue of the manageability of diversity in online writing mixed-ability classes, Table I offers raw statistics.

Statistics in Table I show that most instructors (82%) agreed that teaching writing in mixed-ability online classes is manageable due to the facilities provided via the Blackboard system. Students' roles are identified by the instructor either simply as attendees or moderators. Also, instructors can control students' participations during the virtual class by nominating who can participate. Still, a considerable number of instructors (74%) affirmed that they feel pressured during the writing virtual class due to the fact that available resources (such as the White Board) do not allow writing clearly and neatly to offer proper illustrations and writing models to students. Based on a real experience of two of the authors, many students are not properly motivated to participate in answering the target activities and drills. One reason is that high achievers usually outshine low achievers who finally get frustrated. Still, instructors argued that it is not necessary to divide the class into homogenous groups. That is, heterogeneity could be exploited for enhancing teamwork in writing assignments during the virtual class. In addition, most instructors (87%) agreed that having students with diverse writing levels is natural in physical and virtual classrooms. The Blackboard system offers user-friendly assessment tool though it requires considerable customization.

The second issue addresses the challenges that emerge owing to students' diverse levels in writing online classes (see Table II).

Indeed, diversity is acknowledged by nearly half instructors (47%) as a persistent challenge in online writing classes. The major challenge that students' diverse levels provoke is that low achievers got stuck in most writing activities due to lack of motivation. Taking into consideration that writing is a productive language skill, most instructors (86%) affirmed that linguistic diversity is more prevailing and even problematic when compared to cultural diversity. Here, we affirm that students at PSAU share a similar cultural context. Minor cultural differences are believed as causing no individual core differences in students' writing performance with special reference to the topics offered for writing. Equally important, students' writing performance is rather affected by a set of psychological factors including anxiety

during the online class, the pressure caused by poor internet connection, and inability to handle the tools offered by the Blackboard system, personality traits, and lack of motivation. Despite all these challenges, instructors differed with respect to the notion of tailoring the content, teaching style, and teaching strategies to meet a particular proficiency level set in light of students' writing actual performance. Rather, nearly all instructors (96%) affirmed that they had to vary their teaching methods, writing course materials, and assessment tools to meet students' diverse levels.

The third issue concerns online teaching and learning practices as shown in Table III.

TABLE I. INSTRUCTORS' RESPONSES REGARDING THE MANAGEABILITY OF DIVERSITY IN ONLINE WRITING MIXED-ABILITY CLASSES

No.		SA	A	N	D	SD
1. Manageability of diversity						
1.1	Teaching writing in mixed-ability online classes in manageable	63	19	7	11	0
1.2	I feel overwhelmed upon teaching writing in mixed-ability online classes	51	23	14	12	0
1.3	I think the only practical method to teach mixed-ability online classes is that students are grouped homogenously	22	10	49	6	5
1.4	Having students with diverse writing levels is a natural occurrence inside online EFL classroom	87	0	13	0	0

TABLE II. INSTRUCTORS' RESPONSES REGARDING THE CHALLENGES OF DIVERSITY

No.		SA	A	N	D	SD
2. Challenges of diversity						
2.1	Diversity in online writing classes is not a serious problem and usual classroom dynamics can manage it	19	12	22	14	33
2.2	Students' diverse levels cause low achievers to be demotivated to write	66	19	15	0	0
2.3	Linguistic diversity is the most widely prevailing feature of diversity inside EFL writing class	86	14	0	0	0
2.4	Cultural diversity is not a serious issue in my writing classes	95	5	0	0	0
2.5	Psychological factors do not intervene with students' academic performance online writing classes	0	0	22	35	43
2.6	Taking students' diverse levels into consideration, I always opt for a particular proficiency level and tailor my teaching style and strategies accordingly	7	36	23	34	0
2.7	I vary my writing teaching methods, materials and assessment tools to cope with the varying levels in the online class	87	0	4	0	0

TABLE III. INSTRUCTORS' RESPONSES REGARDING ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING PRACTICES

No.		SA	A	N	D	SD
3. Online teaching and learning practices						
3.1	Challenge emerging due to mixed-ability classrooms can be addressed effectively online	66	17	0	10	7
3.2	All you need to teach in mixed-ability classrooms in online environments is to replicate the effective remedies employed in the physical classroom	12	15	33	27	3
3.3	There are peculiarities that render online writing classes as relatively distinct from physical classes	87	13	0	0	0
3.4	Students respond positively to the procedures taken to cope with diversity in online environments	5	57	16	22	0
3.5	Online teaching provides easier route for enriching the teaching setting with various presentation modes that meet students' different learning styles	27	52	11	10	0
3.6	Collaborative online tools can make up for the lack of physical co-presence	30	45	13	12	0

Responses showed that the majority of instructors (83%) agreed that many of the challenges emerging from traditional mixed-ability classes could be effectively addressed online. Still, the common writing remedial work targeting low achievers in physical classrooms has been proved as effective in online teaching platforms including the Blackboard. Furthermore, all instructors affirmed that online classes do not have some of the privileges found in physical classes where face-to-face communication usually helps to provide prompt feedback to students' writing performance. As affirmed by about 60% of the instructors, low achievers in the different writing courses showed positive tendency toward all the procedures taken to upgrade their writing level. Equally important, around 80% of the instructors agreed that the online teaching setting provided by the Blackboard is markedly rich as it offers various presentation modes through the tools of Share Blank Whiteboard, Share Application/Screen, Share Files, Blogs, Discussion Board, and Breakout Groups. Furthermore, the facility of recording sessions provides students with a living reference that they can check anytime. Finally, 75% of the instructors affirmed that such collaborative tools help to bridge the lacuna caused by lack of physical presence.

The final issue addressed in the questionnaire concerns instructors' tendency toward blended learning which integrates face-to-face communication and online tutoring (see Table IV).

About 60% of the instructors were not explicit about the impact of the technological affordances characteristic of different LMS platforms on their – as well as their learners' – performance. Similarly, they were not decisive regarding continuing only with online classes. That is why most of them (99%) opted for the integration of virtual and physical classrooms for more effective learning since electronic

teaching platforms, represented by the Blackboard in the present study, offer the three basic components of the traditional learning process: content, communication, and assessment. Still, in light of such affordances, a considerable number of the instructors (66%) requested much training for a better use of electronic teaching platforms as they affirmed that they are not fully competent in using all of the tools provided by such platforms.

TABLE IV. INSTRUCTORS' RESPONSES REGARDING INTEGRATING PHYSICAL AND ONLINE TEACHING

No.		SA	A	N	D	SD
4. Exclusion or integration						
4.1	The technological affordances marking the use of LMS affect teachers'/learners' performance	2	17	57	4	20
4.2	I prefer to continue exclusively online as online teaching could fully replace face-to-face teaching	7	13	54	20	6
4.3	Virtual classrooms should be blended with physical classrooms if applicable	87	12	1	0	0
4.4	Much training should be available for a better use of electronic teaching and learning platforms for both teachers and learners	42	24	34	0	0

B. The Interview

Complementary to the quantitative method in the form of the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews are conducted to elicit a clearer and detailed vision about the challenges that writing instructors' at PSAU encountered while teaching students with diverse achievement levels as well as the strategies they empirically found as effective in overcoming such challenges. Despite their affirmation that teaching writing in online mixed-ability classes is manageable, the instructors argued that as long as there is a large gap among students' writing proficiency levels, crucial customizations have to be made. In online mixed-ability classes, the input/content, processes and output/products should be diversified and offered through different audiovisual modes. They used to teach the prerequisite content allowing high achievers to proceed and adapting the content for low achievers. According to most instructors, this is perfectly achieved through the mechanisms of differentiated instruction. One successful strategy is homogenous grouping by classifying students in light of their readiness (i.e., attitudes, experiences, and knowledge), interest (preferences and passions), and learning profile (learning style, type of intelligence, group orientation, and culture-based preferences). With students homogeneously grouped, instructors can tailor their teaching both quantitatively and qualitatively providing that intensive teaching is delivered to those who need more support. However, the learning outcomes should remain the same for all students.

As for differentiating teaching for the online writing class, instructors emphasized that much of the teaching and learning practices marking physical classes are adapted to the new

web-based dynamics and tools offered by the Blackboard. In this regard, instructors highlighted that students' diverse learning styles represent a common challenge in EFL writing classes where multiple intelligences abound. In the context of virtual classes, the instructors considered the resources offered by the Blackboard as perfect for empowering students to use their unique learning styles to achieve better performance in the different writing skills. That is, the multimedia tools, including the White Board, Discussion Board, Blogs, Share Files and Share Screen/Application, made it easy for the instructors to satisfy the preferences of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners. Similarly, the designing of instruction so that a student works individually, in pairs and in groups also helped meet the needs of intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence, exploiting the tool of Breakout Group on the Blackboard. However, instructors affirmed that it took them much time to use all such tools adequately and professionally. To be more familiar with all such technological affordances, the instructors affirmed that much training is required.

One more challenge in online mixed-ability writing classes is the demotivated students who are reluctant to participate being so anxious about writing due to their low self-image. Low achievers used to feel unwilling to embark on interaction with their peers, thereby depriving themselves of developing their potential. To address this challenge, instructors put forth some insightful solutions. This might be addressed by assigning them easy, yet challenging, tasks that are one step beyond their proficiency level. The point is that these tasks keep students on track to achieve the target learning outcomes, usually in the form of writing projects. Some of the strategies that have been proved to be successful in motivating students in writing online classes include providing easy access to available resources usually offered on the content of the course on the Blackboard. These resources include PowerPoint presentations, YouTube channels with relevant educational material, and links to web-based exercises with self-correction. Furthermore, instructional methods could be diversified into visual, audial, and textual formats providing concrete and clear examples. The ultimate goal of such strategies is to help them gain a sense of accomplishment hopefully transforming them into more motivated writers.

Additionally, instructors suggested a more humanistic approach to deal with the different online writing assignments given to students by relating them to their schemata and eliciting their relevant background knowledge and experience so that a sense of intimacy and relevance is ignited gearing their motivation positively. Furthermore, participants encourage low achievers in online writing classes through publishing their work in front of their mates, reinforcing their strengths, and choosing topics that are highly interesting to them. In addition, some instructors stated that they interact with students and come down to their level in order to understand their problems and simplify the process of writing to them. To motivate students and at the same time differentiate assessment tools, students were encouraged to practice self-correction through different websites such as www.grammarly.com and <https://languagetool.org/>. Instructors also highlighted that the emphasis on product (i.e. Students' output) rather than the process causes less capable

students to have an inferior self-image about themselves when comparing their final products with the more capable ones. In response to this challenge, instructors mostly contended that online writing instruction encourages participation from reluctant students and provide equal opportunities for students. In addition, encouraging students to learn autonomously making use of available online resources render the teacher as simply a facilitator.

Another related challenge highlighted by the instructors is the quality of students' participation in the various writing activities and drills. Many of the students' responses were said to be hasty and imprecise. They even used to copy directly from the internet sources, thereby offering a false reflection of their real progress in writing. To buffer against short, undeveloped responses, a specific length of response was set by instructors beforehand. Feedback is offered asynchronously to mitigate the pressure naturally experienced when students are required to respond in real time and to give them more time to reflect on the writing assignment. As for the plagiarism problem, students were notified that final works are to be scanned for plagiarism. Furthermore, taking into consideration students' tendency to provide perfect – albeit falsework, the instructors suggested assessing students' writings from a process-oriented, rather than a product-oriented, prospect. In this regard, peer reviewing and editing could relieve many of the pressures of low achievers. Instructors also stressed the importance that assessment should span all proficiency levels and uniquely addresses students' diverse levels. In other words, a proper assessment the one that reflects the extent of progress achieved across all levels. This essentially required teachers to identify students' profiles by making a record of their linguistic proficiency through placement tests for homogenous grouping.

The inability to provide instant feedback on students' contributions, due to the fact that students' inputs are posted at the same time, constituted another challenge to instructors. Lack of in-time feedback is likely to allow for immature contributions and to render students' primary inputs undeveloped. Teachers suggested sorting responses by students and then determining which ones are in need of instant feedback to develop their input and to pay them due attention in later discussions.

VI. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study aimed at identifying the perceptions and attitudes of writing instructors at Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University towards teaching mixed-ability classes via learning management systems after the quick transition to online learning after the outbreak of COVID-19. The major focus was the challenges that faced them during virtual classes with regard to the content preparation, teaching and learning practices, and assessment methods. It is also thought to reveal how the technological affordances marking the use of the Blackboard system have been customized for offering equal learning opportunities for students with diverse learning styles, intelligence, preferences, and linguistic caliper. Towards the fulfillment of these objectives, both quantitative and qualitative methods have been implemented, represented by an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews

respectively. Both of them targeted four major areas: (a) manageability of diversity in online writing mixed-ability classes, (b) the major challenges encountered in such classes, (c) online writing teaching and learning practices, and (d) perceptions regarding the integration or exclusion of online teaching technologies.

Results obtained from the questionnaire and the interviews pointed out that writing instructors at PSAU do not have the luxury to use or not use online platforms. For educational systems to adapt to worldwide changes, they have to be ready with efficient technological infrastructure and well-trained instructors and educators. The challenges expressed by the instructors are serious, but using online resources is simultaneously unavoidable. The very simple fact of diversity, demotivation, quality of feedback and participation and copying from the internet resources were the most common challenges that instructors highlighted. They suggested that differentiated instruction was the main approach to deal with such challenges making full use of the collaborative tools offered by available educational technologies. The rationale behind differentiation is to reach to teach. Importing traditional teaching and activities used in physical classrooms is not enough. Instructors stressed that the peculiarities of the online class should be respected and necessary adjustments to the traditional class-based methods should be made. The adaptation of the face-to-face activities to the e-learning environment surely requires instructors to be armed with the virtual teaching-specific competencies that, in turn, require relevant training courses.

In accordance with the findings of the present study, it is recommended to administer a placement test at the beginning of each semester in order to divide students in writing classes into groups based on their writing skill level. This would help teachers to target each group based on their abilities which in turn will help them to focus well on weaker groups. Also, it is recommended to provide workshops targeting the best teaching strategies for teaching writing in online mixed-ability classes. This would help instructors to tailor assignments and to offer help in different writing subskills in accordance with students' competence. Training should also target the best practices of educational technologies to maximize educational outcomes. Furthermore, it should be noted that the continuous evaluation and clear understanding of the affordances of educational technologies would help to inform practitioners of the potential benefits and limitations of different technologies to improve future teaching and learning practices.

The current research design can inform further studies addressing other potential challenges in teaching other language skills in online mixed-ability classes, especially speaking. In addition, further studies are recommended to evaluate students' writing skills before and after the implementation of some of the strategies discussed in the present study.

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