Why Teaching Writing to EFL Arab Learners is Difficult:
a sociocultural overview

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Abstract

In most cases, teaching writing to Arab EFL learners, in particular, and to students who had never been exposed to an Anglo-Saxon foreign language in general, is quite difficult and challenging especially when a teacher tries to incorporate culturally meaningful learning material. However, challenge becomes very apparent given the disparate sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds of the learners as well as other factors related to the nature of the imported teaching materials from overseas. The challenge then becomes more intense while identifying and selecting materials for each particular group of learners or class, as well as how to get students motivated and successfully engaged in the process of writing. This paper enlightens educators and language program managers and designers about the mechanism of the writing process while incorporating the cultural components relevant to the learner, as well as drawing their attention to the benefits of engaging students in the actual process of writing and boosting their motivation via a meaningful socioculturally-based approach.

Keywords: teaching writing, EFL learners, Arab learners

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1. Introduction

In many countries in the Gulf region, young learners were not exposed to a foreign language at their early learning stages. Pupils did not learn English until the age of 12 and in some cases, 17 or 18. However, this kind of situation has changed because of the directions issued by the ministry of education in those countries. Furthermore, modern private schools initiated the idea of introducing English as a foreign language (EFL) in their school curriculum at much earlier stages, such as when pupils are at the age of 5. The rationale behind this is that Target Language (TL) learning might be easier if it is introduced at an early age. However, those learners coming from public schools seem to struggle a lot with using the TL, i.e. English, though learners have been exposed to it (for example, a few hours are allocated to learning English during each week). So, why is it difficult for the Arab EFL learners to grasp the idea of writing in good English?

As stated in Benahnia (2016), prior any exposure to the structural writing mechanism, many Arab learners and students who have not studied a foreign language previously in particular, struggle with the actual formation of letters and cursive handwriting. Due to the nature of their mother language (L1), Arab EFL/ESP learners, for example, often find it difficult to adapt to the English writing system, especially at foundation levels. They also find it difficult to adjust to the linguistic, metalinguistic, cross-cultural differences, as well as the complexities of the English language syntax and grammar. Unfortunately, for some learners, these problems

may persist throughout their learning stages and therefore may impede their progress in L2 (second language), i.e. English, acquisition and proficiency.

Many teachers are often excited to incorporate cultural elements into their curricula and syllabi and they often find themselves unable to proceed smoothly to more enjoyable complex and comprehension-oriented writing activities. Not only that, but they might also be astonished to find themselves trying to improve their learners' very basic handwriting (forming alphabets and words). As a result, they may find it tiresome and time consuming, as they move on through their syllabus, to focus more on the *form* rather than on the *content* of their learners' written output. Unfortunately, this still holds true when the learners are at advanced levels. However, we have to take note that it is not the case in the Francophone countries such as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Lebanon or others where students are exposed to extensive handwriting in French from early schooling stages.

This research is an attempt to show why Writing as a school subject is most of the time difficult for many Arab EFL learners to tackle. It will also try to show the impact of incorporating the cultural components in an EFL/ESP writing syllabus to illustrate the benefits of the awareness of the learner's linguistic and cultural background and employing tactics in helping teachers to improve their students' overall written output in the TL.

Besides the idea of L1/L2 culture and teaching/learning of writing skills, the study will also try to indirectly address the following important questions:

- What amount of cultural material should a teacher include in his/her writing class activities?

- To what extent should the focus be on L1 or L2 culture?

- How can teachers help the EFL/ESP learner to overcome the problem of handwriting?

- Does the feedback from the teacher really help learners to improve their writing output and cultural awareness in the target language?

Let us first look at the relationship between culture and the process of writing.

2. Teaching Writing in Relation to Culture

In a formal EFL/ESP learning situation, a writing activity can never be successful until the target language has been successfully exercised in speaking and also in reading activities. Speaking activities give the teacher a chance to explain the material intended to be used in writing; and reading activities underscore that same effort. These two processes are vital to the problem of understanding the cultural context. Also, the learner has to know the context he or she has to write about because the context includes the cultural component that helps the learner perceive the idea properly. In order to get to the writing component phase in the target language, some prerequisites are necessary as it is shown in the following diagram:
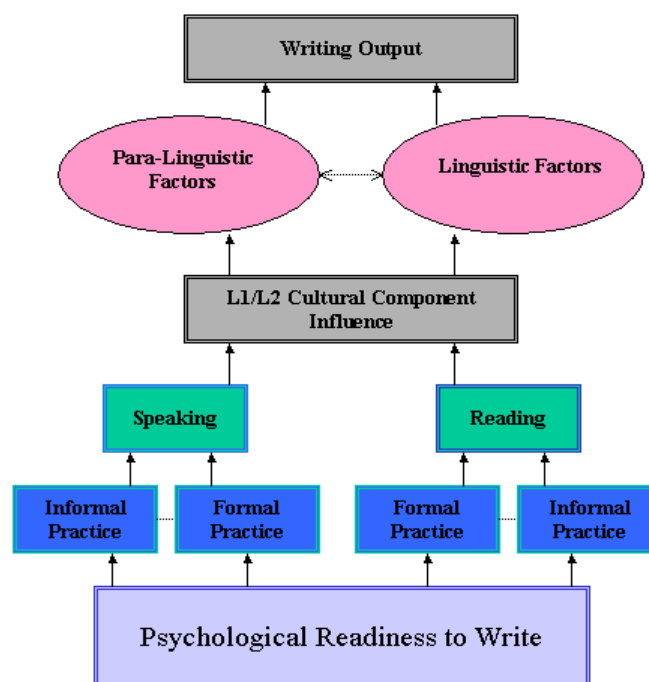
Figure 1   Prerequisites for Writing (mentioned first in Benahnia, 2016)

As illustrated in the above diagram, its base suggests the necessity of writing psychological readiness to write (PRW), i.e., the learners must be psychologically ready to engage themselves in the process of writing. Not only that, but they must also be fully aware of the fact that the process of writing is a fundamental part of their success in acquiring another language (Target Language).

After this stage, and once this readiness has taken place, the learner can move up to one (or more than one) of the upper stages i.e. to the formal or informal speaking or reading process of the target language. This process itself is manifested via the cultural component which may embody L1 and/or L2 elements as well as cultural elements from other sources. The presence of these cultural elements during this cognitive process may possibly create L2 cultural awareness which in turn may trigger and influence the writing ability and its effectiveness and, therefore,

enhances creativity at later stages.   The sum total of the writing output is finally, to a certain extent, influenced by a series of some linguistic and/or paralinguistic factors (as is illustrated in **Figure 1**).   This stage may also be influenced by the inherited learning habits associated with the learner's own sociocultural background and learning style.

Before being engaged into the actual process of writing, adult learners can be influenced by two major parameters: (1) their *writing preferences* and (2) their *cultural preferences.*   The writing preferences involve the learners' perception of writing systems and practicalities, i.e. how they would prefer the writing material to be presented to them while the cultural preferences, on the other hand, involve the learners' preference of which culture they would rather get the writing materials through.   In order to have an assessment of these two preference parameters, some Arab EFL learners were asked in a brief manner in order to get some feedback.   This feedback would help teachers and learners alike to better understand the above mentioned writing process.

The questions were directed to some adult Saudi students: (1) a set of questions dealing with cultural preferences and (2) another set of questions dealing with writing procedure preferences in writing activities (see questions written in both Arabic and English in the **Appendix**).

These two sets of questions were designed with several problem areas in mind. The following areas were targeted: preferences of the writing mechanics and cultural

preferences. In order to avoid any type of confusion or misunderstanding of the questions themselves, the questions were translated by the author into Arabic and given to the students in the Arabic version only. A statistical approach was followed in order to calculate the percentages and frequencies and to make analysis of the outcome of the data.

The main focus was on the teaching of the writing course and the students' perception. In order to fully appraise the reader of this paper of the methods employed throughout the eight week teaching term, it is worth mentioning that this paper does not focus on the methods that are employed in the writing classes throughout the learners' levels, but mostly on the basic writing mechanics used by those students and the use of appropriate teaching materials.

The student body, in situation of the research site, consisted of four groups of native Arabic speakers. They all came from different regions of Saudi Arabia and all of them were over 18 years old. Some of them came straight from high school or university, and others came straight from work (seeking job promotion). Given such diverse groups of Arabic language speakers, the author of this paper, in teaching the writing course, was presented with several different problems: (1) Should the emphasis be upon mechanical, structural, or syntactic forms of writing?; (2) Should stress be placed more on larger units such as paragraphs and their cultural content? or (3) Would it be more expedient to use a blended method identifying syntactical and mechanical patterns that could be expanded from phrases and sentences to

paragraphs and expanded paragraphs all within the parameters of the target language culture?

3. Brief Analysis of the Questionnaire and Results

3.1 Approach and Rationale

Saudi students are a very good sample (considering the gap between their L1 and L2 and their own culture and the TL culture) to investigate as far as writing courses are concerned.   Also, the Arabic culturally-based classroom provided an ideal setting to test the author's hypothesis that the Saudi students would respond better to a writing approach combining Arabic and western cultural elements with different types of writing activities.   In this study, the four different groups contained many different students of different age groups and backgrounds; it was thought that the group members would probably comprehend the questions presented to them differently.   In fact, this was not the case.   In order to ensure that the students would not be influenced by the order of the questions and then think that question one, for example, is more important than the others, the questions were re-arranged randomly by not following a particular order.

3.2 Brief Study Results and Comments

Cultural Preferences.   The results of this brief study showed that the majority of students tend to have similar opinions regarding both sets of questions (cultural preferences and writing preferences), regardless of their distinct levels.   If we look at the results regarding the three questions about students' cultural

preferences (see **Table 1**), we notice that at the preparatory level, for example, the total frequency of options A, B, and C was 13.3% whereas the most popular choice was question B (explanations and exercises involve cultural elements such as: examples, pictures, names of people and places, food and drinks, customs and traditions, and so on from your local culture) - six out of the total number of preparatory students prefer a writing course that involves cultural elements from their own culture.

At the elementary level, students tend to show the same choice, i.e., six of them voted for option B, and their total percentage for options A, B, and C was 18.3%. However, and surprisingly enough, as students move on to higher levels, they tend to have a different preference.   For instance, eight of them (from the intermediate level) voted for option C (explanations and exercises involve cultural elements such as: examples, pictures, names of people and places, food and drinks, customs and traditions, and so on from different countries), and the preferences of options A, B, and C was 30%.   For advanced level students, 16 of them also voted for option C. Their overall outcome showed 38.3%.

Percentage of Cultural Preferences

Prs 1	Sum 1	Advanced	Intermediate	Elementary	Preparatory	Questions
20.00%	12	4	5	2	1	A
33.30%	20	3	5	6	6	B
46.70%	28	16	8	3	1	C
100.00%	60	23	18	11	8	Sum 2
		38.3%	30.0%	18.3%	13.3%	Prs 2

Table 1   Students' Cultural Preferences in Learning Material (mentioned first in Benahnia, 2016)

In other words, Intermediate and Advanced learners prefer to see in their lessons cultural elements from other different countries and not only from their own. This fits in with the author's theory advocating that focus on L1 culture at a beginning stage is a must for better TL proficiency. The rationale behind such a theory is that learners should be exposed first of all to teaching materials involving authentic local items from their own surroundings and sociocultural environment. This can be slowly expanded in upper stages and levels in order to incorporate cultural elements from not only the target language culture (TLC), such as British culture and North American culture, but cultural elements from other countries as well. Once the learners get acquainted with unfamiliar notions and essential lexical items using familiar notions and items around them, they would be able to expand the scope of their cultural knowledge, engage in discussions and become eager to discover facts about other cultures, i.e., by virtue of comparison and contrast.

Hence, they would become more interested in discovering different dimensions of other cultures which may lead them to discover facts about their *own culture* and *identity.* Some of the learners may, probably for the first time, discover that they themselves have and live in a *different* culture (for further insights on this topic, see Benahnia, 1992).

Writing Preferences. If we look at the results concerning the questions about the students' writing preferences (see **Table 2**), we notice that the majority of students in the four different levels voted for option C, i.e., 70% of the total sample population, prefer to "write words and sentences after they read them" and after the "actually see them physically written". This simply means that the majority of these students are probably *field dependent* and they are still at a stage of anxiety in an EFL learning situation and adventure. In other words, they are afraid of taking the risk of writing words or sentences before they visually make sure of the form, spelling and structure of the target words and sentences. They probably do not have enough self-confidence in the basics of the target language and prefer to have an exhibited model to follow. A relatively high number of students (23.33%) voted for option B because they prefer to "write down words and sentences after they hear them and they do not need to see them written".

Percentage of Writing Preferences

Prs 1	Sum 1	Advanced	Intermediate	Elementary	Preparatory	Questions
6.70%	4	1	3	0	0	A
23.30%	14	7	3	4	0	B
70.00%	42	15	12	7	8	C
100.00%	60	23	18	11	8	Sum 2
		38.33%	30.00%	18.33%	13.33%	Prs 2

Table 2   Students' Writing Preferences (mentioned first in Benahnia, 2016)

It can be advocated that these students can be categorized as *risk takers* and probably believe that the best way to improve their writing is to practise it on their own via dictation. It was quite surprising to see this high percentage of students falling into this category, if we take into consideration the amount of stress placed on them in terms of grades and exams and the risk of not being able to embark on the study of their major as a consequence.

Surprisingly enough, only 6.67% of those students prefer to rely on a strict or straightforward copying, modeling, or imitating. This group of students would be classified as among the most 'worried' group. In other words, these strategies are commonly used at lower levels, i.e. at the preparatory and elementary levels, but not in upper levels. It is well-known in the field of foreign language teaching and learning that sheer copying or imitating alone impedes creativity. In other words, a

person who relies solely on copying, may not end up being creative enough to take initiative in formulating his or her own thoughts and put them in writing.   However, imitation or modeling at an early stage can be beneficial, yet it has to be gradually replaced by personal initiatives while creative steps and techniques of exercising creativity and techniques that would move towards an autonomous personal typical writing style.

One more important thing to mention here is that due to the nature of Arabic letter formation, which has a different script from Latin, requires right-to-left eye movement; Arab EFL learners often find it difficult to adapt to the English writing style, especially at early stages, if they have not been exposed to another foreign language of Latin origin, such as French, Spanish, Portuguese, or German.   It is unfortunate to see this kind of problem reoccurring at different learning levels (in some Middle Eastern countries) because these learners supposedly have already been exposed to English at either high school or the university level.   However, many EFL teachers have to struggle with the re-adjustment of their students' basic handwriting.   In addition, these learners may find it difficult to adjust to the linguistic, metalinguistic, and cross-cultural differences and complexities that surround the target language.   The problem of handwriting often creates anxiety which makes the learners ashamed of themselves to show or share their writing output or product to their teachers or peers.   These facts may either slow down or impede the process of their L2 acquisition and achievement.

4. Tips and Suggestions for Writing Courses

Most EFL teachers do agree that teaching writing effectively is not an easy task. Unfortunately, some of those teachers do not pay attention to the fact that there are numerous prerequisite factors before starting a better writing course. Those prerequisites are actually vital to the success or prone to failure in carrying out writing activities and they can be attributed to several reasons. Some of those reasons are related to the techniques in planning the writing class while others are related to the learners and the way they conduct the process of writing in an EFL/ESP situation. Therefore, both of these reasons can be explained below and the following suggestions are made to improve the teaching of Writing in a Saudi classroom:

(1) Teaching writing can help EFL/ESP learners and thereby help the teacher as well:

A good way of defining the students' needs might lead us to a better way of thinking about how to shape or reshape the syllabus geared towards satisfying the learner's motives and ambition. Students can indeed help Teaching Staff Members (TSM) design a streamline syllabus for a better writing output based on ongoing feedback. This latter has to be carried out within a time limit and the material of the specific writing course that is available. Insights in the following subcategories should be obtained from the students:

a. how students can correctly proceed in writing, i.e. the difficulty of writing

specific words and sentences, either contextually or literally in a meaningful way

b. how well they follow the teacher's guidance

(2)   TSM can relatively adapt the writing material to the teaching environment:

This means that we have to highlight the practices that the teachers prefer to use at a specific teaching time because they sometimes prefer to set up guidance that might be different from the ones they would use in another teaching situation.   For example, a teacher may prefer to correct immediately what is going on in his or her classroom, while in another situation he or she may discover the importance of a particular technique that really fits in with the main course of the writing lesson, i.e., the success of the teachers relies on their ability, talent, and art in bringing in cultural elements that would fit in and cover the cultural scope of the course via the three technical dimensions mentioned above because the cultural component and its effect cannot be ignored in this cycle.   The sociocultural context is not something outside of the main stream course that is to be imposed or adapted by the teacher.

Hence, the maturity of the teachers' skills is clearly seen in this context, i.e., their ability to successfully adapt the material to the specific writing course and lead students smoothly towards improving their writing skill without giving them the chance to get bored or to fail to appreciate the efforts that the teachers have made.

(3)   A TSM is to achieve the correct level of understanding of the relevance of the writing material via the feedback of students:

The relevance of the material is controlled by two dimensions: first, the coherence of the material and its reliability to the final course objectives; and secondly, the technical *knowhow* of the students, i.e., their awareness and ability to cope with the process of writing in gradual manner and steps.

To begin with, the coherence of the teaching material should not contain cultural effect that is offensive and should not confront the preliminary writing capability of the learner on one hand. On the other hand, if, in any way the material confronts the learners' preferences, they would then most probably start to dislike the writing course and find ways to avoid classes (by finding excuses, coming to class late; not doing homework; not responding to the teacher's questions in class and so on...). The feedback of students reflects what has been previously identified in this article.

(4)   TSM should equip and prepare their students for the potential reader who reads their written product:

What is meant by 'equip' here is the ability to define the students' need, the ability to define the appropriate techniques for each lesson of the writing course, and the ability to define and meet the objectives of the course through readable writing segments. This can be achieved by adhering to each *course component* and *rehearsal.*

The main course component for each lesson should be carefully taught through activities that would remain within the learners' acquisition capability and within the scope of their writing course and level. 'Rehearsal' means continuous practice of

writing in class and outside of the classroom.   The writing rehearsal should involve writing segments that seem essential to the learners' everyday life and meet their desire to talk about them.   In other words, the writing assignments should focus on authentic (original) and situational topics in different areas of life.

(5)   Students may perceive the TSM guidance collectively (as one group):

This explains the success or the failure of the teacher in getting his/her message across to every one of his/her class.   It also explains the mechanism preferred by the teacher against the mechanism preferred by the students where the teacher has to be aware of the mechanism(s) preferred by his/her students in order to use it as a gateway to making the writing course more enjoyable and to develop progressively, i.e. how to get a better writing performance out of each student.

In other words, the ability of defining the right mechanism(s) at the right moment for a particular group of learners is the art of bridging the students' needs with the teacher's objectives in a fine and exciting collective and cooperative way. Positive or negative feedback, in this case, would be a lot easier to deal with, unlike many distorted individual cases.   Let's not forget that even among a homogenous collective group situation, the level of acquisition and fluency may differ, but our point here is the way students would respond to the teacher's guidance as a fully-fledged group of TL learners.

(6)   The teacher (or TSM) can benefit from his (or her) students' errors and their response to the teacher's comments:

Students' errors can be beneficial to the teacher if the latter makes use of a well-organized strategy of coding and tabulating these errors. At the end of marking all students' papers, he (or she) would come up with a set of common errors and a strategy of how they can be fixed and avoided.

The students' response to the teachers' remarks can also be beneficial to both of them. How far the students strictly respond to their remarks is a parameter that can be used in order to define students' willingness to improve their writing in addition to defining the teacher's success in being successfully followed as a model: if the students are carefully and meticulously following the teachers' remarks and feedback on their writing output, it is an indication of their willingness for improvement.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

As stated earlier, we can conclude that teaching writing in general, and to Arab EFL learners in particular is indeed and to great extent much challenging. Therefore, we can advocate that this study shows that Arab EFL/ESP learners (in countries where learners were not previously exposed to another foreign language of Latin origin) at almost all language learning stages tend to share the same writing learning strategies and tendencies in dealing with the cultural component in their curriculum, and the majority of them also tend to share the same strategies with regard to writing techniques. We can also conclude that success in delivering a better writing course can be summarized into two main prerequisites: (1) awareness

of the theoretical and sociocultural boundaries that surround the learner and his/her linguistic ability in dealing with a foreign language and (2) awareness of the preliminary practicalities of successful writing.

As far as the theoretical and sociocultural boundaries are concerned, the teacher should possess the minimum knowledge about how foreign language learners deal with the skill of writing and how this skill is processed throughout their stages of learning within that particular sociocultural setting of the learners. Awareness of the preliminary writing practicalities, on the other hand, refers to the ability of simplifying the techniques that would help the TL learners perceive and successfully produce readable comprehensible writing output. This includes paying close attention to the learners' own culture, practical and physical handwriting. Practice will then be the key to success in the process of writing effectively, but as far as we recall, as students, initially when we had to face writing activities, either modeling on type of writing, such as creative writing, were the hardest days of our academic career. We were not only afraid of getting low marks, but we were often worried about the 'red remarks' of our teachers on our notebooks or papers and about our parents' and peers' reaction.

In conclusion, we were afraid to be 'branded' just because of our handwriting. Now when you think about it, it is a serious problem indeed!   Do you recall the joy you felt when a teacher returned your paper with a "smiling face" on it and tapped on your shoulder reminding you that "your handwriting was superb!"?   Do you also recall the sadness, sorrow, and agony you felt when your teacher returned your paper (probably keeping it till the end of distributing all the papers) and how your face turned red with shame and the fear about your peers' and parents' negative reaction? All this depended on those little *red* remarks on your paper.   Had the teacher showed you how to improve your writing little by little and the way to improve it, you would probably have avoided those embarrassing writing remarks, pitfalls, and habits.   In other words, your writing achievement could most likely have been much better, and the course itself could have been more enjoyable for you because of the positive guidance and feedback of your writing teacher.

Therefore, continuous training and probably an orientation session is essential for all teaching staff members of any ESL/EFL or ESP program (especially for novice teachers) before they embark on any teaching of writing activities.   They have to be trained on how to adhere to professional writing styles prior to starting teaching a class.   They also need to get familiarised with their students' sociocultural and linguistic background, clarifying and demonstrating to their students the possible types of handwriting they can model.   Most importantly, they should find out about their students' writing preferences.   These preferences would help teachers identify

the needs of every student in their group(s). They would also help teachers to collect the similarities and differences of the learners' writing tendencies. Not only that, by specifying the students' writing preferences, it would also be easier to set the focus on the group's needs, and therefore, satisfy the need of every individual in the class to bring them up to the level or standard of their peers in the same group. Then comes the stage of unifying the preferences through remedial work strategies, such as hands on tasks. Those preferences can be summed up into three main choices or categories among learners, therefore, we would have a category of students who:

(1) prefer to write what they read;

(2) those who prefer to write what they hear or listen to; and

(3) those who cannot do either, therefore, they prefer copying down the drills (or rewriting them).

Further suggested areas of study can focus—in depth—on defining which sociocultural components do specifically have an impact on the writing output and creativity among Arab EFL/ESP learners. Also, it would be better to study the frequency of the cultural elements involved in each textbook used for EFL or ESP teaching and determine whether it reflects the local indigenous culture, or it reflects the culture of the Target Language.

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Appendix

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خلال تلقيك دروس الكتابة في برنامج اللغة هل تفضل؟:

A.   أن تضم الشروح والتمارين عناصر من **الثقافة البريطانية أو الأمريكية** ، مثل الأمثلة والصور وأسماء الأماكن

والأشخاص والمؤكولات والمشروبات والعادات والتقاليد وكل ما يتعلق بالحياة هنالك إلى غير ذلك.

B.   أن تضم الشروح والتمارين عناصر من **الثقافة المحلية في بلدك** ، مثل الأمثلة والصور وأسماء الأماكن والأشخاص

والمؤكولات والمشروبات والعادات والتقاليد وكل ما يتعلق بالحياة هنالك إلى غير ذلك.

C.   أن تضم الشروح والتمارين عناصر من **ثقافة بلدان مختلفة سواء الناطقة باللغة الأنجليزية أو لغات أخرى،** مثل

الأمثلة والصور وأسماء الأماكن والأشخاص والمؤكولات والمشروبات والعادات والتقاليد وكل ما يتعلق بالحياة هنالك إلى

غير ذلك.

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While taking the writing course in your program, which of the following do you prefer?

A. That explanations and exercises involve cultural elements such as: examples, pictures, names of people and places, food and drinks, customs and traditions, and so on **from Britain and America**?

B. That explanations and exercises involve cultural elements such as: examples, pictures, names of people and places, food and drinks, customs and traditions, and so on **from your local culture**?

C. That explanations and exercises involve cultural elements such as: examples, pictures, names of people and places, food and drinks, customs and traditions, and so on **from different countries regardless of their language**?

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كيف تفضل أن تتعلم الكتابة؟

A.   أن تكتب الكلمات أو العبارات بعد أن تقرأها وترى من شكلها.

B.   أن تكتب الكلمات أو العبارات بعد أن سماعها دون أن تراها مكتوبة.

C.   أن تكتفي بتقليد أو نقل ما يكتب لك من كلمات أو عبارات.

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How would you prefer to learn writing?

A. By writing words and sentences after you see their shape.

B. By writing words and sentences after you listen to them without seeing them.

C. By relying only on imitating and rewriting words and sentences (copying).