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## **A Comparative Analysis of Writing Strategies and Performance at a Saudi University**

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### **Abstract**

There has been a widespread utilization of the English language in Saudi Arabia, due to which it is necessary for Saudi citizens to gain an adequate grip on this language. This study aimed to conduct a comparative evaluation between the writing strategies and writing performance shown by Saudi EFL students. Seventy-four female undergraduates between 21 and 25 years and having Arabic as their first language were recruited for this study. The writing samples of the participants were typed into the computer so that no inconsistency takes place based on the students' writing skills by the researcher. Descriptive statistics were then used to ascertain the level of strategy use of the participants. These students were divided into two groups, based on high and low writing proficiencies. It was found that there was no significant difference in writing performance of these students. The students, who demonstrated a higher level of writing proficiency while writing stood at a percentage of 47.3%; whereas, students demonstrating a low level of writing proficiency stood at a percentage of 44.6%. Furthermore, most of the students used drafting strategies as compared to 'before-writing' strategies. More frequent use of 'before-writing' strategies is encouraged. Further research is needed regarding the relationship between writing strategy application and the writing performance of these learners

*Keywords:* EFL, Saudi learners, writing strategies, writing performance

The widespread importance of English as a second language in Saudi Arabia has been noted in different studies pertaining to this discussion (Aljohani, 2016; Liton, 2013). It has been reported that the English language is commonly utilized as a means of communication in this country and has extensive applications in the trade and tourism industries (Liton, 2013). Due to this, an overwhelming majority of Saudi Arabian citizens study the English languages to improve their professional prospects (Moskovsky & Alrabai, 2009). This language is additionally utilized as the medium of teaching within the education sector in Saudi Arabia (Liton, 2013). English is taught to students in Saudi Arabian schools starting from the age of twelve until they graduate (Alkubaidi, 2014). A study outlining the significance of this language in Saudi Arabia highlighted that "English as a subject matter has received a lot of care from Saudi Ministry of

Education as well as from Saudi community” (Al-Hajailan, 2003, p. 1). It is thus apparent that adequate acquisition of this language skill is held in great regard by Saudi-Arabian citizens and aids in further growth and career development.

It is to be noted; however, that Saudi learners attempt to learn English through a series of learning and memorization patterns rather than making active efforts to gain a comprehensive understanding of this language (Alzaharani, 2016). This is because Saudi learners are generally dependent on their English language educators. Furthermore, Saudi students find writing in English to be an extremely daunting challenge and are thus often told to memorize their essays to pass their language examinations. Although writing is a component of the course that should be taught, not much attention is dedicated to teaching this component in terms of genre and discourse. Rather, the emphasis is primarily laid on the development of grammar structures and spelling capabilities. Due to this, students are unable to gain a comprehensive understanding of the language and thus fail in its practical application in general. The absence of a concrete foundation in this language leads to feelings of frustration as the students are unable to reach their set objectives. Furthermore, their educators find it extremely challenging to aid these students in reaching their objectives; and are thus demotivated regarding the accomplishment of their role as teachers (Keshwar Seebaluck & Devi Seegum, 2013).

There was an increasing necessity to conduct studies pertaining to the development of strategies that would aid in the improvement of writing abilities in such students. In this regard, a research study was carried out on Saudi students in connection with language learning strategies applied in a Saudi context by McMullen (2009). The study attempted to investigate if ‘strategy-based instruction’ (SBI) would aid Saudi EFL students in the development of their writing abilities. The results of the study highlighted the influence of language learning strategies in enabling Saudi students to creatively comprehend and apply this language in a variety of contexts. Aside from McMullen’s research, there is a massive dearth in literature pertaining to this arena. This study, therefore, attempts to fill this research gap through investigating Saudi students’ writing strategies alongside their writing performances. It is taken into account that specific strategies will not be suitable for every learner as their learning techniques and performing of a task differs. However, general conclusions may be drawn regarding the frequency of using certain strategies by various learning style types when performing writing tasks. These conclusions would aid students by equipping them with appropriate tools for

undertaking writing tasks. Additionally, informing students about their learning styles will help them develop a more conscious understanding of their own learning process and enable them to be more in control of their learning.

### **Literature Review**

This study has reviewed major studies related to learning strategy and academic writing to provide a critical overview of these studies. The studies chosen for review were narrowed down according to the following criteria: initially, the most recent studies with satisfactory ground-breaking results in the fields mentioned were selected; secondly, studies conducted in the middle-eastern context were selected; finally, studies conducted on Arabic speaking learners were chosen.

A tremendous change has been observed in the higher education system of Saudi Arabia over the last half-century. The change in these systems plays a major role in the advancement of the individual country and its citizens in terms of economic, academic, cultural, technological, and global aspects (Deraney, 2015). It has been experienced that there is no comparison between a native speaker and a native writer. According to Baker (2006), academic writing takes much time to develop and needs to be taught in an academic environment, unlike learning speaking skills. Education is considered as an important component for the Saudi government, and it has taken several crucial steps for promoting higher education. As a result of these reforms, Saudi Arabia has succeeded in introducing domains of international learning and quality assurance at higher education level.

The quality of academic programs can be maintained and promoted by meeting the needs of the labor market and enhancing cognitive skills of the students through preparatory programs (Aljohani, 2016). Writing difficulties in second language development, when the students are not taught the appropriate writing strategies and are already weak in writing the first language that is Arabic (Al-Buainain, 2009). It has been shown that second language writers improve in structuring and idea development; however, accuracy and linguistic complexity does not change significantly (Deraney, 2015). The broad areas of organization and content can improve significantly in a short span of time; however, the grammar and vocabulary do not develop after attending an entire semester of academic writing.

As compared to other learning skills, language learning is more demanding as it requires a deeper understanding of linguistic features. These features are related to complexity and cohesion of different aspects that result in better understanding of writing in the second language. Giridharan and Robson (2011) showed that writing skills affect the learning of English language courses and also the general academic performance of the students. Students are required to be taught for the context in which they are writing. The students failed to revise their own work if they lack confidence in their language proficiency. Similarly, Paiva and Lima (2011) have focused on cohesive devices and thematic progression on the basis of grammar and vocabulary. The study mentioned writing skills as a productive skill of concern in the academic contexts for a long time.

For improving the writing skills, the use of several strategies has been suggested by various studies. The strategy used in writing allows individuals to produce an effective piece of writing. This is evident from the study by Wolbers et al. (2015), which reveals that the strategy instruction for writing can assist the students in the enhancement of their writing skills. Rietdijk, Janssen, van Weijen, van den Bergh, and Rijlaarsdam (2017) further add that the use of such strategies can be modified by the students as per the task and prevailing conditions.

Negari (2011) also assessed the academic writing in terms of the efforts which students put in for composing, arranging or assessing their ideas. It supplies that writing strategies involve various cognitive problems impacting their capability for learning the language. Erkan and Saban (2011) state that writing performance of the students is linked with their cognitive ability which seems to be difficult in terms of producing ideas in another language. The strategy of providing students with the descriptive form allows students to divide the overall task into various parts which makes it easy for them to outline the writing method to be followed.

Similarly, a survey by Sung, Chang, and Liu (2016) adds that the development of the writing skills among the students is significantly linked to the teacher who uses various method for language teaching. The alteration and creativity of the teachers allow them to devise such plans which assist in the cognitive development required for enhancing the students' performance. Anecdotal studies also highlight the significance of the writing in the EFL learners. In this regard, the study of Chen (2011) can be considered which investigated the writing strategies among the Chinese EFL learners. For this, the study utilized the questionnaire-based approach. The study revealed that EFL learners used various writing strategies at the start of

writing as well as for revising. The performance of the students amplified by the utilization of the strategies assisting them in planning their writing, and effectively organizing it.

The writing strategies in the context of EFL teachers is evaluated by De Silva (2014). The study was conducted in Srilanka where the teachers assigned a task to the students by providing a description of the practice which is to be adopted for writing. Based on the adopted practice, the writing performance of the students improved as they were easily able to provide a structured and coherent essay as instructed by the teacher. This study indicated the effectiveness of the writing strategies for improving the writing performance of the students.

A similar experimental study was also performed by Rahimi and Norooziasiam's (2013) on the EFL learners present in Iran. For this, the sociocultural strategies were adopted by the teachers where it showed that students writing performance in terms of cohesion, and organizing increased when the teacher use strategies with regard to their culture. A recent study by Mastan, Maarof, and Embi (2017) on the Malaysian EFL learners showed that the utilization of effective strategies allows the learners in improving their writing skills and performance. The instructions provided to the students in an explicit manner expand their writing capability. It also positively impacts the ESL students writing performance improving their competence, significantly related to the writing pedagogy of ESL learners.

Despite the effectiveness of the writing strategies, the EFL learners lag in the usage of the writing strategies which remains to be either low or moderate as indicated in the study by Maarof and Murat (2013). The lack of integration of the writing strategies both by the learners and teachers is due to various difficulties. For instance, a study by Martinez, Kock, and Cass (2011) highlighted that the limited exposure to the writing strategies along with the lack of teachers' understanding on the new writing paradigms. Another barrier is highlighted by Kuiken and Vedder (2011), which indicates the curriculum limitation in terms of length and pressure to complete the overall course of one academic year in one or few months which severely impacts the learners' development the relevant skills. The exam focused system of education limits the teacher practices for developing more skills which go beyond the examinations. For instance, Alkubaidi (2014) adds that students memorize the various genres or structures used in writing which limits the students understanding of the whole writing process as it needs the same amount of effort from the teacher and the learners.

As per the study evaluation by Luchini (2010), the writing abilities, as well as difficulties of every student, vary based on the different characteristics in terms of their cognitive and linguistic characteristics. The use of strategies provides the students with the support for improving their writing skills and instilling the interaction element in the written paper. A study by Maghsoudi and Haririan (2013), indicates the utilization of the brainstorming strategy for enhancing the writing performance.

According to Azizi, Nemati, and Estahbanati (2017), the writing performance of the students is associated with their linguistic knowledge which serves as the base for their writing. The understanding of the necessary linguistic knowledge allows them to produce a successful piece of writing. This has also been found in research by Abdollahzadeh (2010) which shows that since students in second or foreign language possess limited or inadequate linguistic knowledge, the generation of writing ideas remain limited. This highlights the use of effective strategies by the teachers for assisting the learners in improving their writing performance.

Lim (2014) demonstrates that the writing performance of the learners is impacted due to their focus on getting the good grades in the examinations. To ensure this, the teacher supplies a model essay which can be memorized or copied in the examination. Disregarding this activity, Williams (2012) highlights that developing the necessary understanding of writing among the students allows them to write independently in a controlled way.

As per the evaluation of Mohseniasl (2014), the writing performance of the students increases when they use pre-writing strategies. The study reveals that the utilization of the pre-writing's strategies provides new ideas and lay out a clear plan for the writing process. Additionally, Bean (2011) adds that pre-writing strategies help the students in overcoming problems such as loss of concentration as they possess the necessary knowledge on the pattern to be adopted. The provision of strategies by the curriculum designers or teachers assist in increasing the students writing confidence, their creativity as well as performance.

The development of the writing skills has been emphasized by various researches, particularly for EFL learners. Research by Graham, McKeown, Kiuvara, and Harris (2012) emphasizes equipping the learners with the necessary knowledge of the writing skills which not only assists them in their academic writing but also proves beneficial in the corporate or professional world.

English has become a dominant language in this modern era for communication with international people. Academic writing in the second language mainly focuses on specific language features and teaching practices. The results clearly show that the writing of students is directly related to cohesion and coherence. These findings tend to provide possible implications for the textual aspect of academic writing in the second language, which supports the goal of the educator (Deraney, 2015). The lexical and grammatical devices, used by the second language writers, demonstrate a similar pattern of the textual features. Reflecting upon the increased usage of the English language and with Saudi Arabia aiming to compete with international academic standards, it is imperative for the students to develop effective writing skills for meeting the set standard. Moreover, the development of the writing skills will also assist the students in understanding their own learning process as well as to control their learning.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effects of writing strategies on the writing performance of Saudi students. Seventy-four female undergraduate students who were aged between 21-25 years were recruited for the study. The inclusion criteria also included that the recruited participants must have Arabic as their first language were recruited. All these participants signed a consent form agreeing to volunteer as subjects of this research. Initially, Saudi undergraduates from two different institutes in King Abdulaziz University (KAU) were targeted to be included in the sample. Both groups in the sample were from the English Department; the first was from the College of Education and the second was from the KAU's main campus. However, the data could not be collected from the English Department, KAU's main campus due to time constraints. Therefore, only one sample from the English Department in the College of Education was used.

Questionnaires were used to gather information from the participants. Demographic information which was inclusive of the age, language background and proficiency level of each participant was collected. Additionally, behavioral information; such as the writing strategies used by the participants (Dörnyei, 2009), was gathered through these questionnaires. The participants were given two writing prompts for writing an essay to gauge their writing performance. The writing samples of the participants were typed into the computer to eradicate all the possibility of bias on the students writing skills by the researcher. Jacobs's (1981) rating

scale was adopted for evaluating the writing scores of the students, which shows that the writing effectiveness varies from reader to reader. English Teachers were chosen to rate the writing prompts written by the students. After this, a discussion between the researcher and teacher took place.

It is essential to note that the accuracy of such questionnaires may be compromised due to the variability of reliable responses from the participants. Since this study was restricted by time constraints, it was vital to choose an efficacious and effective instrument. By reviewing the steps of the creators of the instruments, one can gain insight and awareness of how reliable and valid these instruments are by the explanation given as to why these particular items were chosen for inclusion in the questionnaires.

The questionnaire utilized was namely the writing strategy questionnaire. This is also referred to as Petri and Czár's (2003) questionnaire and is utilized to determine the writing strategies employed by the volunteers in this study. This instrument is built on Flower and Hayes' (1981) cognitive model of first language processing in addition to articles pertinent to second language skills. According to Petri and Czár (2003, p. 188), this instrument was designed to study the "self-reported writing strategies of a large number of non-native speakers of English who write in English for academic purposes". Furthermore, this questionnaire aided in investigating the usefulness and relevance of strategies with regard to assignments for content-related courses (Petri & Czár, 2003). The format of the questionnaire was extracted from Oxford's SILL (Oxford, 1990). The items are organized in line with the structure of the writing process, which consists of pre-writing, writing and revision stages. Descriptive statistics were then used to ascertain the level of strategy use of the participants. These descriptive statistics were applied to the writing strategies, writing performance and writing proficiency.

## **Results**

This study has made use of descriptive statistics to analyze the data. First, the central tendency and dispersion were evaluated for the variable of writing proficiency. These are exhibited in Table 1.

Table 1

*Central Tendency and Dispersion Measures for Writing Proficiency*

<b>Valid</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Missing</b>	<b>0</b>
Mean	28.95
Median	28.00
Mode	25 <sup>a</sup>
Std. Deviation	6.380
Minimum	13
Maximum	44

Where, <sup>a</sup> = various modes, the smallest of which is listed.

On the basis of received median writing scores, students were classified into two categories that denoted two levels of writing proficiency (High, n= 28 vs. Low, n=23). Furthermore, an independent t-test had been used to conduct a comparison between writing strategies, applied by students securing a high writing score and students who had secured low writing scores. It has been identified that the mean for drafting strategies was noted to be the highest (46.79). Furthermore, the mean for before writing strategies are relatively at the lowest level (23.04) (Table 2).

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics for the Writing Strategies Questionnaire*

	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
WSbeforeW	72	23.0447	2.47471
WSWW	64	46.7915	7.08545
WSRV	57	43.1130	6.22312
WSOverall	52	37.8046	4.15224
Valid N (listwise)	52		

Where:

WSbeforeW: Writing strategy Before Writing

WSWW: Writing Strategy while Writing

Writing strategy Reading/ Visuals

Writing strategy overall

On careful observation of the mean values, it may be seen that the majority of the Saudi students included in this study possess a fairly proficient writing level, where the mean was noted to be equal to 28.95 and the standard deviation was noted to be at a value of 6.308.

The students, who demonstrated a higher level of writing proficiency while writing stood at a percentage of 47.3%; whereas students demonstrating a low level of writing proficiency stood at a percentage of 44.6%. Furthermore, the percentages of writing performance of the investigated subjects have been presented in Table 2. A closer analysis and comparison in Table 3 yields the conclusion that both groups are almost at the same levels of writing proficiency. Furthermore, there was no significant association identified between the writing scores, which were obtained by the students. Overall, it was noted that there was no significant difference in the writing strategies that were utilized by the students, who demonstrated a high level of writing proficiency and those students that demonstrated low levels of writing proficiency ( $t = -1.15$ ,  $p = 2.56$ ). When the percentages of the writing performance in terms of the groups were evaluated, the majority of the students i.e. 35 showed high performance; whereas, 33 students demonstrated a low percentage, while 6 students were absent.

Table 3  
*Percentages of the Writing Performances' Groups*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Low	33	44.6	48.5	48.5
	High	35	47.3	51.5	100.0
	Total	68	91.9	100.0	
Missing	System	6	8.1		
Total		74	100.0		

### Discussion

There has been a recent shift in the way writing has been emphasized by EFL teachers, which is reflected through their focus that is now placed on adopting a process-oriented approach rather than a product-oriented approach (Onozawa, 2010). Therefore, it follows that the role of writing strategies in influencing the writing output of EFL students' needs further investigation.

Such writing strategies are inclusive of various forms, such as drafting strategies (while writing) and before-writing strategies (Hussein, 2015). It was discussed in studies that students may opt to employ more than one writing strategy (Piolat & Roussey, 1996). It was suggested by another study that the key differences between writers, having a high level of proficiency and writers having a low level of proficiency, lay in the different writing strategies (Abdullah, 2009). The different writing strategies preferred by these Saudi EFL learners were investigated in this study.

As discussed in the results, it was seen that most of the students from both the groups employed the use of drafting strategies. These groups were inclusive of students who achieved high writing scores as well as the students who achieved low writing scores. It was noted that among these students, the mean for drafting strategies was at a value of 47.86. Studies pertaining to discussions of drafting strategies have highlighted that the core aim of such strategies is to conduct a revision of what has been written (Galbraith & Torrance, 2004). Such revisions may be carried out through effectively re-reading the written material, scrutinizing the vocabulary and grammar of the written material and consulting dictionaries (Onwuegbuzie, 2017).

It was seen that a very low quantity of the students from both the groups employed the use of 'before writing' strategies. Such 'before writing' strategies rely on analyzing the writing requirements, making notes relevant to the topic under consideration, and making rough outlines prior to writing the article (López, Torrance, Rijlaarsdam, & Fidalgo, 2017). Studies investigating the efficacy of 'before-writing' strategies found that they were highly effective in enabling students with behavioral disorders to write proficiently (Lane, Graham, Harris, & Weisenbach, 2006). These studies highlighted that before-writing strategies employed the use of POW strategies, whereby the first step was to 'pick' a topic of interest; the second step was to 'organize notes'; and the third was to use the 'what', 'who' and 'how' strategies to give structure to the piece of writing (Lane et al., 2006).

It was seen that the average writing proficiency for most of the Saudi EFL students in this study was at a fair level, having a mean of 29.95. In order to increase the level of writing proficiency demonstrated by these students, a more frequent use of 'before-writing' strategies may be suggested. However, it was suggested that different writers may be comfortable with different writing strategies; and therefore, it is the responsibility of the teacher to provide individualized writing instructions based on the preferred writing strategies used by each student (Kieft, Rijlaarsdam, Galbraith, & Bergh, 2007). Overall, it was noted that there was no

significant difference in the writing strategies that were utilized by the students, who demonstrated a high level of writing proficiency and those students who demonstrated low levels of writing proficiency. It may suggest that writing strategies do not have a significant influence on writing performances. Conversely, it may additionally suggest that the use of drafting strategies better suited the students who demonstrated greater writing proficiency than the students who demonstrated low writing proficiency. Based on the reviewed literature, it may be effective to employ the use of 'before-writing' strategies to investigate the effects on the writing proficiency of the group of Saudi students, who demonstrated low writing proficiencies. It was additionally seen that these students suffered from a lack of creativity with regard to their written work. It may be attributed to the culture of passivity in Saudi Arabian EFL educational settings, where the only active role is that of the instructor and free-flowing ideas are generally discouraged (Fareh, 2010).

Lack of significant difference in writing performance shown by both the study groups may be indicative of a deeper-lying issue; while the students may be using writing strategies, there may be an ineffective application of those strategies. Furthermore, these students may utilize their writing strategies for writing in Arabic and then translate their written work into English (Ghwaileh, 2014). Since Arabic and English are disparate languages, it follows that the translation of an Arabic text into English would be weaker in structure and competency. Furthermore, there may be an unconscious utilization of writing strategies by these students, where they may have limited to no awareness regarding the key functionality and foundation of writing strategies they may be applying (Baniabdelrahman & Al-shumaimeri, 2014). Due to this, there may be an ineffective application of those writing strategies by the students. It is essential that further investigations should be conducted into how these Saudi students apply the use of their selected writing strategies. Further research is needed to establish a key association between writing strategy application and the writing performance of these students.

Learning of a foreign language/second language (L2) has become a complex task as it is associated with the interplay of a wide range of cognitive, environmental, biological, and psychological factors. Therefore, the majority of the people working in this field have acknowledged the role of effect in L2 acquisition. Severe challenges are likely to be experienced by the L2 as a result of the complexity of mental operations involved in learning a second language leading to fear, reticence, and self-consciousness. Management of the intervention

program makes the teachers anxious about conducting classroom lectures. The results have shown that the self-concepts of these learners are implicated by some other cognitive domains including; learning environment, learning methods, and self-confidence to some extent. The success of learning another language within a classroom is likely to be determined through motivation that is an important element along with language aptitude. This help in shaping the beliefs of students that has a significant impact on the academic performance of the students. Language learning is likely to be achieved through positive and strong learning motivation on the student's part.

The complex words of the second language can be interpreted easily and correctly when the L2 apply their knowledge for producing new word forms for themselves. Awareness regarding the morphological knowledge and language acquisition is much more the constituent morphemes of complex words that are likely to be discriminated either phonologically or semantically. The variability of inflectional morphology results due to the inability of L2 learners to access the specified form due to certain blockage or communication pressure. This type of issue arises prominently during the production phase concerning the variability in the production of L2 learners. Therefore, the present study has conducted a comparative evaluation between the writing strategies and writing performance shown by Saudi EFL students.

The second language (L2) learners face major difficulties in reading and comprehension of the second language. These learners could decode the meaning of texts if they are made aware of the issues associated with morphological knowledge and internal structure of the English language. However, it has been shown that no such efficient way has been derived for improving the skills of reading English among L2 learners. In this regard, grooming awareness among the L2 learners regarding the morphological and derivational structure of English would be helpful for the learners. Considering decoding of the texts, it becomes important to understand the morphemic structure of words.

It is important to understand the formation of the word, which is considered as the key component. The study results have suggested that L2 learners need to gain insights regarding the morphological processing of target language because it increases their vocabulary skills. There is a significant association between mastery of morphological structure and vocabulary acquisition. The present study has assessed the association between abilities of L2 learners to manipulate morphological elements and developing vocabulary size among the L2 learners.

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed to conduct an evaluation of writing performances of Saudi EFL students, based on their selected writing strategies. These learners were divided into two groups, where the first denoted students with high writing proficiency and the second represented those students who had low writing proficiency. It was seen that there was no significant difference between the writing performances of both these groups. Moreover, it was additionally seen that a majority of these students used drafting strategies as compared to ‘before-writing’ strategies. Thus, further use of ‘before-writing’ strategies are encouraged. Additionally, it is important to investigate the association between the way these Saudi learners to apply their preferred writing strategies and their writing performances. The future studies can further extend the scope of the present study by investigating the writing performance of EFL learners other than the region of Saudi Arabia. Similarly, the number of students can also be increased for amplifying the scope of the study. Moreover, future studies can adopt a similar objective by recruiting study participants from more than one institute which helps in expanding the research validity.

### **Notes on the Contributor**

Miriam Allkubaidi is an Assistant Professor in the English Language Institute, King Abdulaziz University. She holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics (TESOL) from Trinity College, University of Dublin, Ireland. She is certified in “Teaching and learning strategies in higher education” from Harvard University, USA. Miriam’s research interests include action research in teaching, second language writing, critical pedagogy, and teacher identity. She has a number of publications including her book entitled “Investigating perceived Challenges in English Language Writing: An action research study in a Saudi university preparatory programme”.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The research has no conflict of interest and is funded through King Abdulaziz University.

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