Writing As A Skill: Problems Identified And Pedagogical Remedies

Mohd Nazim
Dept. of English,
Najran University, Saudi Arabia.

ABSTRACT

This study identifies and discusses some common writing problems among Saudi students. The study upholds that pedagogically, writing as a skill and not as an activity has to be taught. The study argues that most of these writing problems arise from pedagogical reasons and a fresh look is needed to find out the pedagogical solutions of common writing problems i.e. punctuation and capitalization, grammatical structure, and language use. To a greater extent, these problems are not limited only to the Preparatory Year (Najran University), involved in the study, but apply also to other teaching and learning levels as well. Thus, the study advocates that writing problems can be minimized if the students are taught writing as a *skill* by professional language practitioners in an environment where students not only engage themselves in writing activities but also enjoy and develop writing as a skill.

Keywords: writing problems, pedagogy, pedagogical reasons, writing as a skill.

INTRODUCTION

There are various types of writing problems among EFL learners. Among those punctuation and capitalization, grammatical structure, and language use are regarded as common ones. There are reasons cited by EFL practitioners (Chen 2002, AbiSamra N. 2003, Newfields T. 2003, Al-Hazmi S. 2006, Al Buinain H. 2009, Sharif Y. 2010, Saleh F. M. 2010, Mojica L. A. 2010, Ezza El-Sadig 2010). Most of the researchers see the reasons of the writing problems (as cited above) as learners' poor background and mother tongue interference, and suggest to root out the problem by engaging learners in writing activities which, perhaps or unfortunately, many a times are not student-friendly, and learners are engaged in those exercises with discomfort. On top of this, the practitioners', generally, STATE that writing is:

- The most difficult or dangerous genre of the language
- A pain for both teachers and learners
- An inherited problem in language learning
- The most time consuming and boring activity
- An assignment which is always less rewarded
- An engagement causing a poor outcome
- A daunting task

This study begs to differ with those practitioners who consider writing a *painful task*. The researcher considers and tries to explore (through interactions with colleagues who teach writing and through his own teaching experience) that writing has never been a pain either for teachers or for learners. The living proof is the great libraries full of volumes not only by great scholars in the past but also, very interestingly and importantly, by teachers who are currently engaged in teaching writing. Even today, when teaching writing, in an EFL situation, has become a debate and a matter of concern, various write-ups are being written for teachers and

learners as well. Had writing been a pain, the writers would not have engaged in such a painful and fearful task! In researchers opinion, learners should be engages in writing tasks without being bored, so they get an opportunity to develop writing as a *skill* and certainly not just as an *activity*.

LITERATURE REVIW

Writing is, generally, regarded the most difficult or dangerous genre of the language. Fareed, Ashraf, and Bilal (2002) opine that writing is the most challenging zone in language learning. Several researchers in their studies have maintained that writing is a complicated and difficult task. Newfields T. (2003) considers the capability to write detailed academic essays as one of the huge contribution in higher education. Al Hazmi (2006) presents that the field of EFL writing in the Arab world suffers from being abstracted, depersonalized and product-oriented. Al Buinain (2009) in her study addresses the problems related to the performance of students in the writing courses. Sharif (2010) analyses compositions written by first, second, and third year university EFL students. His research aim was to find out the kinds of errors they make in writing with special reference to prepositions. Al Khashawneh (2010) investigated the academic writing problems of the Arab postgraduate students and offered solutions to these problems. Mojica (2010), while investigating EFL learners writing difficulties as reported by Flavell and Willman (1977), concludes, "the students' consideration of high-order processing skills during the three stages in writing, particularly during the pre-writing part, is a positive sign. Such skills need to be honed further, as their development can make them better composers, better writers. It must be remembered that helping students to become more aware of their processing strategies means helping them develop their metacognitive skills – which should be every serious and dedicated educator"s concern for the students under their charge." Ezza (2010), while reviewing the contents of writing courses of three Arab universities, maintained that there is a general assumption among researchers that Arab/EFL learners are mainly responsible for their poor writing performance. The study was an attempt to examine whether educational policies may have their role in the learners writing problems. It further suggests that for the most writing problems are the results of outdated approaches and resources.

This study, in contrast with the practitioners who regard writing as the most difficult or dangerous genre of the language, takes a different view. The practitioners' understanding about writing 'a pain for both teachers and learners', in researcher's opinion, may be a 'myth'. The practitioners' submissions about writing as *an inherited problem in language learning*, *the most time consuming and boring activity*, *an assignment with less reward*, and/or *a daunting task*, may have a special context, but, in this study, an attempt has been made to present that writing, pedagogically, is a skill (and not as an activity) to be taught. The researcher, in the discussion section, maintains that most of these writing problems arise from pedagogical reasons and a fresh look is needed to find the reasons from pedagogical perspective to overcome the common writing problems.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore common writing problems: punctuation and capitalization, grammatical structure, and language use along with their remedies from pedagogical perspective to improve writing as a *skill*. The multifold aims of this study are:

- *to identify and discuss the writing problems and remedies from a pedagogical perspective*
- *to develop student friendly tasks/exercises that address these problems and*
- *to develop writing as a skill and not merely as an activity*

To address this research aims, three writing (paragraph) samples of Level 1 students were selected to analyze the common writing problems, as mentioned.
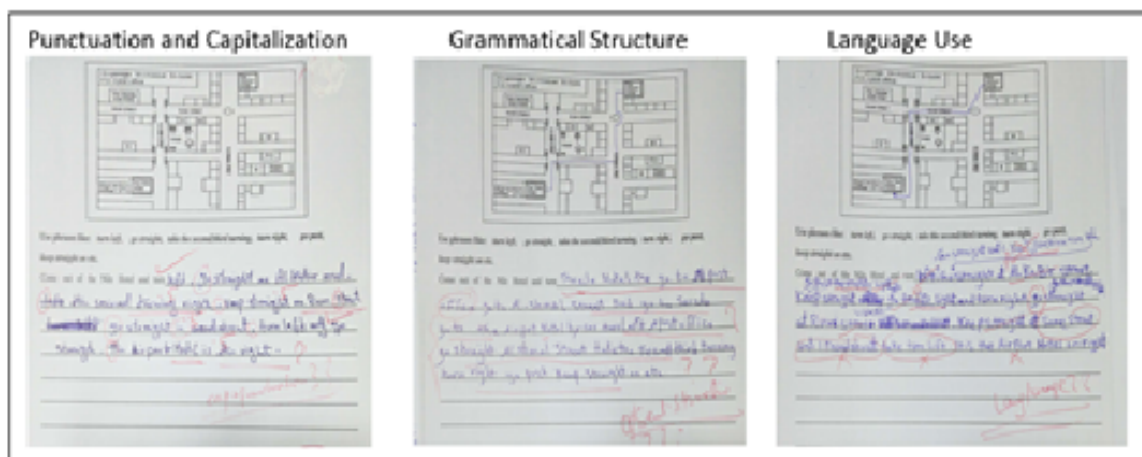
DISCUSSION & FINDINGS

This section discuses the causes generally cited for common writing problems and offers various notional and functional pedagogical remedies to address the problems.

Writing Problems And Cited Causes

The following is discussion on the writing problems in line with the available literature on common writing problems i.e. punctuation and capitalization, grammatical structure, and language use:

Poor Background

Poor background is cited as one of the most prominent reasons of writing problems. Researchers try to maintain that learner's poor background is the hindrance rooting out the obstacle to good writing. This is to understand that poor background does affect the performance of the learners but, by no means, is the barrier in the way of developing writing as a skill.

Memorization

Memorization is another cause which has been cited as one of the major problems among Arab/EFL learners. Researchers maintain that students are asked to memorize in order to produce a good and errorless write up in the exam. As a result, learners do not get any opportunity to develop writing ability and face a great deal of problem when they engage in higher learning at the university level. This may be 'partially' true, but does not give passport to university teachers to do nothing to enhance writing skills/ability of the learners.

Curriculum in Secondary Schools

The secondary school curriculum is also cited as one of major reasons for the problems of writing among Arab learners. The researcher does not see any reason to cite this as a problem at the university level. Instead, this study suggests to do something pedagogically to develop writing as a skill among Arab learners. This is, in researcher's opinion, the future course of research whether or not the secondary schools continue with the same curriculum. Alternatively, is there a dire need to change the current curriculum structure? Moreover, the researcher strongly feels that it is not the duty of the university teachers to look into the curriculum of secondary schools. Instead, they should be doing something pedagogically at their own level to achieve the desired goal.

Teaching methodology

What would be the benefit if the teachers cite the teaching methodology as a problem at the school level? Is there any fruit in discussing whether the learners were not taught effectively or methods and strategies at the school level are/were not effective? This study maintains that the teachers at the university level should do something pedagogically which is effective and fruitful instead of blaming students past learning strategies.

Motivation

If the learners were not motivated at the school level, they can be motivated now. There is no theory that states that motivation starts at the school level, nor is there any theory that indicates that motivation cannot be imparted at the higher level of learning in the unfortunate case when a student joins a university without any motivation. To say otherwise is merely to pay the blame game, because there is always scope to motivate learners at any level of learning. We need only to motivate learners in writing and engage them in writing tasks, which are very much student-friendly in nature, and make sure that the learners not only are entertained but also enjoy writing assignments without any pain and fear.

Controlled writing

Controlled writing is one of the major reasons cited for poor writing skills among Arab learners, and the researcher partially agrees that it is a problem, but this is not a reason which cannot have any remedy. In researcher's opinion, moving from controlled to free writing exercises is the pedagogical remedy, which helps overcome the problem. The important element in writing exercises is that the students need to be personally involved in order to make the learning experience of lasting value. Encouraging student participation in the exercise, while, at the same time, refining and expanding writing skills, requires a certain pragmatic approach.

ESTABLISHED HYPOTHESIS

There is a hypothesis that, perhaps, is established by researchers/teachers that, like any foreign language learners, Arab/EFL learners face many problems in learning English. Many studies have been conducted to investigate the problems of acquiring English in general and problems in writing in particular. This hypothesis is based on the very fact that the students have many problems when writing in English, like not knowing how to organize their ideas, because it is almost a new experience for them. The very fact, that for the students to succeed in a foreign language generally, and writing skills specifically, they need to surround themselves in a language learning environment, remains – without argument, but it is also not fruitful to blame that Arab learners have few opportunities to use the foreign language in their society (though this may be correct).

This study, while reviewing literature and researches conducted by EFL practitioners (Chen 2002, AbiSamra N. 2003, Newfields T. 2003, Al-Hazmi S. 2006, Al Buinain H. 2009, Sharif Y. 2010, Saleh F. M. 2010, Mojica L. A. 2010, Ezza El-Sadig 2010), found that studies are conducted mainly to investigate the causes of writing problems among Arab learners. The researcher is not in denial that the studies conducted thus far do not offer the solutions, of course they do. In contrast, the researcher, through this study, maintains that there is no benefit to buzz the problems and offering remedies/solutions of writing problems from/to the students' perspective. Alternatively, these remedies should have been offered from a pedagogical perspective.

NEED A CHANGE!

There is a dire need to have a change in teachers' notional level (especially those who teach writing at the institutes of higher learning). Teachers should agree with the notion that writing is a skill and not just an activity to be taught; writing is not a pain but a task to be entertained, writing is not a problem but an art. The larger issue is our aim to develop students' writing skills and certainly not engaging them in activities. In order to achieve these interesting tasks, teachers may <u>use the events of students' lives to inspire writing.</u> They also can establish an email dialogue between students from different schools who are studying the same book. Writing tasks may also be used to improve relations among students. There are various activities teachers can ask the students to be engaged in while developing students writing as a skill. Some of them are:

- copying from the teacher's write up with emphasis on capitalization and punctuation
- writing words relevant to students' lives to help them build vocabulary.
- writing very short and simple sentences
- writing steps for making anything (process)
- writing on students daily routine
- writing to an audience for a real purpose
- practicing and playing with revision techniques
- writing descriptions by focusing on the sounds of words
- making grammar instruction dynamic

7. CSE: A UNIQUE APPROACH!

This research has very little relation with the approaches to teaching writing viz. the Controlled-to-Free Approach, the Free-Writing Approach, the Paragraph-Pattern Approach, the Grammar-Syntax-Organization Approach, the Communicative Approach and the Process Approach to teaching writing but wishes to place a unique approach which is far from the traditional approaches used in the classroom. The advocacy of the ***Control-Shift-Enter*** (CSE) approach is, in researcher's opinion, associated with pedagogical solutions where the teachers are expected to have a friendly ***control*** on the classroom, ***shift*** from the traditional, perhaps, ill perspective and ***enter*** into more flexible learning environment. This approach is more *functional* than *notional* which of course, not a command to be used on a *keyboard* but an *assignment* for the teachers to execute in the classroom situation. This approach has the following features where teachers are supposed to play and practice in the classrooms and create a rich environment for the learners. There is a **SHIFT** <u>*from*</u> what we, the teachers, generally, do <u>*to*</u> what we are expected to do to engage learners into a great art i.e. writing.

From TEACHING to LEARNING
Here the teachers *shift* their focus from teaching to learning and ensure that only learning takes place in the classroom. Students learn to write and enjoy the tasks assigned by the teacher. In other words, focus shifts from being teacher-centered to being learner-centered.

From ACTIVITY to SKILL
Here the learners are not engaged in the writing activities but in developing the skill of writing. Basically, writing is not an activity to be engaged in but a skill to be taught and learned. So the teachers present various student friendly exercises and certainly not the rote activities in which students are engaged to develop writing skill.

From ACCEPTED to EXCEPTIONAL
Whatever material the teachers use as per the level of the students should be exceptional ant not merely accepted. Many a times the materials are found accepted as per the students need and level but are not exceptional. As a result, these accepted materials are proven to be worthless. So, it is desirable to use the materials/exercises which are exceptional and students are very happy while taking on the materials.

From RICH CONTENT to HIGHLY RELEVANT LESSONS
The lessons should be highly relevant rather than rich in content. I have no objection to rich contents, but at times, it has been found that the contents were rich but not relevant. It is found that students become stuck, sometimes not being able to familiarize themselves with the richness of the contents. I think it shall always be welcome to have relevance over the richness of the contents.

From TOOLS to TECHNIQUES
The tools play a great role in teaching and learning but the significant point to note is that the tools become ineffective if techniques are not effectively used. Technique is the soul of the tool and in whatever fashion the teachers introduce tools in the classroom, techniques are always helpful to create the healthy learning environment.

From HIGH-IMPACT to HIGH-ENGAGEMENT
Sometimes teachers try to have a high impact on the learners to make them feel that the great leader of the classroom is the teacher. This results in creating a chasm in the classroom between the teacher and the learner. The teachers should assign the tasks to the learners with high engagement without bothering about the impact on the learners. The teachers automatically, in my opinion, get the respect and high impact if they successfully turn students into great writers.

From STIFF to FLEXIBLE
The teachers need to have a very flexible approach and never be stiff towards learners or learning situation. Flexibility ensures that classroom tasks are differentiated to suit all the learners. This also ensures that learners have opportunities to learn what they want, when they want, where they want and how they want. Teachers are the great managers of the classroom and flexible managers are always successful. If the teachers are flexible in their approach, more chances are there for the learners to learn and develop.

From NOTIONAL to FUNCTIONAL
Notions are always helpful when they accomplish their function i.e. to do something unique and better. If they are kept only as notions, they don't serve any purpose. The teachers need to deliver the best from what they have at the notional/abstract level to the function/concrete level by presenting something practical in the classroom, engaging learners in the writing tasks which are fruitful and a means of entertainment for them.

From BITTER to BETTER
To conclude the study, I would like to call the teachers teaching writing at the university/higher level of learning, to work for the better. The project is huge and the task is really challenging but of course, not daunting. If we really want a change in the teaching writing atmosphere, we need to have a fresh look at the situation, develop a notion towards the learners in which they are not the bitter ones but the better ones. We must create an environment where learners do not merely attend the writing classes and, engage themselves in writing activities/exercise but enjoy and develop writing as a skill to be the future writers.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study offers the pedagogical remedies to overcome the writing problems among Arab/EFL learners. First, teachers, at the very inception of writing classes, should present writing as the most interesting genre of language. Second, teachers should motivate students about writing that will always result well (if engaged in and entertained/appreciated). Third, teachers should present writing exercises as a historically proven character building projects. In addition, teachers should create and sustain an environment where students engage in assignments (as a skill) with fun and easiness. Last, but not least, teachers should view writing assignments as a healthy output and a very pleasant artistic task.

References:

Abisamra, N. (2003). An analysis of error in Arabic speakers' English writings. American University of Beirut. Retrieved July15, 2018, from http://abisamra03tripod.com/nada/languageacq-erroranalysis.html.

Al-Bauinain, H. (2007). Researching types and causes of errors in Arabic speakers' writings. in Madraj, S., Jindli, A. and Salami, A. (Eds). Research in ELT Context, pp, 195-224

Al-Hazmi, S. (2006). Writing Reflection: Perceptions of Arab EFL Learners. South Asian Language Review, XVI (2), 36-52

Al-Khasawneh, F, M.S. (2010). Writing for academic purposes: problems faced by Arab postgraduate students of the College of Business, UUM. ESP World, Issue 2(28), and Volume 9, 2010, http://www.esp-world.info

Chen, Y-M. (2002). The problems of university EFL writing in Taiwan. The Korea TESOL Journal, 5 (1), 59-79.

Ezza, El-Sadig. (2010). Arab EFL Learners' Writing Dilemma at Tertiary Level. English Language Teaching Vol. 3, No. 4; pp. 33-39 December 2010.

Jdetawy, L. F. A. (2011). Problems Encountered by Arab EFL Learners. Language in India, Vol. 11, Issue 3, 19-27

Mojica, L. A. (2010). An Investigation on self-reported writing problems and actual writing deficiencies of EFL learners in the beginners' level. TESOL Journal, 2, 24-38.

Newfields, T. (2003, January). Helping Asian EFL students acquire academic writing skills. Journal of Nanzan Junior College, 30, 99-120.

Tahaineh, Y. S. (2010). Arab EFL university students' errors in the use of prepositions. Modern Journal of Applied Linguistics, 1 (6), 76-112.