

ASSESSING THE ACADEMIC WRITING PROFICIENCY OF EFL LEARNERS AT QASSIM UNIVERSITY: HONING THE SKILLS OF YOUNG WRITERS

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ABSTRACT: *Four language skills, academic writing is the one most at casualty at the post intermediate level in KSA. Syntax, organization of materials and expression, all are severely affected so far as the EFL learners are concerned. This paper proposes to evaluate the problem from the pedagogical perspective by comparing the current teaching practices in teaching EFL writing with world trends. It highlights recent studies in EFL apart from showcasing the teaching community's viewpoint. Finally, it presents recommendations aimed at attaining the desired learning outcomes.*

KEYWORDS: Academic, Proficiency, University, Writers, Language, Skill

INTRODUCTION

According to Vygotsky, 'Foreign language acquisition is conscious and deliberate from the start'. Further, the language researcher must be attentive to the relation that exists between speech and inner speech on the one hand, and written language and inner speech on the other. It is imperative that the written language follows the inner speech. In fact written language is translation of inner speech and therefore, (especially so for the L2 learner) even minimal proficiency is a factor of the learner's ability for abstraction, i.e removing oneself from the immediate, as writing is distanced from the dynamic situation which governs a speech situation. Unlike speech, writing requires the learner to elucidate the situation in full in order to be intelligible. Thus writing is a higher order skill than listening, speaking and reading and its acquisition is a bigger challenge for the L2 learner.

Of the plethora of foreign languages that one can learn for various reasons, English has been a language that has had a steady, rather increasing, number of learners. Since the times that England ruled much of the world, English and English language skills have remained at the focus of societies: in fact, the focus has been to use the language as close to the 'native speakers' as possible as this ability is believed to lend a certain amount of legitimacy to the 'education' of the users. This aspiration has become even more pronounced in modern times when economic and technological compulsions have played an active part in placing English at the centre of communication. Thus, from being a vestige of imperialism, English has re-invented itself to be the language of global communication. Current figures also support the theory that English takes the lead as a language of communication across continents and cultures.

In this perspective, the English proficiency of our students becomes all the more a matter of concern for academicians, business community and the government agencies. Whereas a good command over the language will directly translate to progress for all of these, a handicap in the same will mean stagnated or stunted growth for each of them as no community can survive in this global village in isolation: development of part is directly proportional to the development

of the whole. Our pilot studies have concluded that the students entering university education in Saudi Arabia possess below average proficiency in English. Of the four language skills, writing is the one most severely affected among them: they find even writing the assignments a serious challenge and sitting for the examinations is a veritable uphill climb for them. A majority is forced to go in for re-exams which traps them in a vicious circle of avoidable stress, demotivation and demoralisation. Even if they undergo all this grind, they lose out on precious academic years making repeated attempts to complete the programme.

Why Writing is a Challenge for the L2 learner?

Whereas a user acquires listening and speaking skills, reading and writing have to be 'learned'. This is the first challenge for the learner as well as the teacher in an L2 writing classroom. We also know that a large number of languages in the world exist only in the spoken form and those that do have a writing system, developed it fairly recently. Moreover, the non-native learner of English is required to bring to a meeting point the inherent dichotomy of the language: its written form often varies drastically from the spoken form (for illustration, consider the question of the 'silent' letters as in *island* and *knee*). In any language, the process of writing is a complex one. It calls for the integration of several strategies which result in the reproduction of a text.

Broadly speaking, writing involves planning, goal setting, organizing information, language selection, several revisions, editing and constant reviewing. However, each L2 writer is an individual, and while the processes involved in writing remain more or less as these, their ordering may vary from one learner to the other. Therefore, a teaching methodology that strives to guide students into an assembly line sequence of planning, drafting, revising may not achieve much with the L2 learner.

In a majority of learning situations, pressures of time and curriculum often relegate writing tasks to home assignments: a situation where the L2 learner is on his/her own without the support of the teacher or peers. This is especially disastrous for poor writers who struggle with the writing piece and whose confidence gets a further setback when they realise they are unable to deliver. At the same time, better writers miss out on opportunities for innovative ideas and structures which they may have been exposed to in a classroom setting. Besides, writing being a complex process, L2 learners need to be intensively guided through the various steps that will get them to the final production of the piece. Writing, to put it in few words, is thinking with the pen and the most difficult task in any writing assignment is getting started.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In an early study, Murray (1973) says that writing is a skill which is important in colleges and even in other activities or interactions after college in a complex and changing society. In the present society, more people are needed who can write, who have the capability to order, communicate information, and possess experience in having done so at the required minimum proficiency level. Writing, for many students, is the skill which can unlock the language arts.

Discussing the significant place of writing in academics, Raimes (1984) opines that teaching writing helps to reinforce the grammatical structures, idioms, vocabulary, etc., which are taught to learners. Teaching writing also helps the learners to be adventurous and creative.

She lists the following as important components of the writing process: (i) Grammar; (ii) Purpose, (iii) Audience, (iv) Writer's Process, (v) Mechanics of writing, (vi) Content, (vii) Organisation, and (viii) Word-choice. She elaborates that for producing a piece of writing that involves clear, fluent, and effective communication of ideas, the writer must know grammar – like rules for verbs, agreement, articles, pronouns, syntax, sentence boundaries, stylistic choices, and sentence structure etc. As writing is purpose-oriented, the purpose of writing must be clear: the target readers must be kept in focus.

Sommer (1989) says that writing is a way of learning other subjects. It can be used in every discipline as a strategy for teaching and learning.

According to Silva (1993) Academic Writing is different from both the populations, viz. native and non-native speakers who learn or use the language.

According to Greene (2001) the process approach to writing is a multi-dimensional activity in which students are in continual contact of the instructor and peers while going through the steps of planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing.

In various studies, Bacha (2002), Olivas and Li (2006) and Fadda (2012) state that English as Foreign Language (EFL) students have an exceptionally difficult and stressful task at hand when it comes to Academic Writing mainly because of their level of language competency.

EFL students encounter additional cognitive burden for Academic Writing. To counter this, Bacha (2002) advocates a Structural Process Approach to writing to enable learners develop their writing skills.

The Process-based writing instruction for EFL students has been supported by Arslan & Şahin-Kızıl (2010) and Wang et al. (2013) in their studies.

Storch (2011) advocates 'collaborative writing'. Collaborative writing provides writers with opportunities for peer interaction during the writing process. Here, students benefit by directly interacting with peers to assemble, revise, and produce a shared piece of writing that can be categorized as having 'joint ownership'. Amongst the benefits of Collaborative Writing is the unique interaction it affords in the form of peer conversations which require writers to use and filter language. He says that collaborative writing avails learners with opportunities to deliberate about their own and their peers' language use as they attempt to 'create meaning'. This echoes the findings of an earlier study by Yung Fung (2010) who says that the most prominent defining feature of collaborative writing is the social interactions among the members (p.19). Through collaboration, he says, the teachers can guide writers to articulate real-life conversations with their peers, and psychologically, peer-level interactions are uninhibited, frank and fearless and hence, more productive.

Wright et al (2013) discuss the use of electronic reading systems for digital contents. An electronic device such as the e-reader has the potential for aiding students in the process of writing. These are portable and contain a built-in dictionary, and also tools for annotation and information browsing. However, few studies have examined the effect of adopting e-readers as an aiding device in academic writing for EFL students.

Research Objectives

The study will have the following reference points as its aims:

1. Identifying the features prevalent in the writing classroom in KSA.
2. Working out the possibility of adopting a process approach.
3. Encourage learners in successful writing strategies.
4. Help learners become aware of organizing their written materials.

Significance of the Study

- Acquisition of any language is meaningful only when one is well trained in all of the four skills. This is even more relevant for English which is proven to be the language of global communication.
- English has four main skills and many sub skills. However, none of them are totally isolated from each other: they are complementary in their relationship, hence making it essential for one to learn all of them to master even one of them.
- Economic and trade opportunities can be best harnessed only when the Saudi youth are armed with the ability to write well in English: needless to say, business proposals, project reports, even global tenders, all are composed in English.
- In an increasingly technologically advanced world environment, dealings with overseas clients, employers and employees can be effectively done in English with the use of tools such as, Email, Whatsapp, Hangouts, and SMS.
- Global job opportunities demand an above average proficiency in all the four and more skills in English as the workforce comprises of people from diverse cultures and languages: the only way they can work together is by being able to conduct themselves in English.
- Teacher training aimed at imparting the right curriculum in the right manner is the pressing need of the hour because English is, after all, a foreign language for the Saudi learners.
- The curriculum and academic input available to the teachers of English in Saudi Arabia need to be carefully evaluated because the teaching community is bound by the natural compulsions of syllabus, study material and time.

Research Questions

The proposed research would attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What is the pedagogy employed for teaching Academic English Writing to college students in KSA?
2. What is the learners' proficiency in Academic Writing?
3. What specific methods are applied to develop English writing skills in the class room?
4. Does the system encourage peer/group learning?
5. Is communication in the classroom being done in English?

6. Does the teacher encourage writing exercises in the class or relegates them to home?

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in three phases. In phase 1 we sought the permission of four undergraduate English teaching peers to observe their lessons to isolate the pedagogical aspects of the EFL writing classrooms. This was undertaken over a period of three months, comprising one full term. At the end of this period, we requested them to write out the problems that, according to them, plague the teaching-learning situation of EFL in KSA. Phase 2 aimed at evaluating the writing proficiency of the learner group. We administered a writing test to eighty undergraduate level students of English at the College of Science and Arts, Methnab, Qassim University. The test was composed of two sections: One a free writing exercise that required of them to describe their partner in a biographical write up. The other section asked them to reproduce a short essay based upon cues given to them. Based upon *Hedge: Writing, page 148* as quoted in Hedge (2000), the responses were marked in the following way:

i.	Content organization (with special reference to clarity, coherence, and development of the essay).	20 Marks
ii.	Range of Grammar and vocabulary applied	15
iii.	Sentence structure (with higher marks being allotted for complex structures)	15
iv.	Accuracy of grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation	30
v.	Fluency	20
Total		100

Under Phase 3 a frequency scale was used to gather data for a twelve item questionnaire administered to the participants to assess the learners' perception and expectations of the writing classroom.

FINDINGS

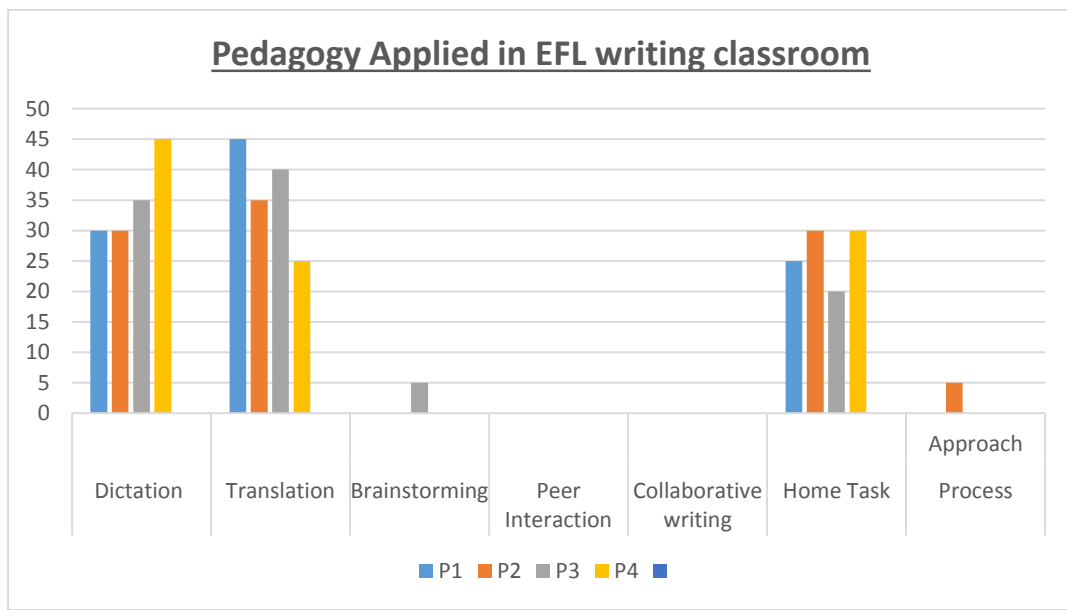
The following tables illustrate the findings of the study:

Phase 1: Pedagogy Applied in EFL writing classroom

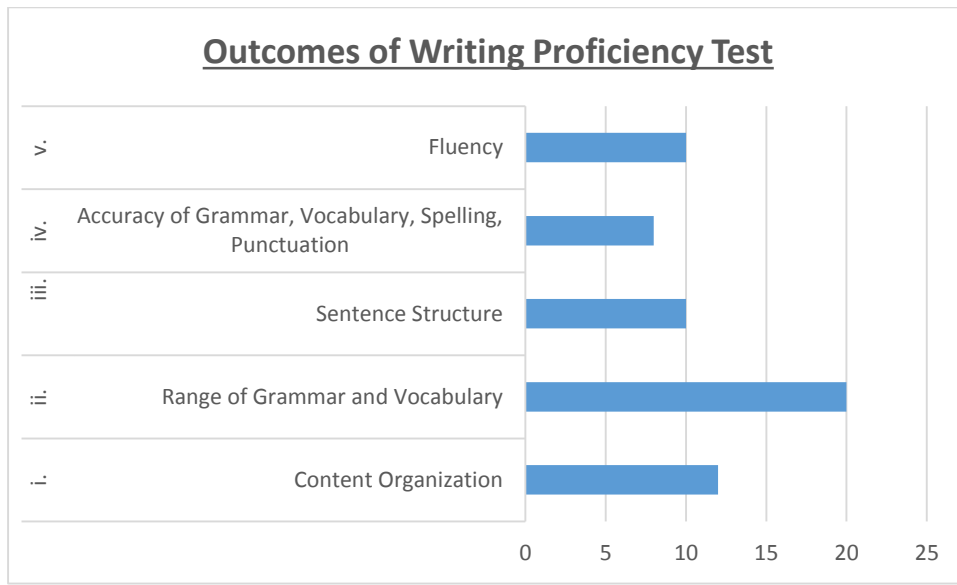
Note: i. 'P' represents Peer observed

ii. All values are representative of the approximate percentage of class time spent spread over one term.

	Dictation	Translation	Brainstorming	Peer Interaction	Collaborative_writing	Home Task	Process Approach
<u>P1</u>	30	45	0	0	0	25	0
<u>P2</u>	30	35	0	0	0	30	5
<u>P3</u>	35	40	5	0	0	20	0
<u>P4</u>	45	25	0	0	0	30	0

Graphically:**Phase 2: Outcomes of Writing Proficiency Test**

S. No.	Assessment Parameter	Mean Score
i.	Content Organization	12
ii.	Range of Grammar and Vocabulary	20
iii.	Sentence Structure	10
iv.	Accuracy of Grammar, Vocabulary, Spelling, Punctuation	8
v.	Fluency	10

Representing the outcomes graphically:**Phase 3: Outcomes of Students' Questionnaire**

Question 1: I feel excited and glad to attend the EFL writing class?

Question 2: When asked to write something, I feel confident of being able to communicate the right message to the reader.

Question 3: At the start of a writing activity, my teacher engages us in a brainstorming session to generate ideas.

Question 4: I feel more comfortable when asked to collaborate with my partner in a writing exercise.

Question 5: I prefer to go all the way alone in completing a writing task.

Question 6: It is better if the teacher allows me to take the writing assignment to finish back home.

Question 7: I feel confident that I learn writing better when the teacher dictates the things to me.

Question 8: As a group, we are highly motivated in the writing class.

Question 9: I feel that I know sufficient grammar to be able to write in English.

Question 10: My language class gives me a large number of English vocabulary to use.

Phase 3: Tabulated responses to Students' Questionnaire

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
Always	1	2	0	55	0	2	0	3	19	23
Quite often	3	6	0	12	1	1	0	5	41	37
Sometimes	1	37	0	7	9	4	3	20	17	13
Almost never	65	20	0	4	53	44	49	29	2	5
Never	10	15	80	2	17	29	28	23	1	2

INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings clearly indicate that modern approach and pedagogy to teaching writing in EFL situations is not being followed in the environment under study. Translation and dictation take the lead as classroom activities: they neither encourage creative and lateral thinking among the EFL learners, nor place them at the centre of the learning universe. Clearly, the teaching community's approach is a far cry from communicative methods advocated all over the world today.

Following closely on the heels of these is relegation of writing tasks to home assignments. At home, these learners lose out on precious peer interaction which could be a big boost to their learning experience. In fact, being at sea at home leads to demotivation among them which is a serious impediment to learning of any type.

The outcomes of this study are also an eye opener for the policy makers and educational planners in KSA: Constraints of time, syllabus and overpopulated classrooms leave little scope for the teachers to undertake communicative language teaching on a major scale. This conclusion was also arrived at from the feedback sought from the teachers in Phase 1 of this study. Further, the study highlighted the fact that only one out of the four teachers who participated in the study had some idea of what is known as Process Approach to writing.

Sixty five of the eighty respondents reported not being in a positive mental state to attend the EFL writing class. That their learning is poor is clear from the response to the next question which asks their opinion about their ability to communicate a written message clearly, is heavily inclined towards the negative as well. Question 3 enquired of them whether brainstorming was encouraged before undertaking a writing task, to which all of eighty replied in the negative whereas a substantial majority of fifty five responded in favour of collaborative work. Fifty three respondents disliked working alone on writing work. Similarly, a thumping large number showed a preference not to take writing assignments back home to finish. Forty nine of the eighty subjects are conscious that their writing proficiency is not improved if the teacher dictates to them. On being questioned about their motivation level, not surprisingly, a large number reported in the negative. All of these responses (to questions one to eight) point towards serious lacunae in the teaching methodology adopted. However, the only positive

outcomes of traditional pedagogical approach is in the perceived development of the learners' grammar and vocabulary.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although task representation may not be directly taught since it can be influenced by a variety of factors, teachers can promote students' awareness of their own task representation and of the context for writing, as suggested in Flower (1990), Greene (1995) & Zhu (2005). For instance, teachers can ask students to **share** and to **reflect** on their representation of each assignment in class discussion.

Teachers of EFL in the field of this study were largely ignorant of recent research and development in the teaching of writing. INSET programmes directed at creating awareness among these teachers is a pressing need of the hour.

Teachers can also help their students to analyse the features of each writing context in order to enhance their awareness. In addition, students need to be taught how to read source articles purposefully and strategically for different types of information. It may help to tell the students that they should try to "find where a writer works or doesn't work in interesting ways with your own view" or "to play ideas off one another". L2 writing instructors can consult Hirvela's book (2004), *Connecting reading and writing in second language writing instruction*, for more teaching tips on reading-to-write pedagogy.

Writing assignments should be carried out in the class environment and learners must be encouraged to take these activities as peer activities where they will be rewarded (and not penalised) for helping each other. Instead of being 'instructed' how to go about a writing assignment, the L2 learners of English must be made to 'write', so that, rather than informing the learners that the first stage of writing can be 'planning', they should be **lead to planning**. **Brainstorming** on how they would like to compose their piece can be a good idea at this stage. The teacher in this classroom bears the responsibility to help students get their ideas together. In addition to these, not fearing the obvious noise it would lead to, **peer interaction** and **collaborative writing** should be encouraged.

As enumerated earlier, listening and speaking are acquired skills and reading and writing are 'learned'. By their very nature the latter two are more complex and follow only after the L2 learner is reasonably established in the former two skills. This brings us to the issue of bilingualism or second language acquisition, children learn a second or a third language for that matter as naturally and are able to use it as accurately and fluently as they do the mother tongue given they are sufficiently exposed to its 'sounds' **early**, as frequently and as naturally. This is so for two reasons: one, the universal grammar equips them to acquire an additional language easily; and two, there are no prejudices to interfere or inhibit the learning of a language other than the mother tongue. These very factors become impediments as they grow older and have to develop proficiency in a language other than the native. It is observed that in Saudi Arabia, English is introduced in the sixth grade, by which time they are well past the 'Critical Age' for language acquisition.

American psycholinguist Eric Lenneberg put forward the 'Critical Age Hypothesis' for language acquisition in adults. This draws from what the biologists studying the origin of species-specific behaviour proposed: if a fledgling was to develop normally, there were periods when a specific type of stimulus was needed. The critical age hypothesis states that 'changes in language acquisition ability are linked to stages in brain maturation'. Studies have shown

that starting at about two years, language skills begin to be limited in the left hemisphere of the brain. This process, known as lateralization, seems to be completed at about the time of puberty. Thus for some reason, puberty seems to mark the point in time when a young adult's ability to acquire a new language will wane!

No EFL classroom can achieve its objective without **motivating** the learners to the optimum. For this, it is important to impart to them early the reasons why they should strive to be proficient writers in English. The benefits that are likely to accrue to them with the mastery of this skill should also be clearly illustrated to them at the outset. Knowing the learner's socio-economic and cultural background can prove to be an asset to the teacher.

To conclude, the researcher takes the liberty to point out that the present study is limited in its generalizability as a result of the exclusiveness of the group of students (they were all students enrolled for BAs programme of English and hence can be assumed to be more proficient in the language as compared to students of other subjects). Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized beyond such a group. Thus, replication of the present study should be conducted to examine task representation of EFL students at different levels and in different educational settings. This line of research will contribute to our understanding of L2 writers' task representation and its subsequent influences on task construction as a legitimate reference group will be created.

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