

The Status of EFL Writing Instruction in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This paper examines the status of writing instruction among EFL learners in Saudi Arabia. It attempted to highlight the current teaching methods and curriculum used to teach EFL writing in Saudi Arabia. Findings revealed that the traditional teaching methods are still used for teaching EFL writing skills in writing classes and the focus is on the form of the written product rather than on the process of writing. The implementation of traditional teaching methods led to students' low achievement in writing skills among Saudi students. There are also other factors responsible for writing difficulties such as cultural factors, sociocultural factors, and psychological factors. The paper concludes with implications and suggestions given to the EFL instructors to enhance students' abilities in writing skills and improve their writing achievements.

Keywords: writing skills, EFL learner, EFL writing instruction, teaching methods

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization and technology, English is regarded as the dominant language of interaction. Therefore, to help the new generation deal with the vast changes and challenges of this age, learning English as the international language has become essential. Since living in the age of information and communication leads people to share their findings or discoveries with other people all over the world, it can emphasize the fact that the ability to communicate thought and concepts effectively in the 21st century depend on written communication. Writing is encoding of a message since we translate our thoughts and feelings into language (Abdollahzadeh & Behroozizad, 2015).

Writing is considered to be a complex, intricate task and the most challenging of all language skills to acquire (Alsamadani, 2010; Mohammad & Hazarika, 2016). It trains students to be more careful in writing, familiarizes students to write according to applicable spelling and punctuation, and improves students' language skills, and cognitive skills. Writing activities make students active in learning activities and stimulate students' skills in stringing words. Moreover, writing teaches students to communicate their ideas and perspectives in written form and apply grammar rules (Faraj, 2015). It is a crucial skill for every student learning a language. Through the mastery of this skill, students are able not only to communicate their thoughts and ideas but also to express their feelings and emotions to others in a written way. Writing in a good way will assist learners to get better jobs as almost all the activities in companies involve writing, for example writing e-mails, reports, or letters. However, writing is a complicated skill for EFL students to master; they have problems related to spelling, organization of ideas, structure, punctuation and others (Sakkir, Rahman, & Salija, 2016). In addition, according to (Idrees, 2017; Alghizzi, 2017, Alghizzi & Alshahrani, 2020) writing has always been considered a challenge for both learners and English language teaching (ELT) practitioners since it is a difficult skill for both native and non-native speakers alike

because it requires writers to maintain a balance of many issues in the process of writing such as content, organization, grammar, purpose, audience, vocabulary and mechanics. In many of teaching English as a foreign Language (EFL) academic context, a learner's success in the target language is measured by his/her capability in writing in that language (Nuruzzaman, Islam, & Shuchi, 2018). According to Fageeh (2011), many EFL students heavily rely on writing as an integral skill to language learning. In Alsamadani's (2010) view, writing in a second/foreign language is even more difficult as it is a complex and challenging process since writers are expected to produce written samples that are syntactically accurate, semantically acceptable and culturally appropriate.

2. Importance of EFL Writing

Barrass (2005) summarized importance of EFL writing for students as follows:

- Writing motivates students to remember: Writing is used as an aid to remember such as making notes as a best way to remember the essentials of a subject, it helps students to concentrate and to learn.
- Writing encourages students to observe: Preparing an accurate description of things observed using five senses assists writers to focus their attention on objects or events.
- Writing stimulates students to think: Writing is used as a tool to capture thoughts since writers may think in a word, scene, or a picture in their imagination and then use words to reflect their thoughts. Therefore, writing is a creative process and enlarges the scope of imagination.
- Writing helps students to communicate: Writing is considered to be one of the most crucial tools in communication. For example, in preparing letters, reports or any other written interaction there is more time for thoughts for deciding what to say.

Harmer (2007) mentioned other reasons for the importance of teaching writing as follows:

- Language development: The mental activity learners go through in order to construct appropriate written texts are all part of the learning experience.
- Learning style: For many learners, producing language in a slower way is something they appreciate. Writing provides time and ease for learners more than face-to-face interaction does.

3. Writing in a Foreign Language

In the 21st century, the world has become a global community in which English has dominated as an international language. As a result, many EFL learners around the world seek to enhance their writing skills in order to satisfy their needs and cope with future careers. EFL writing has become a basic requirement for participation and interaction with the global community in which English is the prevalent language. Thus, learners who are proficient in EFL writing will have the ability to express themselves efficiently and have more privilege when applying for future jobs compared to other peers. As a result, writing is no longer seen as an option for EFL learners (Hussein, 2015; Alammar, 2019).

Like the other language skills (listening, speaking and reading), writing is one of the cornerstones on which learning English as a foreign language is built. In addition, it provides an essential tool for exploring, organizing and refining ideas (Lane et. al., 2008). Writing is one of the basic language skills which are crucial for successful language acquisition. Developing EFL learners' competence to express their ideas through the written language has become a learning objective of its own. That is

why EFL teachers and educators acknowledge the importance of enhancing learners' writing skills (Hussein, 2015; Alghizzi & Alshahrani, 2020)

However, learning to write in the foreign language is one of the most painstaking tasks which EFL learners encounter and one that few of them are said to fully master. This may be attributed to the fact that writing in a foreign language is a complex, challenging and difficult process which involves cognitive (linguistic competence of composing), meta-cognitive (awareness of purpose, audience and style), social (being communicative and interactive with peers and the target reader) and affective (being expressive of feelings as well as ideas) factors (Qian, 2007, Alghizzi, 2017; Alammar, 2019). In addition, writing is a productive skill in which learners need to use all the means they have such as syntactic, lexical, rhetorical and discoursal knowledge to perform certain writing tasks. Thus, to write coherently, fluently and appropriately in English is seen by Nunan (1999) and Tangpermpoon (2008) as the most difficult skill to acquire. It takes considerable time and effort to become a skillful EFL writer. That is why writing instruction is assuming an increasing role in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) (Hussein, 2015). Moreover, writing inspires logical thinking, pushes students to focus their attention and sort out their ideas, and improves their ability to summarize, analyze and criticize. Secondly, writing enhances learning by thinking in, and reflecting on the target language (Luchini, 2010). In addition, students should utilize all the means they have, such as lexical, syntactic, discoursal and rhetorical knowledge, to fulfill certain writing objectives. (Yan, 2010, Alammar, 2019).

Learning to write in the foreign language is one of the most difficult tasks which EFL learners encounter and one that few of them are said to be fully perfect. It is an intricate process which causes problems to EFL learners as it entails using a set of mental processes rather than only using the formal structures of the language itself. It requires not only lexical and syntactic knowledge of vocabulary and grammar but also the ability to generate and organize ideas and thoughts in a way that can be coherently and clearly communicated to a potential reader (Quintero, 2008).

Alsamadani (2010) stated that writing includes multiple skills such as identification of thesis statements, writing supporting details, reviewing and editing. This complex process makes it rather difficult to teach it. The difficulty of teaching/learning of this skill is due to the fact that it includes a comprehensive knowledge of grammar, suitable vocabulary, writing mechanics, organizational skills, style, and imagination (Javid & Umer, 2014). Furthermore, it is less spontaneous because it involves a process, from organizing ideas in the mind to setting the final draft on paper (Samaranayake, 2017).

4. Discussion

The Saudi Ministry of Education has implemented the English language as a compulsory unit for all levels starting from the primary schools to universities (Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013; Alharbi, 2017). English language has become the means of instruction in Saudi tertiary educational system for both English major and non-English major courses. Thus, English proficiency is required for admission to university degrees (Al-Asmari & Khan, 2014). The Ministry of Education aims to enhance learners' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills so that they will be able to communicate effectively using English Language (Liton, 2012). Moreover, tertiary institutions in Saudi Arabia present foundation English courses as part of their curriculum. However, these courses are not sufficient to make the students able to manage discipline-oriented courses at the university level (Liton, 2013). Despite the Saudi Ministry of Education' effort and support, researchers claim that English teaching in Saudi Arabia has not yet achieved its goals and teaching methodologies implemented in English classes do not meet the desired results (Rahman & Alhaisoni 2013; Ahmad, 2014; Mohammad & Hazaric, 2016; Albahri, Yang & Moustakim 2018).

Most elementary schools in Saudi Arabia, and the Arab world in general, teach writing as a subject isolated from other language skills and rely on rote learning- a memorization technique based on repetition- to master it. In writing tasks, students are usually left alone to revise and/or make drafts of their work, without receiving essential guidelines or feedback. For example, teachers' comments on students' written work are largely limited to the surface aspects such as mechanics, grammar, and vocabulary. This practice could contribute to enhancing students' self-reliance. However, scant focus is placed on the other important writing strategies such as planning, generating ideas and revising (Alammar,2019). Therefore, many of them seem unmotivated, inactive, and not interested in learning (Alzahrani & Ismaeil, 2017).

In Saudi Arabia writing is a basic component of EFL instruction. However, at all colleges, the viewpoint of writing has been that writing is producing, involving transmission of the writer's message and clarifying it for others. As a result, the teaching of writing has emphasized the written product. Writing itself has almost always been introduced as an evaluative purpose, causing high writing apprehension for most students. This has been heightened by the fact that feedback on students' writing is basically evaluative in nature and teacher-based. Accordingly, there have been some problems in writing both in quality and quantity as well as writing attitudes of most students. They lack their own ideas in writing and apprehend a lot for writing (Jahin, 2012; Ansari, 2012; Ahamed, 2016; Albahri, Yang, &Moustakim, 2018). Furthermore, writing in English in Saudi Arabia is highly limited in public primary, intermediate and secondary schools. Students are generally asked to write guided and/or controlled paragraphs. In writing classes, the focus is on the form of the written product rather than on the process of writing. Paragraphs are written in one draft and grammatical and punctuation errors are corrected by the teacher. Yet, when reaching the tertiary level, they face the challenge of writing freely in English as they are expected to 'write well-organized paragraphs and essays' to pursue their academic study. Thus, students suffer a poor writing level of English and a risk of repeating courses since most tests are in written form (Jahin, 2012).

4.1 Factors Affecting Writing Skills in the Saudi Context

Recent studies (Sawalmeh, 2013; Javid & Umer, 2014; Siddiqui, 2015 Ahamed, 2016; Mohammad and Hazarica, 2016; Al Zahrani & Ismaiel, 2017) investigated writing problems of Saudi EFL students in general. The results of these studies are almost identical. They show that Saudi EFL students are very weak in writing skills and commit lots of mistakes in their writings. Studies such as (Al-khairy, 2013; Mohammad and Hazarica, 2016; Alzahrani & Ismaeil 2017; Ahamed, 2016; Alfares, 2019; Alammar, 2019) have shown some students' major problems in writing in Saudi Arabia. For example, students do not pay great attention to spelling, punctuation or grammar mistakes, using appropriate lexical items, content, cohesion and organization of ideas. They have serious problems in their writing due to many factors (ALsowat, 2017; Othman, 2019).

4.1.1 Teaching Methods and Curriculum

Traditional teaching of writing in foreign-language classrooms appears as the teaching of basic sentence-level writing skills. A student is given an example sentence whose meaning is explained; then the grammar pattern is taught; finally, the student is asked to write similar sentences using different content. At the intermediate level and above, the student is given an example paragraph to read; the paragraph is explained; finally, the student should write a similar paragraph about a different subject (Quian, 2010).

Liton (2013), Al-Seghayer (2014), and Ahmad (2014) emphasized that Saudi teachers still follow traditional methods of teaching and most of them still believe in the grammar-translation method that considers grammar as the most crucial aspect of the language to master and focuses on memorization of grammatical rules. Additionally, Al-Seghayer (2015) and Alghizzi (2017) stated that grammar-translation method has been largely employed in Saudi Arabia's education. Students are passively attentive to their teachers' explanations of grammar, as the center of instruction, or presentation of vocabulary. Then, the teachers instruct their students to memorize words and grammatical rules and subject the students to drills in reading passages aloud, translating words and sentences, and copying the taught vocabulary and other newly introduced language items from the blackboard into their notebooks (Al-Seghayer, 2015; Alzahrani & Ismaeil 2017).

The current practice of teaching writing skills in Saudi EFL classrooms focuses mainly on the final production of the writing task alongside the linguistic features and sentence level (Alnufaie & Grenfell, 2012; Mohammad & Hazarica, 2016). Saudi teachers emphasize linguistic accuracy, which is at the forefront of their instruction, as well as proper grammar, accurate spelling, meaningful punctuation, and range in vocabulary and sentence structures. This practice reflects a traditional teaching and product-based approach in which Saudi teachers a) eliminate any interaction between the teacher and students or between students; b) approach writing as a linear process in which students are expected to follow fixed steps, such as pre-write, write, and re-write; and c) do not teach students to edit or revise, meaning the students show little flexibility in changing their original ideas. Furthermore, this approach involves several types of writing, including guidance, control, and assistance with questions to answer, a model to follow, an outline to expand, an incomplete piece of writing to complete, or an incorrect text to correct. Writing instructors also tend to ask students to write without planning or collecting related information. Further, these instructors provide the students with only authoritative feedback and minimal commentary, and are overwhelmed by the task of providing feedback and correcting students' writing. The instructors neglect the benefits of teacher-student conferencing and peer feedback and avoid utilizing various writing activities, such as planning, revising and editing. Thus, writing instruction in Saudi EFL classrooms overstressed the final writing product and prioritizes accuracy and linearity (Al-Seghayer, 2015; Alharbi, 2015; Mohammad & Hazarica, 2016; Ahmed, 2019; Alfares, 2019; Alammar, 2019; Alghizzi and Alshahrani, 2020). Regarding the writing skill, researchers (e.g., Al-Khasawneh, 2010; Mourtaga 2010, Javid & Umer, 2014, Ahamed, 2016; Ababneh, 2017; Alfares; 2019, Alammar, 2019, Alghizzi and Alshahrani, 2020), emphasized that some of the previously mentioned techniques were the reasons why Saudi EFL learners' written productions are not proficient. Grami (2010) also pointed out that although Saudi students study English for six years before joining any university, only a few of them are able to show satisfactory performance in the university entrance examinations.

Curriculum constraints appear in not using the quality standards, including those for teaching and learning, upon which to construct educational policies and applications and which require educational responsibility. Moreover, there is a failure to use a global standard for measures and in evaluating the qualifications of English teachers, which should be employed as the basis for hiring them. As of now, the only qualification for being hired as an English teacher is holding a bachelor's degree in English without any competency to teach the subject. The currently employed English textbooks emphasize conveying knowledge at the expense of teaching skills. Specifically, the content seems to be concerned with presenting the information to learners, rather than giving them ample opportunities to practice the given information and materials. To put it into perspective, because of the type of English textbooks utilized, Saudi English learners are exposed to grammar, vocabulary, and reading passages, but they have little exposure to communicative situations (Al-Seghayer, 2014). He added that a close analysis of the Saudi EFL curriculum reveals various constraints that impede

the process of teaching EFL, including limited time for instruction, a lack of learning material resources, crowded classes, and lack of technology.

4.1.1.2 Learner-centeredness Versus Teacher-Centeredness Approaches

According to Richards and Schmidt (2013), the concept of learner-centeredness is a belief that attention to the nature of the students should be central to all aspects of language teaching including planning, teaching and evaluation. It aims at creating a learning environment which de-emphasizes the role of the teacher and focuses on process over product; students take control over their own learning (Weimar, 2002; Fahtaeus 2013; Castellano, 2016). Thus, learner-centeredness entails delegating more responsibilities to the students and enables them to play a more active role in making decisions and in participating in the teaching-learning process. Sarigoz (2008) stated that the center of teaching should be shifted from the whole class to each individual learner in order to enhance foreign language acquisition in the class since critical thinking and problem solving are crucial for learners' knowledge in general and provide a valuable base for foreign language tasks. Furthermore, Alghizzi and Alshahrani, (2020); Alammar (2019), Wali (2017) and Al-Seghayer (2015) indicated that in the Saudi teaching context, there should be a transition from the traditional didactic teacher-centered approach to a more student-centered approach in schools and other education institutes to promote the quality of the written products of students. On the other hand, the concept of teacher-centeredness is a traditional approach whereby authority and control remain particularly and almost exclusively in the hands of teachers and teaching is based on passive lecture format learning (Weimer, 2002; Garvila, 2013; Fahraeus, 2013). According to Richards and Schmidt (2013), a teacher-centered approach in which decisions are carried out by the teacher based on his/her priorities. The teacher tries to instill knowledge into the minds of passive students. Thus, many students become disinterested in learning (Weimer, 2002; Garvila, 2013). Saudi students like most Arab students and other EFL learners in general usually have great difficulty in their writing skills (Al-Sawlha & Chow, 2012, Xu & Zhang, 2015; Mohammad & Hazarica, 2016). They have major problems in writing such as spelling, punctuation or grammar mistakes. In Saudi Arabia and the Arab world in general, teaching writing depends on rote memorization to master the skill and the strategy of student-centered teaching is not applied (Mohammad &Hazarica, 2016; Alghizzi, 2017; Albahri, Yang, & Moustakim, 2018). students need to be involved in the writing task in order to make the learning experience of great value. It has been observed that students are not well equipped with study skills and useful learning styles and in most classes the strategy of student-centered teaching is neglected (Alzahrani & Ismaeil 2017, Alammar, 2019, Alghizzi & Alshahrani, 2020). Therefore, students need to be involved in the writing task in order to make the learning experience of great value (Alzahrani & Ismaeil 2017, Alammar, 2019, Alghizzi & Alshahrani, 2020). Ahmad (2014) stated that EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia have a dominant position; they talk most of the time while students are mostly silent and they are not encouraged to participate in the class since the teacher-centered approach dominates the scene.

The teacher spends most of the time explaining and clarifying language items and writing on the board whereas the students sit and listen, read, or copy (Alharbi, 2017). In addition, Ahmad (2014) indicated that Saudi teaching style centers on teachers as the core of the learning process which explains the trend towards lecturing most of the time. Furthermore, a large percentage of Saudi students have a problem in writing paragraphs which represents in structure of paragraph, organization of a paragraph and linking of sentences together (Mohammad & Hazarica, 2016; Alsowat, 2017, Idrees, 2017).

4.1.1 Cultural Factors

Many writing problems can be attributed to the cultural resistance and familiarity issues. Shukri (2014) pointed out that Saudi students are likely to be hesitant and reluctant to write on certain topics that are unfamiliar or simply considered taboo in their culture such as political and religious topics. Cultural awareness is a neglected feature of Saudi English curriculum. Instructors neglect incorporating the cultural elements of English into EFL lessons because some EFL instructors, parents, and students consider teaching cultural values as a form of cultural invasion. As a result, local cultural values are only included in English textbooks, especially in public schools which teach English without its cultural base (Ansari 2012; Al-Seghayer, 2015, Alammar,2019). Yet the embedded cultural differences between Saudi and Western people remain obvious in Saudi students' continuing reluctance to engage with the contested topics of politics, religion, and other 'taboo' topics (Alammar, 2019). Nonetheless, Hyland (2003) explains that cultural differences are reasons for writing differences, and that there are many ways to form meanings.

4.1.2 Sociocultural Factors

Using the first language in the classroom has been criticized as it perpetuates students' tendency to translate their thoughts from the first language into the target language (Richards & Rodgers 2014, Alammar, 2019) and ultimately gives rise to deficiencies in learning the target language. Nevertheless, this situation prevails in many Saudi EFL classrooms causing the Arabic language to interfere extensively during the teaching of English (Alhawsawi, 2014; Al-Seghayer, 2014). The lack of exposure to and inappropriate practice of English is primarily due to the dominance of Arabic language in Saudi Arabia. Khan (2011) stated that the English language is treated purely as an academic subject studied in schools, and most Saudis communicate with classmates, families and friends through their native language. Alharbi (2015) added that the absence of practicing English outside the classroom is a major obstacle for the fluent assimilation of the language. AlSeghayer (2015) pointed out that a visitor to an English class in Saudi Arabia would notice that Arabic and translation into Arabic dominates the communications between teachers and students.

4.1.3 Psychological Factors

There are a considerable number of psychological factors which impact EFL learners, such as writing anxiety and apprehension, students' motivation, and self-confidence (Alammar, 2019).

4.1.3.1 Anxiety and Apprehension

Writing anxiety is known to negatively impact learners' academic achievement and motivation. Anxious learners frequently choose not to write with other students as they fear the potentially negative results or failures of such interactions (Alammar, 2019). Instructors teach writing composition in the light of a set of rules students should follow when writing paragraphs or essays. Likewise, EFL writing instructors evaluate students' written compositions in the light of the models of correct paragraphs or essays provided by them to their students to copy. Besides, the emphasis of evaluation throughout is on whether students use correct forms and avoid errors of mechanics or grammar, rather than on content, organization and cohesion. This increased students' feeling of apprehension when involved in writing tasks or when asked to submit assignments in written form. This can be best understood with the fact that examinations of all subjects require students to write lengthy essays or passages which adds to the huge responsibility of the EFL writing instructors who, in turn, exercise more pressure on students to produce correct writing compositions. All these factors make writing a highly challenging and demanding skill and create within students' negative

affective attitudes towards writing (Jahin, 2012; Ansari, 2012; Ahamed, 2016; Albahri, Yang, & Moustakim, 2018; Alammar, 2019).

4.1.3.2 Motivation and self-confidence

Motivation is recognized as a critical factor for learner achievement within academic contexts (Hulleman & Barron, 2015). Research shows that EFL learners' attitudes play a vital role in language learning improvement since writing as a complex process requires much more than just teaching in class. Therefore, it is strongly maintained that the positive attitudes of EFL language learners play a significant role in making this difficult task (Alammar, 2019). While motivation plays a very essential role in developing any skill, lack of motivation is one of the most important factors for the poor performance of Arab EFL learners in writing assignments (Mohammad and Hazarica, 2016, Nazem, 2018). Saudi students' lack of intrinsic motivation for learning and speaking English extends beyond the language classroom (Litton, 2012). They have no real purpose for or opportunity to use English outside of the classroom. Thus, they do not pay serious attention to learning the language as a subject matter. Their efforts are devoted to acquiring the minimal competency needed to pass to the next grade level and pay no attention to other aspects of learning. As a result, they tend to memorize grammatical rules, passages of written English, and vocabulary (AlSeghayer, 2014, Mohammad and Hazarica, 2016).

Self-confidence is inherent to learners' writing improvement. Learners with strong confidence in their ability to learn assimilate faster than those with less confidence in their capacities. A number of methods are available to stimulate learner self-confidence such as collaborative learning and peer feedback which can increase motivation and self-confidence while also reducing anxiety (AlSeghayer, 2014; Faraj, 2015; Alammar, 2019).

5. Conclusions

The above discussion has illustrated that the low English language competence among Saudi students in general and writing skills in particular can be attributed to various interrelated factors such as learner-related variables (e.g., motivation and anxiety) to sociocultural variables (e.g., mother tongue influence, culture, and society). Moreover, EFL instruction variables (i.e., teacher practices, the curriculum, and the teaching method) and other factors attributed to obstacles in the educational system in Saudi Arabia. For example, a lack of teacher training, large number of students in the classroom, a lack of technology, outdated and traditional teaching methods, textbooks that emphasize more on rote learning and memorization and lack of a learner-centered approach. Writing proficiency level in Saudi Arabia is expected to remain at its current level unless all relevant factors are taken into consideration. The school environment must be improved and greater emphasis should be placed on teaching methods and teacher preparation programs. Curricular objectives and teachers' quality improvement must be taken into account. Furthermore, implementation of strategy-based writing instruction in Saudi EFL classrooms to empower students to conceive writing as a recursive process. Teachers should motivate students by creating a learner-centered writing environment in which they are actively and safely engaged in the writing process and writing skill courses should be taught to students in nontraditional ways as a process not just as a product. Moreover, collaborative writing and peer/teacher feedback should be implemented in the teaching/learning process to heighten students' motivation and lower anxiety levels among them.

6. Recommendations

The current study provides the following implications for EFL teachers:

- EFL teachers should use modern teaching methods/approach for writing instruction

- Teacher and peer scaffolding should be an integral part of EFL writing instruction in Saudi Arabia.
- EFL teachers should empower students by creating a learner-centered environment in which they are actively and safely engaged in the writing process.
- EFL teachers should provide students with a clear idea of why they write, what they write about and how they write.

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