



Omani EFL Undergraduate Students' Knowledge of and Attitudes towards Essay Writing

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Abstract

Writing is still understudied regardless of its increasing significance in the academic and professional fields which demand writing proficiency in English from their candidates. However, writing in the EFL context (English as a Foreign Language) is a considerably challenging activity, with which many students struggle. Essay writing is usually a vital element in EFL writing courses and is considered an essential academic requirement. Therefore, utilizing a quantitative approach, this study investigated students' knowledge of and attitude towards essay writing in an Omani university in relation to their majors and English language proficiency. Sixty-four male and female students responded to a two-part questionnaire that tested students' knowledge of essay writing and examined their attitudes towards it. The study revealed a moderately positive attitude towards essay writing. It also showed a statistically significant moderate positive correlation between their knowledge of and attitude towards essay writing. It revealed that knowledge of essay writing differed significantly based on students' English proficiency levels but not their majors. The study also showed that students' attitude towards essay writing could be predicted based on their knowledge of essay writing but not based on their majors and English language proficiency.

Keywords: writing knowledge of essay writing; attitude towards essay writing; language proficiency

Introduction

Writing has constantly been gaining more attention in recent years (Starkey, 2004). This is probably due to factors related to the increasing demand for writing competency initiated by the academic institutions that process applications of students seeking to pursue higher education and by the job market that has started to favour candidates who are proficient writers (Gordon, 2008). Writing, therefore, is receiving more attention as teaching writing skills is no longer considered a supplementary skill that is done in class to help introduce, develop or reinforce other language skills and sub skills (Harmer, 2004). Essay writing has rather become an essential



component of a writing curriculum. In essay writing students have to meet certain standards related to essay content, organization and mechanics. Despite the complexity of writing, students encounter syllabi that emphasize essay writing and involve time, effort and resources to help students develop into better essay writers.

Writing is a challenging task, and teaching it is tedious (Dastjerdi & Samian, 2011), a reality that writing teachers constantly have to deal with. If this is the case in contexts where English is the students' native language, one can imagine the challenges of learning and teaching writing in EFL settings, where English is neither the students' mother tongue nor that of the teacher. Part of the complexity of the writing teaching/learning situation is limited to not only writing genre, register or style (Harmer, 2004), which seems to be an area of challenge, but rather its intricacy, which exceeds this to include writing tasks in general (Gordon, 2008).

Despite its complexity and challenging nature, writing is an integral part of writing courses (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009). It should be given priority in language instruction, and guidelines should focus on not only the improvement of writing structure but also the development of text organization including planning and revising (Festas, Oliveira, Rebelo, Damião, Harris & Graham, 2015). When students join a university, they find themselves required to produce essays of quality (Starkey, 2004). Many Omani EFL students, for instance, struggle with their writing, and they usually produce poor-quality texts (Al-Issa, 2005). More hours of instruction are, therefore, allocated to the teaching of writing than any other skill, and it receives more weight in many university foundation programs in Oman (Al-Badwawi, 2011).

Despite the recent focus given to the teaching of writing as an essential component of many programs, there is still a shortage of research that explores the teaching and learning of essay writing (Harmer, 2004). For example, the factors that could affect students' knowledge of and attitude towards essay writing have not yet been sufficiently probed. This small scale research study attempts to investigate this essential aspect of writing. It explores students' knowledge of and attitude towards essay writing in a university in Oman in relation to students' majors and levels of language proficiency. The study can give some indication about the relationships between these variables.

Study Aim

The study mainly seeks to examine the following areas of inquiry:

1. The correlation between students' knowledge of and attitude towards essay writing.
2. The influence of major and language proficiency levels variables on students' knowledge of essay writing.
3. The prediction of students' attitude towards essay writing based on other variables, such as students' knowledge of essay writing, students' majors and their English language proficiency levels.

Operationalizing the Study Constructs: Knowledge and Attitude

The two constructs that were measured in this study are knowledge and attitude.

1. Knowledge of essay writing can be theoretically defined as the the student's level and depth of understanding of essay writing.
2. Attitude towards essay writing can be defined as the student's tendency to positively or negatively evaluate himself/herself in relation to essay writing.

Using a questionnaire that comprises multiple-choice questions and true/false questions, the operationalization of the main constructs was as follows:

1. Knowledge of essay writing: The ability a student exhibits in accurately responding to 18 items: 10 true/false items and 8 multiple-choice questions on areas related to essay writing with scores ranging from 0 to 18. If a student answers the knowledge questionnaire with a high score, this means s/he has a high level of knowledge of essay writing. If, however, the mark s/he gets is low, this shows a low level of knowledge of essay writing.
2. Attitude towards essay writing: Students answer the questionnaire of 20 items by indicating their responses to each item by selecting the degree that shows their stand on a 5-point Likert-scale (5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = not sure, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree), with scores that range from 20 to 100. Scoring high in the scale represents a positive attitude towards essay writing, and scoring low indicates a negative attitude towards essay writing.

Development of Hypotheses

All of the research hypotheses refer to the operationalized knowledge and attitude discussed earlier. The four hypotheses (i.e. H₁, H₂, H₃ and H₄) are explained as follows:

H₁: There will be a significant statistical correlation between the students' knowledge of essay writing and their attitude towards essay writing.

H₂: Students of different English proficiency levels will have statistically significant different levels of knowledge of essay writing.

H₃: Students of different majors will have statistically significant different levels of knowledge of essay writing.

H₄: Students' attitude towards essay writing will be predictable based on their knowledge of essay writing, majors and English proficiency levels.

Study Variables

The study has four variables. H₁ variables (i.e. knowledge of essay writing and attitude towards essay writing) are neither dependant nor independent variables as they indicate correlation, while for H₂, major is an independent variable and knowledge of essay writing is a dependant variable. For H₃, language proficiency is independent and knowledge of essay writing is dependant. The H₄ independent variables of the prediction relation are knowledge of essay writing, major and language proficiency, and attitude towards essay writing is a dependant variable.

Methodology

Subjects

The study target population was students who were enlisted in SQU (Sultan Qaboos University) in Oman in the fall academic semester, 2014. The subjects were either first year students doing the foundation programs (i.e. English intensive courses mainly aimed at improving English proficiency), or the credit programs (i.e. second year students who have successfully completed foundation programs). The foundation programs are grouped into sciences and humanities, and similarly the credit programs are divided into humanities and sciences but for students with higher language proficiency levels.



Upon their university entry, all SQU students have to sit an English placement exam that allocates them to different English proficiency levels. Based on their scores in this exam, students are divided into six language proficiency levels (level one being the lowest and six the highest), which students have to successfully pass before they can join their credit programs. The foundation and credit programs both offer essay writing courses; however, the English writing courses in the credit programs are more advanced.

A total of sixty-four male and female students in four groups were part of the sample: two groups in the foundation programs (15 humanities and 15 sciences majors with lower English proficiency), which comprised approximately 47% of the sample and two groups from the credit programs constituting 53% (16 humanities and 18 sciences majors with higher English proficiency).

Development of the Instrument: Knowledge and Attitudes Scales

The design of the knowledge and attitude scales went through a number of stages. The two scales were designed based on what is emphasized in the EFL literature about essay writing and essay characteristics, and their significance and relevance to students' lives (Appendix 1). The researcher also used her knowledge of essay writing and of teaching general and academic writing, as well as her awareness of various writing approaches, genres, types and pedagogical implications.

Knowledge-Scale Item Design

Most items in the knowledge scale came from notions in the literature of EFL writing. The researcher extracted some ideas related to the primary characteristics of essays, such as having topic sentences, controlling ideas and paragraphing. For instance, items 2, 5 and 7 came from the notion that students may need help with how to develop sentences that deal with a central theme in a paragraph (Prat-Sala & Redford, 2012). Furthermore, the task of essay writing requires many competencies (Starkey, 2004), which was represented by item 17. There are also two sides to any writing task: communicative, which is about being clear about the message which students attempt to convey, and structural, which is mainly about maintaining a good level of grammar, such as the correct use of plurals, tenses, affixes and punctuation (Graham & Harris, 2005). These notions were used in developing items 9, 10 and 18. Essay writing may also involve



writing subskills that are foundational or high order processes (Celce-Murcia, 2001) captured by item 8.

There are different approaches to writing essays (Starkey, 2004). Planning and outlining that takes place before the actual task of writing can improve the quality of writing (Baaijen, Galbraith & de Gloppe, 2014). Items 3, 4, 6, 13 and 10 are related to essay mechanics, such as grammar, word limit, spelling and punctuation. Further, writing quality and coherent compositions are major challenges for EFL learners, and many of them never reach the level of proficient writers (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Items on cohesion, coherence and word choice were 11, 12 and 16.

Attitude-Scale Item Design

Notions in the literature pertinent to attitude towards writing were covered in the questionnaire via the part on attitude. For instance, students struggle with writing, particularly planning and revising (Crossley & McNamara, 2010). They may have different attitudes towards language learning, depending on their experiences with the foreign language and the teaching approaches they have encountered (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006), and therefore may have a negative experience with essay writing. Questionnaire items 1, 3 and 8 covered these notions. Further, beliefs about writing are grouped into two categories: transmissional or transactional (White & Bruning, 2005). Transmissional beliefs assume that writing utilizes information available in other sources and conveys retrieved information to the reader. On the other hand, transactional beliefs propose that the purpose of writing is to illustrate people's thoughts and understandings of themselves and the world. Items 4, 5, 9 and 10 captured these notions. Essay writing also involves strategies that students need to follow to become good essay writers (Starkey, 2004). This was covered by item 9. Items 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15 covered notions related to how writing positively impacts on the development of other language skills as noted by (Klein, Piacente-Cimini & Williams, 2007). The influence of writing on language sub skills, such as grammar and vocabulary, was addressed by items 16 and 17, and academic achievement and future plans for higher education or a successful career were represented by items 19 and 20. Writing is also of vital significance in everyday life functions (Harmer, 2004), and this was illustrated by item 18. Another important factor considered in the development of the questions was feedback, as



students may receive feedback on different aspects of their writing (Prat-Sala & Redford, 2012), and this was captured by item 6.

Validity

Validity shows whether the scale items measure what they are meant to measure, and content validity was carried out through the use of literature and experts' advice. After researching the literature of knowledge of and attitude towards essay writing, it was found that there was no existing instrument against which this instrument could be compared. The tests that were used to validate the two scales were, therefore, comments from three experts. The selection of validators was based on their qualifications, professional experience with teaching writing, and familiarity with the study context (Appendix 2). Constructive comments of the experts were accommodated to modify the instrument. They, however, contributed constructive comments that influenced modifications to the instrument.

Reliability

Reliability concerns the consistency of the measurement (Wahyuni, 2012), and it indicates to what extent the scale is free from random error (Boudah, 2010). Due to constraints related to time and resources, the test-re-test reliability method was not possible; however, internal consistency reliability which is one of the commonly used indicators (Muijs, 2010), was utilized. It is the degree to which items in the scale measure the same attribute (Pallant, 2007). Cronbach's coefficient alpha, which is the most frequent way used to calculate internal consistency reliability (Field, 2009), was also applied.

Sample and Sampling Procedures

Deciding upon the study sample in quantitative research relies on the extent of variation that exists in the study population and the amount of sampling error the researcher can accept (Lichtman, 2013). The variations were students' major and their language proficiency. However, random sampling was not possible due to challenges concerning available resources and study administration logistics. The researcher therefore opted for convenience sampling, not random, as defined by Sapsford (2006), since the sample was produced based on teachers' voluntary willingness to include their classes in the study. Teachers in the sciences and humanities



programs from the foundation and the credit programs were invited to take part, and the students whose teachers expressed willingness to administer the questionnaire were included in the study. Then the teachers took the questionnaire packs to their classes, where the students who agreed to participate in the study filled out the questionnaire.

Administering the Instrument

Since the researcher did not reside in Oman where the instrument was conducted, the researcher made a decision to coordinate with the Language Centre through emails to gain access to the target sample. Codes of ethics in research entail protecting the participants' anonymity and confidentiality and ensuring no harm is inflicted on them (Punch, 2014). Therefore ethical considerations were processed through a number of procedures. After receiving the certificate of ethical research approval from the institution, a proposal was emailed to the committee concerned with approving research projects. After getting their approval, the four program coordinators for humanities and sciences in the foundation and the credit programs were asked to invite volunteer teachers to administer the questionnaire in their classes. After the researcher received the names of the four teachers who had accepted the invitation to help with the questionnaire administration, an introduction was emailed to them which contained information about the study, delivery of the questionnaire packs, questionnaire administration and the collection of packs. The participant students were also introduced to the study, promised anonymity and given an option as to whether to participate or not. Once the questionnaires were filled out by the students, they were collected and posted to the researcher through an express mail. The questionnaires were then coded into numbers and categories by the researcher for data entry and analysis. Anonymity was maintained since the participants were not asked to write their names, emails or university ID numbers. Anonymity was also ensured through giving the participants codes. After the data entry stage, the participants' confidentiality was protected through shredding the questionnaires, saving the data in a folder and keeping the folder in a safe place where no one could access it.

Results

Statistical Analysis

To statistically analyze the study data, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used. The data were coded and the negative items in the attitude scale were reversed. Thus, 5 meant a positive attitude, and 1 a negative one. Descriptive and inferential statistics were applied. Inter-item reliability was tested through the use of Cronbach's alpha where 0 means no reliability and +1 is perfect reliability (Cortina, 1993). Cronbach's alpha for the knowledge scale was .603 (Appendix 3. 1), which is lower than .7, which is considered an acceptable value (Muijs, 2010). One justification that could explain the relatively low Cronbach's alpha might be the difficulty level of the True/False questions in the scale, which was aimed to distinguish students with a higher knowledge from those with a lower knowledge. Students perhaps did not thoroughly cover the writing aspects in their courses which resulted in their low awareness of concepts about essays. However, deleting the lowest three items in the scale (items 1, 3 and 8) would result in raising the Cronbach's alpha only to .652, and therefore the items remained with no deletion.

Nevertheless, the Cronbach's alpha for the attitude scale was .932, which is considered to be a preferable score (Pallant, 2007), and there was no need to attempt item deletion (Appendix 4.1). Students probably had no difficulty responding to the items as the language was clear and the topics discussed in the items were relevant to their academic or future professional lives.

Checking the Normality of the Two Scales

Based on Figures 1 and 2, one can infer that the knowledge and attitudes scores are non-randomly distributed as the data are negatively skewed, and based on this assumption nonparametric tests were used.

Figure 1: *Negatively skewed which indicates non-random distribution of the knowledge scores*

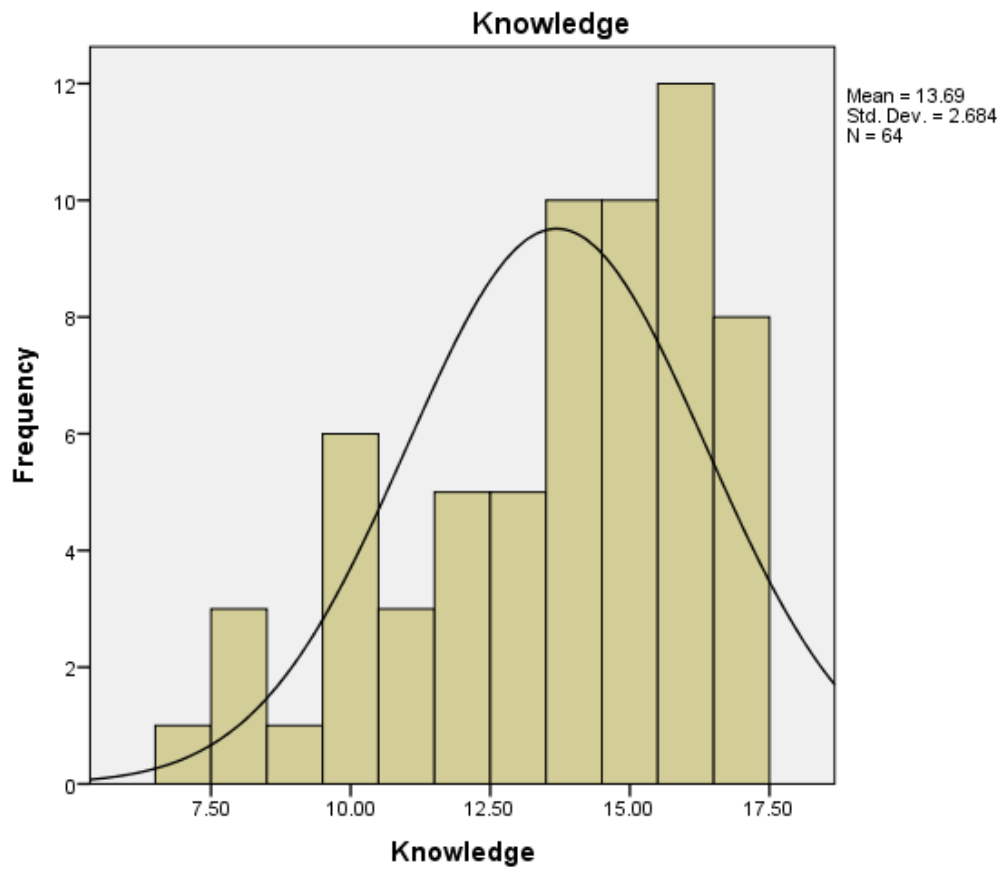
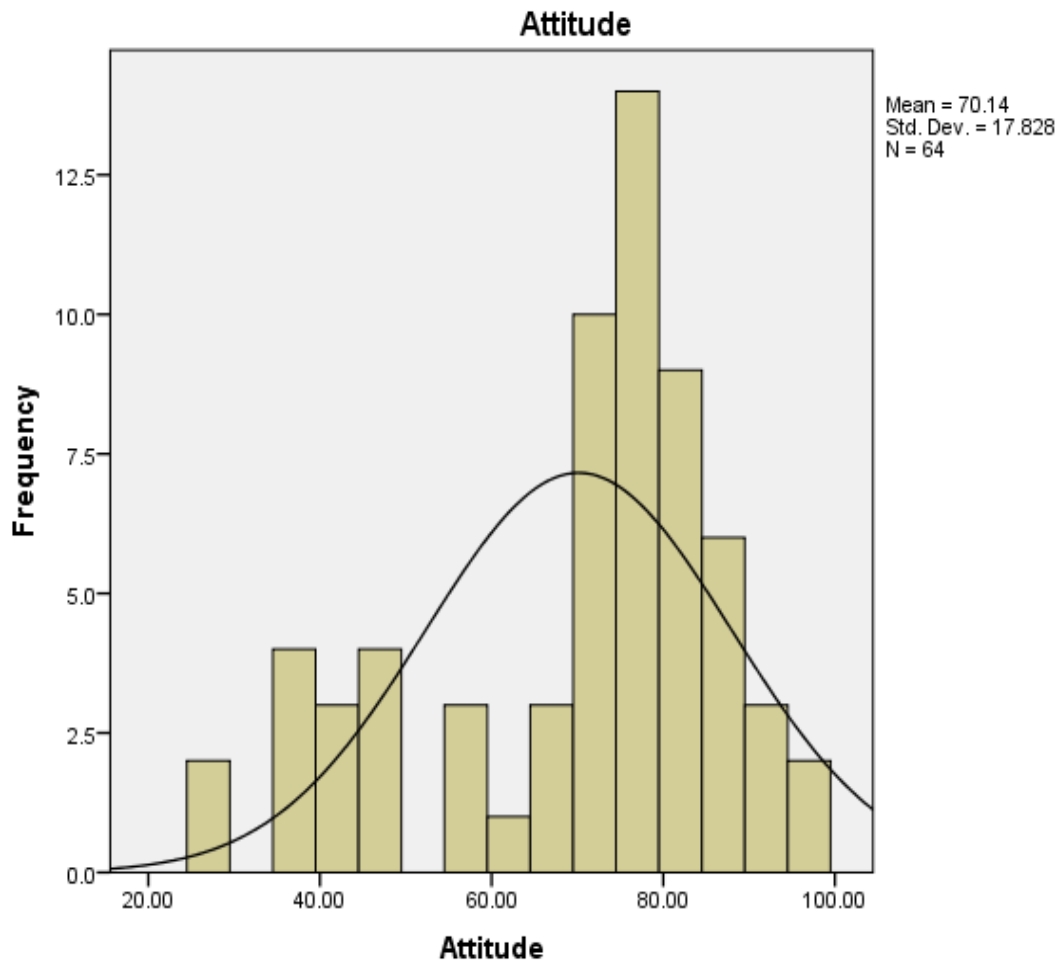


Figure 2: *Negatively skewed which indicates non-random distribution of the attitude scores*



Normality tests were used to decide on the use of parametric or nonparametric tests (Smithson, 2000). Knowledge and attitude data were nonparametric as Kolmogorov-Smirnov^a test was .000 where $p < .05$ for both scales, indicating a significant alpha which meant that the data were not normally distributed (see Table 1). Kolmogorov-Smirnov^a scores were used since the sample was sixty-four participants, more than 50 participants (Burdenski, 2000).

Table 1: *Knowledge and attitude tests of normality*

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	Df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Knowledge	.171	64	.000	.912	64	.000
Attitude	.207	64	.000	.898	64	.000

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Testing Hypotheses

Students' knowledge of essay writing was medium ($M = 13.69$, $SD = 2.684$) and had a moderate positive attitude towards essay writing ($M = 70.14$, $SD = 17.828$). Since the assumption of non-parametric tests was fulfilled and confirmed, non-parametric tests were utilized, and a .05 alpha was used for all the following statistical analysis.

Hypothesis H1 Correlation Results

H₁: There will be a significant statistical correlation between the students' knowledge of essay writing and their attitude towards essay writing.

H₀₁: There will be no significant statistical correlation between the students' knowledge of essay writing and their attitude towards essay writing.

The relation between students' knowledge of and attitude towards essay writing was tested by using Spearman's rho since the scores are non-parametric (Conover & Iman, 1981), which indicated a positive relation of a moderate strength between the two variables where $r(64) = .398$, $p = .001$ (see Table 2). Therefore, there was a statistically significant correlation between the two variables ($p < .05$), and the null hypothesis (H₀₁) was rejected for the sample.

Table 2: *Correlations between knowledge of and attitude towards essay writing*

		Knowledge	Attitude
Spearman's rho	Knowledge		
	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.398**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.001
	N	64	64
Attitude	Attitude		
	Correlation Coefficient	.398**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.
	N	64	64

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Hypothesis H2 Influence Results

H₂: Students of different English proficiency levels will have statistically significant different levels of knowledge of essay writing.

H₀₂: Students of different English proficiency levels will not have statistically significant different levels of knowledge of essay writing.

Mann-Whitney U Test which corresponds to independent t-test to for parametric tests (Field, 2009) was utilized for non-parametric scores. The significance level of the two-tailed *p*-value (*p*) was more than .05 (i.e. the probability value of *p* = .284), and therefore the result was not significant which meant that the null hypothesis (H₀₂) was not deleted (see Table 3). There was no statistically significant difference between levels of students' knowledge of essay writing and their majors. Since the difference between the groups (majors) was not significant, the description of the difference direction was not needed which is done through finding out Mean Rank (Pallant, 2007). Further, the effect size (*r*) can be calculated through the formula: $r = z/\text{square root of } N$ where *N* = total number of cases.



$Z = -1.071$ and $N = 64$; therefore, the r value is $.134$ which is a very small effect size (see Tables 3, 4 and 5) according to Cohen's criteria of $.1 =$ small effect, $.3 =$ medium effect, $.5 =$ large effect (Cohen, 1992).

Therefore, the results can be summarized as follows:

A Mann-Whitney U Test revealed no statistical significance in the students' knowledge of essay writing of humanities ($Md = 15, n = 31$) and sciences ($Md = 14, n = 33$), $U = 432.500, z = -1.071, p = .284, r = .134$.

Table 3: *Mann-Whitney U Test statistics^a*

	Knowledge
Mann-Whitney U	432.500
Wilcoxon W	993.500
Z	-1.071
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.284

a. Grouping Variable: Major

Table 4: *Median report*

Median	
Major	Knowledge
Humanities	15.0000
Sciences	14.0000
Total	14.0000

Table 5: *Ranks*

	Major	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Knowledge	Humanities	31	35.05	1086.50
	Sciences	33	30.11	993.50
	Total	64		

Hypothesis H3 Influence Results

H₃: Students of different majors will have statistically significant different levels of knowledge of essay writing.

H₀₃: Students of different majors will not have statistically significant different levels of knowledge of essay writing.

The significance level of ($p = .008$) was less than .05, and therefore the result was significant which meant that the null hypothesis (H₀₃) was rejected. There was a statistically significant difference between students' knowledge of essay writing and their language proficiency levels (see Table 6). The Mean Rank was used to find out the difference between the groups which are language proficiency levels. The median of the credit program ($Md = 15$) was higher than that of the foundation ($Md = 13$). Further, the effect size (r) is as follows:

$R = z/\text{square root of } N$ where $N = \text{total number of cases}$.

$Z = -2.647$ and $N = 64$; therefore, the r value is .331 which is a medium effect size where .1 = small effect, .3 = medium effect, .5 = large effect.

Therefore, the results can be summarized as follows:

A Mann-Whitney U Test revealed a statistical significance in the students' knowledge of essay writing of foundation ($Md = 13, n = 30$) and credit ($Md = 15, n = 34$), $U = 315.000, z = -2.647, p = .008, r = .134$ (see Tables 6, 7 and 8).

Table 6: Test statistics

Knowledge	
Mann-Whitney U	315.000
Wilcoxon W	780.000
Z	-2.647
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.008

Grouping Variable: Language

Proficiency Level

Table 7: Median report

Median	
Language Proficiency Level	Knowledge
Foundation	13.0000
Credit	15.0000
Total	14.0000

Table 8: Ranks

		Language Proficiency Level	N	Mean	Rank	Sum of Ranks
Knowledge	Foundation		30	26.00		780.00
	Credit		34	38.24		1300.00
	Total		64			

Hypothesis H4 Regression Results

H₄: Students’ attitude towards essay writing will be predictable based on their knowledge of essay writing, majors and English proficiency levels.

H₀₄: Students’ attitude towards essay writing will not be predictable based on their knowledge of essay writing, majors and English proficiency levels.

Standard or simultaneous regression is used when each of the independent variables is evaluated in relation to its power or what it can contribute to predicting the dependant variable (Hayes, 2000). It is also used to find out how the independent variables as a group predict the dependant variable (Field, 2009). Attitude towards essay writing scores were regressed on major, language proficiency and knowledge of essay writing. A linear regression analysis revealed that the adjusted R square (R^2) was .068 which meant that only 6.8% of attitude can be explained by the other three independent variables (see Table 9). The score was also not statistically significant with ($p = .065$) > .05 (see Table 10). However, knowledge of essay writing was a significant predictor of students’ attitude towards essay writing (Beta = .335, $p = .013$), accounting for 33.5% of the variance in attitude towards essay writing. Nonetheless, major (Beta = -.098, $p = .425$) and language proficiency (Beta = -.105, $p = .424$) with $p > .05$ accounted for 9.8% and 10.5% respectively of the variance and demonstrated no significant effects on attitude scores (see Table 11). Thus, the null hypothesis (H₀₄) was not deleted.

Table 9: *Model summary*^b

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.335 ^a	.112	.068	17.21007

a. Predictors: (Constant), Language Proficiency Level, Major, Knowledge

b. Dependant Variable: Attitude

Table 10: ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2252.534	3	750.845	2.535	.065 ^b
	Residual	17771.200	60	296.187		
	Total	20023.734	63			

a. Dependant Variable: Attitude

b. Predictors: (Constant), Language Proficiency Level, Major, Knowledge

Table 11: Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	
1	(Constant)	50.628	13.584		3.727	.000
	Knowledge	2.224	.864	.335	2.574	.013
	Major	-3.471	4.317	-.098	-.804	.425
	Language Proficiency Level	-3.705	4.605	-.105	-.805	.424

a. Dependant Variable: Attitude

Discussion

The results of the data analysis showed some important findings. The study revealed that students had a reasonably high level of knowledge of essay writing and that they tended to have a moderately positive attitude towards essay writing. This perhaps indicates students' increasing awareness about the area of essay writing and its vital significance in the academic and the

professional worlds (Light, 2001). Students may have started to appreciate the importance of feedback, editing and cohesion in writing (Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005), and the impact of writing on other language skills and subskills (Harmer, 2004). Some students may also have started to view essay writing more positively, as they come to realize its significance and relevance to their future plans, while other students perhaps enjoy writing essays and make an effort to improve their skills as writers merely because they are interested in writing itself. Due to the realization of the vital importance of writing, college-level writing courses in Oman, for instance, have started to be focused on essay writing and academic writing in order to equip students with the appropriate skills and prepare them for their academic or professional endeavor (Al-Issa, 2005; Al-Badwawi, 2011).

Correlation between students' knowledge of essay writing and attitude towards essay writing

The study showed that there was a statistically significant correlation between students' knowledge of essay writing and their attitude towards it. There was a positive and moderate relation between the two variables. Possibly students with higher knowledge of essay writing get more motivated to do better in essay writing, which impacts positively on their attitude towards essay writing. Light (2001) suggests that there is a link between students' writing skills and their academic success. It could also be that students who are interested in writing essays work more on their English proficiency, which may result in improving their essay writing skills.

Influence of Major and English Proficiency on Knowledge of Essay Writing

Another finding is a lack of statistically significant difference between students' knowledge of essay writing and their majors. This means that students' specialization has little to do with their knowledge of essay writing. Knowledge of essay writing might be influenced by other factors, such as interest, or awareness of its academic or professional significance (Gordon, 2008).

However, English proficiency was a factor in students' knowledge of essay writing, as the study showed a statistically significant difference between the two variables. This goes in line with notions in the literature that emphasize the importance of developing students' repertoire, for instance, which positively affects students' appropriate choice of words. Besides, higher English proficiency means knowing writing mechanics (e.g. spelling and punctuation), which is part of essay writing. Being good at English also means being able to use a variety of sentence



structures, which obviously enhances students' essay writing skills and their communicative abilities in expressing ideas through essay writing. Starkey (2004) proposes that good readers usually mean efficient writers, as reading is proven to influence writing organisation and quality. This also brings the notion of skills integration which suggests that developing one language skill/sub-skills improves other skills/sub-kills (Richards & Rodgers, 2003). Therefore, being good at a particular skill/sub-skill in English may have a positive impact on writing skills.

Predicting Students' Attitudes Based on their Knowledge of Essay Writing, Majors and Language Proficiency

The only significant predictor for attitudes towards essay writing was knowledge of essay writing. Knowledge of essay writing scores predicted the scores of how students viewed essay writing, whereas major and language proficiency perhaps could not serve as predictors of scores of attitude towards essay writing. One justification for knowledge functioning as a predictor of attitude may be students' comprehension of the writing tasks, genre, register or style (Harmer, 2004), and writing types (Gordon, 2008), which can result in a more positive attitude towards essay writing. In contrast, students of different majors ranging from different language proficiency levels may undergo various experiences while doing writing courses, meet supportive/unsupportive teachers and use diverse facilities which may lead to varied attitudes towards essay writing, both positive and negative.

Limitations

Due to limitations related to the sample size, the type of sampling and the absence of a pilot study, generalizing the study findings to wider contexts is not advisable. Owing to constraints related to resources available for the researcher and time limitations, conducting a pilot study was not feasible. The study, however, can serve as a starting point to pursue this crucial inquiry as the modified future study can reveal insights about the influence of specialism and language proficiency on knowledge of and attitude towards essay writing.

Another limitation to the study is not considering gender as a categorical independent variable. Gender may be an essential variable in investigating knowledge and attitude towards essay writing. Nonetheless, male students were underrepresented in this study population in the humanities programs, both foundation and credit. Including gender as an independent variable



would not be wise, since a very low response rate from the male students was highly expected. Gender, therefore, could perhaps be incorporated into a future study. Age is another a variable that can be included in the future, since this sample has the same age group ranging between 16 and 18 years old.

Conclusion and Implications

Despite the importance of essay writing in the EFL setting, it has not been comprehensively probed. EFL essay writing is intricate and multidimensional and involves areas like teaching approaches, attitudes, teaching facilities, language proficiency, and academic and professional requirements. The study examined undergraduate EFL students' knowledge of and attitude towards essay writing in terms of both major and English proficiency levels. Results showed that there was a moderate positive correlation between students' knowledge of and attitude towards essay writing. It also revealed that students' knowledge of essay writing was significantly influenced by their English proficiency but not by their majors. The study also indicated that, unlike major and English proficiency, knowledge of essay writing could be a predicting factor for attitude towards essay writing. This study can inform the future research that looks into EFL learners' development of essay writing in terms of their attitudes, knowledge, skills and pedagogical considerations for EFL undergraduate students' academic and professional development.

Biodata

Jamila Al Siyabi is a third year PhD student at the University of Exeter. She also works as an assistant Language Lecturer at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. She has about 13 years of experience teaching at different levels in the field of higher education in Oman. Her PhD is on academic writing in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL). She has published some of her research work in various forums and presented at national and international conferences. Her areas of interest are writing, learner autonomy, communication and culture.



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Appendices

Appendix 1

A questionnaire on Students' Knowledge and Attitude towards Essay Writing

Responding to the questionnaire questions means that you have agreed to participate in the study.

Background Information

Please answer the following three questions by putting a tick in the right place:

- 1. Major: Arts or Education (EES) [] Sciences (i.e. Engineering, Science or Agriculture) []
2. You are studying at the: Foundation program [] Credit program []

First: Students' Knowledge of Essay Writing

A. Respond to the following statements about essay writing by deciding whether each statement is true or false.

Table with 3 columns: Statements, True, False. Contains 10 statements about essay writing for evaluation.



B. Please respond to the following multiple questions by choosing one statement that you think is correct in each question.

10. Coherence is a term that is related to essay writing and it means

- a. how the ideas flow easily from a sentence to another.
- b. how grammatical the sentences in a paragraph are.
- c. the wide use of complex vocabulary in the essay.
- d. the essay has the required word limit.

11. Cohesion in an essay means

- a. how accurate the essay is in terms of grammar.
- b. making connections between ideas in the essay.
- c. the different use of word selection in the essay.
- d. every paragraph in the essay has the same number of sentences.

12. The essay organisation is mainly about

- a. whether the font size or handwriting is big or small.
- b. whether the lines in each paragraph have the same spacing.
- c. how the ideas and details are arranged.
- d. whether the typing/handwriting looks tidy or not.

13. The essay content is

- a. the ideas that are mentioned and developed in the essay.
- b. whether the essay is formal or informal.
- c. the writer's style is clear in the essay.
- d. the different grammatical points used in the essay.

14. The essay mechanics in essay writing is

- a. the audience who are going to read your essay.
- b. organising ideas into paragraphs.
- c. the length of the essay and whether it is under-worded or over-worded.
- d. technical aspects of essay writing such punctuation, spelling or points related to grammar.

15. Word choice in essay writing is about

- a. choosing the right level of grammar complexity that suits the intended readers.
- b. selecting the most suitable words that are appropriate for the level and type of essay.
- c. the quality of the essay of the ideas presented in the essay.
- d. introducing more than one central idea in the essay paragraph.

16. Which of the following statement is correct?

- a. Writing an essay is considered to be a complex task in terms of content organisation and language use.
- b. All types of essays have the same level of difficulty in terms of the thinking skills they involve.
- c. Asking someone to give his/her opinion about my essay is cheating.
- d. Copying some information from other sources without mentioning the source is considered to be a good practice in essay writing.

17. One of the following statements is not correct:

- a. Essay originality is part of a good practice in essay writing.
- b. The essay is an academic text that deals with notions and arguments.
- c. Some essay types are more formal than others.
- d. There is one way of writing essays that is followed by all essay writers.

Second: Students' Attitudes towards Essay Writing

Could you please indicate your opinion by ticking in the right place?

Please remember that there is no right or wrong answer as your answer is based on your opinion.

- SA = I strongly agree with the statement.
- A = I agree with the statement.
- NS = I am not sure about the statement.
- D = I disagree with the statement.
- SD = I strongly disagree with the statement.

Statements	SA	A	NS	D	SD
1. I like to write essays.	SA	A	NS	D	SD
2. I would like to be better at essay writing.	SA	A	NS	D	SD
3. I feel bored in the essay writing class.	SA	A	NS	D	SD
4. I like to discuss my essays with friends.	SA	A	NS	D	SD
5. I don't like to discuss my essays with my writing teacher.	SA	A	NS	D	SD
6. I like to get comments from my writing teacher on the essays I write.	SA	A	NS	D	SD
7. I enjoy reading my friend's essays.	SA	A	NS	D	SD
8. I work hard to improve my skills in writing essays.	SA	A	NS	D	SD
9. Writing essays helps me think about topics in a more logical and organized way.	SA	A	NS	D	SD
10. Improving my essay writing skills helps me	SA	A	NS	D	SD



become more confident about my academic abilities.					
11. Being good at essay writing does not help improve my general writing skills.	SA	A	NS	D	SD
12. Improving my essay writing skills helps me become better at academic writing.	SA	A	NS	D	SD
13. Becoming better at writing essays improves my speaking skills.	SA	A	NS	D	SD
14. Becoming better at writing essays improves my reading skills.	SA	A	NS	D	SD
15. Becoming better at writing essays improves my listening skills.	SA	A	NS	D	SD
16. Essay writing can help me improve my English grammar.	SA	A	NS	D	SD
17. Essay writing can help me improve my English vocabulary.	SA	A	NS	D	SD
18. Essay writing is not related to real life situations outside class.	SA	A	NS	D	SD
19. Being a good essay writer increases my chances to complete my higher education successfully.	SA	A	NS	D	SD
20. Being able to write essays will not help me find a better job in the future.	SA	A	NS	D	SD

End of Questionnaire
Thank you again for your participation

Appendix 2

The first validator is a member of the ELT conference publication committee at the SQU Language Center, an experienced teacher who has taught for a long time. The second validator is a member of the Quality Assurance Unit at the center who is also an EFL academic writing teacher. The third is a senior teacher trainer from the Omani Ministry of Education, who has a rich experience of teaching Omani school students and of conducting in-service training for teachers of English in school.

Appendix 3

Table 1: *Knowledge Scale Item-Total Statistics (with no item deletion)*

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
1. True/False	12.67	7.615	-.074	.636
2. True/False	12.77	6.846	.310	.600
3. True/False	12.73	7.476	-.003	.635
4. True/False	12.73	7.331	.081	.626
5. True/False	12.76	6.940	.274	.605
6. True/False	12.86	7.284	.044	.636
7. True/False	12.90	7.164	.083	.632
8. True/False	13.10	7.396	-.028	.652
9. True/False	12.80	7.409	.005	.638
10. True/False	12.83	6.985	.191	.615
11. Multiple Choice Question	12.90	6.497	.375	.588
12. Multiple Choice Question	12.93	6.792	.231	.610
13. Multiple Choice Question	12.70	6.938	.375	.598
14. Multiple Choice Question	12.89	6.103	.574	.556
15. Multiple Choice Question	13.04	6.360	.384	.584
16. Multiple Choice Question	12.97	6.521	.333	.594
17. Multiple Choice Question	12.87	6.346	.466	.574
18. Multiple Choice Question	13.00	6.290	.424	.578

Appendix 4

Table 1: *Item-Total Statistics*

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
1. I like to write essays	66.73	295.531	.545	.930
2. I would like to be better at essay writing	66.41	272.404	.767	.926
3. Att3Reversed	66.92	311.565	.132	.937
4. I like to discuss my essays with friends	66.95	298.966	.407	.933
5. Att5Reversed	66.55	284.061	.591	.930
I like to get comments from my writing teacher on the essays I write	66.25	275.746	.780	.926
7. I enjoy reading my friend's essays	67.02	297.190	.488	.931
I work hard to improve my skills in writing essays	66.61	283.956	.769	.926
Writing essays helps me think about topics in a more logical and organized way	66.69	279.012	.849	.925
Improving my essay writing skills helps me become more confident about my academic abilities	66.33	277.526	.860	.924
11. Att11Reversed	66.50	286.000	.645	.929
Improving my essay writing skills helps me become better at academic writing	66.39	275.004	.821	.925
Becoming better at writing essays improves my speaking skills	66.81	293.583	.531	.931
Becoming better at essay writing improves my reading skills	66.84	286.737	.665	.928
Becoming better at writing essays improves my listening skills	67.39	320.464	-.102	.939
Essay writing can help me improve my English grammar	66.28	272.332	.881	.923
Essay writing can help me improve my English vocabulary	66.23	273.547	.842	.924
18. Att18Reversed	66.61	300.115	.384	.933
Being a good essay writer increases my chances to complete my higher education successfully	66.52	285.968	.677	.928
20. Att20Reversed	66.64	287.662	.553	.930