

Writing Curriculum at Tertiary Level in the Arab World: Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract

This paper investigates EFL writing challenges in the Arab world. For the most part, these challenges are given impetus by the use of a writing curriculum that does not reflect recent developments into the linguistic theory. In that connection, the paper advocates the view that learners' writing problems can best be addressed by the adoption of the genre approach to writing because, unlike the existing language-oriented curriculum, it introduces writing as an activity where the students can write with a communicative purpose rather than practising it as an exercise in English grammar. An examination of the writing courses in four Arab universities has revealed that most of these courses are a mere exercise in the lexico-grammatical structure of English. This has been argued to provide lip service to writing education at tertiary level.

Keywords: Writing curriculum, Genre, context, Writing Syllabus, lexico-grammatical structure, Writing Courses

1. Introduction

Writing is a most difficult skill to practice for both professional writers and students. To substantiate this claim, consider the statements made by two scholars concerning their own writing obsession and the difficulty experienced by their students respectively. According to Widdowson (1983:35) “writing is an irksome activity and an ordeal to be avoided whenever possible”. Raimes (1983:258), on the other hand, observes that when writing, her ESL students “... chew their pencils, shuffle their feet, sigh, groan, and stretch...” - all are symptoms of the difficulties they experience when they are required to perform a writing assignment. Thus, even in academic institutions where English is spoken natively writing is considered a matter of great importance. For instance, not only do these institutions include a good deal of writing courses in their curriculum, they also established writing centers to prepare learners for all types of writing needed for academic and non-academic assignments. It is unfortunate that communication skills have generally been neglected by a number of tertiary institutions in the Arab world. A close examination of the English curriculum in many universities would reveal that English departments concentrate more on content or knowledge courses and less on skills courses as if curriculum developers are of the Chomskyan view reported in Widdowson (1979:44) that “... once competence is acquired, performance will take care of itself”, bearing in mind that “competence” itself might not be acquired.

Most writing courses in a number of Arab universities seem to advocate writing practices characteristic of the 1950s and 1960s; namely, controlled composition and current-traditional rhetoric respectively, where manipulation of the lexico-grammatical information takes precedence over demonstration of writing skills. Such writing focus has for a long time been criticized for being pedagogically weak owing to the insufficient attention it paid to the writing stages (Freedman et al, 1983). Moreover, Raimes (1983:261) argues that when the student-writers manipulate the linguistic components of writing, they do no more than “lock themselves into a semantic and rhetorical prison” – for “grammatical accuracy and rhetorical formulae”, the argument goes, “have little force if the piece of writing is not expressing the writers clearly and forcefully with no involved imagination”. Even the relatively more recent process approach to writing has been argued to operate “in a socio-cultural vacuum” since it neglects the “socio-cultural context” of writing (Horowitz, 1986:144).

The significance of writing emanates from the fact that it is a major and sometimes the only means to assess the students' performance. But it is generally observed that teachers readily conceive of students' (written examination) answers as "poor", "unintelligible", "ungrammatical", "lacking in proper paragraphing", etc. To date, a considerable body of research has been devoted to the writing problems experienced by Arab EFL learners at tertiary level (e.g. Al-Khuweileh and Al-Shoumali, 2000; Al-Hazmi and Schofield, 2007; Fitze and Glasgow, 2009). It is quite noticeable that neither teachers' comments on the students' writing nor researcher papers have addressed the relevance of the writing syllabus to the immediate academic and future career needs of the students. English Departments have taken such writing forms as the paragraph and essay for granted, paying no attention to two legitimate questions:

1. Why should Arab EFL learners be trained to write paragraphs and essays?
2. Do these writing forms have anything to do with the immediate and future needs of the students?

2. Conceptual Background

Writing education has greatly benefited from Hymes' theory of communicative competence. Theorists are particularly concerned about the role of "context" in writing. In principle, the term "context" is conceived to be the aggregate of linguistic, situational, social and cultural variables that surround linguistic units such as the text, discourse, utterances, etc. (Enkvist, 1974). Context is also akin to what Halliday (1979:34) calls the social aspects of language use which comprises the establishment of familiarity and distance, boundary maintenance, personal interaction and settings of language use. One such writing concept that has been given impetus by the general context theory is "writing genres". Since this paper contends that the "genre" concept provides solutions to the writing problems at tertiary level in the Arab universities, this section will attempt a detailed review of its defining features.

Generally speaking, the term "genre" is defined as a social, dynamic and interactive process that emphasizes the nature of language as "a social action" (Mauranen, 1998, n. pag.). Berkenkotter (1995), as cited in Mauranen, 1998, n. pag.), associates "genre" with five defining features. First, it is conceived to be dynamic in that it changes over time in line with its 'users' sociocognitive needs'. Second, "genre" is situational; viz. its driving force is embedded in the language users' "participation in the communicative activities of daily professional life". Third, it is dually-structured in the sense that as

language users get involved in “professional activities”, they constitute and at the same time reproduce “social structures in professional, institutional and organizational contexts”. Fourth, “genre” is community-specific, i.e. it establishes disciplinary conventions employed by a given discourse community. Finally, “genre” is both form- and content-sensitive. In other words, genre knowledge includes “a sense of what content is appropriate to a particular purpose in a particular situation at a particular point in time”.

Where writing is concerned, there does not seem to be consensus among theorists concerning the number and types of writing genres. Table (1) below illustrates writing genres as prescribed by two different inventories:

Table (1): Writing Genres

Mauranen (1998).	Massi (2001)
Press reportage	A letter to the English teacher
Editorials	Sending a letter abroad
Reviews	Writing a letter to the author of a story
Religion	Email writing
Skills and hobbies	Film
Biographies	Providing an alternative ending
Official documents	An introduction to the anthology of short stories
Academic prose	Journal writing
Fiction	Personal anthology
Humor	The writing portfolio
Personal letters	
Professional letters	

Regardless of the differences between these two models, so to speak, they have the potential to provide a solid basis for successful writing programs. Such genres as academic prose, fiction, letter writing, email writing, review writing, journal writing in both columns can be incorporated into the EFL writing syllabus. The rationale for so doing emanates from the fact that they empower the students to write with a purpose. Other things being equal, the students will be made to realize that they are acquiring the disciplinary discourse associated with their subject fields. This type of language awareness is proposed to inform of who the language users are “... and whom they want to be identified with and, importantly, who they don’t want to be identified with” (Hewings et al, 2007: 243). Thus, the students will eventually realize that academic writing does not always function as a tool that teachers employ to assess their performance (cf. Curry and Hewings, 2003).

Moreover, [Sanders et al \(1985, n. pag.\)](#) list five reasons for the need of both academic and non-academic writing genres as summarized in Table (2) below:

Table (2): Writing Reasons

Reasons for Writing	Examples
Writing to capture feelings	To express feelings
Writing to make life easier	To organize thoughts, to remember ideas, communicate with immediate family members who are not available at the moment, budgets, lists and lesson plans
Writing to fulfill obligations	Response to notes, task-delegating memos, and long-overdue letters.
Communication with others outside of the immediate environment	Letters to parents, extended family band friends, letters to insurance company, doctors and hotels.
Writing to gain access to services, institutions and jobs.	Participants fill out forms.

In the light of their own ethnographic study alongside many other studies that led to the classification of writing reasons just quoted, [Sanders et al](#) were able to report four implications for writing instruction. First, in order for teachers to motivate their students to write, they “should provide students with real authentic writing experiences which speak to their social background, interest, and level of expertise”. Of course, this implication can be addressed to course designers and EFL departments as well. Second, writing assignments should not be restricted to few genres; viz. they can cover “a wide range of writing activities, from diaries and journals to letters and memos ...”. Third, approaching writing from a variety of perspectives frees the students from considering it an assessment tool. Fourth, students should be encouraged to address their writing to audience other than the language teacher, e.g. friends, parents, newspapers, etc.

3. Writing Pedagogy in Arab Universities

This study intends to apply content analysis to the existing writing syllabus in some Arab universities in the light of the literature reviewed above. Only the top twenty-five Arab universities (according to the Spanish Webometrics of classifying world universities; Feb 2010 edition) have been included in the study, provided that they have posted at least short descriptions of the writing courses on their websites. This procedure has eliminated twenty-one universities from the survey, leaving four

universities only to provide data for the study. Table (3) below illustrates the writing courses in the four universities (detailed description of each course is available on the websites provided in the Appendix):

Table (3): Writing Courses in Some Arab Universities

	Universities			
	King Saud University (Saudi Arabia)	Birzeit University (Palestine)	Qatar University (Qatar)	An-Najah National University (Palestine)
Colleges	Arts	Arts	Arts and Sciences	Arts
Writing courses	Basic Language Skills Composition (1) Composition (2) Essay Writing Advanced Writing	Writing (1) Writing (2)	Essay Writing (1) Essay Writing (2) Expository Writing Professional Writing	Writing and Research Advanced Writing

Despite the differences in the titles of the courses, most of them focus either on paragraph or essay writing. These have been argued in (1) above to provide only lip service to the students writing needs since a close examination would show that they reduce writing to a mere exercise in the English grammar. In their daily academic and non-academic routines, students can be perceived to write sms, emails, CVs, notices, lecture notes, responses to online interlocutors in chat rooms, business letters of all types, answers to exam questions, etc. These writing routines are not directly related to the writing training that the students receive in the classroom on the basis of the writing syllabus in Table (3).

This paper argues particularly that “paragraph writing” should not be emphasized as an end in itself. In other words, paragraphing is a writing strategy that writers employ to organize their message. In this sense, the paragraph is not, nor can it be, a natural mode of communication, viz. even when a writer understands that a single paragraph suffices to enquire about, say, certain conference information, they would never put it as “*I would like to write a paragraph to the conference committee”. Emphatically, it is not the intention of this paper to detract from paragraph writing; rather, it supports an initiative to incorporate it into the teaching of the specific writing genre.

Despite the paragraphing competence of some graduates, it is generally observed that they could not write CVs, application letters, etc. not even in a least professional way. What is more, it is generally the case that faculty laments the poor written examination answers not in terms of content but rather in terms of textual organization. Sure enough, the students have not been trained in this form of academic writing; they could not, therefore, be expected to master these “writing conventions as part of learning their subject knowledge” (Curry and Lillis, 2003:3).

It is reported in (1) above that to date researchers have investigated learners' writing competence (and incompetence) but these research attempts could not decide if paragraph writing best serves the students' immediate or future writing needs. It is uncertain whether the teachers, students and writing researchers are aware of the writing reasons summarized in Table (2) above. It seems to be the case that writing courses are incorporated into the syllabus because they are part of the requirements needed to earn a degree.

Advocates of the dominating writing instruction trends as shown in Table (2) above might wish to argue that sentence and paragraph writing would provide the student-writer with a variety of organizational skills that they could employ in, say, writing coherent examination answers. While there is some logic in this argument, it can still be defective in at least two ways. First, the student-writer is not clear about the communicative value of the writing tasks he/she is required to perform. In most cases the writing themes, e.g. *private and public schools in California, American social security system*, etc. could not sensibly be expected to enrich the students' academic writing skills in the Arabian context. Second, such a kind of implicit teaching of academic writing, so to speak, would render the students accountable for writing tasks that they have not been sufficiently trained to perform. Indeed, it is universally acknowledged that "... academic writing is often invisible dimension of the curriculum, that is, the rules or conventions governing what counts as academic writing are often assumed to be part of the common sense knowledge students have ..." (Curry and Lillis, 2003:2). This state of affairs can be argued to put EFL students at disadvantage since the little input they received during pre-college stage could not help them build sufficient "common sense knowledge" to deal with the functions of academic writing at college level.

It is unfortunate that English departments in the Arab world irrationally copy British and American universities concerning what to appear in the curriculum, viz. they accumulate their programs with linguistics and literature courses, leaving little room for skills courses in general and writing courses in particular. Thus, despite their attempt to model themselves on the American and British systems, the Arab universities failed to incorporate the new developments into the linguistic theory, i.e. genre theory, in their writing curriculum. What is more, the few writing courses summarized in Table (3) indicate that

Arab universities do not treat writing as a matter of considerable importance as the British and American universities do despite the fact that English is taught as L1 in the latter.

4. Conclusion

Research into the writing of Arab EFL learners indicates that it suffers from a variety of lexicogrammatical and rhetorical problems. Such findings reveal two facts about writing education in the Arab universities. First, it assumes a bottom-up approach to writing in that for the most part it focuses on the manipulation of linguistic information as a necessary component of effective writing. Second, the existing writing curriculum does not treat writing as a communicative event, i.e. it, thus, reduces writing to a mere exercise in the English vocabulary and grammar. Both aspects of writing curriculum can be argued to jeopardize the acquisition of composing competence in a number of respects. First, such linguistic information as vocabulary and grammar are open-ended phenomenon. So it is unlikely that learners reach the end of the continuum to be able to compose satisfactorily, and even when they succeed in acquiring enough vocabulary and grammar, they cannot be expected to excel in writing because the writing skills exceed learners' linguistic competence. Krashen (1984:25) maintains that if the student-writers are "able to master all the rules of punctuation, spelling, grammar, and style that linguists have discovered and described", then their reward would be a Ph.D in linguistics but they would never be competent in writing. Second, by focusing on paragraph writing, English departments ignore the students' need for writing as a communicative event. Needless to say, learners do not normally communicate in "paragraphs" even when their written product consists of a single paragraph. Instead, they communicate using various genres in which the paragraph is simply a component. In conclusion, if these developments are not incorporated into the writing curriculum, writing will continue to be a challenging skill for Arab EFL learners.

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Appendix

Links to English Courses in Some Arab Universities

King Saud University

College of Arts

<http://colleges.ksu.edu.sa/Arabic%20Colleges/Arts/English/englishdepartment1/Pages/BAinarts.aspx>

An-Najah University

Faculty of Arts

<http://www.najah.edu/page/557>

Qatar University

Faculty of Arts and Science

<http://www.qu.edu.qa/artssciences/english/courses.php>

Birzeit University

Faculty of Arts

<http://www.birzeit.edu/academics/arts/english/p/dept-courses>