Writing Skills in English for Specific Purposes Context

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ABSTRACT

Teaching of writing is important since, not only does it provide students with academic English capabilities, but it also prepares them for life in an interconnected world that requires them to write for different purposes and to use different genres (i.e., expository, descriptive, narrative, and persuasive). This research aims to review some of the recent studies on teaching writing skills in different academic and ESP settings. The remainder of this section highlights the writing difficulties which are faced by Arab students. **Section 2** *explores what is meant by writing.* **Section 3** *touches upon the writing processes.* **Section 4** *reviews some of the recent research publications on the methods and approaches to teaching writing skills.* **Section 5** *concludes this research with a summary.*

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

Statement of The Problem and its significance

For Arabic-speaking students, acquiring writing skills in English is highly demanding since the orthographic and grammatical systems, as well as the rhetorical conventions (structure, style, and organization) in Arabic, are distinct from English. Some of these differences include capitalization (no upper- or lower-case letters in the Arabic alphabet); syntax (the verb in Arabic sentences precedes the subject, and sentences can exist without a verb); and spelling (some English letters do not exist in the Arabic language, e.g. 'p' and 'v'). Numerous English vowel sounds are also problematic for Arabic speakers since they have no equivalent in Arabic.

Analyzing the English writing of 96 Arab university students, Doushaq (1986) found that they had problems in three major categories: sentence structure, paragraph structure, and content. Mohamed and Omer (2000) also found problems in cohesion related to the differences in what constitutes a cohesive text in each language. Palestinian students' writing in Mourtaga's (2004) study exposed repeated writing errors in using verbs, punctuation, and articles.

Teaching writing at Arab universities adds up to the difficulties faced by students. Writing tasks are given to students who write their compositions, and hand the paper to the teacher to receive grades. They do not share their writing with peers to receive feedback. In addition to lacking knowledge of vocabulary, English syntax, and writing conventions, students are often unfamiliar with the writing process stages (prewriting, drafting, response, revision, proof-reading, and publishing).

SECTION TWO: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The Concept of Writing

Writing or composition is a piece of written work produced to practice the skills and techniques of writing or to demonstrate a person's skill as a writer. In language teaching, two types of writing activities are sometimes distinguished:

a. *Free composition*, in which the student's writing is not controlled or limited in any way, such as essay questions, or writing about a particular topic. The free composition has to be distinguished from free writing. **Free writing** is a pre-writing activity in which students write as much as possible about a topic within a given time (for example, 3 minutes) without stopping. The goal is to produce as much writing as possible

without worrying about grammar or accuracy, in order to develop fluency in writing and to produce ideas that might be used in a subsequent writing task.

b. ***Controlled composition****,* in which the student's writing is controlled by various means, such as by providing questions to be answered, sentences to be completed, or words or pictures to describe. Controlled composition activities are common at the beginners and lower-intermediate levels.

Writing Processes

In the previous decades, ESL and EFL teachers paid more attention to the product of writing, and that approach is known as the **product approach**. Learners were usually given tasks to write without much explicit instruction on how to attack the challenges of writing. Students were expected to produce pieces of compositions, while the role of teachers was limited to take care of the mechanical aspects of their students' writing products. The **mechanical aspects** of writing include spelling, use of apostrophes, hyphens, capitals, abbreviations, and numbers. Yet, frustration prevailed amongst teachers of writing and they began to question the effectiveness of viewing writing as a product. This shift in thinking led to adopting writing as a process activity, in which teachers paid more attention to the various stages of writing process.

Writing processes stand for the strategies, procedures, and decision-making employed by writers as they write. Writing is viewed as the result of complex processes of planning, drafting, reviewing, and revising and some approaches to the teaching of first and second language writing teach students to use these processes.

The process approach to writing emerged in reaction to the futility of the product approach. The **process approach** to writing is an approach that emphasizes the composing processes writers make use of in writing (such as planning, drafting, and revising) and which seeks to improve students' writing skills through developing their use of effective composing processes. This approach is sometimes compared with a **product approach** or a **prose model approach**, that

is, one that focuses on producing different kinds of written products and which emphasizes imitation of different kinds of model paragraphs or essays.

Nowadays, classroom writing activities usually follow a scheme known as composting processes. The **composing processes** refers to the different stages employed by writers. Three stages are often recognized in the writing process:

1. **rehearsing** (also known as **prewriting**): activities in which writers look for a topic or ideas and language related to a topic before beginning writing.
2. **writing** (also known as **planning, drafting, composing**): activities in which writers note down ideas in rough form.
3. **revising** (also known as **editing, post-writing**): activities in which writers check, revise and rewrite what they have written.

These stages in writing do not necessarily occur in sequence but may recur throughout the composing process. A process approach to the teaching of writing focuses on encouraging the development of these composing processes.

Methods and approaches to teaching writing skills

Several techniques are employed by ESL and EFL teachers in teaching writing skills through a plethora of exercises in general as well as ESP settings. These activities range from bottom-up to top-down activities and from simple self-reflection or brainstorming to more group involvement such as collaborative learning. Some of these activities attempt to promote metacognitive or critical thinking skills. Others attempt to make the learners more involved in their learning by promoting self-regulation.

Rogers (2010) argued that despite the vast research on learning strategies and their application to receptive skills, relatively little has been written on the effect of learning strategies on productive skills, writing in particular, and even less has been written about the effect of metacognitive strategy training and how it might be implemented into the classroom. After

2

reviewing what little literature is available regarding the effect of metacognitive strategy training on writing instruction, he has set down a framework from which metacognitive strategy training could be implemented into ESP writing instruction in an English for Lawyers course. Memos written by lawyers usually follow an institutionalized sequence of moves, which are shown below:

a.   Subject line,

b.   Introductory statement / brief discussion of the context or relevant background information,

c.   Short explanation of the relevant points,

d.   A concluding remark / an offer to provide further information or assistance if needed.

Rogers (2010) used a model for writing which consisted of six steps:

1.   First draft

2.   Reflective journal 1

3.   Language awareness/modeling/ practice

4.   Editing/ revision

5.   Final draft

6.   Reflective journal 2

Students would begin writing themselves and follow the steps outlined above. Steps 3 and 4 are intermediary and they can be repeated as many times as students needed. After producing the final draft, the students would compare their writings with an expert.

Oda (2015) investigated the impact of dual-processing metacognitive scaffolding on architectural student writing. The study investigated whether architecture students in the treatment group showed greater writing fluency and critical thinking after using sketching as a metacognitive process than did the control group that used words in an identical online lesson. Fifty-six architecture design studio students participated in the quasi-experimental online intervention designed to help students describe their design projects in writing. Student papers following the online sketching intervention were scored using the Cognitive Level and Quality WritingAssessment, Critical Thinking Rubric. Although the one-way ANOVA analysis of mean scores on students' papers showed no statistical difference between the treatment group, which used sketching, and the control group, which used words, sketching stimulated students in the treatment group to write lengthy posts critiquing each other's sketches.

Smith, Rook, & Smith (2007) investigated how to increase student engagement by using effective and metacognitive writing strategies in content areas. The study examined the use of cognitive, affective, and metacognitive questioning strategies in a 9th-grade world history class as a means to increase student engagement and academic success. Through the use of structured journal questions over 12 weeks, students who responded only to text-related questions showed no benefit compared to students who did not participate in journal questions at all. Students who responded to metacognitive and affective questions in addition to text-related questions demonstrated better retention of content material as evidenced by course grades at the end of the study. These results suggest that students who respond to questions designed to promote thinking as well as personal connections, experience a positive effect on achievement.

Lu & Liu (2011) investigated and analyzed the relationship between metacognitive strategies and the language capabilities of 90 sophomores of English majors in the writing of English as a second language based on multimedia technology. They concluded that the 90 subjects' frequencies of metacognitive strategies are at high or medium levels. That is, they usually use or sometimes use these metacognitive strategies. On the whole, selective attention is most frequently used, self-monitoring and self-evaluation are in the next place, and the frequency of advanced planning is in the last place. Undoubtedly, the involvement of multimedia technology is essential in conducting the research.

Larenas, Leiva, & Navarrete (2017) reported on the rhetoric, metacognitive, and cognitive strategies pre-service teachers use before and after a process-based writing intervention when completing an argumentative essay. The data were collected through two think-aloud protocols while 21 Chilean English as

a foreign language pre-service teachers completed an essay task. The findings show that strategies such as summarizing, reaffirming, and selecting ideas were only evidenced during the post intervention essay, without the use of communication and socio-affective strategies in either of the two essays. All in all, a process-based writing intervention does not only influence the number of times a strategy is used, but also the number of students who employs strategies when writing an essay—two key considerations for the devising of any writing program.

Wischgoll (2016) combined training of one cognitive skill with another metacognitive skill to examine if such combination had a positive effect on the writing of 60 German-speaking college students. The study found that combiningthecognitivestrategyoftextstructure knowledgeapplicationwiththemetacognitivestrategyof self-monitoringsupportsthe developmentofacademicwritingin highereducation.

While wrapping up, vocabulary is an important aspect of writing which should always be taken into consideration. Beginner students, either in English for Academic Purposes or ESP program, usually find it difficult to find out the exact words and phrases to express themselves. Circumlocutions are common in these stages. However, it is better to divide the vocabulary into several categories such that they receive adequate treatment in the classroom.

According to Nation (2001), words in academic writing can be divided into four categories: high-frequency words, academic words, technical words and low-frequency words. High-frequency words refer to those basic English words which constitute the majority of colloquial conversation or speech as well as all the running words in all types of writing. Language learners/users have plenty of chances to get exposed to these words. Technical words are the ones used in a specialized field, which are considerably different from subject to subject. Low-frequency words are the rarely used terms. Academic words, somewhere in between the high-frequency words and technical words, have some important functions and account for a relatively high proportion of running words in all academic texts, and acquiring these words seems to be essential when

learners are preparing for English for academic purposes (EAP).

SECTION THREE: SUMMARY

This research cast light on the writing skill and how they it treated in different academic and ESP settings. The old-fashioned view of writing as a product is no longer favored by ESL and EFL practitioners. Instead, the process model dominates the academic and research arena, where writing is viewed as principled and sequenced steps. Different settings and learner needs result in adopting different methods and strategies for teaching writing. However, the metacognitive strategies have, no doubt, received much of the attention and research in writing, mostly in the academic settings. Whatever the case, writing in ESP contexts pose another layer of difficulties for both students and teachers.

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